



Teaching Young Adult Literature: Making Magic with YAL

Author(s): Mike Roberts and Jeannette Haskins

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Teaching Young Adult Literature

The value of using young adult literature (YAL) in the classroom often sneaks up on teachers. After all, for most of us, the books we read in school were written by people such as Shakespeare, Hawthorne, and Twain . . . not Crutcher, Anderson, and Myers.

And during those years, we were often told by our all-knowing teachers what all the crazy words meant, how the story related to us, and why we should appreciate the greatness of each piece.

Fired-up by such dynamic teaching, we all decided to become English teachers, hoping to one day inspire our own students much like we had been inspired.

And how did many of us plan on doing this?

By teaching books written by people such as Shakespeare, Hawthorne, and Twain.

After all, if it was good enough for us as students, why wouldn't it work for us as teachers?

Such was the case for Jeannette Haskins on entering her career as a teacher. But over her 22-year career, her perspective on teaching literature has drastically changed—along with the interest level of her students. Here, she shares her thoughts and ideas about how to successfully use YAL in the classroom.

Making Magic with YAL

Jeannette Haskins
West Jefferson High School
West Jefferson, Ohio
jhaskins@west-jefferson.k12.oh.us

When I began my teaching career two decades ago, I was filled with the energy and enthusiasm that often accompanies a new career. My classroom was decorated with all the newest posters from the local teacher store, I changed the window decorations to reflect the unit I was teaching, and I made sure my overhead transparencies were spotless at the start of each day. But I also remember wondering whether I would be able to maintain this same level of excitement over the long haul.

Now, looking back on where I've been, I can honestly say things have not remained the same. In fact, my love of teaching has *increased* more than I ever thought imaginable, and I credit this ongoing and growing passion to YAL.

The use of YAL in my high school English classroom has evolved and grown as much as I have over the years. My first experience with it was as an undergraduate student in 1988, where I was introduced to works such as *I Am the Cheese*, *Z for Zachariah*, and *The Chocolate War*. During that

time, I immersed myself in YAL, and I read more that quarter than in any other in my tenure as a college student.

But no matter how much I loved all the YAL I was reading, I couldn't help but feel a little unsettled. After all, if I wanted to be a high school English teacher, shouldn't I have been devoting more time to reading the classics?

While I enjoyed my brief encounter with YAL in college, I put my interest in using it in the classroom on the back burner when I landed a job as a high school English teacher in 1989. That first year saw me teaching three sections of American Literature, along with two sections of British Literature. So there I was, a first-year teacher at the ripe-old age of 22, attempting to teach *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Canterbury Tales* to my 17- and 18-year-old students. To say I gave justice to either the texts or my students would be giving me *way* too much credit.

Later, I changed school districts, earned my master's degree, and served as an assistant assessment and curriculum coordinator. Throughout these changes, I found myself drawn back to the YAL that I had become so fond of in college. By this time, YAL had changed and improved substantially, and the genres and topics

addressed blossomed exponentially. And the better it got, the more interested I became in using it in the classroom as the basis of reading instruction.

Finally, in 2009, I was provided the opportunity to teach three sections of middle school language arts. After years of waiting, my vision of using YAL as the heart of my reading instruction had finally arrived.

Fast forward to today . . .

The thing that stands out about my classroom is the sheer number of books I have. Walls that were once plastered with posters have been replaced with shelves filled with YA novels just waiting to be read. And there's an open-door policy about borrowing them that nearly makes me crazy, but the payoff is well worth it. Students come in and out of my room before and after school (and at every time in between!) to tell me they need a new book, and it's not uncommon to see sticky notes stuck to the front table of my classroom to mark who has checked out a book when I wasn't in the room. Checking the books back in is just as crazy, with novels often randomly appearing on the hood of my car or on my front porch. And let's not forget about the occasional text message from a former student or a parent inquiring about a book suggestion.

Sound chaotic?

Not for me. These are just some of the daily sights, sounds, and interactions involving YAL that have come to make my professional life so rewarding. More importantly, however, these exchanges are also helping my students become better readers.

So the question is, how did this happen?

Did I wave a magic wand that somehow got students interested in reading? No, but there is magic in the room, and it happens every time the right book falls into the hands of the right student. It was created when Spencer discovered the suspenseful works of Gail Giles and David Klass. It happened again when Tia and Kaitlyn discovered the love stories of Lisa Schroeder. And it has reappeared with almost every ninth-grade boy who has read Carl Deuker's sports fiction stories.

