

INLAND

Spring/Summer 2011 • Volume 28 • Number 1

A Journal for Teachers of English Language Arts

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Literature for Adolescents

Crag Hill

Headlines scream impending doom for literature: “Why Don’t Kids Read for Fun Anymore” and “Literary Reading in Dramatic Decline, According to National Endowment for the Arts Survey.” For many in media, in political office, in school administration, it seems but a short hop onto this pessimistic bandwagon. But we can flip this wagon on its head. For those of us who work daily with adolescents, *InLand* is determined to build a positive vehicle to guide onto the literary highway. We argue never before has there been such an abundance of literary riches for young readers. Just peek into any bookstore: young adult literature is thriving, overflowing the book shelves; graphic novels and manga, hard to find a few years ago, now command entire aisles in Barnes and Noble; and reading is growing on-line where fan fiction abounds, where students read and interact with writers such as Laurie Halse Anderson on social networking and author websites. This issue of *InLand* celebrates this prosperity!

Graciously granting us permission to print “Drawing Boundaries on Water: The Undulations of Young Adult Literature,” Chris Crowe, teacher of teachers, past columnist of *English Journal*, young adult critic and novelist, raconteur and gadfly extraordinaire, has worked tirelessly to advance young adult literature for maximum inclusion into secondary classrooms, libraries, and the ever-evolving landscape of contemporary literature itself. I heard Crowe read this piece at the 2009 ALAN workshop in San Antonio. As curmudgeon, in the persona of a teacher who believes young adult literature is dumb literature, at best, Crowe gets us to chuckle at our elitist tendencies. His ironic voice at the same time highlights the strengths of young adult literature.

Steve Bickmore and Susan Steffel tease out the perennial dilemma for secondary teachers: meet adolescent readers where they reside, making room for their interests, or offer texts that stretch students’ understanding of what literature can do and be. They make a compelling case that strong selections of young adult literature can bind the binary.

In “Infusing Young Adult Literature into High School English,” Bruce Robbins offers suggestions for how to use young adult literature to complement the classics before reading, while reading, and after reading. He also makes a pitch for reading young adult literature instead of reading a classic, arguing that *The Absolutely True Diary*

of a Part-Time Indian presents themes of materialism, social class, and friendship, much like *The Great Gatsby*.

Becky Proctor provides a librarian’s point of view in “New Young Adult Literature: Fun in the Classroom.” From book trailers to communicating directly with the authors to recommendations of novels, Proctor’s article adds to Bruce Robbins’ suggestions of how to integrate young adult literature into the classroom.

One of the most compelling young adult novels to appear in the last five years, *My Most Excellent Year* by Steve Kluger is the focus of Beth Buyserie’s “A Most Excellent Novel for the High School English Class: LGBT Connections in Steve Kluger’s *My Most Excellent Year*.” Buyserie argues this novel can be utilized to teach social justice issues. Building off the March 2009 issue of *English Journal* on “Sexual Identity and Gender Variance,” Buyserie advocates using novels such as *My Most Excellent Year* to show how gay and straight students can serve as allies for each other and how when gay students receive parental support they more readily weather the harassment heaped on them by their peers. Perhaps the most important point of the article, Buyserie believes the pedagogy needed to teach this novel can be the foundation for a pedagogy to resist all the norms of society, not just those related to sexuality.

In “The Ever-Changing Face of Young Adult Literature,” Kat Chew demonstrates how Scott Westerfelds’ *The Ugliers* series can be the focal point for students to critically evaluate their world, making visible how identity is constructed by society. The series critiques how our dependence on technology may not be producing the benefits we think they are. Particularly relevant to student readers, Chew makes clear that when our society spends millions on body image, its ultimate goal is the psychological control of its young consumers. We may look good but it comes at a significant cost.

Young adult literature is continually pitted against the classical literature that has been the heart of secondary language arts curriculum for generations. Yet Bruce Robbins and others in this issue underscore the complementary relationship young adult literature can have with classical literature. In “The Odyssey: Finding Our Way to Student Engagement,” Lee Dubert, Peter Erickson, Susan Martin, and Heather Sinnes outline how through connections with teen culture, weaving in supplementary, contemporary

texts such as popular movies, and tapping students' myth-making potential through writing, reading Homer's *Odyssey* can be engaging reading for today's adolescent.

Scores of teachers across the country have realized that graphic novels, those once reviled comics, can be an important part of their curriculum, especially to motivate reluctant readers. Graphic novels such as *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, and *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang have become staples in secondary classrooms. Katie Monnin, James Bucky Carter, and Brian Kelley, in "Aligning the IRA/NCTE Standards to Graphic Novels: An ELA Pedagogy of Multiliteracies," validate how graphic novels can not only motivate readers but can more importantly meet the standards our classes are so relentlessly tested upon. The authors also make the important point that because graphic novels are multiliterate texts, they widen the lens of what literacy is. This article includes a wealth of specific examples of how a pedagogy of multiliteracies can meet the IRA/NCTE and the forthcoming Common Core standards.

For a special treat in this issue, we get to eavesdrop on the kinds of conversations teachers are having about teaching graphic novels. In "A Mother-Son Dialogue: Comics...Get Serious! Understanding the Visual and Textual through the Graphic Novel," Ginger Reese and her son Spencer discuss how they use the study of the visual elements of graphic novels to strengthen the textual knowledge of their students. Readers will take away ideas for using—and suggestions for reading—dozens of graphic novels and comics.

Shannyn Stagner's rationale for teaching Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* is an off-shoot of the major project Maupin House published in 2010 on CD-ROM, *Rationales for Teaching Graphic Novels*, edited by James Bucky Carter, a project that produced rationales for 108 graphic novels. Intended to not only encourage teachers and librarians to incorporate graphic novels into their classes and libraries, the rationales provide the essential arguments for this inclusion. For *Fun Home*, Stagner points out what grade level the graphic novel would be best suited for, includes a plot summary to entice readers, discusses the strengths and unique characteristics of the text, and presents some ways the novel could be implemented in the classroom.

The issue concludes with five reviews by Marilyn Carpenter that first appeared on her blog, "The Children's Book Compass." I recommend you check in to her blog as often as you can: <http://marilyncarpenter.wordpress.com/>

This likely is *InLand's* final issue. A partnership born of the collaboration between two affiliates cannot sustain itself when both affiliates (INCTE, serving northern Idaho and eastern Washington, and ICTE, serving southern Idaho), hit as so many other NCTE affiliates have been by a loss of membership, cannot afford to fund the journal. I know that I was not alone when I went into mourning when this decision was made. We thank all the educators who have contributed to *Inland* over the last 25 years as writers, board members, editors, copy reviewers, proofreaders, and subscribers. It has been an award-winning run!

Casting

You've seen old men sleeping along this river
and now you're here with a lover.

Lightning trips along mountains
one shade darker than night.

City lights reflect in the rush of water
still too cold to swim in. It might shock—

Drifting down, the ghosts of cottonwoods.
Downtown the puffs had eddied at your feet,

collected along curbs or sifted
between gutter slats. Now the soft down

is a piece of light, a flaw he finds
in your hair. Error he lifts and sends

on its way. Sand that close to water
is always cool. You think how lovely

that sand has its own sort of memory.
It remembers our shapes long after we leave.

—Wendy Erman

Wendy Erman received her MFA from the University of Montana and is currently working as an instructor of English at Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston,

Drawing Boundaries on Water: The Undulations of Young Adult Literature

Chris Crowe

At the 2008 ALAN Workshop, John Green said he'd like to meet someone who doesn't think as he does, someone who, for example, thinks teachers are grossly overpaid or who thinks that the new directions taken by modern young adult literature is a huge mistake. Well, for a few moments, I am going to be that person. Consider me the Grand Curmudgeon of Young Adult Literature, or your English Professor, your department chair, your library director, parent, or grandparent or anyone else old and crooked enough to malign the wonderful variety that exists in today's YA literature.

Back in the good old days, when somebody defined something, it stayed defined, when somebody drew a boundary, it stayed drawn. Most things—especially things taught in school—were exactly what they were supposed to be, never what they *weren't* supposed to be. For example, when a teenager read a 'book,' it meant he had read—silently, with his own **eyes**—a textbook or novel.

Back in the good old days, a novel meant “an extended fictional prose narrative,” that is, a novel was a **book**, a book made up of lots of words, words **printed** in black on white **paper** without pictures or illustrations, a book filled with sentences that were organized into **regular** paragraphs, some as long as a full page. Charles Dickens' spellbinding *Great Expectations* is a wonderful example of a such a novel.

Back in the good old days, young adult literature or “teen fiction,” was called **adolescent literature**, and everybody knew that an adolescent was a teenager, often a teenager at least 14 years old. And “adolescent literature” meant *fiction*, not drama, poetry, nonfiction, short stories, comic books, or any combination of such stuff.

Back in the good old days, my life as a teacher and as a writer was so much simpler. My high school students knew—because I had pounded it into their heads—that a paragraph had to have at least five to seven sentences and that a novel had to have at least 200 pages and that novels

had obvious beginnings, middles and ends, and obeyed Aristotle's traditional unities of time, place, and action.

Back in the good old days when I first started teaching young adult literature at the university level, my students were never confused about what was a novel and what wasn't or by what was for young adults and what wasn't. OK, a few novels experimented with narrative form—Zindel's *The Pigman* and its alternating narrators—but those books were anomalies, quaint exceptions to the comfortable old rules.

And back in the good old days when I first started trying to write books for teenagers, I felt like I knew what I was



Chris Crowe teaches young adult literature, creative writing, and methods of teaching English at Brigham Young University. The father of four—and grandfather of two—also writes YA books and about YA literature. His most recent YA book is Thurgood Marshall: Up Close (Viking 2008) and his most recent book about YA literature is Teaching the Selected Works of Mildred D. Taylor (Heinemann 2007). He's currently working on a historical novel for young adults.

doing, what a book should look like, and who would end up reading it. There weren't any alternative or strange ways for conceiving or creating an extended fictional prose narrative.

Today I find myself in a field that has been turned on its head. My good-old-days brain is in a constant state of Future Shock because the young adult literature world has degenerated into something terribly different from the good old days. My young adult literature students now read books that don't seem to be novels. They read books that don't seem to be written for teenagers. They read books that have more illustrations than words. And they even read some books with their *ears*.

Today I find myself reading books by hot young writers like Ann Dee Ellis¹ and Hope Larson², two authors who obviously never sat through one of my high school English classes where they would learned how to write a *real* paragraph! These two young women obviously never heard me lecture on the definitions and boundaries of young adult literature. Ann Dee was even my own graduate student, a bright and talented writer aspiring to compose a young adult novel, . . . I thought, . . . but her manuscript was like a head of naturally and wildly frizzy hair, and no matter how much water I sprayed on it to make it lay down and straighten out, it kept springing back to its naturally frizzy, full-bodied, and unconventional form.

A form without real paragraphs.

These days, as a teacher and writer, I am adrift in a sea without boundaries, an ocean of books that take any form they please. And I am as excited about it as a drowning man can be.

What has happened to my tidy, well-defined world? Whom can I blame for bringing chaos to the cozy order of the good old days? Who corrupted Ann Dee and Hope and led them to produce novels that would shock and bewilder good old Charles Dickens? I don't have time to list all the miscreants, but here's a start:

- S. E. Hinton for writing in a *real* teen voice
- Paul Zindel for his **alternating narrators** in *The Pigman* and Paul Fleischman for taking **multiple narrators** to insane extremes in *Bull Run*.
- Robert Cormier, with his gritty **adult**-style realism.
- Art Spiegelman for *Maus*, a novel written like a **comic** book.
- Virginia Euwer Wolff for her **choppy** paragraphs and race-less characters in *Make Lemonade*.
- Karen Hesse for writing *Out of the Dust* in **free verse**!
- J. K. Rowling for completely blowing up the **length requirements** for YA novels.
- Walter Dean Myers for **mixing up genre** in *Monster*.
- Jon Scieszka and his children's books that really **aren't for children**.
- Louis Sachar for the twisting, turning, decidedly **un-unified plot** in *Holes*.

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And things get worse.

- Lauren Myracle for *TTYL*, a novel written in **texting**.
- M. T. Anderson for writing *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing* in **18th Century English**.
- Gene Luen Yang for doing the same thing as Sachar, but with **cartoons** in *American Born Chinese*.
- Brian Selznick for a fat hybrid book, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, that is neither picture book nor novel yet is claimed to be both.
 - And Shaun Tan for "writing" *The Arrival*, a novel with **no words**!

Looking at how far we've drifted from our traditional roots, I am haunted by the fear that young adult literature is headed to Hell in a bookbag. If we continue to ride the anything-goes currents of change, just imagine, if you dare, what might come next:

A Twitter edition of a book sent to cell phones.

A picture book with no pictures.

An audio book with no words—I can see it now, the audio version of Tan's *The Arrival*.

And ultimately, I'm afraid that we'll do away with paper, images, print, and even sound—and end up with the telepathic novel, one that exists only in the mind of its author.

YA literature and its teachers and authors have indeed endured a sea change in the last forty years, but fortunately, all is not lost. Hope and Ann Dee and authors like them can still return to the good old days. It's not too late for them to put the clamps on their creativity, to stop breaking boundaries, and to give up grinding genre. Instead of finding new ways to tell stories, they can ponder—and practice—the majestic beauty of the one-page paragraphs in *Great Expectations* and launch the return of YA books to the safe and stodgy ways of old.

Won't that renaissance be wonderful?

Long live Charles Dickens, our anchor in the turbulent sea of YA literature!

¹Written with tongue firmly in cheek by a fan—and a teacher and author—of YA literature.

²Author of *This is What I Did* and *Everything is Fine*.

³Author of the graphic novels *Chiggers*, *Salamander Dream*, and *Gray Horses*.



Motivating Students to Read with Young Adult Literature: Connecting the Reader and the Text

Steve Bickmore and Susan Steffel

Do any of you have a student who won't read? Okay, do you have two or three students who won't read? Maybe, at times, you face what seems like a whole class of students who won't read. In reality, kids do read: Harry Potter, the Twilight Saga, the adventures of Percy Jackson, sports novels (John Ritter, Chris Crutcher, and Robert Lipsyte), troubled teens (John Green, Laurie Halse Anderson, and Jay Asher), and inner city issues (Coe Booth, Walter Dean Myers, and Sharon Draper). The list of authors in these or other genres (fantasy, romance, science fiction, historical fiction, adventure, comic novels, graphic novels and novels in verse) could go on and on. Maybe they just don't want to read what we offer. And maybe this is especially true when we focus on testing mandates and scripted curriculum concerns. Perhaps, it is time to be even more proactive about offering books to students that match their interests and meet their needs.

In our experience we have found that kids do read. They read books that are relevant to their lives. They read books that make them laugh; they read books that make them cry; they read books that let them escape to other worlds and other realities; and, perhaps most importantly, they read books that help them explain the real and potential difficulties of their lives. Not long ago, the ALAN Workshop (see end note, p. 11) following the NCTE convention in Philadelphia with its theme, "YA Literature in the 21st Century: 'Scattering Light' on our Freedom to Think, See, Imagine," allowed participants to hear from young adult novelists just how many kids are not only reading their books, but writing to them about how these books affect their lives. A host of authors described letters from teens that demonstrate how books written for adolescents gave them hope; gave them a vision of a possible future; and saved their lives. Stephen Chbosky read a letter from a young girl who confessed that she was planning her suicide as she also read his novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999). To make a long story short, reading the book helped her find a bit of light in her own life that helped her choose life.

As two veteran secondary English teachers who now work as English Educators, we echo Alan Sitomer's charge: ...sometimes in this world you just gotta put your



Dr. Steve Bickmore teaches young adult literature, English methods, and graduate courses in literacy and English Education at Louisiana State University. He is currently one of the co-editors of The ALAN Review, a journal dedicated to the teaching, promotion, and research of young adult literature.

Dr. Susan Steffel, professor of English at Central Michigan University, teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses in English education and young adult literature. She has served as president of Michigan Council of Teachers of English, editor of Language Arts Journal of Michigan, and president of Michigan Conference on English Education. Most recently she was named Michigan Distinguished Professor of the Year by the President's Council of State Universities of Michigan.

stake in the ground and make a claim. For me, as a teacher, as a writer, as a parent, as a citizen of this country and the world, my stake is staked. I believe in using real books to reach real kids to impact real lives in a very real, very tangible, very gainful, productive, and positive way (2010, p. 44).

We also place our stake in the ground and advocate for placing books in the hands of teens that they will read. Again, at the recent ALAN workshop Sitomer suggested, “If they don’t read, what can you teach? And if they read, what can’t you teach.” We believe that the demands of too many scripted lesson plans, too many tests, and too many meaningless routines from programs that mean well but don’t capture the imagination of kids need to stop. Young adult literature is positioned to meet the emotional and academic needs of students. Young adult literature is written for them: it is concerned with issues they face daily; it is literature they choose to read; and it is literature that ushers them into academic ways of reading.

We offer a look at a persistent binary in the teaching of young adult literature between a focus on the reader or the text. A focus on the reader draws attention to engagement. Is the reader immersed in the text? Is the experience, as Rosenblatt suggests, an aesthetic experience? A focus on the text tends to highlight the literary quality of young adult texts. How well is a novel crafted? Can you teach textual analysis by pointing to a variety of literary elements that curriculum standards suggest students master before completing school? We think both ends of the binary, engaging the student and offering real texts that answer curricular demands, are important. The reading process doesn’t happen until the two, the text and the reader, manage to engage. After all is said and done about teaching English, we believe in teaching kids—teaching them where they are academically, emotionally, and developmentally, so that we can help them advance towards where they need to be and where they themselves want to be. In the best situations, effective instruction happens closer to the middle of our suggested continuum. Try as we might to agree, we both run towards the middle from different ends. In an attempt to show that young adult literature can motivate real students, we explore the two extremes, the reader and the text. We trust that you will see possible mergers as providing more common ground for motivating students to read books written for them. The adolescents thumbing the pages of the books in our classrooms need better options, and we argue that quality young adult literature engages them while meeting the demands of academic rigor.

Highlighting the Reader (Susan’s Starting Point)

“Literature affirms our common humanity, illuminates our differences, and documents how different people at different times have perceived and approached an infinite variety of human aspirations and problems. Literature captures and stimulates the imagination of adolescents and young adults and is a source for acquainting them with the literary, social, and cultural traditions of our diverse

society. It is a vehicle for helping students gain personal and social understanding and develop their abilities to respond to a variety of texts with critical understanding and appreciation. It is a source of pleasure and entertainment” (Stover, 2006, p. 29).

This introduction from NCTE’s *Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts* (Stover, 2006) suggests that reading literature can be an essential human experience. We believe the power and pleasure of reading must not be circumvented by jumping too fast to analysis and bypassing the personal and the affective in reading. HOW we teach literature matters. I’m not suggesting that we ignore the discussion of literary merits, but rather, as Rosenblatt urges, we begin with the readers and ensure their engagement before moving to discussions of literary analysis.

I run my young adult literature course as a readers’ workshop. Students are encouraged to record their initial thoughts in response logs and to deny their teacherly desire to jump to analysis. I want them to be readers first. Class discussion is then based on the shared thoughts, questions, and reactions. This is not an easy feat, however. Before we do anything else with literature, we first need to get students (whether they are preservice teachers or students in an ELA classroom) to want to read it. Is our goal to create lifelong readers or those who can critique literature but find no pleasure in reading? What is the benefit of teaching our students to analyze literature if they stop reading altogether?

By using this readers’ workshop approach preservice teachers rediscover the pleasure of reading and attend to literary analysis. Their experiences with *Luna* (Peters, 2004) demonstrate their reengagement with literature.

Luna. “Well, what did you think?” Initial comments are expectedly emotional. Jake surprised even himself:

“Wow. That’s basically how I sum up this book up. Usually I’m not down with the whole wah-wah-wah-tear-jerking endings to a story, but I really enjoyed this one. There were quite a few points that I could relate to in this story, which frankly kind of surprised me. I guess that’s a lesson in itself. Why would I assume I couldn’t relate with a transgendered young man. Kind of ignorant. One of the biggest things of this book to me ties back to 5th grade and the Core Democratic values. Didn’t think I’d ever be thinking about those bad boys again. One of them is the pursuit of happiness. Everyone has the right to be happy.”

Jennifer found herself so moved she could hardly express her response. “Reading this book was one of the greatest literary experiences that I have had. This novel provoked so much emotion, so much after thought, and provided me with a character I could truly identify with even though our lifestyles are so different.”

Gradually, their comments turn to specific characters and the scenes caught their attention. “All throughout the story, Liam fights to keep Luna out of society. He is fighting to keep himself hidden. No one knows the real her. The pain that that

must cause is unthinkable. There is no way any social pain I endured holds a candle to that,” says Jake, and Janine sums it all up: “This novel was intense, powerful, and wonderful all at the same time. It made me feel every emotion possible. I got angry. I cried. I smiled. I laughed. I felt it all through the emotional roller coaster of both Regan and Liam/Luna’s lives.”

