Jennifer Buehler

Ways to Join the Living Conversation about Young Adult Literature

Buehler offers a wealth of Web resources and personal advice from popular YA authors to convince teachers and students to talk about the books they love.

In the electronic space of the American Library Association's YALSA-BK listserv, on the pages of journals such as *The ALAN Review*, and in book groups across the country, a passionate conversation is taking place about young adult literature. Librarians and critics participate, but so do professors, teens, and authors themselves. When teachers join in, they discover the depth, range, and power of this growing field. They also begin developing the knowledge they need to advocate for these books with parents, colleagues, and administrators. The conversation brings YA books and their readers to life.

What would it mean for a greater number of students and teachers in English classes to become a part of this conversation about books for teens? And what purpose would the conversation serve? Teachers often talk about their desire to create lifelong readers, and some teach YA novels to make that happen. Titles assigned in English class, however, are usually ones that have been recommended by reviewers, sanctioned by award committees, and vetted by curriculum supervisors. Rarely do students and teachers see themselves as people who have the authority to talk back to the gatekeepers; instead, they are on the receiving end of a conversation begun by others. But the conversation about YA books—like the authors who write them—is a living thing. Students and teachers can help to shape it.

Navigating the Field: Critics' Websites

To join the conversation, newcomers need to build knowledge of YA titles and authors. Some may not know where to begin. Luckily, with the click of a mouse, a whole array of YA Internet resources is within reach.

For personal commentary by YA aficionados about the newest books for teens, several websites are worth checking out. Jennifer Hubert Swan's hip site Reading Rants (http://www.readingrants.org) presents YA book reviews organized into themed lists such as "Boy Meets Book," "Nail Biters," and "Teen Tearjerkers," enabling readers to find the kinds of books they're looking for. Richie Partington posts lengthy reviews—including excerpts from specific scenes—on Richie's Picks (http://www.richiespicks.com). Because he receives Advance Reader Copies (ARCs), Richie often alerts readers to the dates when new titles will be released. Teri Lesesne posts brief comments about new YA books almost daily on her blog The Goddess of YA Literature (http://professornana.livejournal.com), and she too reviews ARCs.

For readers who want a more holistic look at the lives and work of a variety of YA authors, Don Gallo's website Authors 4 Teens (http://www.authors4teens.com) provides in-depth interviews with over 50 authors, including Nancy Werlin, Walter Dean Myers, and Virginia Euwer Wolff. In the case of authors who do not have their own websites, such as E. R. Frank, this site is an invaluable resource. Although users must buy a one-year subscription to the site, the free trial period allows for an introductory visit.

Introductions to Authors: Exploring Author Websites

Once readers identify YA authors whose work interests them, individual authors' websites and blogs pro-

vide glimpses of the people behind the books. Author websites are typically anchored by a list of publications accompanied by short blurbs about each title, excerpts from reviews, and awards won. These thumbnail sketches give readers an immediate idea of the topics and themes an author has explored and the critical response their books have received. For readers who don't yet have a copy of an author's newest book but would like a taste of it, chapters from individual books are sometimes available to download.

Author websites also allow readers to discover the insightful and provocative things authors themselves have said about their lives and novels. Some authors provide these insights through special commentary posted on the website. Paul Volponi's author's note on Black and White (http://www.paulvolponibooks.com/Black_White_Notes.htm) explains how his job teaching incarcerated adolescents on Riker's Island led him to write about race and the justice system. Paul also tells the story of a race riot that occurred at Long Island City High School shortly after the team he coached played a game there. This background information allows readers a glimpse of the real events that served as seeds for the story.

