



BOOK IN REVIEW: A TEACHING GUIDE

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Story First: Making a Movement

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In the spring of 2017, people across the globe joined together in support of March for Our Lives, a student-led protest dedicated to expanding gun control in the United States. Numerous people spoke at the rally, from high school students to celebrities, but one message was clear throughout: the commitment to ending gun violence could not end at the culmination of the protest; it had to be sustained for the long term. In fact, Sari Kaufman, a sophomore student from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, told the crowd that politicians thought the protestors were all talk and no action. However, she argued that the rally was more than a place for discussion. Instead, it was the beginning of a marathon, one that would last until structural, political, and ideological changes were realized.

The March for Our Lives protests continued a conversation about the need to change from moment to movement. It furthered the discussion about the need to ensure that social justice does not stop at a conversation, but expands to initiatives that challenge the structure of our society. Specifically, Kaufman's words prompt us to conceptualize moments and movements in myriad ways (see Table 1).

Thinking about movements and moments in this way creates a foundation for YA literature scholars to think about ways to move our social justice concerns

beyond various moments and hashtags. Specifically, in the last five years, the young adult literature community has embraced popular hashtags that promote the need to challenge the lack of diversity in YA. Spurred from a Twitter conversation between Ellen Oh and Malinda Lo about the lack of diversity in children's and young adult literature, #WeNeedDiverse Books was formed in 2014 with the goal of promoting and producing diverse books that reflect and honor the lives of all young readers (<https://diversebooks.org/about-wndb/>). In 2015, Corinne Duyvis coined the hashtag #OwnVoices as a way to recommend and highlight diverse children's and young adult books where the author and the protagonist share an under-represented identity (<http://www.corinneduyvis.net/ownvoices/>).

Table 1. Moment–Movement

| Moment | Movement |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Individual | Communal and societal |
| Brief and transient, ending when the hype is over | Long-term and sustainable; lasts even when the hashtag has lost virality |
| Brings awareness, but does not promote structural change | Brings action that elicits structural, ideological, and political changes |
| Provides temporary support; costs nothing | Provides stable support; costs something (time, space, energy, etc.) |

With each of these initiatives, the organizers show a dedication to bringing diverse books into the classroom; however, publishing numbers provided by the CCBC (2018) reflect that we are still struggling to provide #OwnVoices stories and that diverse books are still minoritized in publishing, revealing that #WeSTILLNeedDiverseBooks half a decade later. Even with these initiatives in place, structural, political, and ideological changes are far from realized. However, these organizations and initiatives are still new, suggesting that we have a great opportunity to begin moving from moment to movement in the coming years.

In this moment of hashtags that highlight important issues of representation across YA publishing, teaching, etc., we must ensure that the initiatives gain momentum to become movements where we consistently see diverse characters and where those diverse characters are predominately written by authors from that same identity group. To us, this means that we must think of our YA literature practices in terms of Sari Kaufman’s words, conceptualizing YA movements and moments in multiple ways (see Table 2.)

By changing our YA practices from moment to movement in the coming years, we can ensure that we are moving from individual talk to communal and societal action. We can ensure that the marathon to promote diverse YA books in classrooms will last until structural, political, and ideological changes are solidified. Eventually, if we maintain momentum, we will win the race so that hashtags are no longer needed because #OwnVoices and #WeNeedDiverseBooks will be an integral component to publishing and curriculum. That is our dream for what is next in YA literature.

Toward Young Adult Literature as a Movement

Young adult literature (YAL) that portrays contemporary and historical representations of society is an imperative in classrooms. How YAL is offered, shared, and discussed; how reading is assigned, scheduled, and assessed—all of this has ethical implications. Which titles, authors, subjects are available in the classroom and school library? How much time is dedicated to choice reading during class time? How will discomfort, resistance, and questions beyond the pages be shared, uncovered, and processed? How edu-

cators are talking about books with youth can sustain or disrupt the very social perceptions and structures YAL intends to disrupt. We offer below several moves toward sustaining classrooms as inclusive literature spaces: story-first book talks, authorial position analysis, and opportunities for students to participate in and shape the language of inclusion.

