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Ed Spicer: The Power of Getting Great Books to Children and Young Adults

AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY LEAH VAN BELLE

I found myself on a business trip with *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) tucked into my satchel for a little reading on the plane. I began reading as I sat waiting for my flight out of Detroit Metro Airport and was immediately drawn into the dark, dystopian world and was hooked even before the boarding came for my flight. I knew resistance would have been futile, and I continued reading feverishly from the moment I boarded, buckled in, and quickly clicked on the overhead reading light. When I arrived at my destination and got to the hotel, I curled up in an armchair and stayed up into the early hours of the next morning, binge reading with urgency to find out what happened to Katniss. After I finished a day of consulting and dropped the rental car at the airport, I immediately found the newsstand and so that I could buy *Catching Fire* (Collins, 2009) and continue the trilogy on my return flight. And when I walked into the newsstand and approached the display table with piles of Collins's books, here's the scene that delighted me: five other middle-aged women were standing by the table, and three of them were passionately explaining to the other two (who were strangers to them) why the latter simply *had* to read the *Hunger Games* trilogy. I chimed in my enthusiastic recommendation for the first book and thought to myself how great it was that a group of women who didn't even know each other had an impromptu book talk about YA literature in an airport newsstand. I still smile to think of that.

Young adult literature is not just for adolescents anymore, if it ever was. Many of us read YA books not simply in order to stay current with what our students are reading or as professional research in order to think about how we can use these books as teaching tools in the classroom. No. We read these books because so many YA books are incredible reads—many of them the kinds of books that we can't put down and find ourselves reading bleary-eyed into the night because we simply must find out what happens to a character who has drawn us into his or her world. Ed Spicer is someone who understands the universal appeal of these books and what makes for a great work of YA literature.

Ed Spicer's column of reviews of books for young adults has long been a favorite with *Michigan Reading Journal* readers. In *The Well-Stocked Bookshelf* he shares his passion for and insights about YA literature and makes uncannily accurate predications about which titles will be winners of major book awards. Ed has a wealth of experience as a teacher, YA literature consultant, and active member of the American Library Association (ALA), serving on selection committees for prestigious book awards such as the Caldecott and the Printz. Although Ed and I had corresponded via email and met briefly at the ALA conference a few years ago, I had never had the chance to sit down with him in person and talk about books. Because I and *MRJ* readers so value the contributions Ed has

made to the field of YA literature, I was honored that he found time to meet me for lunch and a long conversation about the magic that is literature. I'm very pleased for readers to be able to join me in learning a little more about the man behind *The Well-Stocked Bookshelf* column in *MRJ*, his love of books, and his belief in the power of books to touch the hearts and minds of young people.

LEAH: How did you first get started in children's literature?

ED: Well, I first got started in children's literature when we moved to Michigan and I decided I wanted to open up a preschool. Before I could open up a preschool, I wanted to have some experience in the education bureaucracy, so to speak, so I could have more experience working with parents from an administrative point of view, and just to get experience working with a large group of children. I was in the library at Grand Valley State University, finishing up my teachable major. I was on the seventh floor of their library, reading *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson, and just sobbing. Sobbing. And I got home and told my wife, who is a library director, "My goal in life is now to be on the Newbery Committee. What do I have to do?" She told me that I had to join the American Library Association, so I joined it, and then 2 weeks later I asked, "Why haven't I heard?" She said, "Well, have you joined the right divisions?" So I joined everything

that seemed like it was remotely connected with children, and I filled out all the volunteer forms. I heard back very quickly from YALSA, Young American Library Services Association, and they asked me if I wanted to help out with the Teen Read Week, or the Teen Read Work Group as it was called at the time. So I did that for a couple of years. I started doing the online networking, and the listserves, and then I started doing presentations at the Michigan Reading Association conferences. I started writing for “News and Views.” And I complained so much about the children’s literature class at Grand Valley State University because it was geared so highly toward the very young readers and so very little of it had anything to do with older readers that it seemed unfair to middle school and high school teachers. Grand Valley eventually added a young adult literature class, and I was rewarded for my complaints by being asked to teach that class when Don Pottoff went on sabbatical for a year. This experience, essentially, brings me here today.

