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**BUT WHAT ABOUT
SHAKESPEARE?
THE STRUGGLE OF YOUNG
ADULT LITERATURE TO SURVIVE**

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Eager and excited to share, I walk into my secondary English methods class weighted down with bags full of long-treasured and newly fancied copies of what I hope my students will find to be excellent Young Adult Literature. I looked forward to their delight in the novelty of titles such as *Rats Saw God*, *Weetzie Bat*, and *Mr. Was*. I am anxious for their reaction to the discovery of authors like Anderson, Myers, and Cisneros. Already I have a keen sense of who will identify with Dessen's somewhat off-beat characters, Crutcher's ability to name the unspeakable, and Rennison's hilarious truths about the uncertainties of adolescence. Though they have read about and discussed the appropriateness of using YA literature in their own classrooms, only three of the group has any actual experience in reading the genre; a few more have some scattered remembrances of brief encounters with the more popular titles from sometime during their middle school grades. Given their inexperience with the texts, I have decided that a book pass and an extended conversation will greatly benefit students.

Before the pass, I model some pre-reading strategies with text covers from Cormier, Fleischman, and Lowry and ask for story predictions based on opening lines out of *Monster*, *A Time for Dancing*, and *All We Know of Heaven*. Laughing out loud at passages from Bauer's *Rules of the Road* and solemn at excerpts from Ji-Li Jiang's *Red Scarf Girl*, students seem to understand the strong case I make for including humorous as well as non-fiction selections in their teaching. Both, I tell them, remain too often ignored in the classroom. For a few minutes, we revisit our previous discussions about

the importance of student choice and about the range of texts adolescents might enjoy. They agree with the importance of each issue.

I continue pulling texts out of my bags in preparation for the pass, silently expressing pleasure with myself for remembering to bring examples of some fine graphic novels, stories sure to entice even the most reluctant and media savvy readers. Watching the curious faces of students who admit only vague familiarity with

Spiegelman's sobering *Maus*, I see them express amazement as I exhibit the detailed pages of Hosler's *Clan Apis*, approval for the originality of delivery of message I tell them is to be found in Knapp's *Faith*, and surprise at the sophisticated messages of Gaiman's *Sandman* series I end up describing. They seem to acknowledge and appreciate the artistry of such works, and their newly applied understandings of the pedagogical uses of multiple intelligences, literature circles, and other literacy activities that encourage reading spark conversations about other classroom possibilities with such non-traditional texts. Immediately, students sense ways to make important interdisciplinary connections, and they propose a few potential project ideas that might be shared across subject areas, something we have considered in our discussions about teen literacy, but have never specifically investigated. Clearly, it seems, they are beginning to see how YA literature might be germane to their classrooms. The book pass begins, and I am feeling good about covering so much ground in such a short period of time when half way through the culminating event a student looks up and asks, "But where's Twain, *The Scarlet Letter*, Poe?" "Yeah," questions another student, "What about Shakespeare?"

Since tone of voice is everything, it is not possible to mistake what these two students are really asking me: where is the literature of consequence? Though talking about alternative texts is interesting, I can tell by the students' demeanor that being serious about the teaching of them verges on heresy. As those of us who teach YA literature know, it is Austin and Chaucer that our secondary

students are being prepared to teach, not Finn or Nolan. YA literature is a curve ball they are not expecting. Much like the generations of English teachers before them, they are bracing to explicate to their students the same officially sanctioned texts that have been on high school reading lists since the lists were first generated by universities for high schools in the mid-1900s. Dissecting the demanding texts of the canon is what these students have spent the last two years of their major course work learning to do, and they believe that there is no way their students are going to be challenged by a book entitled *Necking With Louise*, no matter how well written it is, what important themes it teaches, or how much students might relate to it.

As soon as the books we have been talking about are actually in their hands, it becomes obvious through their questions that my students are worried that books which speak in a language and derive from an experience that is clearly adolescent cannot be complicated enough or meaningful enough for either teacher or student. Rather than defend my position on YA literature, I choose to have students question how they came to feel this way about the literature that young people seek out and so apparently enjoy. Their responses about “quality” and “expectations” pose a dilemma which force us to examine how others, including many within our own camp, often think about YA literature.