Story First Book Talks

Not all book talks are equal. Teri Lesesne, author of *Making the Match* (2003), suggests, “The best book talks whet the appetite for reading. My tips include practice, practice, practice. The more you do, the more at ease you will be. Do not read a book talk, though you can include a short read-aloud passage that is humorous or suspenseful. Have the book available for checkout immediately. Talk a variety of genres, forms, etc. Picturebooks are great choices” (personal communication, June 29, 2018). Penny Kittle, author of

Table 2. YA Moment–Movement

| YA Moment | YA Movement |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Teaching diverse books only as individual reads or only within the confines of our classrooms | Teaching diverse books as class texts and branching out to other classrooms and schools |
| Reading diverse literature during specific months or holidays | Reading diverse YA all year as an inclusive, regular classroom practice |
| Introducing a book as THE diverse book that represents a group | Introducing numerous diverse YA texts to highlight the diversity within diverse groups |
| Bringing awareness to #OwnVoices and diversity in YA by singularly focusing on marginalization and didacticism | Bringing awareness to #OwnVoices and diversity by highlighting texts that do not always center marginalization and oppression as the main conflict |
| Never mentioning diversity or #OwnVoices when reading stories that do not focalize a diverse identity | Analyzing structural literature practices by always discussing the absence of #OwnVoices and diversity when they are not present; evaluating how silencing impacts the narrative |

Book Love (2012), agrees that the best book talks lead with a “compelling paragraph” that helps the readers “know if this is a narrator’s voice that they want to follow. If we don’t read aloud, we aren’t showing them the power of the book to transport them” (personal communication, June 29, 2018). Donalyn Miller, author of *The Book Whisperer* (2009) and coauthor

How you book talk is just as important as the book talk itself.

of *Game Changer!* (2018) encourages: “Be sincere! Admit when you haven’t read a book, abandoned it, or didn’t like it. Solicit recommendations from your students, too. . . . they need to feel valued as readers and believe their voices matter. They already have a voice. We aren’t giving them one” (personal communication, June 29, 2018). And Dhonielle Clayton, author of *The Belles* (2018), says, “Lead with the drama. Kids want a great story. They want to be entertained. They want to be wowed and shocked and wrapped up in something that stirs them. They want to have an opinion. So, lead with the story versus the marginalization or the message. . . . this is a love story where the world falls apart because of two teenagers. Keep it simple” (personal communication, July 3, 2018).

The five novels featured in this column are books that we, teachers and readers, love. The premise, writing, and characters resonate with us for different reasons. In each story, we learn about the diversity of humanity, we visit times and places beyond our own lives, and we even find glimpses of our teen selves on the pages. In the short book talks below, we lead with the story and encourage you to do the same whenever you introduce a book to a reader. Regular book talks lean toward movement as one way to “introduce numerous diverse YA texts to highlight diversity within diverse groups” and make reading diverse literature “regular classroom practice.” How you book talk is just as important as the book talk itself.

***Dove Arising* by Karen Bao (2016)**

<http://www.karenbao.com/about/>

“I detect his body odor among the otherwise pleasing aromas of Market. I set my Electroston in long-range mode. Why did this man cause so much trouble,

when he knew he’d be caught? With satisfaction suffusing every organ but my heart, I cock my weapon and fire a sticky pellet carrying 50,000 volts onto the skin of his forearm. White veins of electricity wrap around him, knocking him flat. His body performs an involuntary twitching dance, knocking over the table under which he’s taken shelter. Only when his screech hits my eardrums do I realize what I’ve done” (p. 228).

This is the point in the story where the protagonist realizes her personality has drastically changed. Earlier in the story, she would have never hurt someone for trying to steal something small. Now that she has, she must deal with the emotional consequences. This #OwnVoices story by Karen Bao presents a Chinese female protagonist who must join the military to provide for her family after her mom is incarcerated for writing negatively about the government. I like this book because it includes action, family relationships, friendship, deceit, and covert government operations!

***All the Stars Denied* by Guadalupe Garcia McCall (2018)**

<http://guadalupegarciamccall.com/biography/>

“I was so devastated—so humiliated—by my father’s dismissal that I couldn’t help myself. I dropped the tray of bizcochos I’d been holding on top of the nearest table and ran out of the library, down the hall, and out the front door. Outside, the cold air slapped my face. I walked over to the edge of the porch and lingered there, wondering if I should just go to the back of the house and blend in with the younger kids, because it was doubtful my parents thought any more of me than that” (p. 62).