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Shaun Tan provides a lengthy, brilliant commentary about the design of his wordless graphic novel *The Arrival* and ways readers might interpret it (http://www.shauntan.net/books.html). He identifies sources for the many sepia images of immigrants in the book, offers metaphorical ways of interpreting the book's imaginary phenomena, and discusses the conceptual space that images create in the absence of words. Shaun also reveals

Cool Stuff on Author Websites — **Jennifer Buehler**

Frequently Asked Questions

- Patricia McCormick explains how she decided to write about people who hurt themselves in her book *Cut* (http://www.pattymccormick.com/index.php?mode=text&section_id=118).
- Scott Westerfeld explains why it takes so long for books to come out and why he likes writing teen novels better than adult novels (http://www.scottwesterfeld.com/author/faq.htm).

Quirky Information

- Gabrielle Zevin offers a list of literary allusions in *Elsewhere* (http://www.memoirsofa.com/Elsewhere_Extras.html).
- Coe Booth offers a recommended reading list of YA titles including *The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson and *Born Confused* by Tanuja Desai Hidier (http://www.coebooth.com/links.html).
- Chris Crutcher offers statements he has written to would-be censors of his books; he also offers free bookmarks that picture him lying on a park bench with a caption that reads, "I feel a story coming on" (http://www.chriscrutcher.com).

Photos

- Chris Crutcher's website and Laurie Halse Anderson's blog regularly feature photos from school visits and conferences (http://halseanderson.livejournal.com, November 17, 2007).
- Sonya Sones's website includes an album of stunning photos she herself took of YA authors she's met, such as Carolyn Mackler and Frank Portman (http://www.sonyasones.com/photos.htm).
- John Green posted photos his father took of him in Manhattan the morning he learned he had won the Michael L. Printz Award for *Looking for Alaska* (http://www.sparksflyup.com/archives/weblog/2006_01_01_archive.php). The following year he posted video his wife recorded when the Printz Committee notified him of his Honor Award for *An Abundance of Katherines* (http://www.brotherhood2.com/index.php/?m=200701&paged=2).

Study Guides

- Some are created by the author's publisher, such as those for Christopher Paul Curtis's books *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* and *Bud, Not Buddy* (http://www.randomhouse.com/features/christopherpaulcurtis/teachers.htm).
- Some are written by veteran YA literary critics such as Patty Campbell, who wrote the reader's companion for Sarah Dessen's *Dreamland* (http://us.penguingroup.com/static/images/yr/pdf/tl-guide-dreamland.pdf).
- Some are written by the author, such as the discussion guide for *Parrotfish* that Ellen Wittlinger wrote for use by Gay-Straight Alliances (http://www.ellenwittlinger.com/parrotfish-discussion.html).

the texts he consulted as he learned to craft a graphic novel, including Japanese manga as well as Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*.

Other authors provide links to interviews that can be heard and viewed through the website. Markus Zusak's site links to interviews he gave to National Public Radio and Good Morning America when *The Book Thief* was published (http://www.randomhouse.com/features/markuszusak/press.html). Because these interviews can be heard and viewed, they allow readers access not just to Markus's words, but also to his facial expressions, mannerisms, and voice as he explains how he turned his parents' stories about growing up in wartime Munich into an award-winning novel.

Podcasts offer teachers and students another chance to hear authors' voices. Laurie Halse Anderson produced her first podcast when *Twisted* came out. In it, she reads brief excerpts from the book and discusses her different attempts over time to explain what the book was about and get the book written (http://us.penguingroup.com/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,9780670061013,00.html). Podcasts such as these are the next best thing to hearing the author talk in person at a conference or a local bookstore. By addressing readers directly through the podcast, Anderson offers a momentary sense of closeness and intimacy with her and her book through the sound of her voice.

Readers can also find "extras" on author websites, similar to music bootlegs or television outtakes. On a page called "Behind the Book," K. L. Going reveals her motivation for writing *Saint Iggy*, a book about a kid who's not really talented at anything but who "sees the world in a way no one else can." Then she includes a scene she had to delete from the novel for pacing reasons (http://klgoing.com/btbiggy.htm). Barry Lyga goes a step further in sharing behind-the-scenes material from his gripping novel *Boy Toy*, including a series of deleted scenes reflecting 150 pages cut from the original 600-page manuscript, along with explanations of why he wrote each scene in the first place and why he later chose to cut them. In addition, he lists subplots cut from the book and subplots never added to the book (http://barrylyga.com/new/boytoy-deleted.html). These extras bring the messiness of the writing process into view, providing readers with inside information into aspects of a story the writer once imagined but eventually had to let go.