Eventually, the discussion moves to considerations of literary technique. Often combining their insights with all their emotional responses, the students use their knowledge of analysis to support their responses. It’s a serendipitous blending of critical stances. Cassey finds the characterization in Luna especially effective. “I thought the perspective was a really interesting one in this story. Instead of the story being told through Liam or Luna’s eyes, it is instead told by Regan. It allows us to see Luna’s problem from a different angle, one in which not only Luna feels the pain and stress of the secret, but Regan, the sister, feels it too.”

Foreshadowing, flashback, the use of subplots, and the effectiveness of the ending are all topics that came up. Theresa found the use of foreshadowing in Luna compelling, saying, “Julie Anne Peter’s *Luna* is one of those books that had me at the edge of my seat. I was convinced that this was going to end in death because one of the lines Liam says is: ‘I have to finish this. There isn’t much time’ (Peters, 2004, p. 231). That scared me to death. I don’t like it when characters foreshadow something that can be so ambiguous, but it does keep you reading.”

Jennifer appreciated the flashbacks, “I really liked the use of flashbacks. They provided so much insight.” Alissa further comments on the flashbacks used in the text. “The use of italics for the flashbacks was genius. These sections were Regan’s memories when she was little, and each of these sections pieced together things that Regan had experienced with Liam while they were growing up.” Alissa further notices the use of a subplot and comments on its effectiveness. “There is also a sub story that involves Regan having a crush on a boy at school, Chris. It allows an out for Regan and an opportunity to feel like a normal teen.”

Regan’s crush also connects to various literary devices. For example, Theresa loves “the use of chemistry in the book” and quotes the novel to prove her point. “‘Chris and Regan meeting in chemistry class’ (Peters, 2004, p. 26). One can only laugh at how a chemistry class shows two people how much chemistry they have together. Regan also acknowledges this play on words. ‘Chemistry, That was it. The tears in my eyes overflowed the rims. Why did it have to be about chemistry?’ She [Regan] realizes the use of chemistry in this book. Yet, it is used another way. Most people

know the role of chemistry and science in determining our sexual orientation, but Peter’s use of it all here is terrific.” And Charlie comments on the use of ironic humor, saying, “the use of the sexist chemistry teacher was so ironic.”

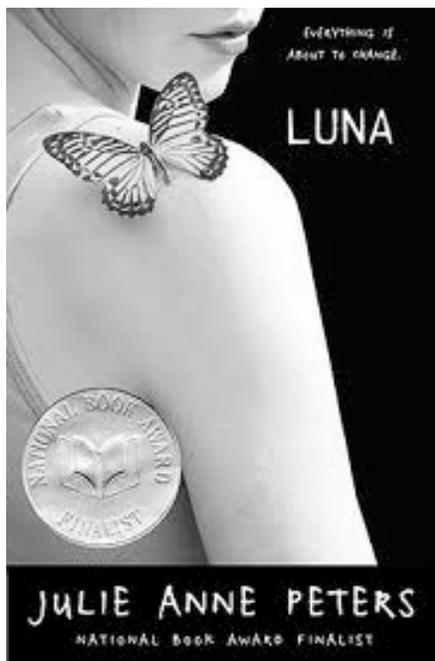
However, Corinne also notices the use of poetic language in *Luna* (Peters, 2004), commenting, “Even more than Luna, I connected with Regan. Regan was a teen who was also trapped. She was a teen who felt the weight of the world on her shoulders. The quote, ‘I cried for her. I cried for me. I cried for a world that would not let her be’ (p. 211) was very poetic and summed up what Regan was feeling through most of the novel. Luna and Regan find their freedom at the end of the story. When Regan says goodbye to Luna, she says hello to herself.”

And, of course, insights into theme are intertwined with the discussion of every literary device. While further discussing *Luna* (Peters, 2004), Jake confesses, “I guess the biggest reflection I can take from this book after reading about the insane amount of pain Luna goes through is that it doesn’t matter what a person is sexually, ethnically, or anything.... They still hurt, just like the rest of us. I don’t know. I feel really stupid saying that a book taught me that all people have feelings, I mean I obviously knew that, but it was like a reminder, I guess.” Sarah makes an interesting connection. “When I first opened this book, I found a temporary tattoo in the cover. At first I thought it was cool because I could use it as a bookmark. Then I read what it said: ‘Are You Free?’ I thought about that

the entire time I read *Luna*. None of the characters are free.”

In discussing the character, Luna, Janice shares, “We tend to place so many restrictions on what it means to be a male or female, masculine or feminine that people (and especially young people) find themselves so afraid to explore who they are that they wind up frustrated with who they become or alienated from themselves in some way or another. Everyone is struggling with who they are and what everyone tells them or indirectly implies they should be—gender struggles affect almost everyone in some respect.” Raeanne poetically concludes by connecting the discussion of identity to the previously discussed *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2002), “Mr. Ward allows his students to take down their ‘masks’ and grow together as a class. I enjoyed reading and catching the subtle transitions the characters make in regard to one another. At the beginning of the novel, Tyrone believes he could be dead by twenty-one, yet at the end he believes in the power of a dream.”

Class discussions were not limited to their thoughts on *Luna* (Peters, 2004) itself. They moved to connect each book with other literature have read. In another discus-



sion, David eagerly made the connection between *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2002) and Dunbar's (1986) poem, "We Wear the Mask," and Callie connected the theme of community to a text in her methods course. "As I was reading this novel, I could not help but connect its context to my reading of Smokey Daniels in my writing methods class. Daniels writes that it is so important to develop a writing community in order for students to connect to their writing and each other." Ben found a connection between *Bronx Masquerade* and *Luna*, pointing out that characters in both novels are masking their true identities.

A few of the characters, like Diondra, become more confident in themselves and their artistic abilities. This is the kind of thing that a lot of students in high school do have issues with: their parents want them to be something that they don't necessarily want to be, and feel alienated both at school and at home. This was also an issue that showed up in *Luna*, with Liam feeling that he HAD to be the son that his father always wanted. This is the same issue, just a different circumstance, of not knowing what to do, and how to express yourself the way you want to without letting anyone down or disappointing your family members.

Responses often conclude with students projecting into their own classrooms and excitedly talking about how these novels could be incorporated into their lessons. Callie shares, "I am excited by the possibilities of this book for my own classroom. The opportunities for writing, for open mics, for discussing the many issues presented within the novel."

And for some, they are inspired by the literature to create their own. Kate's poetic response to *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2002) represents how young adult literature can evoke emotion and creativity.

"Connection.
That's what it's all about.
Words can do that—
words that are kinda artsy.
I mean, that's what poetry's all about, right?
being artistic about your feelings?"

So if everyone really shares,
it's gotta bring you closer.

Maybe I'm afraid to connect.
Maybe that's why I don't want to tell
my family
or anyone
about being a writer.
I don't even call myself that
when no one's around
except when it just jumps
outta my mouth before
checking with me first.

I'm a writer.
Yeah, I am.
It's what I like."

Over the course of the readers' workshop these preservice teachers become students who enjoy the books they are reading. As the discussions develop they remember they are training to be teachers and they more readily apply their "English major" analytical skills. Slowly, the skeptics begin to see how readers can both enjoy the literature and study it at the same time; they begin to find a blend between what Rosenblatt coined the efferent and the aesthetic or analytical and affective (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995). Raeanne gets it. "Wow, after our class discussion, I feel as if I need to re-read this book because even through talking about it, I already feel so much more connected to the plot and characters!!!! In retrospect, it was a lot deeper that I initially gave it credit for."

Highlighting the Text (Steve's Starting Point)

Our second approach considers the text. We surmise that current practicing English teachers received reasonable practice and instruction in literary analysis during their apprenticeship as English majors or minors. How recent or thorough that training might be varies with each teacher. We also wonder if they were encouraged to apply those techniques to children's or adolescent literature and if they were did they take it seriously? A colleague in my university's English department had occasion to teach a children's literature course and lamented that students, who previously demonstrated precise theoretical and analytical skills were reluctant, if not resistant, to apply those same skills in a serious way to a reading of *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963) and other samples of children's literature.

A brief presentation of the possible textual examinations suggested by three YA novels, *Monster* (Myers & Myers, 1999), *Holes* (Sachar, 1998), and *Whirligig* (Fleischman, 1998) demonstrates that quality young adult literature that motivates students in ELA classrooms can open the doorway to rich analysis.

Monster. The courtroom drama, *Monster* (Myers & Myers, 1999), quickly found its way into the classroom. It was a staple in a high school where I supervised student teaching. The experimental text invites readers to think differently about their reading. *Monster* presents its text in multi-font, multi-layered formats as the central character, Steve Harmon, presents a self-conscious screenplay of his time in jail and the resulting trial. Early in the text, page 9 evokes *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) as the print widens and flairs out towards the bottom of the page and narrows and compresses towards the top. Most readers easily notice that the book is imitating the movie's opening display of text. As Steve begins to make sense of his situation, he uses his learning in a high school film class to record his thoughts. With its open layout the novel presents a multi-genre experience as it evokes varied readings through multiple fonts, pictures, and formats. Teachers can direct students to consider how the novel's structure helps them think about a text. How do multiple fonts suggest voice? How do pictures alter point of view? And, how do various formats foreshadow shifts in setting, tone, and narrative tension? This

is a different assignment and pedagogical choice than just having students identify plot, character, setting, and theme.

As they identify the structure of the novel, they can consider Steve's retelling of the events. He can be selective; his version of the plot can be questioned over and over again through the various modes of structural presentation. When students consider characterization they must focus on how thoroughly they see other characters through the main character's selective narrative. As a result, the importance of point of view can be pivotal while discussing character development. As students discuss various settings they see how the author's choice of fonts becomes indicative of place: one

style when Steve is alone and another when he is recording court proceedings. A variety of themes run through the novel deeper than the most obvious issue of social justice. Students can be asked to consider the diversity issues of inner city poverty, race relationships, and the justice system. Beyond those issues, students can be introduced to questions of race theory, class interaction, and the nature of jails as holding cells for those who are innocent until proven guilty.

The novel proves to be popular with readers and critics and can be a powerful instructional tool for full class instruction. This discussion hints at how the expansion of the common foci in a classroom literary discussion of plot, character, setting, and theme can be advanced through a rigorous examination of various structural choices in an adolescent novel. Discussing race theory, class issues, and narrative structures are standard points of examination that might be used with the novels of Morrison, Dickens, or Faulkner. There should be no need to dismiss Myer's novel as a lesser piece of fiction.

Holes. Occasionally a novel sweeps through classrooms. *Holes* (Sachar, 1998) seemed to be one of those books that captured student interest at a variety of levels. When I visit a school, students readily tag me as one of those university types and give me a wide berth for a while. Once, I brazenly carried a copy of *Holes* through the doors. As soon as I sat down a tenth grader told me I was reading her favorite book. She told me how much she liked it. I stupidly asked if she liked to read and if she had other favorite books. She quickly announced reading was stupid and quit talking to me. I should learn to shut up.

I have no idea what Sachar was thinking when he wrote the novel and, furthermore, I don't want to know. I prefer to think of him sitting at a desk channeling the magical realism of Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Toni Morrison as he dashed off a book full of folklore, rhymes, curses, epic journeys, and impossible quests. The narrative structure,

like the name of the main character, Stanley Yelnats, creates a puzzle for the reader from the beginning. Several plot lines cross and re-cross not only in terms of the present day plot, but the reader finds past plots resurfacing and complicating the present. Stanley finds that it takes a Zero, a place holder for no value, to help him make meaning out of his situation.

A seemingly simple novel, *Holes* (Sachar, 1998) is fun and entertaining for students. In reality, *Holes* is quite complex and rich with teaching opportunities. It is a starting point for discussions of symbolism, fantasy, folklore, the hero's quest, the importance of setting, and major and minor characters. Once students have read the novel, a teacher can direct deep discussions about feminism, structuralism, stereotypes, traditions, and the role of imagination in not only writing but in reading as well. It would be hard to imagine an aspect of literature that couldn't be demonstrated with a passage from this novel. I find the novel so interesting and useful that if I were to teach an A. P. literature course again, I would use this novel as the first reading of the class.



Whirligig. There are a host of YA novels that focus on important teen themes, sexual activity, drug and alcohol abuse, physical abuse, alienation, and the difficulty of living with the consequences of a choice—thought out or spontaneously decided. The literary craftsmanship of *Whirligig* (Fleischman, 1998) pushes this novel's

teaching potential far beyond the boundaries of the thematic treatment of alcohol abuse, teen suicide, or accidental death. The first chapter will feel familiar to any reader of realistic YA fiction; it is full of teen angst, music, beer, and rejection. Brent, the novel's main character, is new to Chicago and despite his wealth he just can't seem to smoothly slide into the right crowd. In the chapter's climatic moment Brianna, the girl of his constant attention, publicly rejects him. Brent is devastated and drunk. In a fit of anger he leaves, speeding down the freeway. In a blur of thought, he lifts his hands from the steering wheel and lets the car decide. Instead of creating a sequential narrative that reveals the consequences of horrible choices, Fleischman creates something closer to a collection of short stories whirling around a central narrative. Several canonical short story collections come to mind that also seem held together either by place or theme *The Long Valley* (Steinbeck, 1938), *In Our Time* (Hemingway, 1925) and *Winesburg, Ohio* (Anderson, 1919).

In the second chapter, the reader expects a crash, a hospital scene, or some devastating consequence for letting a car drift across the freeway. Instead, Fleischman begins one of four seemingly independent narratives that separate the five chapters that chronicle Brent's journey. Failing to kill himself, he does cause the death of the young driver behind

him as his car careens off of the freeway divide. Part of his retribution, at the request of the dead girl's mother, is that Brent must embark on a journey to place four memorial whirligigs somewhere near the four corners of the continental United States. While Brent leaves Chicago heading counter clockwise around the country, the dividing chapters begin in Maine and continue clockwise. Not only are they separate by flow and character from the primary narrative, each dividing chapter stands alone as a separated story. They are only connected by the central metaphor of individual whirligigs.

If your first goal for teaching literature in the ELA classroom is to find books that students will read and enjoy you can do far worse than the three texts described in this section. If, however, you want to build on the fact that students will show up to class having read the books, enjoyed the books, and actually having something to say about them, then these books—and many other young adult novels—are a gold mine. If you want students to understand setting or point of view, try *Monster* (Myers & Myers, 1999); or symbolism and the hero's quest, try *Holes* (Sachar, 1998); or if you want them to discuss the complexity of narrative structure, try *Whirligig* (Fleischman, 1998). These novels work just as well as a selection from traditional classroom texts. While we both value and include the classics as part of a broad repertoire of works to be included in the classroom, if student motivation seems elusive, we enthusiastically suggest starting with the books they seem to be reading already.

Conclusion

Whether approaching the book from the perspective of the reader or from considerations of the text, we both end up at the same place—advocating that books that motivate students need a more prominent place in the ELA classroom. Despite our individual protestations, our approaches to using young adult literature for preservice preparation and as texts in the ELA classroom are more alike than different. Both depend on allowing students to bring their own readings to the table. Both encourage students to engage with the text and both promote close reading and extended thought. Student readers at any level delight in their ability to make meaning and see connections for themselves. Their own understanding builds off of the communal sharing as they are encouraged by both teachers and peers to expand their appreciation.

As colleagues we continue to discuss what true engagement with literature looks like for our preservice teachers and the students they will teach. We both agree that young adult literature can prove engaging and fruitful. To echo Alan Sitomer again, these are books that students will read and enjoy. And, if they are reading them, we can teach so much. We can teach the standards and prepare them for any assessment. Perhaps the answer is to engage in the policy discussions. Instead of total resistance, we might strive to know the curriculum goals and mandates and understand their intent. Then we use them for our educational purposes. In essence we can control them instead of feeling controlled by them. They represent goals to be achieved but the pedagogical choice and the tools we employ to reach those goals should remain

ours as teachers. So, we return to our respective students and model enthusiasm. We build their confidence, and as readers in settings outside of school already know, we share our thoughts with each other. They learn about the novels, about each other, and about themselves—and from time to time they realize that they can talk critically about literature and master the assessments. And maybe, just maybe, because they enjoyed the books they read, they just might remain motivated readers. Is there a better reason to study literature?

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End Note

Every year on the Monday and Tuesday following the main events of the National Council of Teacher of English (NCTE) annual convention, the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English (ALAN) holds a workshop. They invite authors, scholars, librarians, teachers, and anyone else to gather and discuss young adult literature. There are workshops, speakers, great conversations, and a huge box of current adolescent novels. It is well worth attending for the books, the inspiration, and the collegial atmosphere.



Infusing Young Adult Literature into High School English

Bruce Robbins

As a high school English teacher I basically ignored young adult literature. I loved the classics that I taught, and my curriculum supported me in my prejudice. That was long ago, but my current position takes me into high schools where things look much the same. My own viewpoint, however, has taken a one-eighty. I now see that we can infuse Young Adult literature into the regular work of the high school English classroom in ways that promote students' reading and learning while complementing, not replacing, students' introduction to the literary canon.

Since I began teaching, young adult literature has changed dramatically. In the last score of years, the marketplace's recognition that kids have spending money has resulted in profuse publication of Y. A. books. Like any large category of trade books, the quality of Y. A. writing comes in a bell curve. Just as trade books marketed for adults have always ranged in quality from the barely literate to the highly literary, so young adult books vary in quality. Because there is now so much more Y. A. literature, and because so many skilled authors now write for adolescents, the best of this literature has become a potentially valuable resource for teaching high school English. Just as high school English teachers have regularly plucked from popular adult trade books works such as *Lord of the Flies*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Great Gatsby*, and further back even *Great Expectations* to use in the curriculum, the best of Y. A. literature now affords high school teachers some useful plucking.

Middle school and junior high English language arts teachers have recognized the value of young adult literature and employed it in the classroom far more than high school teachers. It is in the middle grades where whole classes are likely to read titles like *The Giver* or *Holes* or even the now elderly *The Outsiders*. Obviously, such titles are chosen because they are a closer match to the younger students' reading levels and interests than books for grown-ups would be. And obviously, high school teachers focus more on preparing their older students for the adult world that their students are fast approaching. Unfortunately, we teachers make the leap from adolescent to adult literary

reading far more easily than many of our students. In the gap between middle school and high school we can lose student readers because in many cases the kids just can't jump the gap. For many, reading in high school English becomes suddenly too hard and too distant from their interests and their still-adolescent understandings of the world. As Don Gallo (2001) put it, "We are a nation that teaches its children how to read in early grades, then forces them during their teenage years to read literary works that most of them dislike so much that they have no desire whatsoever to continue those experiences into adulthood" (p. 36). A lot of research has documented that adolescent elective reading drops off significantly in high school (Fisher, 2008; Nippold et. al., 2005). There are many reasons for this, but unfortunately, one of the reasons may be us.

How then could high school English teachers better support adolescent readers without giving up the goal of introducing



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them to literary classics? Here are some possible ways to infuse Young Adult literature into their regular classrooms.

Before Reading a Classic

Young adult literature can be used to ease high school students into more complex texts. Y. A. books can, for instance, provide valuable background knowledge, introducing students to unfamiliar historical periods prior to encountering a tougher historical text. Before reading Chaucer, Dante, or Mallory, for example, students might read stories of medieval life depicted in such Y.A. books as Karen Cushman's *Catherine, Called Birdy* or Avi's *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*, books that acquaint readers with daily life in medieval Europe and its social stratifications. Daily life and political dilemmas from the period of the American Revolution are depicted in such Y.A. books as the Colliers' *My Brother Sam is Dead* and M.T. Anderson's more challenging *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing*. In fact, a wide array of places and periods are represented in Y. A. historical fiction, providing potentially useful background knowledge to take into tougher reading.