LEAH: You started out interested in working with preschoolers, you now teach first graders, and you review books mostly for young adult readers. What’s that like—to really be thinking about the whole age span of readers?

ED: I think that’s the natural way anyone should think about reading anyway. If you departmentalize it so that first-grade teachers are only interested in first-grade readers, and high school teachers are only interested in high school readers, that’s not what reading is. Reading is *life*. And everyone’s a reader, even from the preschooler who recognizes the cereal box or toy, to the grandfather reading to grandchildren, or reading the newspaper. Reading is not something that you can rip apart and fragment into grade periods. When I hug my first graders, I’m hugging that high school graduate, or I’m hugging that future surgeon. It’s all connected, and that’s what it’s like; it just feels natural to see the whole process.

LEAH: Who are some authors that you think really understand adolescent readers and the kinds of identity development they’re doing and the work they’re doing in becoming the people they are?

ED: There are several who really do a good job in specific books. I don’t think any author is on the money every single time they produce something, but there are some that seem to hit it more than others. Laurie Halse Anderson certainly has done a fabulous job of dealing with the young woman, even though *Twisted* deals with the young man, who

struggles with feeling like they’ve got some value when perhaps life circumstances dictate otherwise. There are people like Rita Williams Garcia. Her *Every Time a Rainbow Dies* is a fabulous book that understands somebody who feels judged by the outside world. Thulani is, in some sense, victimized by that judgment, but he really wants people to know that he cares. There are people, like Chris Crutcher, who understand anger and understand that connection with sports. There are new authors like Charles Benoit and his book *You*, which talks about bullying and being victimized. Somebody like Gary Paulsen can write something that is right on the money in understanding that knuckle-headed-kid. Don Calame, who wrote *Swim the Fly*—I think he followed me around high school knowing how sex-obsessed adolescent boys can be before we actually learn to become real human beings. A lot of times it’s not so much the author, but the book-by-book total YA experience that really nails it. Nancy Werlin’s books do that very well, too. I panic at these kinds of questions because I feel I’m going to leave this room and go, “Ahh, I forgot you, and I didn’t mean to! Forgive me, I’m sorry!”

LEAH: It’s the Academy Award acceptance speech! (laughs) So today’s adolescents they’re really digital natives in a way that people of our generation just aren’t. How do you see their literacy changing with the advent of digital text?

ED: Well, if you think back, although not the same, our ancient past shares some similarities with our present day transition period. With our oral tradition we remembered a lot more because we had to. That was the only way we could convey fundamental truths or information to families. We invented the printing press, which presented information faster, and faster, and faster. And then we, in around the 1970s and ‘80s, got very graphic and the picture quality in books exploded and continues to explode. We even have those books that are in 3D, where you need to do that twist your eye kind of thing to see the whole picture. These advances have really changed the way we are able to present information. But the essential process of what books do and what illustrations do to convey meaning isn’t going to change. We’ll have more tools. We’ll have more combination of tools. We might be able to do something slightly different, we might have three-dimensional, holographic kinds of displays, but we will be storytelling still. And it will still be a good story if it doesn’t knock you over the head with a moral. It will be a good story if it surprises you in a delightful way that you haven’t seen before. And that

part of story, has been true, is true, and will always be true.

LEAH: It makes me think of how these books with a really strong visual component can be particularly compelling, particularly to boys as readers. One thing I find when I talk with teachers at the middle school and the high school level is that they often want to know how they can get adolescent boys engaged in reading. What are some thoughts you would share with them about that?