Estrella’s devastation resonates because there have been too many times as a child and even as an adult when “passion” is dismissed as naive. The “dismissal” and the “slap” are palpable. As teachers, how many times have we been dismissive of our students’ ideas? McCall tells the story of Rancho Las Moras, a Texas town during the Great Depression where the Mexican community, including citizens of Mexican descent, is targeted for repatriation efforts. While the adults want to pass new laws, Estrella, who has been reading Thoreau, wants to “forget the planning” and “chain ourselves to posts outside restaurants and hotels the way women chained themselves to ma-

chines and gates during the suffrage movement” (p. 61). Estrella is an inspiring narrator of the first mass deportation in the United States.

***A Blade So Black* by L. L. McKinney (2018)**

<https://www.llmckinney.com/>

“Ever since her dad died, whenever Alice was alone she was just so . . . angry. She swallowed it. Bottled it up. Her mom needed her. Her grandma needed her. She got through the funeral. She got through the first days back at school. She cried. She hugged it out. But she wanted to punch things. So when Addison presented her with the chance to be like him, to kill monsters that crept across what he called the Veil, a border between the real world and the world he came from, a realm of dreams called Wonderland, well . . . she called him crazy. Then she apologized; that was rude” (p. 12).

There are times when I feel angry or sad, but I know people need me to be strong. Just like Alice, I bottle it up, but I cry in secret and want to punch things. Unfortunately, I cannot fight monsters as a form of self-care. In this book, L. L. McKinney, a Black female blerd and kidlit diversity advocate, not only shows a cosplaying Black girl from Atlanta, but she also highlights how our nightmares can solidify and become real if we do not drive back the darkness.

***Love beyond Body, Space, and Time: An Indigenous LGBT and Two-Spirit Sci-Fi Anthology* edited by Hope Nicholson (2016)**

<https://hopenicholson.com/>

“Aanji almost passed for human. Her gestures were natural, her eyelashes fluttered the right way, her breathing was perfect. Still, she failed to completely shed her old self. Standing in the shower, looking at the water rippling down her brown skin, she marveled at the artistry of the details. The moles, the creases in her thighs. But her shaking hands were brightly smeared with proof of what she *really* was. What she tried so desperately to hide. Her blood. Ink black, swirling in the water like oil. Even though it smelled of copper, it betrayed her.” —“Imposter Syndrome” by Mari Kurisato (p. 87).

Although this anthology includes many stories, I found this story to be the most interesting because it forced me to think about what it means to be human. Is it based on how we breathe? How our eyelashes

flutter? These questions were essential as I read through this short story anthology, filled with narratives by indigenous authors who identify as or ally with LGBTQ and two-spirit people. I enjoyed these stories, not only for their sci-fi foundations, but also because they focus on how love is not confined; it is vast, transgressing body, space, and time.

***None of the Above* by I. W. Gregorio (2016)**

<http://www.iwgregorio.com/>

“I stared at the childhood pictures on our mantel. Was it just that all babies look alike, or did I look like a boy in that nine-month-old portrait? All of a sudden, I remembered the last time when I was eight and cried when my aunt Carla got me a pink pair of sneakers instead of the blue ones I wanted. Then, the day my mom gave me a spanking when I made a mess in the bathroom because I wanted to see if I could pee standing up like the boys in my summer camp. . . . I forced myself to pull out my copy of *The Merchant of Venice*. It was the perfect thing to do to get my mind off doctor’s visits and blood tests, because deciphering Shakespeare took every ounce of my brain power, when I did it right” (p. 46).

Kristin has just had her world turned upside down, and she is contemplating everything she thought she knew to be true because she is intersex—“an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of natural body variations. In some cases, intersex traits are visible at birth while in others, they are not apparent until puberty. Some chromosomal intersex variations may not be physically apparent at all” (United Nations Human Rights Office, p. 1). As I read, I reflected: How did *I* learn what it means to be a girl? How does my body define my self-perception? Growing up with seven sisters, there were clear messages about clothes, behaviors, and expectations. Still, how others treated me reinforced such messages or caused me to question them. Like Kristin, I turn to books because I have the power to open, turn, and close its access to me.

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By privileging the story and personal response, we privilege the reader. They will find the message as they care about the narrator, as they dive into the drama, as they are stirred by beautiful language.