Young adult literature is simpler than the classics but these books employ the same literary elements and themes. For example, students might be scaffolded into an understanding of difficult symbolism by first encountering a simpler version of it. In Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, for instance, the textual challenge is relatively low, allowing students to focus their attention on what lies between the lines. *Speak* is told by a narrator who is silent for a whole school year. Eventually her signs of healing are embedded in symbolism, as in this passage:

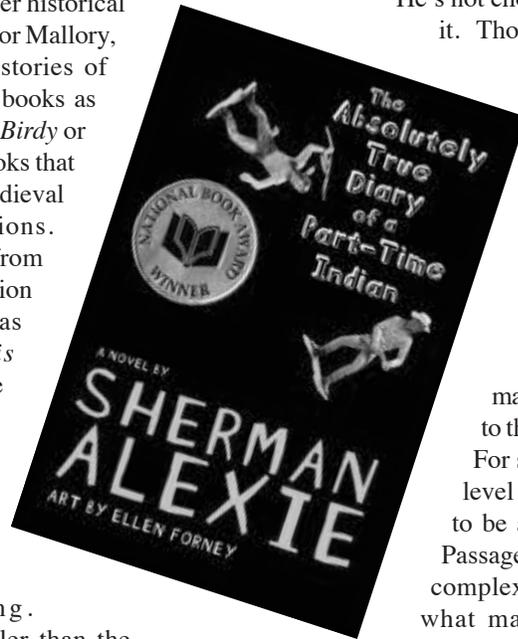
I put on old jeans and unearth a rake from the back of the garage. I start on the leaves suffocating the bushes. I bet Dad hasn't cleaned them out for years. They look harmless and dry on top, but under that top layer they're wet and slimy. White mold snakes from one leaf to the next. The leaves stick together like floppy pages in a decomposing book. I rake a mountain into the front yard and there are still more, like the earth pukes up leaf gunk when I'm not looking. I have to fight the bushes. They snag the tines of the rake and hold them—they don't like me cleaning out all that rot.

It takes an hour. Finally, the rake scrapes its metal fingernails along damp brown dirt. I get down on my knees to reach behind and drag out the last leaves. Ms. Keen would be

proud of me. I observe. Worms caught in the sun squirm for cover. Pale green shoots of something alive have been struggling under the leaves. As I watch, they straighten to face the sun. I swear I can see them grow (p. 165).

A bit later her dad explains some drastic tree-pruning in these terms:

He's not chopping it down. He's saving it. Those branches were long dead from disease. All plants are like that. By cutting off the damage, you make it possible for the tree to grow again. You watch—by the end of summer, this tree will be the strongest on the block (p. 166).



English teachers will quickly match the pruning and growth in the yard to the healing and growth of the narrator. For students it may be harder, yet at this level of difficulty students are more likely to be able to work it out for themselves. Passages like these are not as symbolically complex as Hester's scarlet A, but that's what makes them such useful onramps.

Young adult literature can also ease students into challenging literary themes. If, for example, we wished students to explore the theme of social ostracism in *The Scarlet Letter*, then we might have them first find that theme in a text where the reading challenge is a lower hurdle and kids have more attention available to consider what ostracism is and how it works. After that they can transfer their thematic understandings to Hawthorne's more difficult reading. Many Y. A. novels would lend themselves to such thematic work. For ostracism I currently think of such books as Anderson's *Speak*, Spinelli's *Stargirl*, Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, Zusak's *The Book Thief*, and Green's *Looking for Alaska*. Just as literary classics support multiple themes, so too do the best Y. A. books. The protagonist in *Looking for Alaska*, for example, becomes fascinated with a girl in his school who seems to embrace her outsider status in ways that echo Hester Prynne. Yet the story takes place in a private school and the protagonist's fascination for and later some guilt about the circumstances of the girl's death raise interesting parallels to *A Separate Peace*. Most high-quality Y. A. novels offer such multiple themes and pairing potentials.

While Reading a Classic

Often we teach classics entirely in class, sometimes because we don't have enough copies, but more often because the texts are too difficult for students to read without our help. We would not usually assign Shakespeare as homework

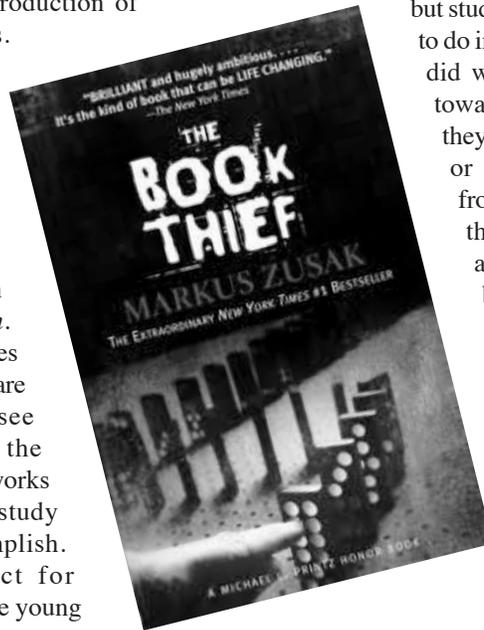
reading, for instance. We could, however, have students read as homework an easier book that supplements the classic. Imagine, for example, that while we teach *Romeo and Juliet* in class, students read outside of class Jacqueline Woodson's *If You Come Softly* about bi-racial, bi-cultural star-crossed lovers in NYC, or *Scorpions* by Walter Dean Myers which depicts how an unwilling protagonist gets sucked into gang activity much as Romeo gets sucked into fighting Tybalt, or Sharon Draper's *Romiette and Julio* that pits lovers against gangs, or even the shorter, easier, and sillier *Romeo and Juliet Together (And Alive!)* *At Last* by Avi, in which kids in the school production of *R&J* suffer parallel complications.

Alternatively, students might read Y. A. books set backstage at the Globe Theater in Gary Blackwood's series beginning with *The Shakespeare Stealer*, or read a work derived from another Shakespeare play like Caroline Cooney's *Enter Three Witches*, an interesting Y. A. treatment of *Macbeth*. The supplemental reading then provides a fulcrum by which students can compare *Romeo and Juliet* to what they see in their Y. A. book. Examining the similarities and differences of two works can illuminate both in ways that study of only one text can rarely accomplish.

While teachers might select for supplemental whole-class reading one young adult book like those listed above, the power of comparison is expanded exponentially if several different Y. A. books, through discussion groups or literature circles, are brought into the discussions of characters, conflicts, and themes depicted in them and in the classic. While reading *The Heart of Darkness*, for example, discussion would be enriched if a class in different groups read not one but perhaps three Y. A. picaresque journeys into the unknown such as Walter Dean Myers' *Somewhere in the Darkness*, Sharon Creech's *Walk Two Moons*, and Will Hobbs' *Downriver*. A study of *Lord of the Flies* might be supplemented by reading Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* and/or Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*. *The Crucible* might be matched with group readings of Elizabeth George Speare's *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, Ann Rinaldi's *A Break with Charity*, or Ann Petry's *Tituba of Salem Village*. The wealth of Y. A. books allows teachers to tailor books to appropriate reading levels and interests for various students. Students who can handle more difficult independent reading might read an adult book on the topic, such as Maryse Conde's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, while other groups contribute what their Y. A. book offers on the topic. However, at a time when most students are struggling to read a difficult canonical text, it can be very reassuring for them also to feel like competent, successful readers when they open their Y. A. book.

After Reading a Classic

Instead of leading up to a classic with young adult books, a teacher might assign the Y. A. reading after working with the classic. In this case students would apply to a Y. A. book the new knowledge or skill in reading or literary analysis previously gained with the teacher's help during work with the classic. For example, if the teacher has taught students to recognize the symbolism in *Lord of the Flies*, the students might then be asked to discover for themselves the symbols in, say, *Speak* or *The Chocolate War*. The reading level will be easier and the story worlds more familiar, but students will now be cognitively challenged to do independently the things they previously did with the teacher's help, moving them toward reading independence. In doing so they not only practice the new knowledge or skills, they also must apply learning from one setting to the next, a higher-level thinking skill. The additional reading also builds from the common knowledge base created by the whole-class text out to enriching supplemental reading. In addition, students will get some reading practice at, rather than above, their reading level. Such reading practice may seem counter-intuitive, but consider that whenever we learn something new, like playing a musical instrument or dribbling a basketball, we need to practice it awhile at a certain level before we have consolidated the learning enough to be ready for a new level of challenge. Finally, what I like best about reading Y. A. books after a classic is the way it hands over to students the job of reading for meaning and reaching their own interpretations instead of simply repeating the teacher's ideas.



Instead of Reading a Classic

So far I have recommended ways to pair young adult books with classics. But there are times when a classic text is the wrong text for achieving our teaching and learning goals. No matter how great a work may be, if it is too high above the students' reading comprehension levels or too far outside their prior knowledge and interests, our heroic efforts at scaffolding will result only in our doing the students' work for them. Before we select texts, we need to ask ourselves what learning we want to use these texts to accomplish. If we could achieve those learning goals better for certain students with different texts, then we should pick the text that will best help us meet our teaching goals. Obviously, if our goal is to introduce students to what Shakespeare's plays are like, we will need to have them read some Shakespeare. But if our goal is to teach elements of fiction, for example, many novels at many different levels of difficulty contain settings, characters, plots, conflicts, themes, and so on, including many good-quality Y. A. novels.

Y. A. novels are also quicker to read and teach, making them a better choice when we are running short on time.

Not long ago I visited a junior English class for low-achieving students who, instead of reading the perennial *Great Gatsby* were reading *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, a story that also presents themes of materialism, social class, desire, and friendship. If our goal is to get students to explore a conceptual theme, many books may provide avenues to this understanding. Why limit ourselves to any one text if it is right for only a handful of students? When students can read texts fairly independently, teachers are freer to focus instruction on helping students deepen their critical thinking about the theme and how to search their various texts for evidence to consider. For example, instead of assigning a whole class to read *1984*, teachers might have literature circles explore the theme of The Near Future in various books such as Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* in which some computer geek boys make a dangerous discovery, Scott Westerfield's *Uglies*, depicting a social world based on appearances, and Nancy Farmer's *The House of Scorpion*, while more able readers might very well read *1984* or *Brave New World* or *Fahrenheit 451*. Such grouping allows the teacher to better match readers' abilities and interests while also creating a broader range of reading experiences and materials to feed whole-class discussion of a theme. Class discussions would center on how The Near Future is depicted and ideas represented across the books, not so much on the particulars of a single text.

Resources

Busy high school English teachers have a lot to do and may well not feel able to keep up with the profusion of young adult literature. In fact, by the time you read this a whole new wave of young adult books will have come out. Luckily there is someone in the school who probably is keeping up: the librarian. School librarians can often suggest a few Y. A. books for a busy teacher to peruse, and if these great resources do not reside in the high school library, they can usually be found in the local junior high or middle school library. They are aware of the award winners (like the Newbery, Prinz, and ALA choices) and can quickly pull books on selected topics or themes. In addition to Y. A. novels and non-fiction books, librarians often also have collections of Y. A. short stories to use when there is not enough time for a whole book. Don Gallo has edited a number of these, and there are short story anthologies edited by Gary Paulsen and Avi, too. Librarians can point busy high school English teachers to books with good teaching potentials. Then high school English teachers can use Y. A. books to strategically support and enhance the development of literary reading of their students while also increasing the likelihood of students becoming the lifelong readers we wish them to be.

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Eucalyptus

In the Diamond almond can
hidden in the dark under the tight red lid
are seven eucalyptus pods
collected on our last day
at your grandparents' house,
to help you remember
long after they move away.
To help you remember
when you clean your room, stepping over college catalogs,
lost Legos, swim ribbons--debris of childhood...

With Nas thudding from the speakers
you lift the lid and are six again
tip-toeing barefoot down the pungent, asphalt driveway.
In a breath you hear Grandma sing "Kentucky Babe"
while rocking you in the small chair that was mine,
sit silently with Grandpa as he throws the ball for Mike
on an evening that smells of wet grass and jasmine,
or leap into the night-lit pool
enveloped by darkness and crickets.

May the sharp, sweet scent of eucalyptus
comfort you with memories of soft dirt and podocarpus leaves,
the bark of a friendly dog, morning rhythms of a Rainbird,
long after you move away
to places unfamiliar
where lost things cannot be found.

—Candida Gillis

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American Librarian Association's Best Books for Young Adults:

<http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/booklistsawards/bestbooksya/bbyahome.cfm>



New Young Adult Literature: Fun in the Classroom

Becky Proctor

Sex, drugs, mental illness, abuse, brutality, suicide, death. Yikes! Doesn't sound like fun at all. In fact, it sounds like all the raw ingredients for a book-burning bonanza, right? But throw in real-life drama, belly-laugh humor, what-if fantasy, and tell the stories with voices of protagonists who think, act, speak, and, yes, often swear like modern teens and you have magic formulas igniting a passion for young adult literature. Young Adult (YA) authors are HOT, and teen reading has never been such fun.

Thanks to news-making authors like J.K. Rowling and Stephenie Meyer, teens (and adults) are reading YA fiction in growing numbers, but how do we expose more of our students to the pleasures of the vast array of exciting new books geared especially for them? Check out this *true* story from West Junior High in Boise:

Having to share his classroom with a traveling colleague this year, 9th grade English teacher Jeremy Bronner often set up office at a table in the library during his prep period. He was interested in doing a new project to encourage his young high-schoolers to read a novel of their choice, and I suggested they create a book trailer (like a movie trailer) to promote their book. We scheduled Jeremy's classes to come to the library for lesson details, to watch the sample book trailer, and to check out books. Using free Photostory 3 media software, I made a demo trailer of one of my favorite new YA books, *The Brothers Torres*, by Coert Voorhees. Listed as one of the American Library Association (ALA) 2009 Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults, *The Brothers Torres* is superb storytelling from the perspective of a 16-year-old biracial protagonist and is chock full of most of the juicy vices listed above. By the end of third period, all 20 copies of *The Brothers Torres* I had available were checked out and a waiting list began.

The following Monday morning, Cindy Rowe, our ELL teacher, excitedly came in the library to tell me that one of her students, Javier, who is also in Jeremy's English class, had proudly announced he had read the entire book over the weekend. She said she'd never seen a book stir this kind of enthusiasm in her students. The following day, 15-year-old Edgar came in to ask me if the author had written any more books.

He also asked if the book was written in Spanish because his Mexican-born father wanted to read it, too. I knew Edgar had not checked out any library books all year and asked him when was the last time he read a book? He answered, "Never."

Coert Voorhees answered my e-mail immediately and an exciting new twist to the project ensued as several students communicated directly with the author. *The Brothers Torres* circulated like crazy with guys, gals, and staff members, too. The highlight of this tale is that an enthusiastic group of 9th grade boys, who previously wouldn't be caught reading, attended our West Mustang Book Club in January to discuss the book with the author, in person, via speaker phone. He posted some photos I took of the event on his blog (<http://coertvoorhees.blogspot.com>). Knowing their book trailers might be seen by a LOT of people has given these young students a whole new appreciation for the revision and editing parts of the writing process. And they want more books!



Becky Proctor is Teacher/Librarian at West Junior High School in Boise.

The following suggestions include just a small sample of some of new YA titles and possible ways to use them in secondary classrooms. Ask your school librarian for more ideas.

- Some authors cleverly teach language arts skills within their stories. Among her other outrageous adventures, the protagonist in E. Lockhart’s hilarious *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* takes readers through steps of the writing process to create a research paper complete with parenthetical citations.

- Novels are great sources to find examples of creative writing techniques. The 17-year-old protagonist in the mystery thriller *Acceleration*, by Graham McNamee, makes the following observation while eating a vegetarian meal prepared by his mother: “You can’t trust tofu. I mean, you never see it out in the wild like a cow or a banana or a zucchini. *Tofu*- even the word sounds weird, like someone sneezing in another language” (50). A fun class project would be to create a class Flip video movie or a Photostory movie to show examples of figurative language or poetic devices in YA literature.

- Author Jodi Picoult’s *The Tenth Circle* examines the complex themes of senior-year mainstay, *Dante’s Inferno*, from the life perspective of a modern teen protagonist. A creative graphic novel imbedded in the main novel adds another enticing feature to the book, making it an excellent lesson tie-in.

- Many classics can now be found in graphic novel format, including Shakespeare’s plays. These renditions are especially helpful in creating meaning for English language learners and visual learners.

- Walt Whitman’s poetry features prominently in author John Green’s *Paper Towns* where the protagonist attempts to solve a mystery with clues gleaned from the classic poet. This title ended up number one on the ALA 2009 Teens’ Top Ten list (the result of a fall 2009 on-line poll) because of its true-to-life voice, humor, and passion.

- One of Idaho teens’ favorite authors, Ellen Hopkins, writes haunting realistic fiction prose in poetry form that grabs even the most reluctant readers. Just ask secondary librarians. They will tell you that Hopkins’ novels (*Crank*, *Burned*, *Impulse*, and *Identical* among other titles) are among the most frequently “lost” books. As they are borrowed and passed between friends, relatives, and neighbors, they unwittingly become part of a stealth literacy campaign.

Thought-provoking quotes from any one of Hopkins’ novels or one of the following titles could be used in classes throughout the curriculum as “Bell Ringer” activities, discussion starters, or journal entries. Add a quick citation of the source, mention that it is available in the school library, and teachers can expose their students to some terrific books.

Date Rape—*Inexcusable* by Chris Lynch

Discrimination—*Geography Club* by Brent Hartinger

Eating Disorders—*Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson

Healing Power of Music—*Born Blue* by Han Nolan

Life and Death Decisions—*If I Stay* by Gayle Forman

Moving Beyond Past Mistakes—*Story of a Girl* by Sara Zarr

Parental Mental Illness/Abuse—*Rules of Survival* by Nancy Werlin

Photography (!!!!)—*Flash Burnout* by L.K. Madigan

Photosynthesis (!!!!)—*The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl* by Barry Lyga

Suicide—*Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher

- Most teens are self-centered by nature, but we can channel that narcissism into self-motivation, a highly valued 21st century skill. The world is in desperate need of creative problem solving. YA fantasy and science fiction heroes offer some mind-expanding possibilities to awaken those real teen super powers: the physical energy of the fearlessness of inexperience, and the naïveté of idealism. Books like the following new YA titles can stir up some of the passion that teens can channel to shape their own worlds or perhaps even *the* world.

City of Bones (and two sequels) by Cassandra Clare

The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins

The Maze Runner by James Dashner

Shiver by Maggie Stiefvater

Soul Enchilada by David Macinnis Gill

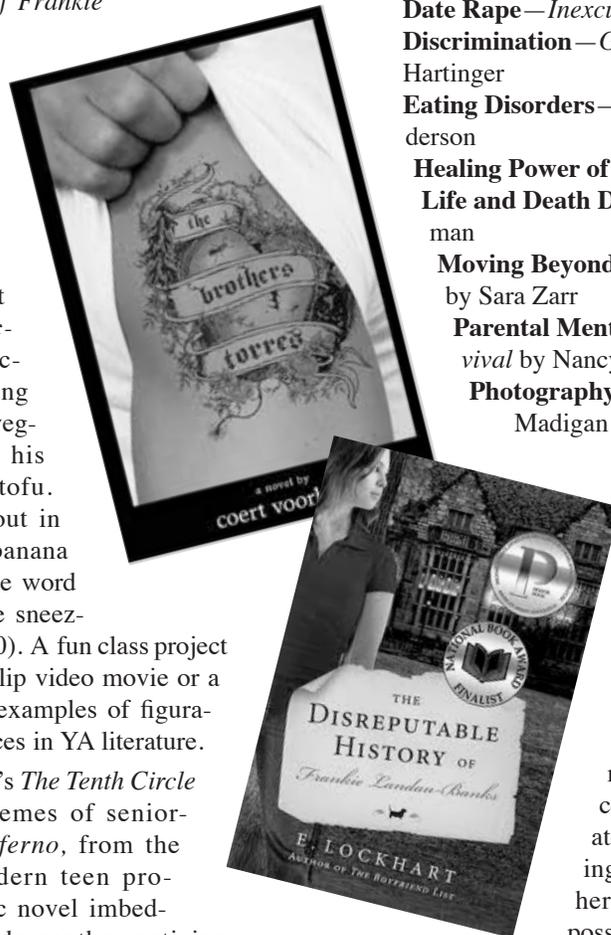
Wake, and its sequel, *Fade* by Lisa McMann

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Baggage

Beautiful.

You speak the word
as though it is precious,
a secret kept in a suitcase
securely clasped
and clutched to your chest.
It settles fragilely among
tattered clothes and
your cut glass and twining metal,
the toil of a lifetime,
the wanderlust fulfilled.

Beautiful,

you whisper to me,
and I crumple
like wrinkled laundry
and ill-protected metal and glass,
folding inward
twisting awkward
and sifting broken.
I carry this weight,
though my suitcase is empty.
Securely clasped.

It is not my fault

that I am bound to my synesthesia,
that my ears can decipher
only poison
and my mouth tastes like sarcasm,
so unfamiliar to me is
your praise: a taste
like foreign food on my tongue,
your affection like a longing,
lonesome voice
shouted from across a border,
the echoes to which are
a gypsy wail.

There exists

a great divide between you and me
which nomad feet must yet wander.
Ever, never closer.

—Kat Chew

Kat Chew's article on "The Ever-Changing Face of Young Adult Literature" appears on page 21 of this issue.

