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METHODS

Fantastic Teachers and Where to Find Them: Professional Development Through YA Literature

BRIAN WHITE AND ANNA MEREDITH WHITE

We know what it's like to be professionally developed: to sit there, often trying but sometimes only pretending to listen, hour after droning hour, aching to do the real, important work waiting for us on our desks. In our experience, much so-called professional development amounts to killing time—"as if you could kill time without injuring eternity" (Thoreau, 1910, p. 10).

We're not trying to be dramatic. Teachers have no time to waste. We agree that ongoing training is vital, but in light of what Apple (1986) refers to as the unreasonable, increasingly intensified demands placed on teachers, those who are responsible for planning and providing professional development must ensure that not a moment is wasted. In our view, one of the surest ways to waste teachers' time is to conceive of professional development as something that teachers must passively receive from someone else whether they want to or not, instead of as something that they design and participate in collaboratively.

In this article, we propose a more active, participatory approach to professional development. Specifically, we argue that bringing teachers together to read and discuss young adult literature in which teachers figure prominently can be a powerful source of interesting, interactive, and useful growth for both relatively new teachers and for veterans. As we shall demonstrate, some widely-read authors of excellent fantasy and realistic fiction for young adults use their bully pulpit to advocate for more humane, more effective instruction inside the classroom, and to call upon teachers to advocate powerfully for struggling students outside of the classroom. Collaborative analysis and enjoyment of such works has the potential to change the politics of the typical teacher-advocacy "professional development workshop," transforming teachers from objects being worked on by experts, to expert professionals refashioning their own growth and practice in light of the lessons they are learning together.

We begin our discussion by taking the train to Hogwarts and considering how a collaborative reading of *Harry Potter* might transform both professional development and our own classroom practice.

Transfiguration: Reading *Harry Potter* for Lasting Change

One reason why we love the *Harry Potter* series is that J.K. Rowling so masterfully depicts the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry as a school: all its utterly fantastic elements (from nearly-headless phantasms to blast-ended skrewts) don't diminish in the least its remarkable, true-to-life academic setting. None of us has ever been to Hogwarts, of course, and yet it's so familiar; indeed, many of us have spent our entire lives there, first as students and now as teachers. We know the place, its routines and its inhabitants like the back of our hand, even without a marauders' map to guide us. We're at home there. Rowling has seen to that.

Her authorial genius lies, however, not just in her stunningly accurate depiction of life in school, but also in the persuasive argument she mounts throughout the series regarding the purposes of schooling and the nature of teaching. In fact, Rowling's fantasy for young adults is so full of helpful insights regarding teaching and learning that we must again (see White, 2015) take issue with the Common Core's invidious distinction between so-called "informational texts" and "non-informational" texts: like all great works of fiction, the *Harry Potter* series is packed with essential, intriguing, and highly useful information. The stuff about wizardry is pure fantasy, of course; Rowling isn't trying to teach us how to cast spells or concoct potions. She is, however, trying to teach us what it means to be a good teacher, and she does so, chiefly, by giving us so many teachers and instructional episodes to compare and contrast. We have space here to present only a few potential areas of focus for professional development and a sample activity or two, but we are confident that those

who know the series will be able to generate a number of other excellent approaches to collaborative reading and interactive growth.

Suggestion #1: Lessons from Five Teachers

Rowling sets up a perfect pedagogical comparison and contrast exercise by showing us, in detail, how five different teachers (Lockhart, Lupin, the Mad-Eye Moody imposter, Umbridge, and Harry) approach the teaching of the same course: Defense Against the Dark Arts. For each of the five, Rowling gives us at least one extensively described class session that highlights the teacher's pedagogical assumptions and strategies. One potential area of focus for professional development is those five teachers' attitudes toward book learning versus experiential learning. In a professional development setting, we might ask teachers to read all five descriptions together and to note, along the way, what Rowling seems to be emphasizing with regard to the role of reading in general and of books in particular in education. Consider, for example, the following:

- Lockhart (*Chamber*, ch. 6) uses books only to focus his students' attention upon himself; that is, he values books, not for the important subject matter they might present, but simply as a means of self-aggrandizement, as tokens and symbols of his own supposed knowledge, expertise, and importance (pp. 99-100);
- Lupin (*Azkaban*, ch. 7) begins his most extensively described class by saying, "Would you please put all your books back in your bags. Today's will be a practical lesson" (p. 150).
- The Moody imposter (*Goblet*, ch. 14) has no use for books whatever, ordering his students to "...put... those books [away]. You won't need them" (p. 210).
- Umbridge (*Phoenix*, ch. 12) focuses her students' attention entirely on book learning, rejecting any notion of practice or experience: "Why, I can't imagine any situation arising in my classroom that would require you to *use* a defensive spell, Miss Granger" (p. 242, emphasis in original).
- Harry (*Phoenix*, ch. 18), who holds his class in the magically appointed Room of Requirement, ignores the hundreds of potentially helpful books populating the shelves (which appeared, no doubt, at Hermione's whispered urging [p. 389-90]) and begins his lesson by saying, "Right. . . , shall we get practicing then?" (p. 392).

A discussion of the similarities and differences between these five teaching episodes and the teachers' attitudes toward books and experience could help teachers of English to consider what is and isn't practical about their subject matter, why and how they might help students see the practical ramifications of the Language (if not the Dark) Arts, and so on. It's interesting to consider what Rowling, an author of some very important books, might be trying to say to us about the role of books in learning. In the course of the conversation, teachers could consider the following questions: When and how, if at all, are books really useful to the liberally educated person? What is the connection between practical, hands-on learning and the reading of textbooks in English class? What does a teacher's attitude toward reading tell us (and the students) about her or him? What do students need books for? This exercise takes advantage of the diversity within any teaching faculty; a teacher who has thirty years under her belt may have different opinions than a first-year instructor, and the two can inform and question one another when answering these questions.

An alternative approach could be to ask the teachers to read all five of these descriptions of classroom instruction and then, based only on these excerpts, to rank the teachers from most to least effective. They could then meet in groups to share and work toward consensus on their rankings, and to generate a list of criteria for good teaching based on the descriptions and their analysis. The teachers might then apply, modify, and extend those criteria by using them to analyze particular teaching episodes in the novels as if they were supervisors assigned to improve instruction at Hogwarts—which leads us to our next suggestion.

Suggestion #2: Playing High Inquisitor

In *The Order of the Phoenix*, the Ministry of Magic appoints Dolores Umbridge to the post of High Inquisitor. According to her job description, as announced in the *Daily Prophet*, "The Inquisitor will have powers to inspect her fellow educators and make sure that they are coming up to scratch" (p. 307). We'd like to share with you what we call our "High Inquisitor" exercise—something we've used in classes for future teachers, though we see it as a potential exercise for in-service teachers as well; in fact, we think that having teachers of varying levels of experience work on the exercise together is likely to lead to rich discussion, especially in light of the fact that some of the Hogwarts educators included in the exercise are neophytes, while others are time-tested veterans.

When we use the exercise with future teachers, the goal is to encourage our students (most of whom are well

acquainted with all of the Hogwarts professors) to consider critically what Rowling might be trying to tell us about teaching, about teachers, and about students. Here's how we do it.

First, we identify four or five students who seem to enjoy reading aloud and ask them if they would be willing to prepare to read a lengthy excerpt to a small group of peers. We then give each of those students one of the following passages from *The Prisoner of Azkaban* (chs. 6 and 7) and ask them to practice their passage at home for a day or so:

- TRELAWNEY: From the bottom of p. 101 ("He emerged") to the middle of p. 108 ("catch up");
- HAGRID: From near the top of p. 112 ("Hagrid was waiting") to the top of p. 121 ("S all my fault");
- SNAPE: From the top of p. 123 ("Malfoy didn't reappear") to near the bottom of p. 128 ("Class dismissed");
- LUPIN: From the top of p. 132 ("They set off again") to the middle of p. 139 ("That will be all").

