



Leaning into Young Adult Literature as Our Curriculum:

The Intimacy of Choice

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The last weekend of the summer, my father called me in a panic. A pipe in his condo had burst, and he needed help. I called the plumber and told him to meet me at my dad's place. I hadn't been in his condo for years because he never let any of us in, but on this day, I discovered he had been living in squalor, had become a hoarder, and was no longer capable of living on his own. Against his will, he came to live with me that night, and I started school the next day.

My dad's life came up again and again in my writing that school year. During dedicated free-write time in my junior high classes, I wrote my stories while students wrote theirs. I wrote a poem about how my dad was an only child who spent hours in his room gluing model cars when he wanted to be playing catch with his father. Alternating between settings, I also wrote about how my dad was kicked out of the choir at school and found solace in running. I wrote a drama about the time my dad said to me that he would trade any of his 11 children for the chance to see one of his inventions on the streets of America. And in the spring, I wrote his obituary.

I wrote in these different forms because I was inspired by what I was reading at the time: Tim

O'Brien's spatial shifts in *The Things They Carried* (1998); the verse form of Patricia McCormick's *Sold* (2006); the temporal shifts in Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Echo* (2015); the point of view in E. Lockhart's *Fly on the Wall: How One Girl Saw Everything* (2006). These books invited me into different places, times, and experiences while I was grieving the loss of my dad. At times, I was escaping. At times, I was comforted. But all the time, my relationship with words was changing. I think this is the psychology of books.

Jesus, one of my students (all student names are pseudonyms), sketched panels inspired by G. Neri's *Yummy* (2010) and devoured Todd Strasser's *If I Grow Up* (2010) in one day, which inspired him to write an advice piece for his younger brother. Last year, Erin read Marilyn Hilton's *Full Cicada Moon* (2017) followed by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminist* (2015), after which she wrote a TED-like talk about women in science and how she is going to change the world. Books plus readers equal a synergistic effect that defies measurement.

When teachers make choice *the* reading and writing curriculum, students learn about books, writing, and life, as well as the writers and readers we are and are becoming. We read and we write to make sense of our lives, to stretch moments, to imagine conversations, to remember smells and sounds, and sometimes, to reimagine memories with new endings.

Writing is a way of bearing witness to our lives, and I think many authors write as a way of witnessing humanity and making accessible to readers the

lives within and beyond their own. A poem, a story, a drama, a list, a book becomes an artifact of humanity, taking on a new life and purpose if/when it makes its way into the hands, hearts, and minds of readers.

It is for this reason—the reason that most literature does not come from a place of teaching or didacticism—that teachers must be careful about “using” young adult literature to teach a topic or to “cover” a theme. Representations of mental illness, trauma, and violence in young adult literature can promote

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understanding and knowledge “about” humanity and being human, but one book cannot teach “about” depression or trauma or explain resilience or surrender.

As a result, for the past three years I have leaned away from whole-class novels or units developed around a theme. It has felt too much like I am “covering” rather than uncovering by labeling or naming a unit according to a culture or topic. Literature reveals such intersec-

tionality that I just could not find a way of framing a unit without marginalizing important features of a story. And by dedicating several weeks of instruction to one theme, I felt like I was limiting opportunities for discovery and exploration arising from the needs of individual students.

This is not to say that there is no place for a whole-class novel study, which can unite a class with a shared reading, but it is to say that there are a lot of great books out there that are not making it into the hands of our students because of past practice. There are at least two new books on the market reviving readers workshop for the high school classroom by offering a framework that balances core texts and independent reading (and so much more): Kelly Gallagher and Penny Kittle’s *180 Days: Two Teachers and the Quest to Engage and Empower Adolescents* (2018) and Kate Robert’s *A Novel Approach: Whole-Class Novels, Student-Centered Teaching, and Choice* (2018).

Because this issue is about psychology, a very personal subject, and the books I am reviewing include potential triggers, I am going to offer methods that allow the reader’s experience to be intimate: readers read at their own pace, stopping as needed, seeking support as needed, or abandoning a book as needed.