Breathing through Music and Meth

by Pauline Sameshima

with Roxanne Vandermause, Carrie Santucci, and Gilda

in my addiction
 I listened to meth music
 it's screaming-at-you music
 loud acerbic aggravation
 like when you've been up
 way too long, tweaked out
 neglected body
 not sleeping
 not eating
 dried out
 mean, hateful
 cunning, sneaky
 everyone becomes just stupid
 that's what meth does
 keeps you up and makes you
 excuse my language
 a f---ing idiot
 you lose all boundaries
 all compassion

I remember
 an album called *Raising Sand*
 by Robert Plant and Alison Krauss
 sad songs about reflecting back

I want my daughter to understand
 how sick I really was

to give her up

she's 17 now
 dragged through this with me

I have her trust and love again
 that's what keeps me clean now
 I had to redeem myself
 it took 10 long years
 to prove myself

hard hard work
 but I was cruel, very cruel
 I broke something in her
 between us
 it's not quite fixed

mended
 but always scarred
 fragile and ready to rip open

a big part of recovery
 is acknowledging my feelings

I'm on edge
 always
 knowing how fast
 everything can be undone
 in a relapse
 in a blink of an eye
 I could lose everything
 I've gained back

you take things for granted
 a kid's love
 a good job
 a car
 housing
 always struggling
 ceaselessly treading water

recovery is awakening
 a different appreciation
 but it's so hard

I buried my friend Jackie this week
 I didn't go to the viewing
 I had to work
 that was my excuse
 I didn't want to see her dead

the service was beautiful
 her brother talked about her
 as a little girl and when
 she was a young woman
 and her daughter spoke too
 how brave was she in that?

I got to know how much she loved her
 even the way Jackie was

they opened the casket at the end
 I made the choice to go up and
 say goodbye

she looked tired
 like she had fought a hard fight
 trying to breathe

I turned away
 had enough

I went out to lunch
 then back to work

they had another memorial for her
the next day
I couldn't go
I know myself better now
I didn't push myself

I'm in recovery
ongoing, unending
always trying to stay afloat
forever in recovery

I respect myself and my emotions
I make downtime
I need to
no means no

it was ok
I rested a bit
Jackie was with me
I talked to her in my heart and soul

and today, when I was
coming here
I rocked out with Jackie
in the car to the song
Spirit in the Sky
Jackie, her spirit and soul and me

there's always something to
look forward to

there *is*
in life

there is always
spring

there is always
music

the addictions never leave
like you trade one for another
I do tanning now
and have weight watchers, curves
Tuesday meetings
it's helped with my depression
I love things that make me feel better
like meth I guess
to feel better too

but now
I have to be strong
it's about boundaries
healthy behavior
instead of
destructive behavior

the sad songs I told you about
there's a song asking to please read the letter I wrote
if I had written a letter in my addiction
it would have been asking for forgiveness from my daughter

so many regrets

when my mom was in the hospital
I wanted to take her to see
Wind Beneath my Wings with Bette Midler
she had read the book and really liked it
I never got to do that
cause she died

I wasn't close to her
wanted to
would've like to
but she had her own sickness

her favorite song was
Harvest Moon by Neil Young

they closed Jackie's funeral with
that song

it was supposed to hopeful
remembering and dreaming

This work stems from a Washington State University research project on women and meth with Roxanne Vandermause and Carrie Santucci from the College of Nursing. Pauline Sameshima works in the College of Education. She is a long-time classroom teacher, now teacher educator, curriculum theorist, and arts-informed researcher. The poem is an interpretation of an interview transcript with Gilda (pseudonym). Pauline's work is an effort to develop authentic curriculum from research. She is co-author of *Climbing the Ladder with Gabriel: Poetic Inquiry of a Methamphetamine Addict in Recovery* and co-editor of *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences*. For more information, please see www.womenandmeth.

A Most Excellent Novel for the High School English Class:

LGBT Connections in Steve Kluger's My Most Excellent Year

Beth Buyserie

One of my favorite novels of late—young adult or otherwise—has been Steve Kluger's *My Most Excellent Year: A Novel of Love, Mary Poppins, and Fenway Park*. Told from the perspectives of three high school teenagers, *My Most Excellent Year* tells the tale of their 9th-grade year, a year when they learn about romance and what it means to grow up—a relatively routine story plot until you add *Kiss Me, Kate*, a baseball diamond for the Japanese-American internment camp at Manzanar, American Sign Language, purple balloons, and, of course, *Mary Poppins*. The three main characters are Alé Perez, the daughter of the former ambassador to Mexico, who can “find a social issue in a box of Kleenex” (Kluger 12); T.C. Keller, a white Boston Red Sox fan whose deceased mother “taught me to believe in magic” (3); and Augie Hwong, an American-born Chinese, who at age 6 helped T.C. survive the death of his mother, and at the beginning of the book “doesn't know he's gay yet” (22). Altogether, an absolutely *fabulous* read. And because I support teaching young adult literature in English classrooms, I immediately recognized that this novel could be an important—and engaging—way to teach the types of social justice issues that English teachers often strive to foreground in their classes.

Yet I didn't realize just how important this text could be until I read many of the articles in the *English Journal's* March 2009 issue on “Sexual Identity and Gender Variance,” which advocates for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) connections in the classroom. The conversation begun in this issue of *EJ* made me realize that Kluger's book could help students and teachers read, discuss, and write about LGBT issues in provocative ways; moreover, it could do so in ways which were grounded in research and National Council of Teachers of English curriculum guidelines. In the NCTE's “Resolution on Strengthening Teacher Knowledge of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Issues,” the Council “urge[s] NCTE members to address the needs of

LGBT students, as well as children of LGBT families, and to incorporate LGBT issues in their work” (14). Naturally, including YAL is one way to honor these needs as the quality and quantity of LGBT-YAL only continues to grow.

Seeing the Invisible

While many teachers try to include literature that reflects students' experiences, LGBT literature is frequently left out of this equation. Jen Scott Curwood, Megan Schliesman, and Kathleen T. Horning, in their article, “Fight for Your Right: Censorship, Selection, and LGBTQ Literature,” argue that



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“One of the key ways that schools condone homophobia is by failing to include LGBTQ literature in the curriculum” (38). Yet not all LGBT literature is created equal. As Paula Ressler and Becca Chase, guest editors for the *English Journal*’s issue on “Sexual Identity,” write in their editorial, “Much of the early literature was fraught with negativity, danger, and death” (20). William P. Banks, author of “Literacy, Sexuality, and the Value(s) of Queer Young Adult Literatures,” echoes this concern, noting that positively-framed LGBT books in his youth were rare. As Banks writes, “you were more often faced with a host of books that weren’t about adolescence at all, but about coming out as adults away from home and often in places where the protagonists could blend in or be invisible. . . . I found nothing about the successes of love for the young” (33). Fortunately, as Banks continues, “more recent titles feature positive LGBT characters and heterosexual allies, and plot lines that offer life-affirming possibilities” (20). *My Most Excellent Year* perfectly represents this category of literature and provides all teens with strong role models: energetic characters who are quirky, complex, and experts in topics ranging from civil rights to Broadway musicals—and they’re not afraid to test us on their knowledge. As Augie asks us: “Do you know who sang opposite John Raitt in *The Pajama Game*? Have you ever heard of Rita Shaw? Didn’t think so” (Kluger 6). A full third of the novel is written from Augie’s unique perspective, so his role is neither invisible *nor* silent, as his previous comment undoubtedly illustrates.

As a gay youth of color, Augie provides a voice to multiple underrepresented groups, as well as to individuals who identify with more than one sexual or racial minority group. Too often LGBT movements have been (rightly) criticized for silencing the voices of people of color, just as the feminist movement is criticized for privileging the concerns of white women. The problem, of course, is clear: by not acknowledging race, other underrepresented groups imply that to be a woman or queer, for example, means to be white, and that any exceptions to this mold have to be specifically noted, an approach which at best only tokenizes all students of color. But in this novel, students of color find multiple characters that might reflect their experiences, the most notable examples being Augie and Alé: two-thirds of the main cast of characters. And similar to the scholars who criticize LGBT-themed novels for only focusing on the negative associations with coming out, as I will discuss in more detail later, Yolanda Hood argues against YA texts which emphasize only negative issues connected to race. In her article, “Rac(e)ing into the Future: Looking at Race in Recent Science Fiction and Fantasy Novels for Young Adults by Black Authors,” Hood points to author Maiya Williams

who “recalls reading ‘fun’ genres like mysteries, fantasy, and science fiction and noticing that the protagonists were always White” (Hood 82). As Williams explains, “If the protagonist was black you could be sure the story was going to be about racism. . . . The message I was getting was that the white kids are allowed to have wonderful, fantastic adventures, while the only thing Black kids can do is suffer and battle oppression” (qtd. in Hood 82). Hood praises the recent science fiction and fantasy books which include “plots that are fun and adventurous; black protagonists who are gifted, insightful youth surrounded by functional, supportive family units,”

and which “approach ‘blackness’ as a normative experience. While race and ethnicity are not ignored in these books, the race or ethnicity of a character does not drive the plot” (82). *My Most Excellent Year*, while not of the same genres examined by Hood, similarly allows Augie and Alé to comment on their Chinese and Latina backgrounds and how those might intersect with their American identities (at one point Alé and her mother learn American Sign Language through the Spanish version of *Mary Poppins*). Race is not ignored, but the momentum of the story most certainly focuses on how the three friends, with the help of their parents and teachers, rely on each other.



Allies for Augie, Augie as Ally

Together, Augie, T.C., and Alé wonderfully illustrate how queer and straight students can serve as allies for each other. These friends do, of course, face conflict during their freshman year, but the emphasis is on the way they support each other *through* conflicts, rather than dwelling on the conflicts themselves. In the context of this article, they specifically help Augie transverse a new relationship. This relationship is perceived as normal from Augie’s perspective, but it also admittedly is disrupted by an issue that opposite-sex couples rarely have to face: Andy Wexler, Augie’s boyfriend, is not nearly as comfortable in his own skin as Augie is and insinuates that Augie should act more like a stereotypical straight boy—something that Augie with his love of Ethel Merman is not interested in doing. T.C. and Alé are firmly on Augie’s side and want to teach Andy not to be so careless with his feelings for Augie. But Augie is ultimately the one who helps Andy discover how to be a supportive boyfriend. And he does it in such a way that by the end of the novel, as Alé comments, “it’s no coincidence that two other boys in the ninth grade have been courageous enough to come out since Thanksgiving, because when you’ve got a pioneer like Augie Hwang blazing the trail, what’s there to be afraid of?” (Kluger 345). The novel serves as a positive example for all students to recognize that not only can LGBT teens rely on

their heterosexual allies, and vice versa, but queer teens can also be allies for each other.

I want to clarify that despite some turbulence, Augie and Andy sincerely enjoy being together. As Alé observes, “The way they were taking such obvious delight in each other—especially after the crisis they’d survived together—you couldn’t help feeling jealous that you weren’t either one of them” (Kluger 344). I emphasize this point because Banks correctly argues against

texts [that are] primarily about characters whose existence is a struggle; the plots [that] are mostly about individuals trying to ‘deal with’ their sexualities, conflicts with others because of their sexualities, fears of parental reactions, etc. While these conflicts may be ‘realistic,’ they are also reductive when rendered as a canon of available literature, suggesting that the experiences of being queer are only about these personal conflicts, not about larger issues or more complex experiences with the world. And more significantly, these books, taken as a whole, continue to reinforce the notion that one’s sexuality is inherently controversial and conflicted. (35)

My Most Excellent Year indeed resists these theories; Augie’s relationship, despite its troubles, is primarily framed as a love story, a fact that Alé and T.C. definitely notice. When the couple first begins dating, T.C. asks Augie, “How many times did his knee touch yours under the table?” (Kluger 147), as Augie is quite naturally worrying about whether or not his new love interest feels the same way; later at Thanksgiving, T.C. lists “Augie coming out” (Kluger 173) as one of the things which he is most grateful for this year. And upon first meeting Augie, Alé calls him “extraordinary” and notes how “The boy who gets to kiss him for the first time is never going to be the same again” (Kluger 68). While the romance is as complex as 9th-grade will allow, Augie’s sexuality in itself is not the main reason for controversy. When Augie first realizes his crush for Andy he writes, “When he calls me Spidey I turn into grape Jell-O. His favorite kind. I’m doomed” (Kluger 52), but we know he is “doomed” because he has fallen in love for the first time, an event which people of all sexual orientations share.

We also know that Augie’s alarm does not stem from a lack of same-sex couples as role models for his relationship with Andy. Fortunately for the boys, Kluger has provided Augie with T.C.’s married aunts Babe and Ruth (remember, this is a book about baseball), who have been together nearly 40 years. While admittedly they are not a large part of the story, the women have been in Augie’s life since he first met T.C. at age six. Because T.C. and Augie adopted each other as brothers at that tender age, Aunt Babe and Aunt Ruth likewise welcomed Augie into their family with the same devotedness that T.C. and his dad did. These acts allow *My Most Excellent Year* to join a growing cast of “books [that] portray multiple LGBTQ characters within supportive communities and families, including families of their own making. They

show the diversity of LGBTQ characters and dispel the myth that being gay means being alone” (Clark and Blackburn 29). Therefore, one could easily argue that the reason why Augie took his realization that he was gay with such confidence is because he knew what a stable same-sex relationship looked like. He also knew, although he never specifically says so, that he would immediately have adults who would support him, who would never question his sexuality—an important message for all teens to hear.

Teens Need Parental Support

“What I learned to hope for was escape, a calculated move away from my family and community and, if possible, the good sense not to call home again”

—Banks, p. 33

Although some YA novels have been criticized for their weak parental role models, the parents in *My Most Excellent Year* are strongly involved in their children’s lives. In fact, these parents also take turns narrating the story, although we don’t hear from them as often. We see their emails, memos, instant messages, and phone call transcripts, written both to their kids and to each other (and to each other’s kids, further strengthening the network of support that the teens have). We know—and the young adults reading the book know—just how devoted the parents are toward their children. T.C. and Augie’s fathers (Dad and Pop respectively, to both boys) wonder how to approach “the talk” where Augie will tell his parents that he is gay—something that they have already known and embraced for a long time. And it turns out that it just happened naturally. Augie simply asks, “Dad? Is love supposed to hurt?” (187). After asking Augie to share “all of the things he feels when he thinks about Andy” (187), Augie’s father reflects, “I realized that we’d never had the ‘I’m gay’ conversation. Has this generation finally made it superfluous? If only” (188). Kluger makes it clear that the conversation happens this naturally because Augie’s relationship with his parents is authentic. Additionally, T.C.’s father—and adopted Pop to Augie—is equally involved in both boys’ lives. Even Alé, who has felt for years like an outcast in her own family, learns to stand up for herself while including her parents in her success. Any parents reading this novel along with their teens will find plenty of strong role models and reasons to celebrate the successes of their own children. And while Augie’s teachers do not specifically refer to Augie’s sexuality (although his drama teacher wonders, “Should I have considered non-traditional casting??” (345) when Augie performs a song usually sung by a girl and wows the audience), this book could easily foster parent-teacher relations in supporting LGBT youth in schools.

While the fictional parents in Kluger’s novel avidly support Augie, real-life parents are unfortunately often used as an excuse not to teach LGBT literature in secondary classrooms. Rather than focusing on these types of parents, I urge teachers to instead focus on the parents who don’t want their children to be homophobic, but who want their children to challenge the heteronormative privileges of society. I suspect

that some teachers who might privately affirm individual LGBT students, but who have not yet actively examined LGBT issues in the classroom, may feel quite liberated if they remember that some parents will strongly support their inclusion of LGBT texts, regardless of whether or not their youth—or the parents themselves—identify as queer. As Curwood, et al., argue, “one of the first steps every educator can take is to acknowledge that books with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning characters aren’t about ‘the other,’ they’re about us—all of us” (39). This sense of shared fate helps everyone affirm each other’s positive contributions to the classroom or school. Though I don’t wish to ignore the fact that so many LGBT teens face acts of harassment and violence—as repeatedly and soberingly cited by the various authors who contributed to the specific issue of *EJ* which I reference—*My Most Excellent Year* allows all students, parents, and teachers the opportunity to picture the daily lives and activities of LGBT youth as *normal*, as natural, as something that we all have a right to have. And for English teachers, inclusion of the book into our curriculum further reinforces the idea that LGBT-themed literature has an equally privileged space on our shelves as any other text. Indeed, *My Most Excellent Year* could be the ideal YA novel to begin the year—one that introduces all manner of social justice issues, while simultaneously engaging students, teachers, and (potentially) parents with the possibilities of reading and writing.

Considerations, Clarifications, and Comfort

However, as novels can obviously be used in a variety of ways, I do want to discuss some considerations associated with using LGBT literature in an English class. Because Kluger’s novel, in particular, is framed as a series of diary entries, IMs, emails, and phone calls, teachers will be eager to develop writing assignments that allow students to mirror this multi-modal writing style. But as Ressler and Chase also caution, “we need to be aware of how difficult it may be for sexual and gender minority students to write about their life experiences in heterogeneous writing classrooms” (20). Not only must teachers be sensitive to this issue in any writing assignment, but teachers also need to recognize that several characters in the book partially out Augie—T.C. in his diary entry, Augie’s dad to T.C.’s father in an email, Alé in her diary entry—before Augie himself recognizes his sexuality and decides to make the fact that he is gay public. Granted, these are relatively confidential spaces, and the characters wait for Augie himself to tell them he has come out before explicitly discussing it with Augie, but teachers do need to be conscious so that any student writing treats the sexuality of their classmates with confidentiality unless the students in question have already publicly come out.

Lest readers misread my intent, I want to clarify that I am not merely advocating for what Nicole Sieban and Laraine Wallowitz define as “antihomophobia education” (45). In their article, “‘Watch What You Teach’: A First-Year Teacher Refuses to Play It Safe,” Sieban and Wallowitz advocate instead for a “queer pedagogy, which” as they clarify, “goes

beyond antihomophobia education. Antihomophobia education, rooted in advocating acceptance, assimilation, and tolerance, does not require investigating the construction, production, and maintenance of what is considered normative” (45). I have framed my argument within the context of creating the type of “welcoming school environments with supportive teachers” where “LGBT youth can flourish” (Ressler and Chase 21) that Kluger’s novel provides, but I recognize that this framework could be read as mere inclusion. Rather than distinctly supporting Sieban and Wallowitz’s notion of queer pedagogy, my claims and support may fall more in line with antihomophobia education: a good start, but not good enough as I would not be helping the teachers reading this article to “challenge the status quo” (Sieban and Wallowitz 45) through their use of the book. Teachers need to make specific choices in how they use this text, for while Kluger’s protagonists do a fair amount of challenging, it comes quite naturally to them. (Alé and T.C., in their quest to restore the baseball diamond as a tribute to the Japanese-Americans interned at Manzanar during World War II, write not only to the director of the Historic Site, but to all 100 members of the Senate—and they wind up on an advisory board for a congressional committee on the topic.) They make these strides just by being themselves, with the help of Kluger’s fantastic writing. And because Kluger himself writes articles for GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educator’s Network), as well as “counseling gay teenagers,” he is experienced in championing the rights of LGBT students (Kluger, *Author*). Unfortunately, English teachers don’t always have such well-written scripts or such devoted support. Nevertheless, I urge us all to see *My Most Excellent Year* as an opportunity to always challenge the level of comfort we maintain in the classroom. As Sieban and Wallowitz remind us, “In an effort to ensure that students feel ‘safe’ and ‘comfortable’ in the classrooms, we English teachers often avoid controversial topics, particularly issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality. . . . Since no teaching is neutral, creating classrooms free from controversial topics does not situate the teacher as impartial or objective. Nor does it ensure that *all* students feel comfortable” (44). By challenging both our students and ourselves, I argue that we can truly adopt Sieban and Wallowitz’s framework of queer pedagogy in our classrooms, regardless of the particular theme or content which we might be teaching. In other words, queer pedagogy enables us to challenge all the norms of society, whether or not these norms specifically relate to sexuality.

Perfecting our pedagogy takes time. As Banks’ notes with regret, “the question teachers usually bring to me when they want to include an LGBT text in their class is not ‘What’s the *best, most powerful* LGBT young adult novel you’ve read recently?’ but ‘Is there a book you think I could *get away with* without ruffling too many feathers?’” (34). Banks argues that “The desire to include LGBT characters is laudable, but there also needs to be something *there* in the books beyond just queer characters” (34). I trust that I have given enough glimpses of the book to illustrate that this holds true for *My Most Excellent Year*, as I believe it exemplifies the best of

YAL. The book is both powerful and fun, and the writing is fabulous. But precisely because of these merits, I also believe that it is a book that many teachers—perhaps those new to the teaching of LGBT issues or those teaching in a more restrictive and homophobic setting—could both “get away with” this text and use it as a foundation for other queer texts. Indeed, *My Most Excellent Year* can serve as a gateway into a year where LGBT, race, and social justice issues are highlighted and valued, rather than tokenized and silenced.