On the day of the exercise, we give each student a copy of the passages, identify our well-rehearsed readers as "prefects" (one per group), and give the following instructions:

1. In a moment, you'll be working in groups of about four. Your group's prefect is going to read a description of a teaching episode to you. Pretend that you are a team of experienced students and teachers who have been asked to observe a particular Hogwarts instructor and to provide constructive feedback on his/her instruction.

2. While your prefect reads aloud, read along silently, marking and noting aspects of instruction—strengths, weaknesses, goals, strategies, attitudes, etc.—that you will want to remember and comment on.

3. After the reading, your job as a group will be to create the following five lists together, which will be presented to the instructor in the spirit of improving teaching and learning at Hogwarts. Make the lists as long and as specific as possible, basing each item on what you have observed in this particular teaching episode alone.

- the teacher's strengths (words of praise)
- the teacher's weaknesses
- suggestions for improving instruction
- questions for the teacher to consider
- advice for students about how to maximize their learning in this teacher's class (based on what you see of the professor in this class session only)

Every time we have used this exercise, the "prefects" have performed admirably and the entire class has been deeply engaged in the reading, analysis, and discussion.

Several things stand out from our students' responses to the exercise. For example, we have found that, in their discussion, they gravitate toward the kinds of comparison and contrast that we mention above (and that we think Rowling intended all along). Specifically, they tend to be interested in the fact that Lupin and Hagrid have similar subject matter, but that only Lupin has planned effectively (taking into account what his students are likely to know and not know beforehand, designing a strategy to introduce and help students connect to the unfamiliar, organizing his lesson to maximize oversight, and so on). In addition, we have found that requiring each group to compile all five lists for their particular teacher helps the students to notice things that they might have missed (and perhaps didn't want to see) when they first read the books for pleasure. For example, most students come to recognize, usually quite grudgingly, that Severus Snape is a terribly effective teacher on a number of levels ("He knows his stuff backwards and forwards"; "His class is very practical and super important for their futures"; "His instructions are crystal clear"; "He manages the class expertly, noticing everything that happens in his dungeon classroom").

It's worth noting here that Smith & Wilhelm (2013), in their discussion of the *Harry Potter* phenomenon, encourage teachers to use the series in their middle and high school classrooms both because the books are so immensely pleasurable and because adolescent readers' pleasure is enhanced by the amount and kinds of practical, useful work the stories help readers to do. They explain that "work pleasure is the pleasure one takes from using a text as a tool to accomplish something" (p. 48), and they report that young readers of *Harry Potter* use the series to accomplish the hard, pleasurable work of reading imaginatively; to do the life-building, "inner work" (p. 172) of growing as individual human beings; to forge connections to real-life problems that need figuring out; and to build relationships with friends and family. We have found that reading pedagogically-focused excerpts with our students has helped all of us to do similar work, and with just as much pleasure. Our future teachers have found reading and talking about Harry Potter's teachers both deeply engaging and highly informative. It's enhanced their love for the stories and their respect for Rowling's genius—and it's caused them to think about the purposes of schooling and about what it means (and what it takes) to be a good teacher in the classroom.

Of course, all of us know that good teaching extends beyond the classroom walls. Good teachers contribute positively to their communities, to their schools, and to their

students' lives in ways that sometimes have little to do with subject matter and pedagogical strategies. We turn now to these "extra-curricular" contributions of good teachers, focusing in particular on teachers in both fantasy and realistic fiction who advocate powerfully and effectively for specific struggling students outside of class and who, as a result, see their students perform more successfully in class as well. We begin, again, at Hogwarts, with Minerva McGonagall, Rowling's teacher-advocate par excellence.