First, I offer two books that, because of language and content, may be a better fit for older young adult readers, *In Sight of Stars* (Polisner, 2018) and *Blood Water Paint* (McCullough, 2018). Then, I suggest a book that can be stretched into junior high, *The Night Diary* (Hiranandani, 2018), and finally, I offer two anthologies, *#NotYourPrincess* (Charleyboy & Leatherdale, 2017) and *Hope Nation* (Brock, 2018), filled with voices of hope. All of these books explore trauma but also represent the strength and resilience of teens confronting the sources of trauma.

Books of Hope and Resilience in the Face of Trauma

In Sight of Stars, by Gae Polisner

The main character, Klee (pronounced Clay), is grieving the death of his father, a man who told him stories of magic and introduced him to the world of art. On top of that, his mother, “Ice Queen,” uproots Klee from Manhattan to a suburb during his senior year of high school. Klee’s loneliness is temporarily assuaged by Sarah, a fellow art student, who recognizes Klee’s talent and offers physical comfort, but when Sarah pulls away from Klee, he spirals in and out of reality, eventually landing in a psychiatric hospital for teens known as “Ape Can.”

Polisner utilizes temporal shifts, depending on Klee’s mental state and where he wants to be, or can be, in his consciousness: the present, recent past, or distant past. Klee’s internal monologues juxtaposes flashbacks and recent scenes, aligning the reader with the narrator and observing “tender distance”—a less intimate scene in deference to the target readers’ young age. A reader will feel Klee’s instability. Vincent Van Gogh’s life and art are woven into and through the narrative as both subtle and overt allusions to humanity’s fragility and resilience. The story navigates therapy and recovery after a traumatic psychological break, and readers bear witness to this process with the gentle guidance of two strong female characters, a compassionate therapist and a clever nun.

***Blood Paint Water*, by Joy McCullough**

Artemisia Gentileschi is an iconic painter from the seventeenth century. When Artemisia was 17, she had taken on most of the duties at her father's art studio and was preparing to marry a trusted teacher. However, her handsome fiancé raped her, and she was forced to undergo a trial for her honor—a trial that involved torture. This historical fiction novel is written largely in verse, partially in second person, but mostly through Artemisia's first-person perspective with her late mother's bedtime stories of the biblical Susanna and Judith in prose. Her mother passed away when Artemisia was just 12 years old and thus before the story takes place, so Artemisia's father raises her and her brothers. Artemisia's fire comes from her mother and is put to the test when the judge, jury, and bystanders intimidate her to rescind her claims. It is based on a true, brutal story (e.g., rape, torture, beheading) that inspires further inquiry into art, trauma, and implications beyond the life of the survivor.

This book was first a play. Joy McCullough, wanting Artemisia's story to reach more teens but convinced it would not be published, "wrote it completely and unapologetically" for herself. In the same interview, McCullough explains her choice to write in verse: "I think it can be really easy for the details of day-to-day life in a distant historical novel to hold the reader at arm's length. When those things are stripped away, though, as they are in verse, I think it makes it easier for the reader to relate the story to their own time and life." She explains that verse "allows the reader to make emotional leaps . . . rather than having a horrifying scene described in full detail" (Ansbach, 2018).

***The Night Diary* by Veera Hiranandani**

The night before the Partitioning of India in 1947, 12-year-old Nisha is struggling to understand the implications of the end of British rule on her half-Hindu, half-Muslim family. She writes diary entries to her mother, who passed away when she and her twin brother were born, in order to make sense of why her family is in danger. Nisha lives in what is now Pakistan, and the family must travel hundreds of miles to India and safety. The epistolary format is poetic apostrophe. Nisha confides in her mother's memory of the riots and border crossing, but also writes of her special relationship with Kazi, the Muslim family cook

who teaches Nisha to cook and ignites her love of food—another way to express herself.

In an interview with National Public Radio (Montagne, 2018), Hiranandani explains that she is from a "mixed background"—her father is Hindu, and her mother is Jewish. It followed, then, that she wanted Nisha to be from a mixed background, "not only for my own personal connection, but it allowed me to explore her own sense of belonging during this time, and it allowed me to open up and break through some of the bias and explore some of the questions I had about that time." Around 14 million people migrated during this time, but rather than confront teen readers with graphic images, Hiranandani lets readers experience the migration through Nisha's innocence in order to "open up some of the truth" of that period while representing what most 12-year-olds could relate to—her father, brother, food. Nisha does not understand how brave she is.