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Through website links and comment sections on blogs, readers can glimpse the social side of the YA community, learning which authors share friendships, participate in writing groups together, and mentor newer writers in the field. Blogs also provide the place where readers can get the most current information about an author's projects, including information about speaking engagements and hints about works in progress. When John Green was writing the manuscript for *Paper Towns*, he thrilled fans by reading an excerpt from the opening chapter in a vlog posting (a video-based online journal) on Brotherhood 2.0, the yearlong video exchange with his brother Hank (http://www.brotherhood2.com/index.php/?m=200709&paged=3). There's no better way to feel connected with YA authors on a daily basis than through access to this piece of the conversation.

Conversing with Authors: Possibilities and Problems

So what kinds of conversations can teachers and students enter into as they begin exploring the world of YA lit? Who can they talk to? Many teachers envision conversations with authors themselves as a natural first step. Believing that an authentic audience for student writing is just a postage stamp or an email click away, teachers may require students to write letters to authors. During my years as a ninth-grade English teacher, I gave this assignment more than once.

However, as popular as such assignments are, required letters don't always foster a genuine exchange, and they can cause problems for authors that teachers don't anticipate.[1] Gail Giles notes that heartfelt letters "make what we do in those dark, lonely hours worth it," but adds that such letters don't tend to come from assignments. "They come from a lost soul that found a friend in our books and wanted to tell us so. Not to make sure they got all the points for the book report or paper." On the contrary, Giles has found that assignments tend to generate "baskets of email, some nice, some

demanding, some downright rudely entitled wanting me to give ten lengthy answers to questions. Many of which could be answered if they went to my website." Furthermore, when teachers require students to find out something about an author's life not included on the website to ensure the student contacted the author, they may unwittingly violate the author's privacy. Giles suggests that before a teacher makes an assignment for his or her class to write to an author, he or she should first contact the author and ask if it is a good time. If the author has a deadline looming or personal obligations that would prevent him or her from responding to such letters, the author can say so rather than appear uncaring or arrogant. Absent such pressures, the author, such as Giles, might be quite willing to answer questions (personal email, May 10, 2008).

According to Kelly Milner Halls, Chris Crutcher's assistant, Crutcher also gets baskets of email, often in the form of 30 different "required" messages written by students in the same class who repeat the same question. When he gets groups of letters or emails like this, Kelly adapts them into a single list of questions that Crutcher can answer and return to the teacher to distribute to the kids. He won't refuse to answer individual letters, but in the case of a class assignment, it's much easier for him to answer questions in one consolidated email. When teachers do this streamlining themselves, authors truly appreciate the foresight (personal email, May 11, 2008).

Alex Flinn also affirms the value of letters from readers. "If my book changed the letter writer's life, I totally want to hear about it! If the letter writer was assigned to read my book and sort of skimmed it . . . I don't. This probably means that the entire class should not write to the same author." Nor, she adds, should students get graded on whether the author writes back. Flinn suggests that teachers offer alternative assignments after a whole-class reading experience so that authors do not receive letters from students who have not read or did not like their book. Students who want to criticize or praise a book could post reviews on websites such as Amazon.com, thus drawing attention to the author's work and at the same time getting a taste of literary criticism (post on YALSA-BK listserv, May 13, 2008, 1:28 p.m.). Flinn's suggestion offers a different, but no less authentic, way of joining in the conversation about YA lit.