Regardless of how YA literature seems generally viewed by those unfamiliar with its ability to impact the reading habits of teenagers, many teachers know that, in some cases, it is a teacher’s ONLY hope of getting scores of students to evolve as readers and, in most cases, the BEST hope. Yet, for all my faith and confidence in it, for all its relevance to student interest and experience, YA literature remains, I am afraid, the redheaded orphan of language arts. Despite the wealth of texts now available within the genre; despite the most recent findings about reading being conducted by researchers as different as Janet Allen (1995, 2000), Jeff Wilhelm (1997), Pam Mueller (2001), Michael Smith/Jeff Wilhelm (2002), William Brozo (2002), and Bruce Pirie (2002); despite, even, our undeniable

ability to connect the genre in practice to important theoretical concepts of reading and questions of democratic education as posed by Rosenblatt and Dewey, YA literature remains suspect to our colleagues in university departments of English, an add-on to many teachers prepared not in the basics of literacy but in what is known as the “best” literature, out of the question for educators concerned with tests that deal with canon, and, as I learned from the ensuing conversation with some of the pre-service students of the above mentioned experience, merely a “politically correct” way of incorporating multiple representations of culture and experience into secondary English classrooms.

Attitudes such as these, which stem in part from traditions of what constitutes worthwhile literature, in part from the notion that there is little connection between those traditions and the on-going barriers to reading, and in part from a separation of language and literature from the integral events that contribute to student literacy, assume YA literature is just a classroom literary sideshow that can be promoted only at the risk of dismantling canonical strongholds of Western Culture. Surely, my students’ comments seem to suggest, I cannot possibly mean to suggest that YA literature is capable of standing on its own merit. It is not “scholarly” enough, they say; it does not have a “history.” These students have come to believe that if literature is not “approved,” it is not what SERIOUS English teachers should be teaching, overlooking the pertinent link between literature choice, life experience, and reading development.

The truth is that many secondary English teachers do not consider themselves reading teachers, nor do they especially want to be. They are literature teachers. Reading is something that either happens in the elementary grades or that requires remediation by specialized teachers should it be problematic in the later grades. Such thinking makes transitions from English content area into English Education course work and then into school settings difficult for students and methods teachers, especially in university preservice programs that

espouse YA literature as a viable and responsible option for improving literacy in secondary classrooms.

The problem extends beyond mere perceptions about what constitutes “good” literature and how English teachers tend to think of their roles. It concerns itself too with the fact that most secondary teachers are not prepared as “reading” teachers, which, no doubt, probably has much to do with their reluctance to think of themselves as such. Preservice teachers may get a course in content area reading, but rarely anything beyond. They may also be required to take a course in literacy, but the connections between the tenets of that course and content area courses are often tenuous. It is common to hear preservice English teachers say that they know nothing about the actual teaching of reading.

My own preparation in English affirms that comment. No one ever once suggested to me that as a secondary teacher I would have to be astute about reading habits, understand issues of development, or plan lessons based on student experience and interests. I never dreamed *Huck Finn* could be a tough read for all but my most motivated readers or that Faulkner could seem almost impossible. I never questioned that the problem with teaching the Victorians, the Romantics, or even the great Bard himself might lie in the fact that these authors reflected very little of what most of my students saw when they looked at their own lives; that they felt a distance from the texts I could only superficially bridge. Non-reading students, I was informed, were not the victims of curriculum, but were the by-products of poor teaching, ill-prepared instructors, and apathetic students. It took me about one week of “general” tenth grade to realize my expectations of teaching “literature” did not begin to match the actuality of it.

I am convinced that we still do not adequately prepare secondary language arts students for the part reading will inevitably play in their classroom careers. In addition, educational institutions continue to reinforce traditional literature curriculum that gives barely a nod to what we now know about literacy insofar as choice and

relativeness are concerned. Accustomed still to thinking that secondary literature must reflect Eurocentric “standards” which have withstood the test of time, many educators remain unaware of the excellent writing now evolving in the YA genre that might speak more closely to who their students are and what concerns them. In fact, as YA literature more frequently exhibits signs of what has always been the mark of “good” literature—pushing boundaries of both form and content, employing varying points of view, enabling people to see their lives in more meaningful and complex ways—the more suspect it becomes, generating labels with negative connotations such as edgy and bleak (Dresang, 1999).

I do not mean to sound like the prophet of gloom and doom here, but I cannot shake what is evidenced in fact. Astonished that most of my secondary language arts undergraduates do not choose on their own to take the departmental course in YA literature, I am even more concerned that my Masters students in the Advanced Degree in Secondary English cannot even consider it in their program except as an independent study. The prevailing ethos, even in many excellent university English departments such as my own, seems to be that the YA genre is not of much consequence for students who study “real” literature. Fiction originally written with adult audiences in mind continues to dominate and dictate that which is deemed worthwhile reading. The disconnect between what is offered as acceptable reading material and what students will be motivated to read remains profound.