Two Collections

#NotYourPrincess: Voices of Native American Women, edited by Lisa Charleyboy and Mary Beth Leatherdale, includes the words, art, and photography of 58 different Native women. *Hope Nation*, edited by Rose Brock, includes personal stories and original essays from 24 young adult authors. I think it is important to include anthologies in classroom libraries. Not only do most anthologies work as inclusive artifacts, bringing together a range of voices, but selections can be read in any order. A page or chapter can offer students a shorter piece to ponder on days they may be feeling out of sorts or overwhelmed by a scene in their novel. Also, anthologies can spark new interests in subjects and authors.

A student can turn to any page in *#NotYourPrincess* to bear witness to lives of today's indigenous women: an illustration by Danielle Daniel (Métis) beside a poem, "Two Braids," by Rosanna Deerchild (Cree); a celebration of a mother's past and a daughter's future; and two pages of a short story in graphic novel form, "A Tale of Two Winonas," by Winona

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Linn (Meskwaki), who rewrites the “mythical Winona leap.” The multigenre collection is painful, beautiful, and brave, yet the form acknowledges that there are still many stories to be uncovered.

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hope, however, comes without some grappling with what it means to be human.

Commit Class Time

Given the rich selection of books available to young adult readers, including those described above, I encourage the creation of a classroom space that centers students’ interests. Start class every day—10 minutes or so—with personal-choice reading. And that includes middle school, high school, and, yes, college classes, too. Teacher candidates will say they want to read more, but there just isn’t time, given their myriad responsibilities; however, if teachers do not have a rich reading life, then they will not be able to offer recommendations or engage in meaningful conversations about the books teens are reading or want to read. Young adult literature advocates will never be able to innovate curriculum if our newest teachers have not developed a commitment to reading young adult literature. If we start prioritizing personal choice reading in class, using class time, everyone—teachers and students—will have richer reading lives.

During reading time, walk around and check in with a few students each day. Some days, simply write down the title and page number associated with

In *Hope Nation*, a student can read an essay by Angie Thomas, author of *The Hate U Give* (2017), to witness her book tour across America and how her words changed minds and hearts. Another student will meet I. W. Gregorio, a practicing surgeon, author of *None of the Above* (2015), activist for intersex youth, and founding member of We Need Diverse Books. This woman is changing lives every day with her work and words. None of the

the books being read; this will avoid interrupting the flow. Occasionally, stop and ask a student or two what they are thinking and feeling about their reading choice. You will notice patterns in students’ book choices and reading paces. If students are not making progress, suggest another option. These 10 minutes, you will discover, may have the greatest impact on the reading lives of your students.

In these brief, private conversations with your students, you are able to personalize instruction while relating to your students as fellow readers and, in the case with teacher candidates, as teachers. When you notice students are reading something particularly sensitive, you’ll be positioned to offer comfort, guidance, and insight. Here are some questions to get started:

- *Tell me what’s happening in the book right now.*
- *What are you noticing about how the author sequences the narrative?*
- *What emotions are stirring in you?*
- *What ideas and events are causing tension?*
- *And the best follow-up question is this: What makes you say so?*

After reading time, transition into something new; ask students to connect to your whole-class work or do a quick pair-share:

- *What’s hard about being human for your main character?*
- *How does the writing style enhance, create, or distance tension?*
- *What is one word to capture what happened in the plot today?*
- *What do you want to know or understand better?*

These quick discussions help readers process their reading experience and hear about other books, and they help nurture a community of readers.

Choice in Reading Response

CER—claim, evidence, reasoning—is a simple frame to help students engage with texts and to help teachers assess understanding and progress toward learning standards. However, the process of making a claim, finding evidence, and articulating reasoning is rather complex; students must reflect, reread, and ponder how the text is constructed and how an author’s choices are impacting their reading experience. I have

modified this popular acronym with another “R”: response. (Please see Appendix A for sentence stems to support CERR.) When teachers ask for analysis and close reading, it is easy to overlook personal response.

To include response in this process, encourage students to find a medium that allows them to process their reading in a meaningful way. Many students already have a YouTube channel, but students do not need to go public. If you have access to technology, you can download a Chrome extension called Screencastify (free), and students can vlog about their book. Screencastify allows students to simply click an icon on their browser, click record, and talk for up to 10 minutes about their book; the video is then automatically downloaded to Google Drive. Vloggers can share the link or embed the video on a class blog such as Kidblog. I love seeing students in their kitchens or basements, sitting in a favorite chair with a book in hand, but what is even better is listening to them read aloud a passage that resonates with them.