ED: Well, that's an interesting question, and the answer could go on for years, and it is going on for years, and it has been going on for years, and will continue to go on for years because it's not a simple answer. I have a part of my brain that objects to the genderfication of books. I served on the Best Books for Young Adults committee with another male, and there wasn't a person on that committee that I disagreed with more. We're both boys, so theoretically we should both like the same thing. It doesn't happen, and it will never happen, but there are some general truths with boys and girls that are impossible to ignore. It's even true of my first-grade boys and girls. Whether that's a gender thing, or a societal expectation, or some other reason, I don't know. There are things that are different about them, and we may disagree on the details of what makes them different, but in general we say, "Yeah, there is a different way boys look at books than how girls look at books." But if you want to get a boy to read, you've got to let that boy know that you care about him reading, and that's more important than whether or not the book has a pink cover. There's no reason why a boy can't pick up a book with a pink cover, and there's no reason to think girls can read books about boys doing things, but boys can't read books like *Miss Lina and Her Ballerinas*, which my first graders love, and it has a pink cover and it's about girls dancing. I think even more important than what kind of subject matter is in the book, if you want to get your boys to read, whether they're first graders, middle schoolers, or high schoolers—and I work with high schoolers and I teach first grade—CARE about the books. A lot of the time I have a tremendous amount of success getting boys to read something by *asking* them to read it, saying, "You have a real interesting way of looking at this kind of situation, and it's different than anybody else I know in this class. I would really like you to read this for me and tell me what you think about it." A lot of what revolves around getting boys to read is audience, and when you give them an audience, that tells that boy, or girl—reading is

important for everyone—when you tell those boys and girls that what they read is important for their brain development, it's going to make them smarter. I tell my first graders I want them to be good readers because, "When you graduate from college, you're going to be my doctors, and I don't want good doctors. I want great doctors, and you won't be great if you can't think, and you're going to think a lot better if you read. So read this for me. You've got a unique experience in life, and I want to know how you read these words and what you think about this book." Sometimes when you actually give very specific direction for the feedback you want from a book, you have a much better job at getting boys to read. If you say, "Oh, you should read this because you're going to get smarter," that will work to a certain extent, but if you say, "I would like you to read this book and tell me what you think of how this character handles this problem," then suddenly it's like, "Oh, this is important! This person really wants something from me. They want my opinion," and people love to be asked their opinions.

LEAH: It's really lovely to hear you talking about books, and that it's also really about relationships, knowing your students, and connecting personally through books with your students.

ED: There's no other way, and if you try and solve it through a specifically gendered or racial or religious point of view, you're not going to be as successful saying to a student, "Oh, Leah, I notice that you have a really fine eye for art. This is a book about an art student! What do you think about it?"

LEAH: Have you ever thought about writing for adolescent readers yourself?

ED: I've actually written a book, and it has gone to an editor. I had an agent and the agent told me that this is a fabulous book. It's my life story, and I grew up as a homeless teen. I did a presentation for the Texas Library Association on homelessness and library services. The book that I have written is essentially autobiographical in nature, except when I needed to make some parts up because it made the story a lot more interesting. And the agent told me, "It's going to sell millions! Just first change every single word in it." That was just so daunting and terrifying and so humbling that I have gone back to it very, very slowly. But I think I have a new agent, and I think I'm going to revive it as soon as I can get a life.

LEAH: It's interesting because you've done so much work with the American Library Association on

various book committees, and you also understand the writer's process. What has the work been like with ALA and all the committees that you've been on and the book award work that you've worked on?

ED: Book awards are only valuable to the extent that they bring attention to ALL the books that are out there. The award shines brightest when there's a lot of argument about what should have or should not have been honored, about what got forgotten, what got overlooked. I like being on award committees. I've been on the Caldecott Committee and I've been on the Printz Committee, where you choose a winner and maybe three or four honor books. When you say that one book is the best, that automatically generates discussion about your sanity and about whether or not you know what you're talking about, and "What book did you read and how could you even think that could be an award winner?!" I love that, as long as at the end of the day you realize it's just a book and we can still be friends and go out to lunch. Really good, smart, great readers can come to diametrically opposed views of what constitutes quality in a book. I remember on BBYA (Best Books for Young Adults), Deb Taylor, who is this beautiful, smart Black woman brought this book to the table for BBYA. It was *Letters to a Young Brother*. I read that book and hated it, just thought it was the most mawkish, cliché-filled trash I ever read. And I was pretty convincing in the arguments and it didn't make our list. Deb Taylor spoke up in defense of it, "Think of the family situations of the Black kids that I work with in Baltimore, versus your experience coming from your community. This BBYA list is for all of us, and I can point to child after child after child, who needs this kind of Black role model from a prominent member of the Black community telling them how to deal with the problems in their life every single day." I have to admit I went back and thought about what she said, and I thought about my reaction to the book, and I could see that, because of my experiences, I was reading a totally different book than she was reading. So when it came to the end of the BBYA session, when you have your chance to bleed on the table for a book. I changed my mind and bled on the table for that book because I could think about two things in my own life. I remembered my son, who's Korean American, coming up to me when *A Single Shard* and *A Step Toward Heaven*, the Newberry winner and Printz winner, both won in the same year, both featuring Korean people. My son asked me if there were sequels to these books, if there were more like them. I had that light bulb moment of something the White community often