Sometimes the teacher's strict formatting requirements for author letters get in the way of students being able to engage their intended audience. Jordan Sonnenblick commented on his mixed reaction to a batch of letters he received from a class of students who had just read his book—each one formatted as a five-paragraph essay:

> I mean, when a teacher gets 150 kids to read your book, it's an *amazing* feeling. But when that teacher gets every one of those kids to write you what essentially amounts to a standardized-test-prep exercise, what is the correct or expected author response? The whole setup becomes unfair to both the author and the students.

Jordan handled the situation by writing one letter back that thanked the teacher for sharing his book with the class. Like most authors, he makes an effort to read all the students' letters, but he concedes that it's hard to get through the pile when the fourth paragraph of every single one starts off, "One thing I would have changed if I were writing *Notes from the Midnight Driver* is . . ." (post on YALSA-BK listserv, May 14, 2008).

Even when they haven't assigned author letters, teachers may be unaware of the requests their students are making of YA authors—requests that are not about conversation at all, but about grades. Alex Flinn received one email message from a desperate senior who had failed his teacher's pop quizzes on *Breathing Underwater*. He hoped he would receive extra credit if Alex phoned his class to thank the teacher for choosing her book. Flinn wrote back telling him that if he could pass a pop quiz of her own by 4 o'clock the next day, she would email his teacher. When the student emailed with right answers to all but one of her questions, she forwarded the email to the teacher with an offer to call. The teacher decided to give the sought-after extra credit (post on YALSA-BK listserv, May 13, 2008, 4:06 p.m.). Still, the situation presented a dilemma. How much responsibility do YA authors have to help students succeed academically with their books?

Authors may feel a sense of responsibility whether teachers intend it or not. One week a number of students attempted to contact Sarah Dessen by

leaving questions in the comments section of her blog, even though she never responds to comments. These students had been assigned her book and could get extra credit if she commented back. This put Dessen in the awkward position of trying to soothe readers' hurt feelings and intervene between them and their teacher, which she addressed on her blog:

> Regular readers of this blog know that I don't usually respond to comments—although I do read them, every single one—because it would be really time consuming and I'd rather put that time towards, you know, writing more books. So please don't get mad or hostile with me, or call me names. It's not personal, it's just my policy. And I thank you very much for reading my books. Maybe if you show your teacher this entry he/she will find another way for you to get the extra credit? (http://writergrl.livejournal.com/, April 4, 2008)

In a similar case, Laurie Halse Anderson asked teachers reading her blog what to do when she received a message through her MySpace account from a ninth-grade student who asked for "cool facts" she could include in her author report. The student wrote using text-message abbreviations and asked Laurie to "message [her] back today." Laurie's inclination was to hit her delete key. She explained, "My strong-worded 'I won't do your homework' policy is everywhere. With just the tiniest amount of effort, the student can find all kinds of information about me—like on my website." Then she wondered if she was being "appallingly old-fashioned and cranky." She wrote back with an offer to help, but decided to take the role of "the village auntie" trying to raise standards by warning the student not to write as though she were text-messaging in future correspondence. The student never replied. Anderson figured it was because the paper was already past due (http://halseanderson.livejournal.com/, November 26, 2007).

Months later, after hearing about the discussion that research for this article generated on YALSA-BK, Laurie responded with a new post on her blog providing excerpts from one day's worth of email. The email excerpts included, among others, a teacher asking why the art teacher in *Speak* has the same name as Maya Angelou's rapist in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*; a student asking for quotes Anderson lives by for a school project; a bookseller requesting signed books or a stack of bookmarks that could be included in store goodie bags; and multiple messages Anderson deemed "lovely" from teens who had been moved by her books. Acknowledging that answering reader mail is "mostly a very nice problem to have," Anderson echoed Alex Flinn in imploring teachers not to link students' grades to her ability to respond in a timely fashion (http://halseanderson.livejournal.com/, May 14, 2008).