Two alternatives to vlogging that allow students more artistic expression include designing quotes and #booksnaps. One student rearranged CERR to ECRR; she preferred starting with a quotation or evidence rather than a claim. Using Canva, a free app, she designed the background for her quotation, carefully choosing colors and fonts to match the tone. Then she wrote about the quotation, unpacking the meaning of the words, focusing on connotation. Another student used an app called Pic Collage for his responses; he took a picture of the page he wanted to analyze and then inserted thought bubbles with claims, reasoning, and responses; this medium was made popular as #booksnaps by Tara Martin (2016).

For the entire school year, my students have been posting a weekly response on their blog to document their reading experiences. The range of titles represented on our class blog speaks to the rich reading lives students can have if only given access to books and time to read them. There are many options for setting up a class blog. I have used Kidblog for several years; teachers have administration rights and can set privacy to just the teacher, the class, and even the public (if you want students to share their portfolio of reading and writing with parents or guardians). This space is not for submitting assignments but rather for creating and nurturing a community of readers and writers. Students get ideas for their to-read list from

classmates, and are inspired to try out new writing techniques they find there. As a result, my role has shifted from teacher to community member.

Conclusion

When we as teachers make time to read young adult literature, we invite our students to learn alongside authors and gain a community of co-teachers. Teaching can be lonely at times; teachers struggle to be all that our students need from us. Let the literature do the work.

In one semester, a student may read *In Sight of Stars*, *Blood Water Paint*, *The Night Diary*, *#NotYourPrincess*, and *Hope Nation*. What impact could access to these stories and these authors have on that student’s writing? Reading and writing are not to be compartmentalized in the English classroom. Make time and space for students to draw from the craft of great young adult authors to write through the stories of their lives.

After reading *The Night Diary*, my student Aarushi wanted to write her immigration story in a series of diary entries. Brianna had found a diary written by her great-grandfather; she wanted to “translate” his diary from cursive to print so that she could read it. After a mini-lesson on literary apostrophes, she had the idea to write letters to her deceased great-grandfather within his diary, responding to his words and experiences with her own. *In Sight of Stars* will inspire students to write with temporal flashes. How empowering for a writer to start with present day and then flash to the past to explore a connection or antecedent. *Blood Water Paint* will illuminate the possibilities of verse, to understand the art of word economy, to feel how verse allows a writer to explore complex, even traumatic moments with sensitivity. I did not have access to this book earlier in the school year, but this is the first year I have seen a seventh grader write a short story in verse, and it changed her understanding of language and story. In offering the classroom as a safe space to uncover stories within and beyond our daily lives, teachers can validate the place of choice and voice in our story of English education.

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methods. She earned a PhD in English from the University of Illinois at Chicago and is the author of *Genocide Literature in Middle and Secondary Classrooms and Alone Together*, a young adult verse novel. Her blog, *Ethical ELA*, features stories within and beyond the classroom, encouraging teachers to nurture their own reading and writing lives.

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Appendix A: Sentence Stems to Support CERR

Claim:

- I noticed . . . when
- The effect of . . . on . . . is
- X believes
- The theme of this chapter is
- The setting change made the characters
- The choice X made caused . . . to happen.
- The way X reacted caused . . . to happen.
- The word . . . hints that . . . might happen.
- The most important word is
- When . . . happens, my heart/mind is moved.
- When . . . happens to X, I understand our world better.
- When . . . happens to X, I understand my life better.
- X is a stereotype of
- X defies stereotypes because
- Classism influences
- Racism influences

Evidence:

- For example, the text states
- Evidence from the text states
- According to the text,

Reasoning:

- The words in this quote, like . . . , show . . . because
- The quote relates back to something earlier when . . . , which proves
- These words caused . . . because
- If X did not . . . , then Therefore,
- If X did not realize . . . , then Therefore,
- This quote shows how . . . caused/reacted/changed . . . because
- This quote made me think . . . because . . . , so it relates to my claim because

Response:

- Include your personal thinking, response, connections, opinion, concerns, and ideas about the world, humanity, big concept.
- Express what are you learning about the world or life through the characters and literature. Does the story sound familiar or is it a life different from your own?