Disruptive Umbrellas

In his article, Banks tells the story of an author whose publishers are urging her to portray more stereotypical versions of LGBT characters: teens who are perhaps overly conflicted about their sexuality or who are ostracized by their peers and families. And while these situations exist, they do not necessarily define all youth. Banks laments a “publishing industry . . . [that] has its own assumptions about queerness and queer experience, particularly where youth and coming out are concerned. Those assumptions are rooted in a past that, in many ways, may no longer resonate with young readers, or which may reinforce some of the conditions we’d like to disrupt” (36). Does Kluger’s novel specifically *disrupt* these assumptions? As I reflect on my unabashed love of this novel, I admit that the humor and laughter that Kluger imbues into his story make it hard for us to consider his novel as disruptive. But perhaps this is the most disruptive type of novel of all, for readers will immediately find themselves rooting for Augie, T.C., Alé, and all their wild predicaments. Before Alé met T.C. and Augie, she “simply couldn’t accept umbrellas as a believable means of air travel” (Kluger 335). By the end of the book she was planning visits to Mary Poppins and speaking with llamas—all “through Augie’s trust and Anthony’s heart” (398). *My Most Excellent Year* ends on the ideal that individual friends support each other, challenge the system, and change the world. If we allow ourselves to truly take this message to heart, we will find it

easier to question our current pedagogy, to welcome more LGBT literature into the classroom, and to make our language arts classrooms *most* excellent.

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Bishop

First snow fell this week
 covering scratched-out holes,
 chewed roots,
 pad-worn paths.
 Its crust stretches smooth,
 fence to fence,
 strangely serene.
 I miss the mounds and troughs
 of dog-dancing,
 paws leaping deep in white,
 the joyous motions of winter.
 out my window the snow is quiet
 I do not want to disturb its surface
 or the memories lying still below.

—Candida Gillis

The Ever-Changing Face of Young Adult Literature

Kat Chew

Young adult literature is an evolving genre which is steadily gaining positive attention from readers of all ages. Though a claim has been made in the past against young adult literature, it does not allow for the recent influx of incredibly profound and inventive literature for teen readers. Many young adult novels help to magnify social and psychological issues, such as dependence on technology, government control, controversies regarding body image, or the psychological effects of violence. A young adult series in particular which demonstrates the sophisticated themes of societal ideologies and technology is the science fiction series *Uglies* by Scott Westerfeld.

One such central theme in the novels draws from a frighteningly emergent prominent practice today: extreme cosmetic surgery. To be able to change one's appearance for the better seems like a blessing. Yet how far can technology go before it crosses the boundary between what is welcomed and what is invasive? The *Uglies* series paints a picture of a futuristic dystopian society in which methods of extreme cosmetic surgery dictate the lives of everyone on the planet. Cybernetic technology in conflict with nature and a stifling, closely observed world hinder the psychological development of the two main characters. These characters are strong female figures whose ideologies are both constructed and altered by body image and a skewed sense of self. The *Uglies* novels can be viewed critically through a theoretical framework of subjectivity and identity, particularly as they pertain to young adults in these examples, and therefore serve as a strong example of critical literary merit in the young adult genre.

Westerfeld's series begins with the novel *Uglies*. Fifteen year old Tally Youngblood finds herself coming ever closer to her sixteenth birthday, the age at which all children undergo an operation which will make them "pretty" (*Uglies* 16). Westerfeld illustrates Tally's desire for the operation by writing "Tally was nothing here. Worse, she was ugly" (7). The terms "ugly" and "pretty" refer to more than physical description; an ugly is someone who still has all of the natural

physical features he or she was born with, while a pretty is someone who has had the operation. This operation is no mere cosmetic procedure, however. It completely and irreversibly alters every aspect of the subject's appearance.

From a young age, uglies are taught about the flaws of genetics. It is understood that "Ugly faces were always asymmetrical; neither half looked exactly like the other. So the first thing the morpho software did was take each side of your face and double it, like holding a mirror right down middle, creating two examples of perfect symmetry" (*Uglies* 42). Early in the first novel, Tally and her friend Shay sit in Tally's room designing various possibilities for what they will look like after the operation on a "wallscreen" (41). The girls play with the software until they create versions of themselves that fit the pretty standard. Shay complains to Tally, "This



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whole game is designed to make us hate ourselves” (44). Tally replies that making everyone the same “standard morphological model” while also equally beautiful is the only way to eliminate issues of race and discrimination based on physical appearance (45). Tally and the rest of the city’s population are in denial about their physical appearances, refusing to see who they truly are, without the aid of technology. The wallscreen can be viewed metaphorically as a mirror, and exemplifies Lacan’s mirror stage theory, which describes the stage in which a child can begin to recognize his own reflection in a mirror (Lacan 1285). Lacan writes:

We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*. (1286)

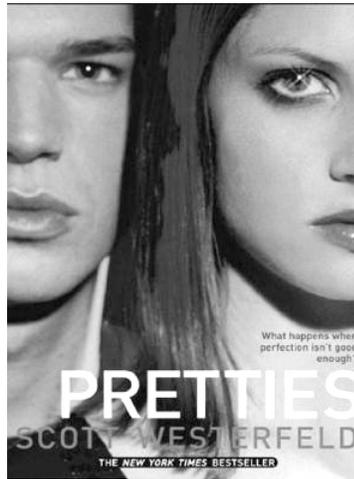
The wallscreen is viewed as a mirror which ignores uglies’ true reflection of appearance. The only reflection uglies will accept is the constructed image of themselves which the authorities of the city create. Because of this, they fail to develop beyond the mirror stage, and never truly develop an individually constructed sense of self. Shay’s identity, however, is more developed than Tally’s; this becomes clear when Shay asks Tally to reject the city’s imposed ideologies and come with her to join the Smoke, a rebel group outside of the city that opposes the operation (*Uglies* 91).

Despite their ever-changing opinions on the implementation of the operations, Shay and Tally agree on one aspect of the female body image. While in the Smoke, Tally and Shay flip through magazines from Rusty times—what readers would call the present—and come across a lingerie ad featuring an anorexic model. They are both horrified at the picture, remembering lessons in school about anorexia: a puzzling and dangerous disease that causes people to starve themselves. Even with their horror at the girl’s anorexic appearance, Tally still notices that “her face was closer to being pretty than any of the rest” (*Uglies* 199). However, in the second novel, after having undergone the pretty operation, Shay and Tally self-consciously regard their large breakfast, allowing that they might take a few “calorie purgers” (*Pretties* 6). Susan Bordo, in her essay titled “Unbearable Weight” calls the body “a medium of culture” and stresses the unfair standards of perfection which have been placed upon women (2362). She writes, “The nineteenth-century hourglass figure, emphasizing breasts and hips against a wasp waist, was an intelligible symbolic form, representing a domestic, sexualized ideal of femininity” (Bordo 2374).

These are physical attributes city officials in the novel seek to emphasize as well, because of the biological advantages of such a female figure. Shay even notes, however, the absurdity of making this ideal a requirement: “We’re not freaks, Tally. We’re normal. We may not be gorgeous, but at least we’re not hyped-up Barbie dolls” (*Uglies* 82). These morphological pretty standards may seem extreme, but they do not compare with the tenuously far-reaching possibilities of the operations.

As Tally struggles with these possibilities and ideologies, she regards another unsuspecting young ugly, wondering:

Should she tell this new ugly that... her body was going to be opened up, the bones ground down to the right shape, some of them stretched or padded, her nose cartilage stripped out and replaced with programmable plastic, skin sanded off and reseeded like a soccer field in spring? That her eyes would be laser-cut for a lifetime of perfect vision, reflective implants inserted under the iris to add sparkling gold flecks to their indifferent brown? Her muscles all trimmed up with a night of electrocize and all her baby fat sucked out for good? Teeth replaced with ceramics as strong as a suborbital aircraft wing, and as white as the dorm’s good china? (*Uglies* 97)



This passage describes the physical changes one undergoes with the pretty operation. Beyond aesthetics or improved physical capability, it turns humans into hybrid beings. Westerfeld later calls the characters “products of a technological civilization” (*Pretties* 274). In her “Manifesto for Cyborgs” Donna Haraway discusses this same idea. Haraway defines the term cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (2269). This is exactly what the characters of the novels become once they have undergone the operation. They are no longer merely human, but rather engineered figures of physical perfection.

Haraway calls her essay “an effort to build an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism” (2269). Haraway’s essay is intended to provoke, and does not suggest that modern culture has literally become filled with cyborgs. Rather, she suggests that the boundaries of nature and nurture begin to be questioned, and whether the forces that tempt humanity closer and closer toward hybridity with technology are really nurturing at all. Surely a person with mechanical features such as engineered muscles and vision would be considered to have cybernetic qualities, but would someone who had received a vaccine be called a cyborg as well? Such a person is surely a blend of the organic and the technological. This point critiques controversial or invasive genetic procedures and causes the reader to consider the direction in which our own technology is turning.

This is the point at which it becomes necessary to

question where the line should be drawn between human, human-machine, and pure machine, the point which Haraway calls “a leaky distinction” (2272). Westerfeld steps over this line as he describes a second feature of the pretty operation: lesions on the brain which affect the way that pretties think. The lesions cause pretties to become pleasantly docile (*Uglies* 266). This frightening technological possibility launches the series into a new level of bioethics. Tally’s ugly friend David, who is the leader of the Smoke, struggles to explain the magnitude of the psychological damage by saying, “That’s the worst thing they do to you, to any of you. Whatever those brain lesions are about, the worst damage is done before they even pick up the knife: You’re all brainwashed into believing you’re ugly” (276). This revelation also returns to the idea that the characters’ sense of self is negatively constructed, not only on a physical level, but in a way that changes how they are able to realize and react to the world around them. Lacan writes of this damaging attitude:

The sufferings of neurosis and psychosis are for us a schooling in the passions of the soul, just as the beam of the psychoanalytic scales, when we calculate the tilt of its threat to entire communities, provides us with an indication of the deadening of the passions in society. (1290)

This leads to another prominent theme in the novel: its constantly shifting ideological systems. The characters live in a world of fantasy which is dictated by higher powers and in which their very mode of thought is controlled. Their view of the world is consequently skewed by these imposed ideologies. Louis Althusser writes, “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (1498). The “individual” in this case, however, is a construct of how society thinks he or she should look and act. Westerfeld writes, “Not just your face was changed by the knife. Your personality—the real you inside—was the price of beauty” (*Uglies* 406). This loss of individual identity applies to both extremes of the cybernetic alterations: pretties and an even more altered group called “specials.” Specials work for a government agency called “Special Circumstances” and closely resemble the concept of a special agent, except with superhuman strength and speed (288). They are considered both elite and formidable, and are regarded both with awe and fear. This causes a schism in the series, both in the ideologies of the societal groups in the city and in Tally’s own way of thinking and acting.

At one point in the third novel, after becoming special, Tally has been captured and is being informed of exactly what the special operation has done to her brain. The doctor tells her, “There are also certain structures in your higher cortex, apparently artificial, which seemed designed to change your behavior. Tally, do you ever suffer from sudden flashes of anger or euphoria, countersocial impulses, or feelings of superiority?” (*Specials* 253) What Althusser calls “contrasting Virtues (modesty, resignation, submissiveness on the one hand, cynicism, contempt, arrogance, confidence, self-importance, even smooth talk and cunning on the other)”

in an ideological system applies both to the contrast between pretties as the submissive and specials as the dominant (1495).

This duality in society is also mirrored between the personalities of the two central female figures, Shay and Tally. Though Shay seems to be the more dominant and rebellious of the two, she is usually the one to surrender in each instance to the will of the city, becoming whomever and whatever it wants her to be. Shay’s personality leads her to be reckless, destructive, and a product of whatever technological whim the city can muster. Tally, on the other hand, encounters hardships because of the part she unwillingly, and often unknowingly, plays in the city’s games. She manages to overcome these problems by returning to who she is and her own sense of self: “Deep inside herself were threads of permanence, the things that had remained unchanged whether she was ugly or pretty or special—and love was one of them” (*Specials* 95). This is what allows Tally, through every stage in her technological evolution, to rewire herself to think individually.

The two young woman also experience constant exchanges in opinion and role reversals. In the first novel, Shay rejects the idea of becoming pretty, scolding Tally for her readiness to accept a pretty, mechanically engineered appearance over her natural one (*Uglies* 81). Later, however, after having received the operation herself, as well as the perception-altering lesions, Shay muses, “I like the way I look...I’m happier in this body” (*Uglies* 408). When Shay becomes a special in the third novel, she is ecstatic at her new physical form, almost as though she had begun taking drastic and dramatic steps in order to arrive at that outcome, while Tally is horrified at the possibility of “terrible beauty... cold, commanding, intimidating, like some regal animal of prey” (*Specials* 101).

Once Tally has undergone the pretty operation, the city officials take actions to keep an extremely close watch on her. It is apparent that the technology of security and surveillance has stepped beyond the boundaries of privacy. Westerfeld writes:

The city interface brought you pings, answered your questions, reminded you of appointments, even turned the lights on and off in your room. If Special Circumstances wanted to watch you, they’d know everything you did and half of what you were thinking. She remembered talking to Croy up in the spire, her interface ring on her finger, the walls catching every word. (*Pretties* 69)

Later, Tally and her boyfriend Zane are fitted with interface cuffs that cannot be taken off (*Pretties* 169). In the third novel, when Tally is captured by the authorities of the city Diego, her hospital room is actually able to monitor not only her movements, but also specific aspects of her body chemistry. Tally observes that “the fabric of the padding glittered with a hexagonal pattern of micro-lenses, thousands of tiny cameras woven into it. The doctors could watch anything she did from any angle” (*Specials* 250). Moments later, she notices that “like the wall padding, [the bed covers] were woven through with microsensors, greedy little machines to measure her heart rate, sweat, and galvanic

skin response” (252). In all of these examples, surveillance has moved beyond measures to ensure that regulations are followed to a voyeuristic form of punishment which removes all sense of freedom or privacy. It seems as if in every situation the characters face, the walls literally have eyes and ears and can betray their very thoughts. This is very similar to the idea of the Panopticon, the circular prison system ideal for surveillance which Foucault addresses in his essay “Discipline and Punish” (1642). Foucault writes, “In this panoptic society of which incarceration is the omnipresent armature, the delinquent is not outside the law; he is, from the very outset, in the law, at the very heart of the law, or at least in the midst of those mechanisms that transfer the individual imperceptibly from discipline to the law, from deviation to defense” (1642). Another radical system of punishment which Foucault discusses is Mettray, the French juvenile prison camp (1636). Foucault calls the wardens of this prison “technicians of behaviour: engineers of conduct, orthopaedists of individuality. Their task was to produce bodies that were both docile and capable” (1637). Though in the novels the city officials seek to stamp out individuality and maintain order through strict regulation, they also quite literally manufacture the children to be submissive bodies.

The idea of control through absolute power, even over nature, makes the argument that man and technology must be in conflict and opposition with nature rather than co-exist with it.

Dr. Cable, the head of Special Circumstances, explains to Tally the reason for the surgery by saying, “Outside of our self-contained cities, humanity is a disease, a cancer on the body of the world” (*Uglies* 136). Tally’s own manifesto at the end of the third novel contradicts this attitude, declaring her intentions to rewire the world for the better, much in the same way she continually rewires herself, by protecting the natural state, both in man and in the natural world (*Specials* 371). Her manifesto mirrors Haraway’s praise of the scrutiny of technology:

Cyborg imagery can help express two crucial arguments... (1) the production of universal, totalizing theory is a major mistake that misses most of reality...(2) taking responsibility for the social relations of science and technology means refusing an anti-science metaphysics, a demonology of technology, and so means embracing the skillful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life. (Haraway 2299)

Westerfeld incorporates cyborg imagery in his novels in order to argue these very points. He stresses that for the authorities of this society to maintain control, it is not sufficient to change the way people look and act. They must also control their actions and continually changing identities. The surgical operations and breaches of privacy invade the characters’ literal minds as well as their senses of self.

It is clear that the *Uglies* series has a high level of literary sophistication as well as incredibly entertaining and original plots. Its merit does not stand alone within the young adult genre, however. M.T. Anderson’s novel *Feed*

also comments on rapidly-changing technology, describing a futuristic world in which all thought processes are based on consumerism and dictated by advertising via a network connected to people’s brains. Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* features a futuristic dystopian society which is divided similarly to Tally’s world in *Uglies*, but is much more oppressed and demoralized by its government, which forces children to fight to the death in gladiatorial games. The protagonists in all of these novels are incited to rebel and improve their societies, fighting for drastic change and ultimately justice. These common themes in modern young adult literature center around elements of the hero’s journey whose sub-plot serves as commentary on issues in society.

Uglies and books like it have the unique ability to not only capture and hold young readers’ interests, but to encourage them to take this journey for themselves, to think critically about the issues explicitly and implicitly presented in the books. Infinite doors are then opened as readers use these new and critical ideas to consider the real world and how closely these stories may resemble it. Young readers are able to gain from the young adult genre because it provides them books with profound themes and issues, but with more modernized, personalized, and contextualized plots than those of their classic literature counterparts. In its unique ability to connect young readers meaningfully to the world around them, young adult literature stands as a significant contribution to the literary canon.

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The Odyssey: Finding Our Way to Student Engagement

Lee Dubert, Peter Erickson,
Susan Martin, and Heather Sinnes

Greek myths and heroic tales have a place in the curriculum in many different grade levels and subjects. *The Odyssey*, for example, is required reading in many secondary English Language Arts classrooms. Although it is a thrilling story, sometimes its apparent age and language discourage our students from reading it or enjoying their study of this work. In this article we suggest ways to capture student interest and foster connections with this ancient classic.

Embarking on *The Odyssey* in the secondary classroom can be intimidating. Greek mythology does not always draw stellar reviews from teenagers. In fact, countless English teachers have tried and failed to introduce Zeus and “the gang” through tedious memorization and vague stories involving ambiguous gods. *The Odyssey* has much to offer today’s young adults, and there are effective approaches to help students understand and appreciate the cultural significance of the work.

The instructional approaches we present draw primarily from a month-long, ninth grade unit on *The Odyssey*, in which we hoped to: help students understand the rich interconnections between the text and modern life, appreciate the importance of literary allusion in creating a deep and resonant appreciation of literature, allow for differentiation to meet the varying reading abilities of students, and provide opportunities for students to use the above in their writing. We thus involved students in multiple learning activities—viewing of popular media, as well as reading and writing activities.

Tapping Teen Culture

If Yogi Berra had been an English teacher, he might have uttered, “Sometimes kids have no idea what they don’t know!” In order to help our students appreciate the many connections *The Odyssey* makes within their everyday lives, we introduced some pop-culture references hoping that the average teenager would enjoy and identify with them. These references included selections from modern movies/television shows, music, poetry, and well known literature. We found no shortage of “teen-popular” contemporary media clips with mythological associations. Ultimately we used “Homer’s

Odyssey” from season one of *The Simpsons* episodes and clips from *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Coen & Coen).

“Homer’s Odyssey” offers witty satirical dialogue, an adequately accurate account of Odysseus’ journey, some great slapstick comedy, and many teen culture connections. Perhaps the most effective hook in the entire episode is seen via the hilarious image of the 80’s lipstick rock band Styx. The band



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is costumed as skeletons and playing one of their cheesy rock ballads—to which Homer exclaims: “This truly is HELL!” The fact that the main characters of the *Odyssey* are played by the legendary cast of *The Simpsons*—Bart as Telemachus, Marge as Penelope, and, of course, Homer as Odysseus—helped to forge mnemonic associations for the students.

The 2000 box office hit *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* was also an easy sell to students. The movie’s plot only loosely follows the *Odyssey*’s overall storyline, but many of the *Odyssey*’s main characters are memorably represented. The humor and amazing musical score in *O Brother* were engaging hooks for our secondary students. That many of these teens had already seen and enjoyed the movie with their family and friends only further validated its effect.

Our students enjoyed these viewing experiences and the videos helped them discover just how pervasive Greek mythology is in their daily lives. One never knows when Homer will show up next, but when he does, we want students to be able to recognize his influence.

Weaving in Other Texts

Integration or layering of various texts—particularly current young adult fiction—can also foster student interest and engagement with the classics (Fisher and Ivey). Intertextuality can serve to strengthen both cultural understandings and personal connections with classics such as *The Odyssey*.