Teachers may think that without an assignment to contact authors, students won't reach out, and conversation won't happen. For many students, this is just not true. Those who seek connection—whether with an author or other like-minded readers—don't need an assignment for motivation. John Green's Brotherhood 2.0 spawned an online community of over 8,000 self-appointed "Nerdfighters," many of whom are fans of Green's books. Though the Brotherhood 2.0 project has ended, Green still answers questions from Nerdfighters in occasional "Question Tuesday" vlog postings. Exchanges are often decidedly literary, demonstrating that teens seek intellectual engagement as well as emotional support when they reach out to authors. One Tuesday, Green responded to questions on topics such as his favorite personification of death in literature ("It's in the Andrew Marvel poem, 'To His Coy Mistress'"), his favorite last words by an author ("Emily Dickinson's last words were pretty good. She said, 'I must go in. The fog is rising.'"), and his opinion on *Catcher in the Rye* ("It's excellent, and if you disagree with me—and I say this respectfully—you're wrong"). Maybe Green opened some minds to classic literature that day; he certainly had a receptive audience (http://nerdfighters.ning.com/, April 21, 2008).

As Gail Giles puts it, students will write letters when they feel a bond with an author; that is all the motivation they need. They want to connect with the author "because there's an understanding between them. A thread they want to tug and bring closer." Teachers may never hear from students about these private letters, but authors sometimes share them at conferences. Julie Ann Peters read aloud from many of the moving letters she has received from gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth in a panel session on bullying at the 2006 ALAN Workshop. Joan Kaywell collected further examples of deeply personal letters to authors, fol-

lowed by individual authors' responses, in her book *Dear Author: Letters of Hope*.

As teachers, we can't force connections between authors and students if students don't want or need them. We can't *make* an authentic conversation happen. When we assign letters to authors, the nature of the conversation between reader and author changes, and students' resulting knowledge of YA books may not develop in meaningful ways. But there is another kind of literate conversation we can foster, and students don't need to write letters to become a part of it. Better yet, there's room for teachers in the conversation, too.

Better Possibilities: Conversing with Fellow Readers

The conversation about YA lit can entail so much more than swapping title recommendations or assessing students' understanding of assigned works. It can be about raising awareness of the field's innovators, changing minds about what the field has to offer, or developing explanations for trends that have occurred in the field over time. Teachers and students who participate in discussions of YA lit gain the opportunity to both expand their knowledge and bring a new degree of expertise back to their departments and classrooms. They also get to see how members of the YA community form their views and sometimes find them challenged. What would it mean to engage one's students—and even one's colleagues—in debate over why certain YA books receive multiple awards each year while others receive none, or why certain aspects of teenage life attract so much attention in YA novels while other aspects attract so little?

This kind of literary conversation is exciting because it evolves *daily* as new YA books are published and new readers come to the table. The landscape of YA literature is changing rapidly, and readers' minds stay alive when they have the chance to explore that landscape. The opportunity is wide open, and no other group of contemporary writers is quite so accessible. But how does a person who isn't a librarian or critic gain access to the conversation?

It helps to think in terms of different realms where the conversation takes place. First, there is a virtual realm that can be found online. The American Library Association's YALSA-BK listserv, mentioned at the beginning of this article, is one such space for conversation. Membership on this list is free, providing participants with invaluable access to daily conversations among librarians, critics, and authors about the newest books for teenagers and trends in the field. Particularly in January when the Printz Award is announced along with the annual list of Best Books for Young Adults, debate grows heated over which books were recognized and which were left out. Subscribing to the list is simple. Go to http://lists.ala.org/wws/arc/yalsa-bk, look on the left-hand column and click "subscribe," then enter your email address and click "submit." Because the list can sometimes generate a large number of posts each day, some subscribers set up special email accounts just to handle their listserv mail.