The fact is that many student teachers have their first teaching experiences in schools that make no general use of YA literature in the classroom. Because the role of the language arts cooperating teacher is generally seen as one which should reinforce experiences with great literature rather than one which is responsible for addressing student needs as developing readers, the student teacher’s suggested uses of the YA genre is too frequently met with a polite but firm “no.” Because they may have only limited familiarity with YA texts, cooperating

teachers sometimes unknowingly dismiss the validity student teachers have assigned to the wonderful YA books they have recently come to know. These veteran teachers never suspect how much influence their opinion has on preservice teachers struggling to find their identities as English teachers. Confused about what they thought they had understood about adolescent reading habits, the student-teachers are at a loss to see much philosophical, theoretical, or pedagogical carry over from what they learned at the university to how schools are in “reality.” Ways they have been taught to support teen literacy in the classroom seem naïve and elementary in comparison to how their new peers view the same problems. Newly developed theories and systematic research that resonates with their own sense of high school reading experiences drop quickly out of play. At first, the student teachers try to apply the pedagogical techniques that came so easily for YA literature to the “approved” literature, only to fail miserably because many of their students still refuse to read the texts, even if they ARE invited to “write a letter to the main character” or “design a movie poster.” In the end, many slip back to teaching only the canon in the strict analytical ways that failed them and will fail far too many of their own students, a slip that distorts their vision of both students and literacy.

Distressing as it is that there is often only passing familiarity with the YA genre among teachers who, in their own education, were prepared to be the gatekeepers of “great” literature, it is even more unsettling that uninformed principals may randomly decree such teaching rules as only “one adolescent lit novel per semester.” More serious still is the large number of veteran teachers who love and understand the benefits of YA literature but avoid it because of their fear of public censorship issues. Were this an issue of any other population, few would accept the breadth and depth of the silencing imposed. Yet those among us who would never think to question the premise that literature curriculums need to be more inclusive of gender, race, class, and sexual preference have no trouble dismissing the fact that the literary identity of entire generations of young people are consistently ignored.

The unintended consequences of those who reject YA literature before its merits are fully and carefully considered reach deep, for such rejection undermines attempts by new and veteran teachers working within this genre to encourage adolescents to join the world of readers. Though years of research and numerous links from theory to practice stand in favor of YA literature, there remain far too few key people willing to acknowledge the fact that the YA genre is apropos in helping to not only groom life-long readers, but also to address some of the most important emotional and spiritual needs of this critical stage of life. If more educators would be willing to read YA texts, they might stimulate a conversation about what such texts offer a curriculum that is too eclectic, prescribed, and unrepresentative of many of the students it serves. All the discourse about “knowing our students,” “meeting their needs,” and “diversifying” stands only as empty rhetoric if we acquiesce to a curriculum that never comes close to the realities it purports. The issues called into question are troubling.

Controversies surrounding YA literature, I am convinced, uncover truths about societal attitudes toward teens that cannot be easily masked or morally ignored (Hersch 1999; Hines 2000; Lesko 2001; Males 1996 & 1999). Legislated “solutions” to the teen literacy problem are determined with institutional and adult interests in mind, rather than student needs and desires; rarely is the actual experience of adolescents of main concern. Instead, the focus is on test scores, quantified knowledge, and accountable standards. In schools, teens are allowed to play with the meanings and issues of contemporary life only within the limits to which they can be controlled and tested. We fear youth’s rebelliousness and mistakenly believe that it will be fueled by a text like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and tempered by *Travels with Charlie*. We believe we are the only ones concerned with their immortality, so we impose *The Scarlet Letter* rather than invite a story like *Hard Love* or *Kit’s Wilderness*. We want adolescents to embrace adult rules and behaviors, so instead of offering *Memoirs*

of a Bookbat, a book that questions the truth of adult authority, we give them *Lord of the Flies*, a text that confirms it. The institutional trivializing of youth's taste in reading as well as the desire to replicate particular adult sociopolitical and cultural interests are clear, even if how to act on such ingrained prejudices is not. Still, we owe it to secondary language arts teachers to initiate a conversation about these issues, so that they are at least aware of the role they may be slotted into and, in many cases, are unconsciously being forced to play in the reproduction of such habits. Making certain teachers understand the connection between their content area and student reading literacies is paramount; ensuring they know how schools reinforce the status quo should be obligatory (Apple 1986, 1996; Freire 1970; Giroux 1988).

Denying teens experiences with texts written specifically for them makes a farce of our constant sloganing about how we want students to "own" their learning. Little discussion is currently taking place to address the difficulties teens experience in reasoning and reading for deeper meaning, yet we remain wedded to a literature that marginalizes them and prohibits the deeper reflection we hope for, never considering that the marginalization may well be contributing to the problem, and that, in fact, much of our problem may be aliterate teens who choose not to read rather than being forced to read texts they consider arbitrary. However, the domino effect of Band-Aid politics on educators has made such contradictions a daily occurrence. The judgments of everyone from content area professors to veteran teachers to administrators are affected by the predominant "standard" attitude that if teens do not engage primarily in the "respected and approved" canons of literature, any other attempt on their part to enlist a text is negligible and less meaningful. How is it that the reading needs and desires of adolescents are not considered as valuable or worthwhile as adult needs and desires? If we determine that there is only one "true" literature, how do we remain open to the possibilities of texts that might allow us to imagine our world, our youth, and ourselves in different ways? In our persistent

intent to name the world for young people, we do more than fail them at literacy. We fail to allow them the openings required to fulfill a unique potential; we rob them of a chance to remake the world through fresh eyes; we force a cognitive detachment between the lives they know and the lives they are expected to engage. In doing all of this, we also fail ourselves. By trapping teens in the limits of a predetermined "reality," we keep our own world small and rigid.