Adele Geras has two books that are very useful complements to *The Odyssey*. The first, *Troy* (2002 YALSA Best Books for Young Adults award), is told from the point of view of a adolescent serving girl in Troy, includes several Gods as characters, and is easily accessible to 9th graders (670L). Geras’s, *Ithaka*, more directly covers the content of *The Odyssey*, but focuses on Penelope and Telemachus’s stories from the perspective of a servant girl in their household. Although it is relatively easy reading (740L), it has some conventions in its form that a teacher would want to preview before turning ninth graders loose. Interspersed with traditional prose chapters advancing the plot line are poetical interpretations of Odysseus’s journey as Penelope “sees” it in her waking dreams while weaving and the “thoughts” of Odysseus’s dog, Argos.

More closely focused on *The Odyssey*, Rick Riordan’s series, *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* translates many of the chapters of *The Odyssey* into the contemporary adventures of a new demigod, Percy (Perseus) Jackson, son of Poseidon and a mortal woman. In this series, recommended for 6th-9th graders (630-740L), the author situates the Greek gods in contemporary America. Percy Jackson finds himself on an odyssey of his own, following a series of quests that closely parallel those of Odysseus.

Teachers, wishing to support second language learners or students with reading disabilities, may find Mary Pope Osborne’s series about *The Odyssey* a nice addition to the classroom library (750-880L). Osborne is the children’s writer who is most well known for her Magic Tree House series of books. The *Odyssey* series is very readable and the interest range is identified as “older kids” by NoveList¹. They will be useful for students who need materials at a much easier reading level than *The Odyssey*, as it appears in most textbooks.

Although during a unit on *The Odyssey* most teachers may wish to focus on Odysseus’s journey, it is helpful to be able to recommend related literature that students will enjoy. There are other works that students may have already read. By pointing out the connections between these more contemporary works and *The Odyssey* teachers can help students leverage their background knowledge. The first of these is Michael Scott’s popular trilogy *The Secrets of the Immortal Nicholas Flamel* (840-890L, interest level-teens), perhaps currently the most popular of



these books. Scott’s expertise in a wide range of mythologies is reflected in these novels. A second popular teen series loosely connected to mythology begins with *Thief* by Megan Whalen Turner. Turner’s trilogy portrays a world in which gods and goddesses have a direct hand in events. A third series with similar themes is *The Trickster Series* by Tamora Pierce.

Because most high school readers are not overly familiar with Greco-Roman mythology, it is helpful to have several reference sources in the classroom. A particularly appealing reference resource is *Mythology: A Fandex Family Field Guide* (Petras and Petras). Fandex guides are “stacks” of bookmark shaped cards held together with a rivet. They are available in a wide array of topics. They do a nice job of bridging the encyclopedia genre (Palmer & Stewart), graphic novels, and media. Students will learn the usefulness of reference resources as they consult the Fandex, Wikipedia, and other references to check the definitions and histories of the various mythical heroes, creatures, gods and goddesses.

Students as Myth Makers

We cannot emphasize enough the critical role that writing can play in fostering students’ interactions with text. Our *Odyssey* unit ended with a final writing project: a seven to ten paragraph myth/epic story. Purposes of the writing assignment included deepening of students’ understandings of the conventions of an epic, use of figurative language, as well as use of allusions to Greek mythology and Homer’s writings. Writing a myth/epic required the students to apply their newly acquired knowledge. While we required myth/epic story as the type of genre, students participated in planning and decision-making processes

through self-selection of topics. Students chose from a variety of classical or contemporary topics including:

- A natural phenomenon or disaster: Hurricane Katrina, the Indonesian tsunami, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, etc.
- A moral lesson: selection of an emotion (love, envy, fear or jealousy) and an adventure using that emotion as the theme.
- An origin story: why people don't have tails, where the stars came from, why the landscape is textured.
- An epic journey or adventure.

Engagement in writing processes was scaffolded through the use of the following project guidelines.

Guidelines for Writing Your Myth/Epic:

1. Create a myth/epic with an original idea (teacher approval needed).
2. Give your myth/epic a creative title.
3. Make a minimum of two allusions to Homer's works or Greek mythology, these can be geographical naming of a place or setting.
4. 7-10 paragraph minimum.
5. Include at least 2 different archetypes in your myth/epic and this characterization must be apparent through dialogue or description.
6. Include at least five characteristics of myth/epic writing:
 - Hero with a fatal or disabling flaw
 - Intervention of gods
 - Supernatural – going to the underworld, performing superhuman task
 - Problem caused by greed, jealousy
 - A woman/man is responsible for causing problems
 - Explanations of how things are now
 - Explanation of the natural world
 - Not always a happy ending
 - Lesson in the story for the reader
7. Write for your audience: Your classmates and teacher.
8. We want to hear your voice in your writing. Be creative, use humor, let your personality drive your voice.

The opportunity for students to synthesize new found knowledge with prior understandings through myth-writing proved to be a successful venture. Students' pieces displayed an understanding of and ties to many themes present in *The Odyssey*. They incorporated many Greek and Roman allusions that can be traced back to Homer. One of the students, who went above and beyond the assignment, even wrote his myth in epic poetic form—Dactylic hexameter (also known as “heroic

hexameter”). This was especially remarkable considering the constraining parameters of the assignment itself.

Students were also able to make personal connections to content of *The Odyssey* in their writing. Many student-generated myths made connections to the nature of life's unpredictability and the difficulties bestowed upon us along our individual journeys. One student portrayed himself as a bold hero with superhuman strength in his epic poem. The hero had all but his head dunked in to the River Styx as a young child—an allusion to Achilles, of course. This caused severe forgetfulness and confusion when it came time for him to remember and follow through with responsibilities, especially responsibilities that came from parents and teachers. Writing an epic allowed him to delve into issues of what it is like to have expectations put upon him, and, how sometimes, outside forces cause him to forget.

In another myth that explained reasons for people and objects having shadows, a student dealt with defying those in authority. The main character acted against the wishes of the Gods and was then banished from human form, forced to be nothing but a flat dark figure that followed loved ones around. This author incorporated punishment by the Gods for minor acts, such as going against parental wishes, into her myth.

These two examples, like many of the other student-written myths, portray the personal ways that students wrote about very real issues that they deal with during adolescence. They were able to connect *The Odyssey* with their own contemporary and often complicated journeys through life. Students' voices shone through these personal connections.

Extending the Voyage

In sum, we have found that extending the voyage through a unit approach to reading *The Odyssey* can lead to student interest and engagement with complex, classic texts. Thoughtful planning and awareness of student interests contributed to success with students. Creating connections to popular media, layering of multiple texts, and fostering writing within the genre were critical components of this successful unit. Each, in some way, facilitated students' abilities to make cultural and personal connections that helped to deepen their understanding of and appreciation for *The Odyssey*.

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Rick Riordan's website www.rickriordan.com has a link to many resources about mythology and some engaging games and activities that gamers will find entertaining as well as informative. <http://www.rickriordan.com/index.php/books-for-children/explore-greek-mythology/>

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¹Novelist is an EBSCO Publishing subscription website. Our university and public libraries have subscribed and thus this reader advisory service is free to us. For more information visit <http://www.ebscohost.com/novelist/default.php>



Along the Bitterroot

When I was younger,
my grandmother taught me
that fish like sweet kernels
of corn. And I believed her,
though I never caught a one.
Years later, my clumsy hands
Fumbled among hairy-knuckled
old men who hunched over
their work with glasses perched
on nose, knowing all. I did my share
of daydreaming--not in a baitshop
but wading waist deep into Lochsa waters
and mimicking what I'd seen the first time
I drove away from home: My life
was in boxes and a cat yowled
in a carrier beside me, and I wondered
what the hell I was doing, and then,
around a bend, where rapids move
into mirror-still waters, I saw a man
standing alone, wearing solitude
like some fancy brand of waders.
I won't say that the sun seemed to shine
only on him. It didn't. And that
would be a sort of forced loveliness.
I will say it illuminated the line
arcing above his head. And that line
was as luminous as a spider's filament.
With each clockwork of his wrist, I knew
he came out here, probably to this same spot,
knowing he would either catch something
or he wouldn't. And as I negotiated the curves,
I was sure he'd feel gratitude either way.

—Wendy Erman

Aligning the IRA/NCTE Standards to Graphic Novels:

An ELA Pedagogy of Multiliteracies

Katie Monnin, James Bucky Carter,
and Brian Kelley

One of the most intriguing and contemporary questions about the IRA/NCTE standards and their pedagogical interpretation during a new media age (Kress, 2003) centers on how English Language Arts (ELA) teachers can better adopt pedagogies of multiliteracies in their classrooms. The guiding question for this article is, then: In what ways, can ELA teachers use graphic novels to adopt pedagogies of multiliteracies that reach out to the IRA/NCTE ELA Standards and IRA’s position statement that students be able to ‘visualize and visually represent’?

Theoretically grounded in the work of scholars who advocate for a pedagogy of multiliteracies in ELA classrooms (Buckingham, 2003; Carter, 2007; Cope & Kalantzis, 1999; Frey & Fisher, 2008; Gee, 2003; Kist, 2004; Kress, 2003; Monnin, 2010, 2011; The New London Group, 1996), coupled with the work of graphic novel scholars who suggest that graphic novels are multiliterate texts (Carter, 2007; Monnin, 2010, 2011; Schwarz, 2002), this article suggests that graphic novels can be aligned to the IRA/NCTE Standards.

To begin, the article will discuss the theoretical groundwork that informs adopting a pedagogy of multiliteracies with graphic novels. Then, building upon that foundation, this article will offer practitioner-friendly examples and resources for teaching graphic novels as multiliterate texts that align to the IRA/NCTE standards in middle level and high school level ELA classrooms.

Adopting a pedagogy of multiliteracies in ELA

Adopting a pedagogy of multiliteracies is not necessarily a new concept to ELA teaching and learning. In 1996, The New London Group argued that modern educators should rethink how they defined literacy. “Mere literacy,” traditionally defined as print-text language alone, is no longer applicable to living and working in the modern world. In a



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modern literacy world, The New London Group explained, literacy is defined by its social and multi-modal applicability:

What we term “mere literacy” remains centered on language only, and usually on a singular national form of language at that, which is conceived as a stable system based on rules such as mastering sound-letter correspondence. This is based on the assumption that we can discern and describe correct usage. Such a view of language will characteristically translate into a more or less authoritarian kind of pedagogy. A pedagogy of multiliteracies, by contrast, focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone. These differ according to culture and context, and have specific cognitive, cultural, and social effects. In some cultural contexts . . . the visual mode or representation may be much more powerful and closely related to language than “mere literacy” would ever be able to allow. (p. 64)

In short, today’s teacher needs to widen the lens through which he or she defines literacy. When we define and teach literacy today, we need to include, alongside an emphasis on print-text literacies, an equitable emphasis on multiple modes of literacy and their social and cultural purposes.

In 1999, in another publication titled *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, some members of The New London Group further argued for a pedagogy of multiliteracies. They pointed out that there was no canonical, traditional English language left to teach. Today’s literacy climate is linguistically and culturally diverse, and, as a result, the English language is not as static as it once was. Educators need to be more responsive to this current literacy climate. Instead of basing their pedagogies in a standard English language of print-text literacies, as had once been traditional (Langer, 1998; Purves & Pradl, 2003), educators need to see modern literacy teaching in two regards: as a matter of modality and as a matter of designing social futures: “written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning” (Cope & Kalantzis, 1999, p. 5). For example, consider how the World Wide Web (WWW) places equal value on all of the following literacies: print-text, images, audio, and spatial awareness. Since modern literacy modalities can stand alone and/or in relationship to others, Cope and Kalantzis argue that “there cannot be one set of standards and skills that constitutes the ends of literacy learning, however taught” (p. 6).

With a more diverse understanding of literacy, Cope and Kalantzis continue, teachers must also think about how a pedagogy of multiliteracies influences our students’ futures. Since the English language is the most widely spoken language around the world, it is becoming a world language. However, at the same time that English is becoming a world language with diverse communicative modalities, it is also socially fluid:

At the same time as it is becoming a *lingua mundi*, world language, and a *lingua franca*, a common language of global commerce, media, and

politics, English is also breaking into multiple and increasingly different Englishes, marked by accent, national origin, subcultural style and professional or technical communities. Increasingly, the name of the game in English is crossing linguistic boundaries. Gone are the days when learning a single, standard version of the language was sufficient. (p. 6)

We must not only define literacies as multiple, but also as culturally responsive (representative of the cultural and linguistic lives of those who are using it). For example, to effectively communicate in a more modern world, we must know a variety of Englishes, and we must also know a variety of other languages that blend into, alter, or enhance the English language. Our modern literacy world is both multiliterate and multicultural.

Gunther Kress is probably given the most credit for relating a pedagogy of multiliteracies specifically to ELA teaching and learning (Kress, 2003). Kress’ (2003) *Literacy in the New Media Age* explains the significance of reaching out to both verbal-linguistic and visual spatial-learners in particular (Gardner, 1983): “The world told is a different world to the world shown” (p. 1). The world of print-text literacy, integral in its own right, now shares the stage, Kress argues, with the world of visual literacy. To teach reading and writing today, ELA teachers in particular must move toward, as The New London Group also explained, a multimodal definition of literacy: “A new theory of meaning cannot do without the concept of *transformation* . . . Transformation needs to be complemented by the concept of *transduction*. While transformation operates on the forms and structures within a mode, transduction accounts for the shift of ‘semiotic material’ – for want of a better word – across modes” (p. 36). Today’s ELA teachers need to be conceptually aware that the modern literacy climate calls on them to be transformative leaders (Henderson and Gornik, 2007), and, as such, transcend traditional literacy boundaries and redefine what counts as literature/literacy in today’s classrooms. Traditionally, when ELA teachers have chosen a literary text, their choices have placed value primarily on print-text literacies. Now, however, as transformative leaders in charge of transcending traditional literacy boundaries, ELA teacher’s must show that they place value on print-text literacies and visual literacies. Print-text literacy and image literacy now share the stage: “A theory that deals with multimodality comes up against the need for a usable definition of *text*, given that our present sense of text comes from the era of the dominance of the mode of writing, and the dominance of the medium of the book . . . It is absolutely essential now to consider the *sites and media of the appearance* of text” (p. 36).

A year before Kress called for a redefinition of “text” in ELA classrooms, Schwarz (2002) argued that graphic novels, and the literacies within them, be considered valuable literary-level texts: “In an increasingly visual culture, literacy educators can profit from the use of graphic novels in the classroom, especially for young adults. The term *graphic novel* includes fiction as well as nonfiction text with pictures—”comics” in book format” (p.262). In other words,

since the graphic novel presents a format for valuing both print-text literacies and visual literacies, the graphic novel can be used to adopt a pedagogy of multiliteracies in ELA. And even though some critics may take issue with Schwarz’s statement that a graphic novel is “‘comics’ in book format,” we define a graphic novel as a literary level format that places significant value on both visual literacies and print-text literacies to tell story. The popularization of the term “graphic novel,” in fact, comes from esteemed comic creator Will Eisner (1985), whose intention was to demonstrate that sequential art, like comics, could also work on a literary-level, and, in doing so, would be called a “graphic novel.” We agree with Eisner’s statement: “A key to my thinking has always been the almost fanatical belief that what I was engaged in was a literary art form.” Hajdu (2008) further explains Eisner’s thinking; the comic book format had been popularly criticized in a post World War II era for being low-brow and juvenile, and many comic artists – including Eisner – wanted to show how versatile their format could be, thus the genesis of the graphic novel as a valid literary level format.

When we couple the graphic novel and its literary-level intentions with ELA teaching and learning, we can see a unique gateway for teaching the IRA/NCTE standards. Operating on the level of canonical literature, graphic novels reach out not only to print-text literacy learners (what Gardner’s 1983 publication of *Frames of Mind* called “verbal-linguistic”), but also to visual literacy learners (what Gardner called “visual spatial”). Graphic novels, in

short, are one multiliterate format that can address the more recent IRA/NCTE standards emphases on multiliteracies. Figure 1 (p. 38) offers a brief rationale for how each IRA/NCTE standard reflects an ELA pedagogy of multiliteracies, and, also, how graphic novels meet that standard. In fact, all twelve of the IRA/NCTE standards seem to show a preference for a pedagogy of multiliteracies in ELA teaching and learning. Further, embedded in each standard and each rationale in Figure 1 lies not only the IRA/NCTE standards, but also IRA’s position statement that students be able to “visualize and visually represent” when they read.

Along with the alignment of graphic novels to the IRA/NCTE standards, further support for adopting a pedagogy of multiliteracies is swiftly rising on yet another front as well. The proposed Common Core Standards are media literacy friendly; in other words, The Common Core Standards reach out to multiliterate texts, a pretty sure sign of support for graphic novels. Moreover, The Common Core standards also place emphasis on persuasive texts and nonfiction texts, both of which just may steer teachers even more toward graphic novels, for both are not only well-represented in the graphic novel arena, but also critically praised, high quality texts with international acclaim.

As a multiliterate text capable of reaching out to the IRA/NCTE standards and the proposed Common Core Standards graphic novels stand tall. In fact, it may be fair to say that graphic novels have perhaps found a standard-supported home in every ELA classroom.

Textual	Textual
Enter the author. retrace slight mistakes the ink can make upon the page so imperfections are beautiful.	Enter Control alt or erase slight mistakes. in sync? navigate beyond this page. Slow connection, memory full.
From Roman times: classical writers, and the scribes beneath, fingerprint upon a parchment sheet.	Times New Roman: classical spiders upon black and white keys reflections upon a projected screen.
Quill, upon the Scroll.	Click, click, Scroll.
	—Kat Chew

Figure 1: Brief rationales for how each IRA/NCTE standard reflects a pedagogy of multiliteracies in ELA, and how graphic novels meet that standard.

IRA/NCTE Standard	“How does this standard reflect a pedagogy of multiliteracies?”	“How can graphic novels, as multiliteracy texts, meet this standard?”
<p>1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.</p>	<p>To “read a wide range of print and non-print texts” in order to better understand the world around them, students need to exposure a diverse array of literacies. When ELA teachers adopt a pedagogy of multiliteracies they are providing such exposure.</p> <p>Indeed, in our opinion, this standard seems to be calling for a redefinition of literacy in ELA classrooms, to include not only print and non-print texts but also various literacies.</p>	<p>Graphic novels rely not only on print-text literacies and image literacies, but also on various genres of storytelling (“fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works”). Due to their multiliterate format and their creative expression in various genres, graphic novels certainly align with Standard # 1.</p> <p>Digital comics are beginning to have a presence on cell phones, Ipods and Iphones – certainly conveyances for non-traditional print-based texts.</p>
<p>2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.</p>	<p>To “read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres” can certainly be seen to advocate for a pedagogy of multiliteracies. For instance, if my students are reading <i>My Brother Sam is Dead</i> (about the Revolutionary War) they can also be reading political cartoons from the same time period, perhaps even those from one of Benjamin Franklin’s newspapers.</p>	<p>In the U.S., graphic novels have been popular for over thirty years now, and, their origins range from hieroglyphics to 20th century comic books. They cover memoir (Alison Bechdel’s <i>Fun Home</i>), biographies (Ho Che Anderson’s <i>King</i>), fiction (Alan Moore’s <i>Watchmen</i>), nonfiction (Art Spiegelman’s <i>Maus</i>), history (Joe Kubert’s <i>Fax from Sarejevo</i>), science fiction (see any Star Wars comics), fantasy (Jeff Smith’s <i>Bone</i>), and self-help (Daniel Pink’s <i>Johnny Buno: The Last Career Guide You’ll Ever Need</i>), just to mention a few genres they represent.</p> <p>The University of Nebraska offers an array of comics from different war eras that can help students understand propaganda and notions of war through different times and countries: http://contentdm.unl.edu/cdm4/browse.php?CISOROOT=%2Fcomics</p>

<p>3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).</p>	<p>Students need exposure to and experience with a wide range of literacies in order to develop schema that will allow them to pair appropriate reading strategies to the appropriate type of text. For example, if we ask students to read a poem, and they have never seen a poem before, we cannot expect them to automatically start looking at rhymes, patterns, and so on.</p>	<p>There are a variety of reading strategies, some new and some old, that can be used to help students read graphic novels. For a more thorough discussion of these reading strategies please consult Carter’s (2007) <i>Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels</i>, Thompson’s (2008) <i>Adventures in Graphica: Using Comics and Graphic Novels to Build Comprehension</i>, 2-6, or Monnin’s (2010) <i>Teaching Graphic Novels</i>.</p>
<p>4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.</p>	<p>In order “to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes” students need to be able to reach out to a variety of audiences, each of which retains its own literacy strengths, purposes and/or needs. When students are taught a pedagogy of multiliteracies, they are more likely to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences, for a variety of purposes.</p>	<p>Since graphic novels stress two of the most dominant literacies in today’s modern literacy climate, graphic novels can, in order to effectively communicate, help students adjust from one literacy mode to another.</p> <p>As well, the recent work of Bitz (2009, 2010) illustrates how teachers and students can use comics scripting techniques to get students considering advanced composition options relative to the goals and forms of their writings.</p>