Teacher Advocates in Fantasy and Realistic Fiction

Fantastic Advocacy for Students

McGonagall is an example of excellent teaching throughout Rowling's series—she's tough but fair, she has a firm handle on both her subject and the classroom, and her students know that she has their interests at heart. Her best qualities as teacher-advocate, however, appear most clearly in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, when she has an adversary in the form of Ministry of Magic minion Dolores Umbridge.

Though Umbridge would no doubt disagree, some of the most important work a teacher-advocate can do is aid students as they realize and develop their potential. In a chapter titled "Career Advice," Harry meets with McGonagall, who serves as his head-of-house and therefore his advisor, about the steps he will need to take to pursue his chosen future as an Auror—a career something like magical law enforcement. Unfortunately, Umbridge, who has a special dislike for Harry, sits in on the meeting.

When Harry arrives, McGonagall is clearly shaken by Umbridge's presence—as even excellent teachers often are when being observed by or interacting with a difficult and contrary colleague or administrator—but McGonagall remains student-focused, proceeding with the career counseling session as planned. Though Harry's chosen career path is not an easy one—"they only take the best" (p. 662)—McGonagall strikes a healthy balance between preparing Harry for the challenges he will face (he'll need to improve in several classes, including her own, in order to qualify to test for the position) and encouraging him to pursue his goal. Her advice for her student is practical and outlines in detail the steps he will need to take to succeed. This alone is a useful example of an interaction between a teacher-advocate and her student; however, not only does McGonagall's advice focus on helping Harry achieve his career goal, but it also works

to essentially disarm another teacher (Umbridge), who is determined to discourage him. Umbridge discriminates against Harry because of her personal dislike of him and because of what she calls his "criminal record" (p. 664), going so far as to insist in his presence that he "has no chance whatsoever of becoming an Auror" (p. 664) and that anyone who says otherwise is giving him "false hope" (p. 664), as though Harry, a fifteen-year-old orphan from an emotionally and verbally abusive home, were not capable of any further growth.

Umbridge is the antithesis of an advocate; McGonagall first tries to ignore her interruptions and to give Harry the one-on-one attention a student making plans for his future deserves. When that fails, she goes to the mattresses for her cause—Harry. She refuses to allow her colleague to disparage their student, particularly one with a weak home support structure—Vernon and Petunia Dursley are hardly likely to instill their charge with a sense of his personal worth and capabilities. As a result, her advocacy for Harry is amplified by her awareness of his particular needs—and, we acknowledge, a strong distaste for Dolores Umbridge: "'Potter,' she [says] in ringing tones, 'I will assist you to become an Auror if it is the last thing I do! If I have to coach you nightly I will make sure you achieve the required results!'" (p. 665).

While perhaps extreme, Minerva McGonagall's plan for and reaction to the events of this career counseling session reveal the basics of a strong teacher advocate: she knows her student personally and academically, seeks to encourage him while remaining honest about his chances, and is willing to make a personal investment in his future even when other teachers are not. Though teachers in today's schools are unlikely to find themselves coaching a teenaged wizard through difficult Transfiguration courses, they may work closely with a student who receives little encouragement from home, or one who has a criminal record but big dreams. They may need to come to the defense of this student even at the expense of professional relationships, and they may need to not only express belief in the student's capabilities, but also to act on that belief and work to help him or her succeed. As the ultra-talented and under-privileged "Boy Who Lived," Harry is admittedly a very special case; but teachers serve all their students as advocates. Studying McGonagall's expert, determined advocacy for Harry together might lead teachers to important discussions and discoveries that could transform

some of their interactions with and beliefs about their own students to better assist them in learning and in living.

Really Advocating for Students

Teacher-advocates, of course, do not appear only in the Wizarding World of YA fantasy, but in other genres as well, most notably realistic fiction. We think that Rob Buyea's (2010) YA novel *Because of Mr. Terupt* is a ready source of professional development in this regard, perhaps especially because of the novel's popularity among students—sales were strong enough to ensure two sequels. Buyea's titular character is a young teacher who recognizes that his fifth-grade class is composed of individuals and works to meet each student's unique needs. The novel is told not from the perspective of Mr. Terupt but from that of seven of his students, each from different walks of life and struggling with different obstacles. The novel's popularity is undoubtedly due in part to the multi-voiced narration, which allows a wide variety of readers to "find themselves" in the story; we think that teachers of diverse backgrounds and experiences who read the novel together are also likely to find themselves, and some of their students, in the story.