takes for granted—that you need to be able to see yourself in the books. When you can't see yourself in the books, it tends to have you not feel as good about reading. So there was that idea. The other was the fact that Antoine, a Black teen, lived with us during all his high school years. I thought of all the times he got mad at me when I made him do something and how, in me, he had somebody that could sit and talk with him and love him enough to truly get pissed off by some of his behavior. I thought, "Umm, okay, I'm seeing this book in an different way." And so those are some of the magnificent things about serving on committees. One of the things I take with me when I'm looking at books for awards is recognizing that I come to a book with a very limited perspective, but I'm smart enough to recognize that sometimes and attempt to put myself in other people's shoes.

LEAH: Do you think that sometimes with book awards the choices end up being more for the adults on the committee than for the young people who will be reading the books?

ED: The folks that I've served with, whether it's been for a single book or a list committee, are passionate advocates for youth. The awards and the book lists are generated by adults, but I don't know of a single committee member who thinks they're choosing books for other adults. But there is a very significant disagreement about what that means practically. I can remember *Criss Cross* the Newbery winner that was so divisive in our discussions because there was the opinion that "It doesn't do anything. It's just a bunch of nice words thrown together, and no boy is ever going to like that book." Well, I like it and I'm a boy, but the literary quality of the book was so fabulous that how could you not want to have children have the chance to find that? Sometimes what we're really talking about is that notion of how important is quality, how important is popularity? Now if you're looking at the Newbery, they don't really care much about popularity. They really care about what is the significant contribution. And the Printz Award is strictly about literary quality. The thinking is that when you present high quality books to teens, whether or not they're going to be the most popular books in your library, you're exposing those young people to really beautiful, brilliant writing that will stay with them until they go off to college, when they start reading what we call the canon, which, as you well know, is often dictated by whether or not you're a White male. So I think, for the most part, that awards are decided by adults who have very different ideas of how those books are going to benefit children, but I think everyone, regardless of

what they choose or don't choose, really does have the best interest of young people in mind.

LEAH: You mentioned the canon. Many people would argue, as you have, that the canon at the secondary level hasn't been open to change and hasn't been very inclusive. What are some books or authors that you think really should be a part of the canon?

ED: Rita Williams Garcia is number one. She's always the first one I think of and *Every Time a Rainbow Dies* is at the top of my list. I'm not even sure if the book is still in print, but it should be. When I taught my graduate young adult literature class, we read *Monster*, which is probably the single best book talking about race that I've read. I read it and thought there was only one answer germane to Steve's guilt or innocence and was amazed by the polarity of opinion. Floyd Cooper is probably one of the best portrait painters, especially of Black people in the business today, and I haven't even gotten to Jerry Pickney or Kadir Nelson or folks like that who are really doing just fabulous work. I want to put this question on pause to some extent because I can go back through my database of 17,000 books and come up with examples of folks who are doing a lot of good work, such as Nikki Grimes and Pam Muñoz Ryan.

LEAH: You mentioned *Monster*, which is a pretty controversial title, and so I'm wondering if there have been ways you've been involved, or asked to become involved, in responding to challenges to books and book censorship?