The ALAN Book Club, moderated by retired English teacher CJ Bott, provides another kind of virtual space where twice a month on Wednesday nights, readers of a particular title can come together for an online chat session. Readers who visit the ALAN website (http://www.alan-ya.org) on the third Wednesday of the month chat with each other; on the fourth Wednesday they are joined by the author. Previously discussed titles include *A Room on Lorelei Street* by Mary Pearson, *Raiders Night* by Robert Lipsyte, and *Endgame* by Nancy Garden. For people who don't have a community of fellow YA readers at their schools, the ALAN Book Club offers a helpful opportunity to get others' reactions to provocative new titles.

Beyond the realm of virtual conversation, teachers who are able to attend the NCTE Annual Convention or the ALAN Workshop in November each year have the chance for face-to-face conversation with many of these same authors and YA advocates. At publisher booths in the NCTE exhibit hall, readers can walk right up to authors such as M. T. Anderson and Benjamin Alire Saenz during book signings. At the publisher-sponsored ALAN reception on Sunday night, readers can chat with authors over a glass of wine (although they may find themselves tongue-tied; it can be nothing short of awe-inspiring to be in the presence of those whose books you love). When Sherman

The landscape of YA literature is changing rapidly, and readers' minds stay alive when they have the chance to explore that landscape.

Alexie traced the parallels between his life and that of Arnold "Junior" Spirit in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* during the keynote speech of the 2007 ALAN Workshop, he got a standing ovation. Readers in that room knew the value of his story and its importance to the field of YA lit. After the applause ended, they were still talking about it.

Bringing the YA Conversation Back Home

But there are limits to the usefulness of conversations that occur far from readers' schools and communities. The distance between those conversations and the settings where teachers teach and students learn diminishes their potential to have a palpable effect on local reading lives and curriculum. Readers may need to take action for YA books to get the attention they deserve on the local level. What remote conversations do, however, is prepare readers of YA lit for conversations they might have with fellow readers and stakeholders back home.

These conversations are immensely important. What teachers and students say about YA lit can influence who reads these books, how parents and departmental supervisors think about them, and even which teens get access to them. Discussions of YA lit can influence curriculum decisions, school library collections, and book club choices. In a worst case scenario, what teachers and students say can save books that have been challenged by would-be censors. You don't have to be a reviewer for a national journal to have this kind of influence. All you have to be is someone who is knowledgeable and passionate enough to take a stand in the conversation—or get it started.

Spectators at the biannual meetings of the ALA Best Books for Young Adults committee, which are open to the public, often comment on the intensity of debate over which books are truly the best published for teens each year. In moments of vehement disagreement, members have been known to cry, "Blood on the table!" signaling with this inside joke the lengths to which they will go to defend a book they love (Campbell 275). Passions run high not just because committee members love these books, but also from awareness that what gets said in the conversation about these books matters greatly in the end. The committee's choices will affect the reading decisions of countless teachers, students, and fellow librarians across the country. As librarian Patricia Foster put it in a discussion of the 2008 Printz winner, *The White Darkness*, "That's what award committees do—consider so many books and surprise us frequently! We probably need to be shaken up a bit now and then . . . gets us thinking in different ways" (ellipses in the original; post on YALSA-BK listserv, January 15, 2008).

Ordinary conversations about YA lit in teachers lounges and classrooms can also get us in the world of English teaching thinking in different ways. For those who participate, such conversations are the lifeblood of our reading lives. They bring new books into our awareness; they enrich our understanding of individual titles and the field itself. But we teachers—and our students—don't have to remain listeners in this conversation. There is always room for new voices. EJ

Note

1. Ed.'s note: See also Nilsen and Blasingame Jr.'s article in this issue.

Work Cited

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION — **Traci Gardner, RWT**

For more of Buehler's ideas for engaging young adult readers, visit her author page on the ReadWriteThink site. There you'll find links to Buehler's podcasts on topics such as the post-9/11 landscape, series books, and books worth owning as well as a link to her lesson plan that puts her suggestions for inviting students to enter conversations on young adult literature into practice. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/author_detail.asp?authorid=328