To become better readers, all students need texts that engage their interests and touch them as somehow relative. Yet, in secondary language arts, we continue to uniformly roadblock adolescent literacy by narrowly defining that space rather than opening it up. This does not mean we should quit guiding teens in their selection of texts; it does mean we need to be familiar with and offer up texts they will find authentic to their experience. If more educators could take their lead from reading teachers who long ago stopped insisting on only the "official" literature that addresses adult morals, behaviors, and fears at the expense of ignoring genuine adolescent concerns, they might discover that the choices young people make eventually offer greater opportunities for the desired engagement with literature. They might also find that the pedagogical focus would shift from content driven models of understanding to ones that extend development and skill.

What I am saying has the potential to sound several alarms. An either/or argument could have the camps lining up for a continued insistence on the overriding value of the dominant discourse or for a militant postmodern tendency toward multiple, though fractured, truths. I worry that this divide is the giant crack into which YA literature has fallen. I fear that too many well-meaning colleagues, teachers, and administrators, led by safe and evasive politics, see YA literature not as a life-line, but as the ultimate rejection of values, traditions, and perspectives meant to inform the nature of what constitutes "important" knowledge. So, for clarity's sake, let me note that no one loves Will or Walt or Jane or Emily better than I do, nor am I advocating that these authors are forever irrelevant. However, like many who have come to understand the

contributions of literary history, I recognize too that this is a love that was cultivated when I was ready for it, not when it was forced on me. I have also learned that these authors offer only one version of the world, a version that does not include the varied ethnic, socioeconomic, and lifestyle experiences that our students bring to the classroom. When they are either absent or only marginally represented, the experiences of too many of our students are not validated or honored, and they resist reading, no matter our efforts.

As we know, allowing a love of literature to occur naturally and more gradually does not prohibit students from learning how to be more exacting readers. Students can learn important analytical skills through texts that engage and interest them, and YA literature has grown into a genre that can help us help them do this very thing. It is a credible literature that provides many of the understandings about life adults value, questions that which should be questioned, and, rightfully, disturbs the complacent behaviors we fear. It does this not by what it dictates, but by what it considers. YA literature invites the reflection, inquiry, and opportunities for collaboration and interaction that we believe most benefit students in their education. It teaches the pleasure, power, and possibility of the written word beyond the mere word itself because it engages readers rather than alienating them.

Last week one of my first year teachers contacted me. She asked if I could suggest some “different” ways to get her eleventh grade students to read assigned material. She told me that she had to stick to the curriculum and that YA literature was not an option. Short of standing on her head, she outlined that she had tried most of what it seems every veteran English teacher I have ever known has tried in the struggle to get students to read, all to no avail. When I asked her to tell me a bit more about her students, she replied that they were a mix of Latino and African-American boys, a few Pakistani girls, and a small number of Caucasians mixed in gender. All were tracked into her “standard” classes; reading levels varied. I went on to ask what she had to teach and what optional texts were available. She

responded with a list of canonical works that I had taught almost twenty years ago, literature that addressed little, if anything, of the immediate lives of the young people I once knew or that she now teaches.

At a loss, I had to tell this teacher that I just did not have any advice beyond what she was trying and had already scrambled to do - building a classroom library, encouraging and allowing for independent reading when she could, giving options if at all possible. There was a brief silence as her dismay settled in and a sense of betrayal took hold. Her response told of a sinking recognition that teaching English was not going to be what she had imagined; she felt discounted and at odds. I, in turn, felt like a failed impostor, first, because I truly did not have any hopeful advice for the situation she was in, but foremost because I knew her students who were not in the institution’s reading “program” would continue to avoid reading and certainly would never learn the pleasure of it while in school. When students who can read will not, and students who struggle to read find no reason to keep trying, it is time to ask the hard questions not of our students, but of ourselves. What might have changed if I had been able to suggest to this young teacher that she invigorate her classroom curriculum with the relevant work of authors like Walter Dean Myers, Suzanne Fisher Staples, Naomi Shihab, Brock Cole, or Jack Gantos? What possibilities might have existed if the focus had been on building reading literacy rather than legislating literary superiority? When will we understand that as long as we continue to discount the needs of so many and ignore the importance of connecting teen lives to literature, few will gain the deep appreciation of the written language we so profess to love?

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