What does this magic create, you ask?

How does an average of 38 books read per student sound?

And while I wish I could take credit for all this, I can't. Much of what I do in my classroom has grown out of the ideas presented

by the likes of Nancie Atwell (*In the Middle*), Donalyn Miller (*The Book Whisperer*), and Kelly Gallagher (*Readicide*). I've also been blessed to encounter a couple of administrators and a curriculum supervisor who support and partially fund my efforts.

But what I do take ownership of is my role in cultivating and sustaining this magic.

Conjuring the Magic of YAL

I begin each school year by having my students complete a Reading Profile (see fig. 1). In addition to asking questions about students' reading histories, the profile also contains a list of YA titles and authors (see fig. 2). I ask students to go through the list and circle the titles/authors they've previ-

FIGURE 1. Reader's Profile, Parts I and II

Part I: Answer each of the following questions.

1. What are your earliest memories of reading?
2. What was the last book you read? Was it for school or your own reading?
3. How do you choose a book? (Circle as many as apply)

I want to learn something.

I like the author.

The picture on the cover.

A friend recommended it.

My teacher requires it.

The description on the back cover.

It's short.

I like the genre (romance, adventure, fantasy, nonfiction).

4. What is the best book you ever read?
5. Do you have a favorite author? If so, who?
6. What would you like to learn more about?
7. If you could be any character from any book, television show, or movie, who would you be? Why?

Part II: Complete each sentence.

8. When I have time to read . . .
9. To me, books . . .
10. I like to read about . . .
11. I'd rather read than . . .
12. I'd read more if . . .

FIGURE 2. Reader's Profile, Part III

Below is a list of book titles and authors. Please circle the title of any book you have read. Then, rank the book on a scale of 1–5 (5 being the highest) based on how good you think that book is.

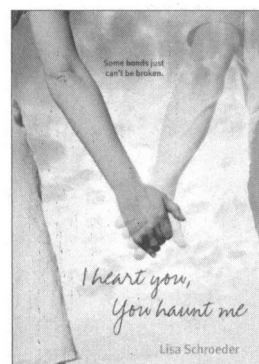
- The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins _____
- Son of the Mob* by Gordon Korman _____
- The Giver* by Lois Lowry _____
- Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry _____
- Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney _____
- Daniel X* by James Patterson _____
- Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer _____
- Cirque du Freak* by Darren Shan _____
- Harry Potter* by J. K. Rowling _____
- The Angel Experiment (Maximum Ride)* by James Patterson _____
- The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan _____
- A Child Called "It"* by Dave Pelzer _____
- Cut* by Patricia McCormick _____
- Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen _____
- Alabama Moon* by Watt Key _____
- Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson _____
- Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers _____
- The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton _____
- Purple Heart* by Patricia McCormick _____
- Soldier X* by Don Wulffson _____
- Boot Camp* by Todd Strasser _____
- Shattering Glass* by Gail Giles _____
- Breathing Underwater* by Alex Flinn _____
- Beastly* by Alex Flinn _____
- Holes* by Louis Sachar _____
- Unwind* by Neal Shusterman _____
- Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher _____
- Dairy Queen* by Katherine Gilbert Murdock _____
- Gym Candy* by Karl Dueker _____
- The House of the Scorpion* by Nancy Farmer _____
- Artichoke's Heart* by Suzanne Supplee _____
- I Heart You, You Haunt Me* by Lisa Schroeder _____
- Pop* by Gordon Korman _____
- Summer Ball* by Mike Lupica _____
- The Cupcake Queen* by Heather Helper _____
- I'd Tell You I Love You, Then I'd Have to Kill You* by Ally Carter _____
- The Melting of Maggie Bean* by Tricia Rayburn _____
- The Unwritten Rule* by Elizabeth Scott _____

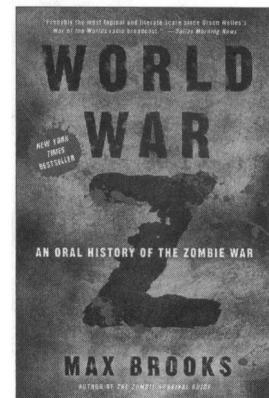
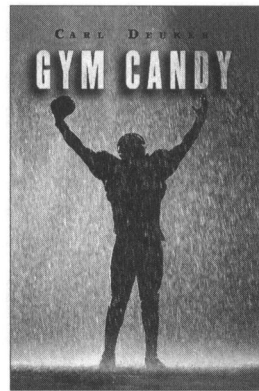
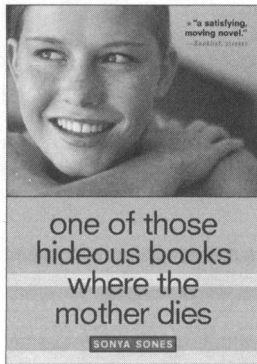
ously read. Of the ones they circle, I have the students rank how good they think the book is using a scale of 1–5.

