

## Stories from the Field

### Riley Writes a YA Novel

#### Danny Wade

Associate Professor of English  
Coordinator, Secondary English Education Program  
Department of English  
Washburn University  
Topeka, Kansas  
danny.wade@washburn.edu

On the first day of class, their jaws dropped in my undergraduate Young Adult Literature course when I exclaimed the classics are not the best books for teens. I knew I couldn't convince any of them on the first day, so I transitioned to explaining that they would read 16–20 YA works during the semester. Again, their jaws dropped.

We then introduced ourselves. Most were English education or elementary education majors. One was a writing major interested in writing a YA novel. The last introduction was Riley, who professed, "I am a writer." I inquired, "Oh, you're also interested in writing a young adult novel?" Surprisingly, he explained, "No. I'm in the course because I might want to teach middle school or high school English. I've published eight novels. They're not young adult."

Early in the semester, Riley showed deep enthusiasm for what we were reading. I began prodding him to write a YA novel. My suggestion didn't seem to click. One day during a discussion about diversity issues, Riley described one of his novels about a soldier who hides his homosexuality while serving in the army. Riley expressed he wanted to represent gay men in similar situations as strong men who also make sacrifices and serve this country with dignity and pride.

After listening, I told him about the need for more LGBTQ content in the YA genre. I saw a spark as he left class that day.

A week before the semester ended, Riley gave me a copy of his new novel, *Dissecting Sean Connor* [self-published by R. J. Hamilton; available on Amazon]. While I admired its blue, glossy front cover, Riley explained that it's about a gay teen who finds hope and confidence despite being constantly bullied in high school. I then opened it to his handwritten note, "Dr. Wade, thank you for opening my eyes to a genre as important as YAL and for inspiring me to write my first young adult novel."

### Our Little Secret

#### Bridget Mahoney

Instructor & Doctoral Student  
University of South Florida College of Education  
Tampa, Florida  
gatorteacher2@gmail.com

Wide eyed, Addie motioned me to an unoccupied corner of the classroom.

"One of the characters in here is gay," she whispered, motioning to the novel in her hand.

"I know," I whispered back.

"Did you know before you gave it to me?"

I nodded.

"It's cool," she continued to whisper, "to read about someone kind of like me."

I gave her shoulder a squeeze. "I'm glad you like it."

"The principal and stuff, do they know about this book?" she asked.

“I don’t think so and I’m not going to say anything.”

She nodded solemnly, completely understanding the need for secrecy. I watched Addie return to her favorite reading spot, a quiet corner of the classroom. She opened up *Keesha’s House* by Helen Frost and commenced reading.

When I began teaching a reading class for struggling readers, I was unfamiliar with some of the titles included in the independent reading collection, *Keesha’s House* among them. I took *Keesha’s House* home to read, and as soon as I finished it, I passed a copy to Addie. I was thrilled and amazed that a book with a homosexual character had made it into the school. An administration scared to upset conservative parents paired with a literacy specialist with strong traditional religious beliefs resulted in an unwillingness to purchase or allow books with homosexual characters.

This refusal to allow access to homosexual characters was problematic for Addie. An openly lesbian adolescent, Addie struggled to identify with the characters in the books supplied by the school. Addie’s obvious identification with Harris, the homosexual character in *Keesha’s House*, resulted in the creation of a voracious reader. Reading and enjoying *Keesha’s House* made Addie more willing to read other books I suggested. She finished the year as one of my strongest and most avid readers. While I’m happy *Keesha’s House* got her reading, I’m sad it had to be our little secret.

## YA Book Buzz

### Georgia Parker

English 8 Teacher  
Trinity Preparatory School  
Winter Park, FL  
parker@trinityprep.org

As many English teachers do, I cringe when I excitedly introduce a new novel only to be met with eye rolls and groans. However, after attending NCTE and ALAN in Chicago, I returned armed with a wealth of new ideas to engage my students. I paired several YA novels that included Dashner’s *Maze Runner Series* (2009), Roth’s *Divergent* (2011), Oliver’s *Delirium* (2011), Hautman’s *Rash* (2006), Weyn’s *Empty* (2012), and Treggiari’s *Ashes, Ashes* (2011) with Orwell’s classic *1984* (1948). In Chicago, I even chatted with James Dashner about my plans—an amazing experience!

The objective was to spark my students’ excitement about reading. I asked students to choose one of the YA novels and produce a book trailer depicting a common theme in that book and *1984*. The buzz began, and my students assembled some amazing trailers, posted them on YouTube, and even had some of the authors, unsolicited by me, comment on them. My students were thrilled, to say the least. Even more fulfilling for me was the book chatter, not just in my room, but in the halls, by the lockers, and at lunch time. My students were not just reading the one required YA book, they were passing them around. Students were counting down to the release of the *Divergent* sequel, *Insurgent* (2012), and lining up to borrow my copy of *The Maze Runner* (2009), because all the copies were checked out of our school’s library. The kids were reading because they wanted to not because it was required.

As a college prep school, our curriculum is founded on the canon. However, I have long believed that YA literature must be incorporated and encouraged. Schools promote the learning of a lifelong sport through PE. Why not provide students with an opportunity to become lifelong readers? Pairing YA literature with classics accomplishes this goal.