Though Mr. Terupt is presented as an idealistic figure who seems to know what to do in even the most difficult circumstance, the situations in which he serves as a teacher-advocate are commonplace in the average classroom: bullying, thoughtless language, low self-esteem. Although we think that Buyea (2010) presents some of these events in stick-figure fashion, leaving out essential detail and description, we believe that the spare presentation may benefit teachers who study the book together as a source of professional development. Mr. Terupt's actions may be somewhat predictable, but they are also generalizable and malleable to a wide range of particular situations and student problems. For example, one of Terupt's students, Alexia, is a known bully; the chapters told from her perspective reveal the deep insecurity that drives her mean-spiritedness. She pits her so-called friends against each other, lies to whomever will believe her, and spouts insults in the eerily accurate way only middle-schoolers can. After a particularly vicious interaction between Alexia and a group of students working on a project, Mr. Terupt intervenes, sending Alexia to wait for him in the hallway. Before following her, he turns to the group:

I've watched Alexia be unpleasant to all of you. I hoped that one of you was going to stand up to her and tell her to stop. You didn't .... If you let people get away with being mean, they're going to keep being mean. You need to stick up for each other. Even

Alexia isn't tough enough to make fun of you—not if all four of you stick together .... You should be disappointed. You should stand by each other. That's what being friends is all about .... Don't sit and pout .... That won't help anything. You need to keep working. Learn from this and don't make the same mistake again.' (pp. 82-83)

He then leaves his students to think, and several pages later, readers see his interaction with the (now crying) bully herself:

I like you, Lexie. I want some of your classmates to like you, too. I'm trying to help. I want you to be *friendlier* .... I will not tolerate your meanness anymore .... You're acting like the meanest girl I've ever seen .... I'm telling you the truth, and sometimes the truth can hurt .... I know you're *not* mean deep down inside, so stop acting like you are. Miss Kelsey has told me some amazing things about you in her room.' (p. 86, p. 90, emphasis in original)

Here Mr. Terupt acts as teacher-advocate in two distinct ways in reaction to the same event. In the first, addressing the group of students, he lets them know the high standard he holds them to—a sign of respect ("I hoped that one of you was going to stand up to her..."). He then makes his expectations for them clear ("You need to stick up for each other .... You should stand by each other...") before reminding them that he isn't trying to punish them ("Don't sit and pout ... Learn from this and don't make the same mistake again").

In his dealings with Alexia, he employs similar tactics, first reminding her of something positive ("I like you, Lexie") before highlighting the unacceptable behavior ("I will not tolerate your meanness"); however, Terupt (and, by extension, Buyea) pointedly distances Alexia's bad behavior from her personhood. Alexia isn't *mean*, she is *acting mean*—something Mr. Terupt reminds her is not inherent to her personality. Finally, before sending her to the bathroom to calm down, he reasserts a positive—the volunteer work she's done in a special education classroom, where she is known for being gentle and understanding.

In both of these conversations, Mr. Terupt shows a sensitivity for the autonomy of his students; he wants them to know that they are, in part, in control of what happens in the classroom, and that they should choose to have a positive effect rather than a negative one. The group needs to stand up to a bully rather than let her rampage freely; the bully needs to take responsibility for her actions and be who she really is. The lesson Terupt is attempting to teach serves not only

as a peace-keeping method for the classroom, but also as a life-long reminder for personal conduct: don't be a bully, and if you see one, stop one. And the lesson Buyea is trying to teach is that sensitive, truthful, gentle, courageous teachers can make a difference.