The Reading Profile gives me a good sense of the reading interests of each student. It also allows me to look for trends in their reading choices, and if I find one, I run with it. For example, if a student likes the action of Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* series, I'll immediately suggest he or she read James Daschner's *The Maze Runner* and *The Scorch Trials*. These profiles are incredibly valuable in that they allow me to gain insight into my students' reading interests. And once I know this, I can guide them toward other novels that will build upon their interests.

But what happens if students simply say they don't like reading at all? If I hear this from a female student, I often will hand her a copy of *I Heart You, You Haunt Me* by Lisa Schroeder. This book appeals to many female students because it is written in verse and filled with both romance *and* mystery. And rather than pressing the issue, I generally ask a student to "just try it." Like clockwork, in a day or two she'll show up in my room telling me how much she liked it.

Once I have a female student hooked on one author, I'll work quickly so as to not lose her inter-





est by suggesting Sonya Sones's *One of Those Hideous Books Where the Mother Dies*. Building upon this, I may switch her to a verse historical fiction book such as Jennifer Roy's *Yellow Star*, or for a more mature reader, *Sold* by Patricia McCormick. And after discovering she now likes both verse and historical fiction, I'll hand her a copy of Sharon Draper's *Copper Sun*, written in a traditional prose format. By now, this student has really stretched herself as a reader, and she is left thirsty for more. At this point, the student is inevitably captivated and proud of the reading she's done, and the possibilities are endless.


I use this same "bait and switch" process with the boys.

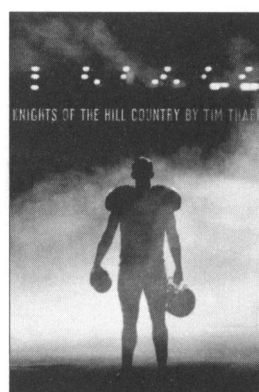
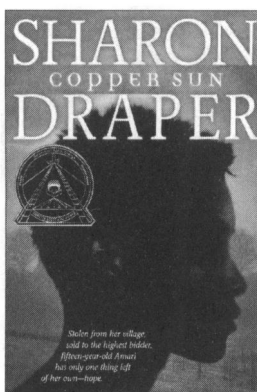
If a boy expresses his interest in sports, I usually start him on Carl Deuker's *Gym Candy*. If he likes it, I'll follow this up by recommending *Knights of the Hill Country* by Tim Tharp. Both *Gym Candy* and *Knights of the Hill Country* are about high school football, and my students can see themselves, people they know, and experiences they encounter within the pages of both these novels. Many of Chris Crutcher's books, including *Whale Talk* and *Athletic Shorts*, also appeal to boys for these same reasons. Similar to the girls, once I have the boys engaged, it's easy to encourage them to branch out into other genres.

Historical fiction is another genre to which boys seem fairly

receptive. Don Wulffson's *Soldier X* is the book I usually first recommend for a student who expresses an interest in historical fiction. After they're hooked with this one, I'll suggest Dean Hughes's books, *Soldier Boys*, *Search and Destroy*, and *Missing in Action*. An autobiographical historical piece boys liked last year is *Ghosts of War: The True Story of a 19-Year-Old GI* by Ryan Smithson.

Another type of book boys have embraced is anything related to zombies. *The Enemy* by Charlie Higson and *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* by Max Brooks are two that took me by surprise last spring. I can't keep these on the shelves!

Let me set the record straight. I'm not saying young adult literature should replace the literary canon. At the same time, if I can use YAL to help make reading enjoyable, my students stand a better chance of someday appreciating *The Scarlet Letter* and *Ethan Frome*. And even more importantly, they stand a better chance of leading literate lives. For now, my students and their reading accomplishments prove they can enjoy reading, no magic wand required. 



Jeannette Haskins is a ninth-grade English teacher at West Jefferson High School in West Jefferson, Ohio. She holds a BS in English education from The Ohio State University and a master's degree in school guidance counseling from the University of Dayton. She lives in West Jefferson with her husband, two daughters, and their dog.