



TEACHER TALK

Mary Cate **LeBoeuf**

Book Love for All:

A Conversation with Stacey Reece

While getting my master's degree in English Education at the University of Tennessee, I read Penny Kittle's book, *Book Love: Developing Depth, Stamina, and Passion in Adolescent Readers* (Heinemann, 2012), and knew that my main goal as a teacher would be to help kids learn to remember that they love to read. One of my teacher mentors and fellow booklovers, Dr. Stacey Reece, has a mission to find representation for every child through YAL, and I am regularly challenged and inspired by her love of reading and her motivation to get students reading. For my first column, I had the opportunity to sit down with Stacey and one of her students, Erin Claxton, to discuss Stacey's experience winning Penny Kittle's Book Love Foundation Grant in 2018. This grant awards classroom teachers \$1,500 to build their classroom library and help students develop their own love for books and reading. With her foundation money, Stacey has chosen to purchase a wide variety of novels to allow for as much student choice as possible in her classroom.

LeBoeuf: How did you come to love young adult literature?

Reece: Oh gosh. I was in the 7th grade, and I found Judy Blume. I went to a very small school, so my elementary school didn't have a library; we had a media bus. The bus came every two weeks and was just a converted school bus. I'd never been inside a library, and I remember going into the library when I was in middle school and thinking "Whoa, there's a lot of books in here," and Judy Blume was

the first one I picked up. I can't remember which one it was . . . I think it was *Are You There God, It's Me, Margaret*. But anyway, after that one, I read all of Judy Blume. Then, I hadn't read Beverly Cleary when I was younger—and it was kind of "younger" for 7th grade—but the stories of Ramona and *How to Eat Fried Worms* (Thomas Rockwell) were so funny, I went back and read all of those, and that's how I just kept going [with reading].

LeBoeuf: What was access to YAL like for you growing up?

Reece: Honestly, Judy Blume is the big name I remember. Once I discovered Stephen King, I kind of fell out of that [and moved more into adult lit]. Once I started teaching in Johnson County, I discovered *13 Reasons Why* and *The Hate List*, and it was kind of a rediscovery of YA Lit in that class. I bought *13 Reasons Why* four times because kids kept asking to read my one copy. I started thinking "There's something here," so I started trying to re-familiarize myself [with the genre].

LeBoeuf: You taught in Johnson County and then moved to Knoxville for grad school, and then came back into the classroom. What is it like coming back into the classroom after spending so much time reading and studying YA Lit while getting your PhD? Do you have a different focus?

Reece: Yes! So much more of a different focus because [YAL] is accessible. It's just rich. There's so

much in YA books and it's so diverse. There's a YA book for everybody. I feel like in schools, especially, we get caught up in "dead white guys" and the canon. Noticing that in Johnson County and then taking classes about YA allowed me to build on what I'd already seen in my own classroom; I could really see how YA works in a class. As a result, I think I'm a better teacher.

LeBoeuf: Talk to us about the process of applying for and winning the Book Love Foundation Grant.

Reece: I don't know if I was aware of the Book Love Grants, but I had just started following Penny Kittle on Twitter after reading *180 Days* (Heinemann, 2018). And right about the time I started following her, the Book Love Grants were close to being due. I thought, "I'm going to try this because the worst thing that could happen is that [I] don't get it." After all, I always tell my students [the same thing], and I didn't want to be a hypocrite. I decided to apply at the last minute. I knew I needed reference letters, and I knew a student letter from Erin would bring this home for me, so I reached out to her over spring break as well as to a colleague to write recommendation letters. After I sent it in, the waiting was hard. I kept checking Twitter and thought I didn't get it because others had been notified and were announcing their wins on Twitter. Then I got a second email [the first email had gotten lost], and I realized I *won*. I kind of just sat there and looked at the screen for a minute, and there was my name. I won it!

LeBoeuf: That is amazing. Talk to us about what winning this grant means to you and your kids.

Reece: It's incredible. It's very humbling to be one of just a few dozen educators in the entire United States and Canada to be chosen out of the hundreds of applications. What a gift. Penny Kittle is a treasure—she is and the whole foundation is. Having someone invest in you, knowing that you're going to reinvest that in students is pretty awesome. And for my kids? I do a lot of book talks, and they are constantly asking, "What should I read next?"—more this year than ever before. Having a variety of books where you can match a kid with

a book, like I did with Erin, means I can be more successful in developing lifelong readers.

LeBoeuf: What advice do you have for other teachers in applying for grants like The Book Love Grant?

Reece: Well, number one, do it. Don't be afraid of failure, because I know sometimes as teachers we get caught up in that. You have to try. Number two: Make it as solid as you can. Don't be afraid to say what your strengths are and what good things are going on in your classroom. As teachers, we support each other, and we need to know those things anyway, so you've got to "toot your own horn." And then, find a student who buys into it as much as you do who can exemplify what you are doing in your classroom. Finally, do your application creatively. Make yourself stand out. Do a video, do any kind of thing that is creative and makes you stand out.

LeBoeuf: What advice do you have for other teachers looking to bring new books into their classroom to increase engagement?

Reece: First of all, check and see what your kids are reading, because that's a pretty good indicator of books you should be bringing into your classroom. Also *ask* them, "What do you all want me to get? What do I need to add [to the classroom library]?" I buy what I can, but my wish list from students is always long, so when parents ask me what they can do to help support me and my students, I direct them to my classroom Amazon wish list or tell them I need gift cards to bookstores. I also love going to ALAN because it is a huge resource, and I get access to all the current books.