Buyea's work is obviously more realistic than Rowling's in some ways—Mr. Terupt is no wizard, at least in the Hogwartian sense; and Buyea's heroic teacher may be an easier example to follow than Professor McGonagall for many teachers who simply don't have time or energy to tutor every student every night for the rest of their careers to ensure that they all achieve their dreams. Mr. Terupt teaches all of us that serving as a teacher-advocate may be as simple as letting your students know their value—and when they need to work harder to live up to that value.

Teachers seeking professional growth together might also find inspiration in the pages of Sharon Flake's (1998) Coretta Scott King Award winner *The Skin I'm In*, where they will encounter a fellow professional who, like Mr. Terupt, works as an advocate to help her students become and behave as their best selves. Miss Saunders is an African-American woman with a skin condition that causes loss of pigmentation in blotches. As a result, the narrator, middle-school student Maleeka, says that her teacher looks "like somebody tossed acid" (p. 1) on her face. Maleeka knows what it feels like to be ostracized because of her looks; her classmates think her skin too dark and her clothes too old, but that doesn't mean she's going to make Miss Saunders' job any easier.

Luckily, Miss Saunders is an example of advocating for her students simply by living the life she hopes her students will lead. When a student makes fun of Miss Saunders' skin, the teacher responds that she's "traveled all over the world, and there's nothing [students] can say about her face that she ain't already heard in at least four different languages" (p.8). Miss Saunders is not afraid of verbal barbs; she looks different, and she refuses to be ashamed. All teachers and students have vulnerabilities. Not all are as visible as Miss Saunders' vitiligo or Maleeka's dark skin, but rather than try to hide or avoid insecurity, Miss Saunders chooses instead to lean into her insecurity and face her classroom with confidence.

The first assignment in her English class is a response to the question "What does your face say to the world?" We think teachers, including ourselves, have a lot to learn from Miss Saunders' courage and vulnerability; and we respect her determination to advocate for her students by unashamedly being who she is.

Kids can be cruel; after a lifetime with a highly visible skin condition, Miss Saunders knows this. In fact, she probably expects it. Regardless, after a few awkward moments, she turns the assignment around and allows them to share what they are thinking: "What's my face say?" she asks. Maleeka raises her hand:

"Not to hurt your feelings...but...I think it says, you know, you're a freak" (p.18).

Miss Saunders could choose to react to this name calling with anger or even disciplinary action; Maleeka is certainly being unkind at best, and it may be to her benefit to learn as soon as possible that she cannot call authority figures "freaks" to their faces. Instead, Miss Saunders opts to share some of her story with her class as a living example of self-acceptance:

'Freak ... I saw that too when I was young. Liking myself didn't come overnight .... I took a lot of wrong turns to find out who I really was. You will, too .... It takes a long time to accept yourself for who you are. To see the poetry in your walk...to look in the mirror and like what you see, even when it doesn't look like anybody else's idea of beauty .... So what's my face say to the world? .... My face says I'm smart. Sassy. Sexy. Self-confident .... I think it says I'm *all that*.' (pp. 19-20, emphasis in original)

She tells them how her family tried to "cure" her when she was a child and allows her students to ask questions and point and stare as much as they need to so that she can work back to the regular school day, full of evaluations and syllabi. Her honesty, vulnerability, and self-confidence have a positive effect not only on her classroom—the novelty of her face wears off fairly quickly after she makes it an open topic of conversation—but also on her students as individuals, who can now share and celebrate what they think their own faces say, without fear of judgment.