ED: Yeah, it's pretty interesting. Our library had one of Julie Anne Peters' books challenged because the person challenging it said that those books should not be in our children's section. We told her, "Well, it's not in the children's section. It's in the young adult section." But in her mind, everything that is for anyone under 18 is children's literature, and she doesn't see any distinction between a 6-year-old and a 16-year-old. She hadn't read the book, and she was offended that it dealt with families that had different views on sexuality, that sort of thing. I also run a book group, and we're in a very conservative community, so that means that there are a lot of books high school students have access to that their families will not like. I tell those families, and I tell those students, that nobody is qualified to tell me what my teen daughter or what my teen son can read. I want my children reading everything because that gives me the opportunity to talk with them about those things that challenge our notion of what it means to be a Spicer. I'll say to my kids,

"We're Spicers, and we don't believe the way this author does. How come?" It gives us an opportunity to explore those values, to strengthen what we do believe. The fact that you read a book that has very disgusting behavior, or racial or religious beliefs that you don't share, doesn't mean that you are going to read that and become brainwashed and say, "Okay, yeah, I believe that way now, too, because I read it in a the book." No, it just means that now you have the chance to discuss why it doesn't meet your family's expectations. I don't want anyone telling me what my children can't read; I want them reading everything. My daughter was pretty self-selective, too. When she had a book that had high sexual content in it, she put it down, by herself. I didn't have to tell her to do that. She did that herself. In my experience, a lot of teens do that themselves as well. I don't think we give them enough credit for being as sophisticated as they are when it comes to knowing what's good for them. I had a young girl in one of my book club meetings long ago come marching down the aisle with the book, *Doing It*. Now I don't know if you're aware of that book, but *Doing It* is about three boys and their individual sexual experiences. She said, "Every eighth-grade girl must read this book!" And I thought, "Wow! There are a lot of high school teachers who think that book doesn't belong in a high school, and you're saying eighth-grade girls should read that book?" And she said, "If eighth-grade girls read this book, they would know what dumb people boys are, and we wouldn't have so many sexually transmitted diseases, and there wouldn't be as big of a problem with teen pregnancy." I love that answer because that's a book I know her family would have chosen to ban, and it is the very book that is teaching their daughter the lesson they want their daughter to learn. Books are funny that way. Just when we think we can pigeonhole it as gutter-slime trash, that book turns out to be the one that makes a big difference for somebody and changes his or her life. So I tell my teens, "We're going to trust each other to know what's good for us, and we're not going to try and dictate what somebody else can or can't read because it won't work." In fact, I tell a lot of families who are concerned about titles that the best ways to generate sales about those books is to try and have them banned. So if you don't want that book to sell, shut up about it. It will quietly disappear and go out of print, and you'll never have to worry about it again.

LEAH: It's so great to hear how passionate you really are about literature for young adult, and you're so involved at the state level and the national level.

What is the legacy you hope you're creating as you do all this work with children's literature?

ED: Love the books! I tell my kids, "Love those books so much you want to marry them." For me, being a homeless teen, I didn't have money to go do things, and I can remember many, many, many afternoons spent in southern California in the old Federated stores that had the big long bookshelves. I had finished reading all of the *Henry and Ribsy* books and the Beverley Cleary books, which I just adored. My library was small, and I was done with them, so I latched onto *Nancy Drew* books because there were a lot of those. The Federated store had all of them. I would go down to the store and read a book for three hours, sit there quietly, just reading, entering into a different world, albeit now a slightly twisted world, but still someplace that I couldn't get to on my own.

Books really do change lives, and I wouldn't be here talking to you without them. I've said it before and maybe it sounds very much like a cliché, but I think books really have saved my life. Books really have changed who I am, and they have that potential for anyone. It's not always realized with every single person you meet, but in some ways there's a book that has the potential to make you into a better human being, a kinder human being, a more aware human being, and somebody who has more empathy for different kinds of situations. I think if we had more readers, we would have less of a polarizing political climate, for example.

LEAH: Ed thank you so much. I am so glad that you're out there helping young people find these books and helping teachers and librarians help them find these books.