LeBoeuf: In your experience, what increases engagement for your students when it comes to what they are reading?

Reece: Number one is accessibility. My kids are surrounded by books and hear me talking about them constantly. Even if they're reluctant, your kids will read if they know it's the expectation. But really, it's always having a conversation with kids. I think we forget to do that sometimes because everybody

talks *about* teenagers and what they like and what they don't like, but sometimes we just forget to ask. The place I start is always, "The last book I really liked was . . ." and they tell me. Or if they

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have never really read, I'll ask them to finish this sentence: "If I read a book, it'd have to be like this." And just reading yourself. It's easier for me to recommend a book if I've read it myself. If we want to increase engagement, we've got to read, too. We have to know what we're talking about, and they have to know it's a priority and important. YA is written for young adults! So often in English classes, we make them read things for adults. But being engaged in a book means they have a choice. They can say, "I chose this. This is what I

want to read. Nobody's making me read this." That helps, too. Then, having a variety of books about different ethnicities, races, sexual orientations, ability levels, genres, etc. That means they don't have the option to say, "You don't have anything I'm willing to read." There's something out there, and I'm going to help you find it.

LeBoeuf: Erin, can you talk to us now about your experience with reading? Did you like to read before coming to Dr. Reece's class?

Erin: Growing up, I did not like it at all. In elementary school, we had Accelerated Reading, and it definitely seemed more like a chore then. My mom is an English teacher, and she always wanted me to read, but I just struggled with finding the right books. I read the basics, but I still really never connected with anything I was reading. As I got to middle school, it wasn't very pressed on me to read. When I look back, I don't remember being asked, "Are you reading something right now?" or "You should read this." So when I had Ms.

Reece on the first day of sophomore year, and she was telling me I was going to have to read for 15 minutes at the beginning of every class, I wasn't very excited about it. But then I saw how excited she was about reading. She came in just about every day with a book to talk about or recommend to us. And so slowly, with some trial and error, I definitely started to love [reading]. The first book I read and loved was *Everything, Everything*. I started it over fall break sophomore year, and I finished in two days. I think that's the fastest I've ever read a book.

LeBoeuf: What does it mean to you for Dr. Reece to have won the Book Love Grant? What does this mean for students in the future?

Erin: Even though I'm not in her class anymore, I come in here pretty often looking for books. Lots of kids like me are coming into her class, and they don't really enjoy reading whatsoever. But to have that variety of books available for everyone means that these students have the opportunity to find the right book for them—the book that can get them on the path to reading. That just excites me that this experience of having the opportunity to find books can be passed onto someone else.

LeBoeuf: Why do you both think YAL is so engaging for adolescents? For non-adolescents?

Erin: Sometimes I like to see a reflection of my personal experience—what I see around me in high school. Other times, I want to see things that aren't necessarily at my school. It goes with the genre, but I love how real YA books seem to be, and are.

Reece: Yeah, like a window into someone else's world.

Erin: Yes. I don't feel like it's so much transporting me to a new place as people say books do, but it's more of a true reflection of my life and the world currently.

Reece: Most people who buy YA are 30. And yes, part of it is because we have jobs and can afford to buy books, but I think YA is so appealing because, like

Erin said, it doesn't matter who you are; you identify with something. I mean, I'm 48 years old, and I can identify with the conflict that a character is facing. I think there are things we all identify with. There's something about remembering how it felt to be that age and getting behind that feeling.

LeBoeuf: Okay, last question for you both. What books are you recommending to students and classmates these days?

Reece: *Time Bomb* by Charbonneau, *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* by Sobina Khan, *Jacked Up* by Erica Sage, *Dread Nation* by Justina Ireland, *Voices: The Last Hours of Joan of Arc* by David Elliot, *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* by Kiersten White, and *People Kill People* by Ellen Hopkins.

Erin: I always recommend *The Female of the Species* by Mindy McGinnis.



Mary Cate LeBoeuf holds a master's degree in Secondary English Education from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and teaches Secondary English and Creative Writing in Knoxville. She believes in the power of the written word and strives to have every student that enters her classroom leave loving to read more than they did before. She spends her free time reading as much as possible, as well as spending quality time with her husband, friends, and dog. Her next YA reads are *A Little Too Bright* by Samuel Miller and *Two Can Keep a Secret* by Karen M. McManus.

Stacey Reece has been in the classroom for nearly 30 years. She has divided her time between middle school, high school, and undergrad and graduate students in Mountain City, Tennessee, and Knoxville, Tennessee. After receiving her PhD from The University of Tennessee, she returned to the high school classroom and is currently teaching 10th- and 11th-grade International Baccalaureate students in Knoxville. She also serves on the Knox County Teacher Advisory Committee and coaches basketball. When she is not working, you can find her reading. Her next YA reads are *Dry* by Jarrod and Neal Shusterman, *The Field Guide to the North American Teenager* by Ben Philippe, and *You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone* by Rachel Lynn Solomon.

Erin Claxton is a dancer and recent graduate from West High School in Knoxville, Tennessee. Her love of reading was rekindled in Dr. Reece's 10th-grade classroom. She plans to attend The University of Tennessee, Knoxville in the fall. Her next YA read is *Dear Evan Hansen* by Val Emmich, Steven Lawson, et al.