This scene has a strong effect on Maleeka, whose dark skin has made her an object of ridicule among her classmates—they sing a taunting song about Maleeka being "so black [they] just can't see her" (p. 3) and openly argue about whether Maleeka's face says that "she needs to stay out of the sun" or if it says that "Black is beautiful" (p.16). Maleeka isn't exactly sure what she thinks about her face at first, but after sitting in Miss Saunders' class for a semester, she decides that her skin is like midnight—in a good way. Having come to a kind of peace with herself, when Maleeka overhears Miss Saunders revealing some insecurities to a friend, she takes the opportunity to show her teacher how much she's learned,

saying, “You act like you’re the only one in the world who’s been teased . . . Some of us is the wrong color. Some is the wrong size or got the wrong face. But that don’t make us wrong people, now does it? Shoot, I know I got my good points, too” (p. 119). Miss Saunders’ teacher-advocacy planted the seeds of self-acceptance in Maleeka, whose newfound confidence and comfort in her own skin allow her to become the teacher herself and to encourage Miss Saunders.

Preparing and Reading Together

Prior to reading *Because of Mr. Terupt* and *The Skin I’m In*, in-service teachers in a professional development setting might consider talking and writing together about teacher-advocates they have known. These teachers might be friends, colleagues, professors, or teachers they remember from elementary school. Before engaging with the novels, these teachers could share stories and memories about advocacy in and outside of the classroom; some of their stories are bound to be similar, highlighting common characteristics and features of teacher-advocates that can be applied to the fictional teachers in the books and later to the readers themselves in their own teaching and advocacy practices. During and after reading, heterogeneous groups of more- and less-experienced teachers could meet again to discuss the similarities they saw between the characteristics of their “real-life” examples of teacher-advocates and their fictional counterparts.

This exercise allows teachers to think realistically about advocacy by determining what an ideal advocate looks like—does it look like their first grade teacher, like Mr. Terupt, or a combination of the two? What kind of advocate do they want to be, and what kind of advocate do their students need? What characteristics do they already share with the successful advocates they have known personally as well as the ones they are reading about in YA lit? These discussions serve to keep professional development active, not passive, and focused on how to better advocate for students.

Many Books, Many Teachers

At a time when many powerful forces seem to be trying to standardize both instruction and instructors (White, 2011), we think that reading about a wide variety of teacher advocates in Young Adult fiction could help us to recognize and encourage healthy individuality. For example, unlike Professor McGonagall, whose advocacy for Harry took place outside of her classroom, and Mr. Terupt, who had to serve as an advocate in a moment of discipline, Miss Saunders

works her determined advocacy into a lesson plan. All three examples, carried out using different strategies, are positive pictures of teacher-advocates in YA literature. Indeed, we would argue that the authors of these powerful stories about teaching and learning—Rowling, Buyea, and Flake—are advocating for particular, yet varied kinds of and attitudes toward teaching and teacher-advocacy. Teachers of varying experience and expertise who come together in professional development settings to read and discuss these works are likely to consider the joint venture time well spent, for the authors provide us with ready and practical resources, tools that can open minds and stimulate discussions about what it means to teach well, to care for students, and to be our best selves on their behalf.

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To Judge the Living and the Dead

When reading *Walden*,
the students rage—*rage*—against Thoreau,
like the man shot their
dogs one by one, gangland-style.
They call him a fake,
a phony, a poseur
when they find out his cabin was only
a mile or two
from town;
call him an idiot
for the whole enterprise;
call him a nerd for
having no friends,
a *loser* for his experiment in
isolation.

But would the students say the same
if Thoreau,
in the manner they've
grown up with,
had divulged his personal business first,
if the book didn't start with
"When I wrote the following pages,
or rather the bulk of them,
I lived alone, in the woods,"
but with
"After my best
friend, my brother John,
died—RIP, JT—I needed to be
alone, to build
something, to tend some beans,
just to tend
some beans for awhile, you know?"
instead?

Would they try so hard
to outdo each other's bile
if they paused to remember
that he was a person,
like each
and every
one of us—
a person with a
heart made of mixed media—
part steel but part cardboard,
part stoic oak but part decrepit spider web—
first?

—Mitchell Nobis

Mitchell Nobis is a teacher and English department chair at Seaholm High School in Birmingham, Michigan. He is the current president of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English and is a co-director of the Red Cedar Writing Project. He lives in Farmington, Michigan, where he and his wife spend their spare time playing baseball and basketball with their sons.