<p>5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.</p>	<p>“To communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes” students must be able to write in multiliteracies, for, as ELA teachers know, and The New London Group stresses, culture influences literacy knowledge. If I have some ESOL students from China, for instance, and I know that the Chinese language is based in a symbol system, I may want to rely on more visual literacies in order to communicate. When I write for students, and ask them to write for me in return, in short, it would be beneficial for everyone to communicate in a similar operate with familiar literacies.</p>	<p>Students should not only be taught to read with both print-text literacies and image literacies found in graphic novels, but also to write with both print-text literacies and image literacies. As ELA teachers know, reading and writing always go hand-in-hand. An excellent resource for teaching students to write their own print-text literacy and image literacy stories can be found on the Professor Garfield Website: http://www.professorgarfield.org/comics_lab_extreme/</p>
<p>6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.</p>	<p>To apply their knowledge of these various genres, styles and formats, students must first know how to read and write in various genres, styles and formats. Students must be multiliterate.</p>	<p>Again, if we expect students to apply various linguistic conventions, we must move outside of our traditional definition of literacy as predominantly print-text literacies. Graphic novels can help ELA teachers widen the scope of how students see various literacies and how they are used: language structure, conventions, techniques and so on, especially when teachers are willing to learn the process behind producing such texts and share opportunities to do the same with their students.</p>

<p>7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.</p>	<p>Since the goal of Standard #7 is to conduct research, students and ELA teachers are free to choose a literacy that they feel is most appropriate for their research goals, one that is probably most appropriate to the types of questions they ask and answers they seek. Traditionally, this has been interpreted to mean an essay of some kind. But if we are teaching a pedagogy of multiliteracies, and we want students to conduct research about the music of the 1920s, we may want them to respond musically as well (in an auditory literacy). In other words, after generating questions and posing questions, they could write and perform their own Jazz Era song.</p>	<p>When students research in our modern literacy climate, they go on the Internet and/or pick up a book with the most up-to-date information. Either way, modern resources place much more value – than has been traditional – on both print-text literacies and image literacies together to communicate information. Graphic novels provide students with reading experiences that help them couple both print-text literacies and image literacies together, into a collective understanding.</p> <p>The Grand Comic Book Database, available at http://www.comics.org, is an online resource that allows students to examine the cover of almost any comic every published. Looking at certain series’ depictions of minorities and other “othered” presences (see <i>Tarzan</i>, <i>Captain America</i>, and <i>Black Lightning</i>) can help students research the various histories of oppression and racism through the media.</p> <p>Http://www.ComicsResearch.org offers various resources on comics.</p> <p>The Ohio State University hosts a site on The Yellow Kid, an influential early cartoon strip, that can help students understand sociocultural and socioeconomic issues associated with the late 19th and early 20th centuries: http://cartoons.osu.edu/yellowkid/index.htm</p>
<p>8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.</p>	<p>Again, just like Standard #7, Standard #8 puts the topical interest in the hands of the ELA teacher and his or her students. However, a pedagogy of multiliteracies has at its roots advancements in information technology. Just to use variety of technological and information resources is in fact to adopt a pedagogy of multiliteracies.</p>	<p>When we think of modern literacies we most likely think of advancements in technology and information resources. Since these advancements are primarily visual in nature, it becomes imperative that we teach students how to read visual/image literacies. Thus, the graphic novel is one such text that can help us do so in ELA teaching and learning.</p> <p>Plus, many graphic novelists and webcomic artists maintain user friendly websites that show readers how to produce a comic/graphic novel in a technological age. For instance, Hope Larson: www.hopelarson.com. Also see the resources associated with standard 7.</p>

<p>9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.</p>	<p>Since a pedagogy of multiliteracies is defined by global cultural necessity, Standard #9 can easily be aligned to a pedagogy of multiliteracies.</p>	<p>When reading with graphic novels, students are offered both print-text literacies and image literacies, which, as sometimes claimed in ESOL teaching and learning, offer bridges from one language to another language. In other words, when learning a new language, students may rely on the images to help them understand the words; conversely, they may also rely on the words to help them understand the images. The simultaneous use of print-text literacy and image literacy found in graphic novels can help students to develop and understand diversity in language use.</p> <p>Titles such as Will Eisner’s <i>A Contract with God</i>, J.P. Stassen’s <i>Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda</i>, Lynda Barry’s <i>One Hundred Demons</i>, and Art Spiegelman’s <i>Maus</i> all deal with linguistic markers of sociocultural or sociopolitical importance, often with life-or-death implications.</p>
<p>10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English Language Arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.</p>	<p>Just like Standard #9, Standard #10 rests on cultural understanding. Thus, again due to its cultural philosophy, a pedagogy of multiliteracies is easily linked to this standard.</p>	<p>Just like Standard # 9, Standard # 10 stresses diverse English language use and knowledge. Because graphic novels use both print-text literacies and image literacies to communicate meaning, they can serve as a bridge from one language learning experience to another. An excellent resource for introducing ESOL students to reading with both types of literacies can be found at: http://www.toon-books.com/rdr_one.php</p> <p>See Cary’s (2004) <i>Going Graphic! Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom</i> for more resources and ideas.</p>
<p>11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.</p>	<p>When ELA teachers adopt a pedagogy of multiliteracies, they are certainly covering Standard #11, which calls on students to be members of “a variety of literacy communities.” One literacy community that has traditionally received most of the attention in ELA teaching and learning is that of print-text. But, that is only one literacy community and this standard calls on students to be members of a variety of literacy communities. A pedagogy of multiliteracies can certainly help ELA teachers reach Standard # 11.</p>	<p>Since graphic novels are multiliterate, they provide students with the chance to participate in a variety of literacy communities, as “knowledgeable, reflective, creative and critical” thinkers. Their variety of topics, especially in non-fiction titles, also assist in meeting this standard. Texts like Ailissa Torres’ <i>American Widow</i> and the graphic novel adaption of the 9/11 report can help students reflect on the events of 9/11 and help student discuss the various communities they noted or found solace in during that moment.</p> <p>Asking students to compose comics via the team method – artist, writer, penciler, inker, editor – used by the major comics companies also allows students a chance to form distinct literacy communities with specific literacy goals.</p>

<p>12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and exchange of information).</p>	<p>When “students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes,” they have already participated in a pedagogy of multiliteracies.</p>	<p>As mentioned earlier, in order for students to really be literate in multiliteracies they must know how to read AND write in those literacies. Graphic novels provide students with model texts for this standard, for students can accomplish their own writing goals by also adopting a writing style that uses both print-text literacies and image literacies. Again, the Professor Garfield website provides an excellent resource: http://www.professorgarfield.org/comics_lab_extreme/</p>
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A Mother-Son Dialogue: Comics...Get Serious!

Understanding the Visual and Textual Through the Graphic Novel

Ginger and Spencer Reese

Mom:

When Spencer was young, the first thing he did when he got money was to ask to go to Comics and Collectibles, a local comic book store. He would pour over all the comic books looking for the issues he didn't have, while his little brother and sister just bought a pack of the latest "Garbage Pail Kids" by Art Spiegelman.

Then, it was bound to be an omen when Spencer decided to major in English and his brother leaned toward art (the kind at Comicons) and his sister majored in journalism.

So Spencer, the English major, wanted a masters and his dad couldn't believe they had a major in "Comic Books"—i.e. the graphic novel. As he began teaching in a middle school, a more noble profession, he decided to apply his knowledge of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey to all his favorite comic book characters—it even extended to works like *Lord of the Flies* and eventually to *Harry Potter*—on whom he's somewhat of an authority . . . as he's currently earning a Ph.D. on the subject and has lectured on both sides of the Atlantic about the wizard.

Now, his middle schoolers apply their *Marvels* comics theories to develop their reading comprehension, their analysis of works, and, of course, the hero's journey. Today he is at Memphis University School teaching these same ideas in a Graphic Novels senior seminar.

In addition, he suggested that perhaps I should have my ninth graders read *Maus I*; as it turns out, not only did these same students read *Maus I*, but *Maus II*, *Persepolis*, *9/11*, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, and all for no credit. They loved the methodology for the grasp of difficult topics. As one student said, "to understand the Nazis' treatment of little Jewish children, you have only to see a cat soldier swinging the feet of a mouse child against a thick brick wall. No matter; you get the idea of the horrific acts which were committed" (63). To be able to deal with that though, it is much easier to see a mouse and cat than it would be an actual photo.

This whole idea of using the visual as well as the textual increases the number of students who understand the readings probably by double. This means we're into the realm of good teaching practices with differentiation.

More specifically, consider how *words* create:

- Images
- Stories
- Characters



Ginger Reese has been teaching for forty years with a B.B.A., M.Ed. and M.A. in English. The mother of three grown creative children, she continues to teach life through literature. She lives in Memphis, Tennessee, with her husband and two dogs and teaches at Lausanne Collegiate School.

*With a B.A. and an M.A., Spencer Reese has been teaching for eleven years. Currently Spencer is teaching at Memphis University School and is continuing his studies at Exeter University, England, as a distance researcher in pursuit of a doctoral degree in film studies with emphasis on the visual interpretation of the witch-figure in modern British and American cultures—mainly the witchcraft and magic in *Harry Potter*. He lives in Memphis, Tennessee, with his wife, Alysson, and his daughter, Poppy.*

- Plot
- Setting
- Theme

Now consider how *images* create:

- Images
- Stories
- Characters
- Plot
- Setting
- Theme

See what I mean? It's the combination of both presentations that are doubly effective.

Scott McCloud notes in his work, *Understanding Comics*, that we make a progression socially through the use of literature and art. As a child we read picture books, learning to understand the visual as a depiction of (or manipulation of) the words the image represents. From this, we add words with the pictures to further the understanding. Then, having matured beyond the state of "childishness," we are required by social standards to read works with little to no pictures with the understanding that great works produce the images in our mind's eye.

But somewhere along the way we forget about this connection . . . or rather, we overlook it. Picture books (a loose interpretation of the comic) used to play a key role in the development of reading comprehension. These works were used as a guide to understanding literature as a means to help bridge the gap between the two worlds. In other words, comics were used as tools to develop the understanding of a learner in the educational process of reading.

I pose that they still can. Somewhere amidst all the mainstream educational process, there are learners who are still on the pier watching the boat leave them behind. That's not to say reading isn't being addressed in schools. It is. Teachers are still teaching learners to read but not *how* to read, but this is where comics come in.

Having considered all of this, imagine the applicability to a classroom: when Spencer taught seventh grade language arts, he ended the year with a study of Joseph Campbell's "The Hero's Journey." To apply it on a seventh grade level, he chose to capitalize on all of his comic book background. What better heroes for today than comic book *superheroes*? Spider-man, Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman. And so the research began...

Furthermore, other functional additions to teaching the graphic novel are *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, *The Arrival*, *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, and *Baaa*.



Consequently, even stick figures drawn on a board make a case for visual explanations. We use these all the time as teachers, but to have the access of prior studies to base our present understandings on is immeasurable. In other words, what you understand visually in seventh grade can again be applied to ninth and again at twelfth grade to show a connection that continues for a lifetime. Again, consider my son--
Spencer:

My mother makes it sound like I invented the wheel here, but people have been having this discussion, whether comics make for "good" educational tools, for some time now. I think it was a quote from Gloria Steinem that was the real catalyst of my research. She once said, "After all, haven't comics always been disreputable? Something that would never have been assigned in school? The answer to those questions is 'yes,' which is exactly why they should be."

Was she serious? Was Gloria Steinem actually posing something here that could be considered academic *and* fun? I had been collecting comics since the early 1980's and had acquired an extensive collection at that, but not once had I considered them of academic value. But why not? Why hadn't I considered this? Had I actually been conditioned by society to believe that these works were

no more valuable than the paper they were—I had.

I had been oblivious to the true nature of these works. For years I had labored under the notion that comics were for kids...or at very least the sad little man who hordes comics in his office. That the works I had so carefully bagged and boarded, the works I had labeled and then hid in the confines of my office were shamefully for children and not at all intellectually stimulating beyond the recourse of the fantasy, the imaginative...the escape.

I was wrong.

But why? Why was I wrong? Why were comics something beyond the notion of the mere fantasy they portrayed. I needed further proof. I needed a substantial conclusion that would convince the rest of the world I wasn't that sad little man; or rather, that Gloria Steinem was right! So I collected my thoughts and flipped through page after page of comics: *Batman*, *Superman*, *The Fantastic Four*, *Spiderman*. But something was missing. Sure, you could apply literary elements (character, setting, theme, etc.) to these works or even consider them somewhat artistic based on the print, but there was something else that kept these works from being academic. How have I, as an educator, validated these works in the classroom or even to utilize them to help with reading comprehension?

Consider this, I teach the literary classic, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson. Now, for a seventh grader this can be a daunting task to handle with dialect they rarely hear let alone know how to read and understand and

vocabulary that is quite foreign to them. However, if I let them read a few chapters into the work and then give them the graphic novel *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Lorenzo Mattotti and Jerry Kramsky the visual coupled with the textual allows them to read between the lines and teaches them how to read the work. In contrast to other visual adaptations of this novel, the graphic novel focuses on what Stevenson's book was really about, the internalized view of Gothic horror. Quite simply, the visual adds to the textual. In this case conveying a slight nuance which they didn't know helps them with *how* to read the book; however, because of the visual image of—let's say the “door” to Jekyll's lab that Utterson and Enfield are standing in front of—coupled with what they know the door represents figuratively (the entrance to Dr. Jekyll's lab and the “internalized gothic” going on inside) . . . they learn to “see” the underlying meaning of the work.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Let me first outline the methods and procedures of using the graphic novel in the classroom as yet another tool to aid in the educational process and to further the comprehension levels of the learner.

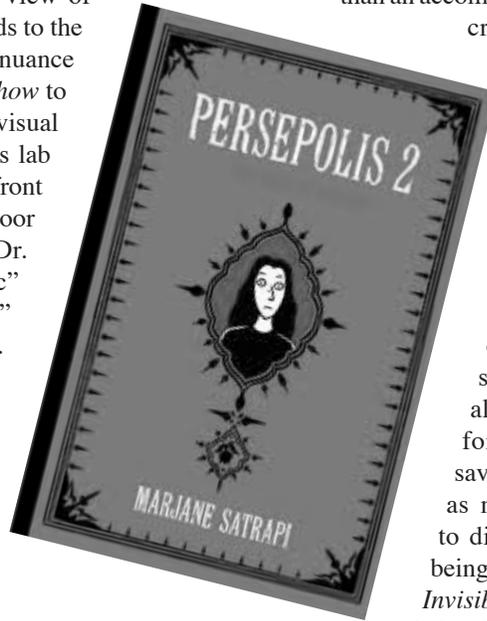
Comics are starting to be taken seriously as a communications vehicle with a distinguished history and body of conventions to be taught and expanded. With these conventions and long-established syntax combining picture and text, a cinematic range of content can be economically expressed. This was what I was trying to convey to my students, as well as a curiosity about Comics history—an understanding that the medium did not begin with *Batman* or the *X-Men*. Kids need to be encouraged to participate in this medium as creators, not just uncritical consumers; like all real teaching, it is thus slightly subversive by advancing their empowerment. We want them to participate in the learning . . . not simply regurgitate information they don't care about and will forget. We want them to care about this information so we can get them to care about more information, ultimately caring about themselves and their lives.

My first approach then is to address the class from a literary perspective: as our school functions on the quarter system, I use the graphic novel and/ or comics the first two quarters to define how to read as a basis for future readings.

The first class session deals with the history of Comics and their progression as an art form with emphasis on how Comics are essentially about storytelling with artwork and words, and that there are techniques that have built up over the years for doing that. We begin by looking at Scott McCloud's seminal work, *Understanding Comics*. McCloud explores the medium and its history in comic form. His follow-up work, *Reinventing Comics*, explores the effects of new technologies and cultural changes on an existing industry. In his works, he notes how the visual lends to the textual by developing the viewer/reader's ability to infer meanings.

As for our text in this section, we read *Marvels* by Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross. We talk about multiple panels and how they sequence plot, action, and time. We examine the lettering of talk and thought balloons, and then various types of display lettering for titles (capitals, block, three-dimensional illusions; burning, melting, metallic etc.), and why this is important. The visual and textual combine to create more than an accompanied storyline. This combination

creates a subtle underlying motif or theme that threads the work together and creates not only movement but also understanding. For example, in *Marvels*, Maggie the Mutant is being carried off by Angel the X-Man while “society” throws rocks at them. We consider how the artistic effect presents the idea of both the “outcast” and his or her social implications. In this picture alone, there is a thematic prompt for discussion as the heroes who save society from disaster are treated as monsters. This in turn can lead to discussions of literary motifs like being the outcast *Frankenstein* or *The Invisible Man*. Or the graphic novel can help address social issues within literature like race relations as seen in *To Kill a*



Mockingbird.

The next few classes are about developing their own superhuman character and how they can be given personalities. This assignment takes the graphic novel to a new level. For the kids, the work now becomes something personal. Here, I try to give influence based on things we have covered to date: the human condition as seen in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson or the social characteristics of *The Invisible Man* by H. G. Wells. This creates a link between the literary and the visual. Further, we examine superheroes and adventure, the creation of characters with enhanced powers and identity, and watch some *Justice League* and *Batman* animated films. In this, we try to find the link between the actions of the characters in the films to that of the novels we have read: “The Joker reminds me of Mr. Hyde,” a student notes. “They both only became truly evil after their faulted experiments.”

This notion is furthered in the graphic novel, *Marvels*. Students began to “see” the literary connections in this work as *Marvels* begins with a quote from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; the creature states that “It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original era of my being...” The idea is continued in the way students begin to relate literature to the graphic novel: Dr. Phineas Horton is seen by students as a model of Dr. Jekyll or Dr. Griffin because all three tried to create something through science that was outside the social constraints of their time. Again,

literature is coupled with art to allow students to understand the author's point or to further thematic representation. Consider how the finger of the Human Torch is artistically equated to God from Michelangelo's *Creation of Man* and thus allows the students to see the Human Torch as a god (again going back to the first lesson on mythology).

As an educator you can take this a step further and develop/present literary elements to the class through the graphic novel as well. For example, you could develop setting through a pre-existing comic character as a model, but you had to make it yours by putting him in your school or a local setting. I'd suggest the kids create monsters that relate to their daily lives (thus invoking a sense of their own being in the project and relating it to their lives...ultimately to make them further appreciate the project), and we saw some comics produced featuring monstrous authority-figures and menacing English teachers.

Again, I suggest for a final project that the students take all they have learned from the literary influences and literary elements and create a comic of their own. This can be done in two ways: Students can produce their own work, allowing it to be personal and defining their own application and synthesis of the gained knowledge, or each class can produce a comic that includes at least one contribution from each student, still allowing for students to show what they know but also allowing for group work and team building skills.

Mom:

This understanding was affirmed in my ninth grade class when I was confronted with a need for a brief form of reading with a visual counterpart and since the Holocaust has never been an easy subject to broach particularly in the presence of Jewish students with relatives who survived the era; consequently, Spencer suggested Art Spiegelman's *Maus I*. And since my daughter still has her collection of Garbage Pail kids to show, this seemed the exact piece of literature that I needed. After introducing the basics of the graphic novel, my students have always been happy to dive right in (and usually end up reading the whole thing in one weekend). By taking a chapter a night to read and responding with a quiz the next day for each, the particular skill for the reading of a graphic novel is exposed. To begin with, students do not ordinarily pay much attention to the background. This is no different than in reading a text with no pictures. They seem to skim over the descriptions, wherein lie some of the most important foreshadowings and symbolism. They do not recognize the swastikas in the background rising like the moon or the vertical lines in the wallpaper to represent the impending jail of the concentration camps. However, as we take note of each of these points, they are able to write an essay wherein they explain the difference between reading straight text and text with the benefit of cartoon pictures.

In addition, after reading *Beowulf*, I divide the epic poem into the number of sections I need for however many groups I want to make and each group is responsible for illustrating that section of the poem. As a laptop school, they may use

ComicLife (a minimal cost program for making cartoons with photographs which can be used from the free sources or what is already in their pictures folder) or Microsoft Paint. Or, they may simply draw and color their illustrations by hand. Ultimately, we have the whole story of *Beowulf* in graphic form with famous quotes in word bubbles and narrative blocks.

Spencer:

Today, I teach seniors, but I still use graphic novels in the classroom. When I teach Blake's "The Tyger," students analyze this poem based on word choice and imagery that comes about because of those words. But then we look at how Blake's interpretation of the "Tyger" isn't what the students expect. The representation in art has altered their view of the poem and in some cases the interpretation. Sure we could write this off as Blake being a bad artist, but then why bother trying to convey a message through both the text and visual? (There's no right answer here...it's just something for them to consider before we leap into more difficult stuff).