Authorial Position Analysis

In addition to considering the titles described above, we also invite educators and students to contemplate questions of authorship. What does it mean to be an

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insider or outsider author? What do authors owe readers when it comes to self-identifying or labeling their books as #OwnVoices? Can allies or secondhand witnesses tell a good, authentic story about an identity group to which they do not belong, and what are the ethical implications?

To explore these ideas, consider making class

time for students to do inquiry into the authors' lives and how they prepared to write the book. Discuss in which ways an author is an insider and outsider. Make available additional books and suggest that students follow up one book with another to highlight the diversity within an identity group and how authorial positions influence representation. Zoom with authors to hear their writing processes. Here are a few questions to guide author inquiries:

- Where were they born?
- Where did they grow up?
- What can you learn about their family, friends, education?
- Do they support other authors writing about this subject?
- Do they support nonprofits or activist organizations?
- Do they write a blog or use social media to educate on social justice issues?

To nurture in all readers a capacity to identify sociopolitical literary implications in publishing, educators can model and guide students in author inquiry as a regular analytical reading practice. Such inquiry might apply the critical questions above to what we learn about authors.

Author of *All the Stars Denied*, Guadalupe Garcia McCall, for example, was born in Piedras, Negras, Coahuila, Mexico. She immigrated to the United States when she was just six years old and grew up in Texas, the setting of the novel. She is one of 26 authors in the Latinx Kidlit Community who signed an open letter (Jensen, 2018) to the Middleton School District in response to “the decision of staff to wear offensive and racist Halloween costumes” and extended an offer to visit Middleton to show “a positive and realistic representation” of Latinx peoples (Nov. 6, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y7pbbg4h>).

The author of *None of the Above* is a surgeon, an intersex activist, and a member of We Need Diverse Books. I. W. Gregorio tells Kristin's story of Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS), a diagnosis invisible to the gaze of others but nonetheless a very personal, biological existence that Gregorio knows because of the patients she has treated and research she has done. She writes as a mother, surgeon, and writer. She writes to illuminate and teach the false binary of sex through story.

The Language of Inclusion

According to Debbie Reese (2018), “a critical literacies perspective gives voice to how stories are presented and told about people and their history” (p. 390). Students need time to read and space to voice what they are noticing. Educators can support students in developing language to talk about representation, which includes how people are identified by social groupings and how such categories are constructed. Students will notice more explicitly how people's identities interact and create complex individuals that defy neat categorization; in making accessible a variety of young adult literature, students can develop knowledge that affirms their belonging to multiple identity groups.

To begin, invite students to journal about the words they use to describe their culture, religion, race, home language, etc. Invite them to tell stories, to share memories in their writing. Then, after reading time each day, invite students to write about how their characters would self-identify. What stories are they telling about their home, their family, their religion? The Critical Media Project (2017) of USC Annenberg offers an entry point for students to do some preliminary research into identity as a social construct, including introductory definitions of categories

that students see in demographic data: race, nationality, ethnicity, home language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and socioeconomic status.

In partners or small groups, readers can discuss how the characters they meet in their choice reading would self-identify and how a character's story presents intersecting identities. Here are some questions that will move students toward shaping the language and meaning of inclusion:

- Is some aspect of the protagonist's identity positioned as the main conflict?
- How does a character's identity group impact the way others see them?
- What does the character want others to see or understand about themselves and is it centered on some aspect of their identity groups?
- How has a character's history—the family history, identity group history, geopolitical history—created this complex individual?
- Which identity groups are represented as main and supporting characters? Which are not? Why?
- Is there some element of instruction or didacticism about a certain group coming from the author's presentation of one or intersecting identity groups that is stereotypical or is it more nuanced?

By beginning with personal response, moving into author inquiry, and then joining other readers to discuss how the stories are told, readers are engaged in a communal literacy practice that uncovers the structure of literature to reveal how books impact our thinking and way of being.

Continuing Thoughts

In order for our classrooms to be part of a movement, educators must make a variety of literature written by a variety of authors accessible to students. Access, however, is not enough if we do not also make time in class to read, time in class to discuss, time in class to uncover how social identities are constructed in our lives and on the pages of the books we read. By privileging the story and its reader, a multitude of identities will interact and shape ways of being that defy stereotypes and resist categories. We need one another to read and share books that present healthy, confident teens navigating their own multiple, intersecting identities across time, space, and peoples

every day. Then. Then. We can be the movement.

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