We then undertake the opposite by addressing Pieter Breughel's "The Fall of Icarus" and then read Auden's "Musée de Beaux Arts" to continue the analysis of the interpretations of both the visual and the textual. It is in this process that the students become self-advocates of their own learning and the development of reading comprehension and writing skills. You could also use "Porphyria's Lover" by Robert Browning with the visual interpretation by Scott McCloud. When I did this before, I had students explicate the poem, then I show them Scott's piece. We discuss how the text and the visual work and don't work. Next I tell them to select a poem from the Norton's or poets.org...and create their own visual interpretation like Scott McCloud's. They can use any medium, but it needs to be something that they can show and discuss.

Mom:

As the mother, I must have the last say on this topic. In vertical teaming, I have found that I can build on the superhero background or the gothic or the hero's journey. All I need to do to reference any of this is to say, "Remember when you studied comics in seventh grade?" They respond that they still have, love, and reference their *Marvels* studies, even as seniors. Somewhere, somehow, the focus on the visual has made an impact on the textual knowledge of our students.



Review of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*

Shannyn Stagner

Shannyn Stagner's piece below follows the format of a major project spear-headed by James Bucky Carter, Rationales for Graphic Novels (Maupin House, 2010), to enhance the inclusion of graphic novels in secondary classrooms and libraries. By providing arguments for the educational benefits of graphic novels, these rationales give teachers vital tools to incorporate these texts into the curriculum.

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic

By Alison Bechdel

Grade Level and Audience

Modern American Literature or Woman's Studies/Women Writers classes in high school would find Alison Bechdel's memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* a pertinent part of their studies and/or teachings. Bechdel's memoir focuses on sexual orientation, gender roles and the roles of literature in understanding oneself and one's family. This novel could also be used in the curriculum of a psychology class studying suicide and the effects of dysfunctional families and parental abandonment on individuals.

Plot Summary

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic is constructed through the single narrative of Alison Bechdel, following Alison through adolescence to adulthood, and the relationship with her family, paying particular attention to the connection she shares with her father, Bruce. It is not until college that Alison realizes she is a lesbian and also discovers that her father is gay. A few weeks after this revelation, her father ends up dead. The novel includes the key element of Alison's diary, used to record her everyday life while she's growing up; moreover, the diary is used as the object that helps her try to solve the mystery of her father's death by reflecting on her past as she searches for clues. Alison's narrative is unique in the way that she constantly goes over the same material, but works from the outside of the story and spirals in to the center.

On one level, Alison's story focuses on her father, Bruce, and his obsession with restoring their Victorian house, revealing his long-term aesthetic quest and its relation to his emotional and physical distance from his family. This emotional and physical distance, in turn, is used as his device to hide his affairs from his family. Eventually, Alison's mother finds out about these affairs later in the marriage and requests a divorce from Bruce. Two weeks later, Bruce steps into the path of an oncoming semi-truck and is killed. Alison concludes that her father committed suicide; however, the evidence for this is equivocal.

On another level, Alison's story reveals the struggle she faces with her sexual identity, her realization that she is a lesbian and the consequences she has to face in telling her parents. The story closely examines her sexual development.



Shannyn Stagner received her MA in Teaching in 2011 from Washington State University. Her goal in life is to successfully integrate popular culture/intersections of sequential art (comics and graphic novels) and literacy in her classroom.

Strengths and Unique Characteristics of the Work

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic is a unique coming of age story. Alison Bechdel makes it a point to push the reader's limits into perhaps what could be an uncomfortable narrative, but a very educational and eye-opening piece at that. The comic itself is innovative in terms of plot and form. It stretches beyond the typical DC or Marvel comic and their well-known superheroes and fantastical worlds by taking Bechdel's memoir and turning it into a world of art.

In terms of plot, the novel uses two levels, past and present, to demand the constant attention of the reader. The interwoven shifts between past and present, and the technique of using Alison's diary for reflection makes it impossible for the reader to not pay attention. If the reader does not pay close attention to the shifts between past and present, losing their place in the story would not be hard to do. The demands of the novel, however, are highly rewarding. As each new detail progresses, the novel opens up a new world for readers that is extremely personal and, in various instances, relatable.

Bechdel constantly goes over the same material, but works from the outside of the story and spirals in to the center. As stated in Grovel, "it's more like a moving portrait of a family, a documentary if you will, with Bechdel peeling back the layers for us to see inside her life without applying very much judgment." Thus, the reader gets information spanning from her present life, back to her childhood, and back to her present life. However, this repetitive material is connected in this spiraling effect by literally spiraling (narrowing) down to the source of her father's death, and who she is as a person. The constant shifts between past and present represent Bechdel's search for answers, and as she finds them, the spiral brings her closer to the truth.

In *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Alison Bechdel faces the death of her father and her revealed sexual preference, which creates interesting contrasts between sexual orientation, gender roles, and understanding her family (particularly her father). For example, throughout the novel, Alison is very interested in men's clothing, and even makes it a point to dress up as a male figure when she and friends play "dress-up." We see this scene occur later in the novel when Alison learns more about her father—as he would dress up in women's clothing while he attended college, hiding it from his friends and family. Alison's life is troubled and misunderstood and she clearly wants to understand her father, which in turn reveals her own self-discovery.

Possible Objections

The novel has a few instances of profanity and sexual exploration. Some high school readers may be uncomfortable with these sexual encounters.

Ideas for Implementation

To start, have students write down a list of words that describe who they are - funny, intelligent, colorful, etc.

They are not allowed to write sentences, just single words. Have students share with their peers what words they picked and why. Following this short discussion, ask students if they found it hard to describe themselves in one word, without giving an explanation. For example, they might say they're "intelligent," but they don't believe that they're a genius, or perhaps they think they're "pretty," but they didn't get to explain what their version of "pretty" is. After this short exercise, explain to students that describing oneself in single words is hard because it doesn't clearly identify who they are as a person. This activity is a great way to have students quickly explore self-identity, an important aspect of Bechdel's memoir. After reading, ask students to map the novel with time, setting,

and character actions. Have them analyze the decisions Bechdel has made. What choices in sequencing augment the storyline? What instances in the novel slow down the understanding of the story? For example, ask students to consider the spiral effect that Bechdel uses – peeling back the layers of her life, and exposing them to herself and her audience. Ask students to consider in what ways this spiraling effect establishes the tone of the novel, and how it is related to Bechdel gaining personal knowledge and identity. By peeling back these layers of her life, Bechdel is learning more about who she is as a person. Ask students to determine how sexual orientation affects Bechdel's identity and how the gender roles associated with Bechdel's self discovery are questioned and exposed. Again, these questions can all be brought back to the structure of the novel and how Bechdel purposely sets up the format in such a way that this spiral effect literally peels back these layers that consume her identity.

Ideas for Thematic Braiddings

To further study the aspects of sexual orientation and gender roles, braid *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel and *Wide Awake* by David Levithan. In each of these novels, sexual orientation and gender roles that create



the story. In each, the main characters are faced with accepting who they are, and how that role is portrayed, and/or played out on an individual and social level. Students could determine how sexual orientation affects one's identity and how, in the two novels, gender roles are questioned and exposed.

Awards

- Finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in Memoir, 2006
- Winner of the Stonewall Book Award – Israel Fish Nonfiction Award, 2007
- Finalist for the Quill Award in Graphic Narrative
- Double finalist for the Lambda Book Award, 2007
- Nominated for GLAAD Media Award and the Book Sense Book of the Year Award, 2007

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Given the Future

I pledge to country & god, in unison
with my comrades: the smoker & the pharmacist.
I swear like I had when I was 4.

I doubt the reason the lawyers plead
& thump like the weather in winter.
But with hand from heart to high-
five, I could be chosen. Impaneled
& given duty to decide somewhere
between two years & life. I consider
rhetoric as a way out of objectivity:
I tell the judge, once I know anything—
a word—I can't help but associate
this for that. I've been given a narrative
in the courtroom, a story of a man in July
who acted poorly with a young girl,
allegedly. And his mother's here.
She's demure and sad in neutrals, behind
the defense attorney's paralegal.
Even Hitler had a mother, though.

Once I know the story, you can't take it back—
you can't retract the plot and say forget
those words and make your own ending—
not when you've foreshadowed and framed.
I tell the judge, as per example, once I know the
word
for tree the word for tree, when I see a Scarlet Oak
it's still a tree like the Scotch Pine.

Dismissed, whether the jury was found,
and if they found the many years for the man
to live doing this or that, I am glad not to know.

—Sara Kaplan

Sara Kaplan is an English instructor at Del Mar College in Corpus Christi. Her poems have appeared in a wide range of journals. Her chapbook Moon Talk is forthcoming from Trilobite Press.

From the Oregon Trail to the South Side of Chicago—

Outstanding Books for Young Adults

Marilyn Carpenter

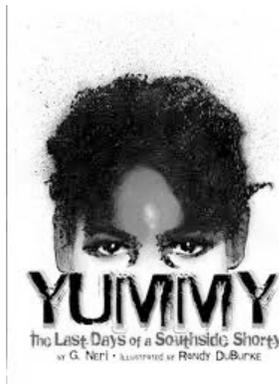
***Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty* by G. Neri. Illus. by Randy Du Burke. (2010). 94 pages. Lee & Low Books Inc. Grades 6 and up. Graphic Novel/Realistic Fiction.**

The graphic novel format is an excellent choice to dramatize the true story of an eleven year old boy, Robert “Yummy” Sandifer, who murdered a girl and then was killed by his own gang. The black and white illustrations give the story a gritty realism. Neri creates a narrator, Roger, who is Yummy’s classmate. In telling Yummy’s tragic story Roger tries to sort out how such a thing could have happened. Roger describes his neighborhood on Chicago’s Southside as feeling like a war movie. Gangs ruled the neighborhood, “if you go out at night, you might get yourself shot.” The gang was the only real family Yummy knew. To belong he carried a gun and followed the orders of his gang leaders. After he mistakenly shot a 14 year old girl instead of the intended gang rival, his gang hid him from the police. When the police pressure became too intense the gang executed him.

In this note in the beginning of the book Neri writes, “I invite you, like Roger, to sort through all the opinions that poured in from the community, media, and politicians, and discover your own truth about Yummy.” Neri gives a detailed list of these sources at the end of the book.

The even manner presentation of Yummy’s story shows that there were no winners, only losers. Neri asks in his Author’s Note at the end, “So, was Yummy a cold-blooded killer or a victim? The answer is not black-and-white. Yummy was both a bully *and* a victim – he deserves both our anger and our understanding.” DuBurke’s pictures add power and tragedy to the story. The multiple illustrations on each page are framed in different sizes and presented in a variety of lay-outs on the page which moves the story

along at a fast pace. Close-ups of faces add to the drama. Speech bubbles alternate with Roger’s boxed narration to clearly show who is speaking. After youngsters have read this book, guide them in discussing the story to come up with their own answers to the question about Yummy being a cold-blooded killer or a victim.



***Mockingbird (mok’ing-bûrd)* by Kathryn Erskine. (2010) 235 pages. Philomel. Grades 5 and up. Novel/Realistic Fiction.**

Some books make indelible imprints on our hearts and memories. *Mockingbird (mok’ing-bûrd)* is such a book because it helps us understand and have empathy for a child with Asperger’s syndrome. Caitlin, a ten-year-old girl with Asperger’s syndrome, narrates the story of how she tries to help herself and her dad deal with grief. Her older brother, Devon and two others were killed in a shooting at his middle school. The school counselor, Mrs. Brook, works with Caitlin. Mrs. Brook tells her that, “people have a hard time understanding



Marilyn Carpenter teaches literacy and literature at Eastern Washington University. She taught in the Los Angeles Unified School District and earned her PhD at University of Arizona. Her web page has lists of recommended titles for the last ten years. <http://www.ewu.edu/x14875.xml>

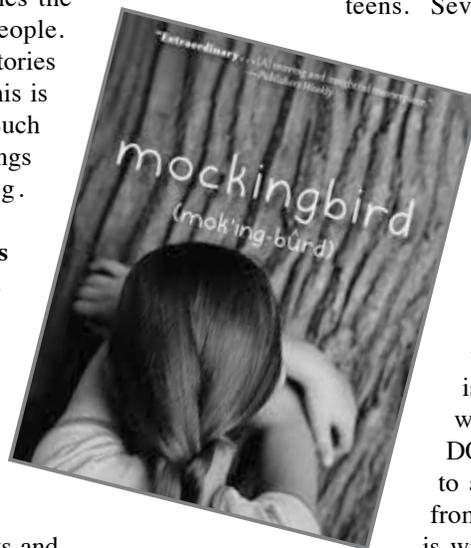
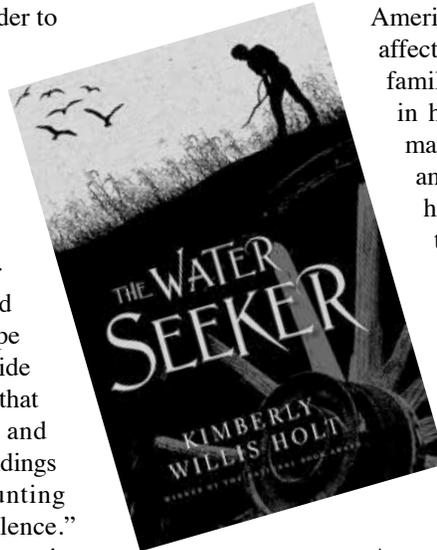
me (Caitlin) because I have Asperger's so I have to try extra hard to understand them and that means working on emotions." In a T.V. news report of the tragedy Caitlin hears the newscaster say, "isn't it good that we now have closure?" Caitlin wonders "how CLOsure can help. And what it is." Her dictionary, gives her a definition of closure: "the state of experiencing an emotional conclusion to a difficult life event such as the death of loved one." Caitlin works hard to figure out how to reach closure in order to heal her father's grief and her own.

Erskine writes in her Author Note at the end, "This book was inspired by the events at Virginia Tech as well as my own need to try to explain what it's like for a child to have Asperger's syndrome. ... I hope that by getting inside her head (Caitlin), readers will understand seemingly bizarre behavior. And I hope that readers will see that, by getting inside someone's head, really understanding that person, so many misunderstandings and problems can be avoided—misunderstandings and problems that can lead to mounting frustration and, sometimes, even violence."

Erskine's skill at storytelling and creating realistic characters helps her readers achieve that understanding. Caitlin's literal take on the world provides levity and keeps the story from being sad. The characterizations of Mrs. Brook and Caitlin's teachers show the positive support teachers and counselors can provide. The title refers to the movie, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Caitlin loved to watch it with her brother and sees herself as Scout. Caitlin's love of books enriches the story. She says – "Books are not like people. Books are safe." Reference books and stories provide help her understand emotions. This is a book that children will want to discuss. Such discussions may lead to new understandings about the pain caused by bullying.

***The Water Seeker* by Kimberly Willis Holt. (2010). Henry Holt. 309 pages. Grades 7 and up. Historical Fiction.**

The best of historical fiction causes us to ponder the sacrifices and struggles of those who have come before us. *The Water Seeker* is one of the most enthralling historical novels I have read in years. It prompted me to thoughtfully consider the lives of my great grandparents and their contributions in the settling of the West. The novel chronicles the story of Amos Kincaid from his birth in a remote cabin in Missouri in 1833 through his journey on the Oregon Trail starting in 1848, and continuing with his new life in Oregon in 1859. Along the way there are adventures, romances and heart touching moments. The in-depth



descriptions and depictions of various settings and secondary characters in this epic novel provide a rich portrait of the way life during the Westward expansion. Amos' mother dies in giving birth to him, but she reappears to those who care for him throughout the story as a hovering, loving presence. Jake, Amos' father is a trapper and a mountain man who is a gifted dowser. The character of Jake's second wife, Blue Owl, provides insights about Native Americans and how the Westward movement affected them. Amos has two romances as the family travels to Oregon and there is a surprise in how they turn out. As Amos grows to manhood he demonstrates honesty, endurance and courage. Along the way he discovers his own gift of finding water and is able to bless the new farmers in the Oregon territory. The themes of the value of family and importance of perseverance in the face of many challenges are skillfully woven throughout the story. The details of the hardships and triumphs along the Trail are an inspiration. Social Studies teachers will find this book an excellent read aloud for their classes in American history. All ages from middle school on will enjoy this book as a satisfying read.

***The Last Summer of the Death Warriors* by Francisco Stork. (2010). 352 pages. Scholastic Grades 8 and up.**

Stork's previous book, *Marcelo in the Real World*, a coming of age story of an autistic teen, was one of the best books of 2009. Stork's newest book will also be a hit with teens. Seventeen-year-old Pancho wants revenge for the death of his sister, Rosa, who he is convinced was murdered. The police disagree. They attribute Rosa's death to natural causes. Because Pancho's father also died just before Rosa, Pancho is sent to an orphanage (his mother died when he was very young). There he meets DQ a boy who is dying from cancer. Pancho is given the job of caring for DQ which means he must accompany DQ to the hospital for treatments and to a facility for children recovering from the cancer treatments. Pancho is willing to go with DQ because he believes he will be able to investigate death and find a way to kill her murderer. However, DQ has other plans. He wants to train himself and Pancho to become "Death Warriors." DQ believe that every person has been given a task by an angel on a written slip of paper before he is born – "and our job is to

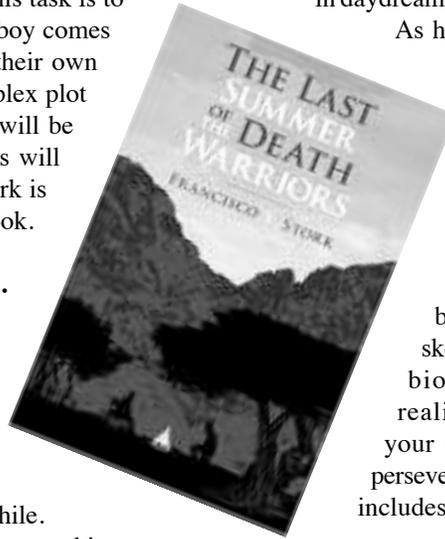
remember, to recollect it, and then go about doing what it says.” DQ has written his wisdom in his “Death Warrior Manifesto” and he wants Pancho to go on a quest with him to discover their tasks. Pancho believes his task is to get revenge for his sister’s death. How each boy comes to terms with issues of life, death, love and their own destinies makes an absorbing read. The complex plot and language demands a mature reader who will be richly rewarded for his efforts. Some readers will enjoy the connections with *Don Quixote*. Stork is a talented writer I look forward to his next book.

***The Dreamer* by Pam Munoz Ryan. Illus. by Peter Sis. (2010). 372 pages. Scholastic. Grades 5 and up. Fiction.**

Ryan imagines the boyhood of the Nobel Prize winning poet, Pablo Neruda. Ryan tells us in her Author’s Note that *The Dreamer* is a work of fiction based on the events of Neruda’s childhood growing up in Chile. That story is a poignant one of a timid youngster working hard to overcome a lonely childhood and the oppression of a domineering father. His father was so ashamed of his son’s writing that Pablo Neruda later became the pen name

of Neftali Reyes. Neftali loved to collect things- pinecones, seashells and other treasures from nature and was also passionate about reading and writing. He spent his time in daydreaming, savoring the sounds of words.

As he wanders in the forest he writes in the damp earth: “Slowly, he murmured the words to the trees, delighting in the tempos they played on his tongue.” Ryan’s word choices paint vivid portraits of Neftali’s world. Her language is poetic and is complimented by Peter Sis’ line drawings. The sketches and the lyrical text combine biography, poetry and magical realism with themes of becoming your own person, social justice, and perseverance. At the end of the book Ryan includes a sampling of Neruda’s poetry.



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Wheel

out of the crooked timber:
cheaply and thoughtlessly built
with a third or fifth, off-balance tilt.

the dreamer:
a cindered voice and shadowed eye
deter circular alibi.

small weaknesses:
in the axle. as the tempo blurred,
she spoke and sighed, but no one heard.

long past midnight:
a carriage with an orange tinge
will creak and creep back home, unhinged.

—Kat Chew

Steamboat Moselle

We must fly on cheap boiler iron:

The captain felt the mammoth gain,
not far from the lumber raft,
a mile and a half above the quay.
A dandy leaned against the frescoed wall,
the ruffles on his shirt swayed & the weight
of the chandeliers yanked the wood ceiling.

The boilers burst like that of a mine
of gunpowder, the 300 limbs & heads
of westward-bound German immigrants shot
in every direction. Even survivors couldn't
stay alive long enough to wait
for the few persons onshore hurrying
in their wood-floats. Only her chimneys
and a small portion of her upper works drifted.

She shattered as far back as the gentlemen's cabin
& the whole length of the hurricane deck.

—Sara Kaplan

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