

The Critical Work of YA Literature

JENNIFER BUEHLER

The summer after my first year of teaching, I went home to Kentucky with the hope of figuring out how to be a better English teacher. I stayed up late reading books I borrowed from the Louisville Writing Project after visiting for one day as a guest. *Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescents*—which had been published just one year earlier in 1992—was the book that changed me, in part because the author, Linda Rief, had introduced me to the concept of the reading workshop. I was a reader, and this model was unlike anything I'd seen before. Launching a reading workshop felt necessary and urgent, so I studied *Seeking Diversity*. I followed up with Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle*, and I began gathering books for a classroom library.

My initial collection was a motley assortment comprised of children's and young adult literature salvaged from my bedroom shelves; \$50-worth of paperbacks, mostly by Stephen King, purchased from the used bookstore in LaGrange; and a handful of murder mysteries and spy thrillers donated by my dad. It was a terrible collection, really, when you consider who it was for. Most of the ninth graders I taught in Elizabeth, New Jersey were first-generation immigrants from Central and South America and the Caribbean islands. What was I thinking when I included my old copy of *Anne of Green Gables*? And yet, Chermite Manace, a fourteen-year-old girl from Haiti, loved that book because it was a story about friends.

Including YA lit in a classroom library

was a no-brainer to me. I was a reader in large part because of the role those books had played in my own adolescence. Throughout middle school I read plenty of Wildfire paperback romances (purchased with babysitting money from B. Dalton's in the mall), but I also worked my way through every Madeleine L'Engle book I could find. I remembered the time I'd spent with Richard Peck, Robert Cormier, S. E. Hinton, Isabelle Holland, Paula Danziger, Norma Fox Mazer, and, of course, Judy Blume. I still felt in my gut how compelling it was to read books about kids my age. I knew YA lit deserved a place in the English classroom. It helped that practicing middle school teachers like

Atwell and Rief affirmed the books' value. My knowledge of YA lit wasn't current, but my belief in it was solid.

Despite the uneven quality of my classroom library and my limited book matchmaking skills, many of my ninth-grade students became readers. Sharing books gave me a way to

form relationships with kids whose cultural worlds were different from mine, and it provided a sense of purpose in teaching I'd lacked throughout my first year. Still, at the end of my second year in New Jersey, I quit. Teaching was just too hard. I moved to Michigan and sought reprieve in a retail job at Borders. Stepping away from teaching gave me time to develop deeper book knowledge while I pondered what was next.

When it came to building knowledge of YA lit as a field, I was in the right place at the right time. After the first golden age of YA

Sharing books gave me a way to form relationships with kids whose cultural worlds were different from mine, and it provided a sense of purpose in teaching I'd lacked throughout my first year.

From the Middle

lit in the 1970s followed by a dormant period in the 1980s, in the mid-1990s YA publishing was starting to take off again. I discovered great new titles while stocking the shelves at Borders: the *Weetzie Bat* books by Francesca Lia Block, Chris Crutcher's soon-to-be-classics including *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* and *Stotan!*, early middle-grade novels by Jacqueline Woodson such as *Last Summer with Maizon*, and the *Tomorrow When the War Began* series by Australian author John Marsden. I loved these books, and I missed kids. It was time to go back to teaching.

A week before school started, I got a job at a high school in the Detroit suburbs. Reading workshop was just as foreign in Canton, Michigan as it had been in Elizabeth, New Jersey, but my boss said she hired me because I had vision, so I ran with it. For the next eight years I tried every model I could find for teaching YA lit: reader response journals, book talks, literature circles, whole class read-alouds, letters to authors, book pen pals, thematic units. To a large extent, what I did worked. Kids became readers because of YA lit. It helped to have a growing number of quality titles to choose from: *Someone Like You* by Sarah Dessen, *The Killer's Cousin* by Nancy Werlin, *The Golden Compass* by Philip Pullman, *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, *Hard Love* by Ellen Wittlinger, *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, *Make Lemonade* by Virginia Euwer Wolff, *Feed* by M. T. Anderson. All of these books were new at the time, and it felt important to feature the same titles in my classroom that were on display in local bookstores. By centering YA lit, our talk about books felt fresh and current. I was frustrated that more teachers didn't prioritize this goal.

The Problem of the Binary Paradigm

Only later, after I became a college professor and started writing a book about teaching YA lit, did I start to consider aspects of my approach that were problematic. I came to that realization through conversations with middle school teachers in St. Louis who were encountering the same resistance to YA lit I'd faced 20 years earlier. We commiserated about the attitudes of colleagues who made blanket statements about how YA lit just wasn't challenging enough, or how it was okay for reluctant readers, but not appropriate for the college bound. These comments weren't new, but they still stung.

However, when I paused to reflect on what we typically do with YA lit in the classroom—silent reading in bean bag chairs, creative projects, reading for quantity

We need . . . an approach to teaching YA lit that is intentional in mining the complexity of the books and valuing the complexity of adolescence itself.

instead of quality—and compared it to the formal literary analysis we apply to the classics, it became easier to see why our colleagues viewed YA lit as they did. I called it the “problem of the binary paradigm,” and I saw it reflected in my own classrooms, where work in ninth grade English focused on using YA lit to make lifelong readers, while tenth grade American

Literature was about using classics from the canon to engage in the study of culture, society, and humanity. These pedagogical distinctions worked to the detriment of YA lit and students in both contexts.

When we limit our work with YA lit to the space of reading workshop and literature circles—the methods most commonly utilized by teachers who include YA lit in the classroom—we send the message that YA lit is fun but not rigorous, entertaining but not challenging, personally satisfying but not sophisticated enough to analyze. Beyond the way it ghettoizes YA lit, the binary paradigm sets up literary hierarchies that marginalize certain kinds of books and certain kinds of readers. None of this is healthy. None of it is necessary.

The Common Core, Text Complexity, and YA Pedagogy

At the same time that I was working out my ideas on the binary paradigm, we arrived at the moment of Common Core. Suddenly everyone was talking about text complexity, and I saw an opportunity for course correction in our collective arguments about YA lit. It began with talking back.

Rather than accede to the notion that complexity can be measured as a Lexile level—a concept that contradicted everything I knew about what and how readers read—I made the case for a different definition of text complexity and a different approach to teaching YA lit. If we conceive of complexity as something that's there to *find* in a text (in its substance and style) as well as something that readers *make* as they interact with texts and each other (Buehler, 2014), then we can change the conversation about which books are worthy of serious literary analysis and what the study of YA lit can be.

In order to help students find and make complexity with YA lit, however, we can't just leave them to their own devices. We need a YA pedagogy—an approach to teaching YA lit that is intentional in mining the complexity of the books and valuing the complexity of adolescence itself. We don't have to invent anything new here. YA pedagogy, as I conceive it (Buehler, 2016,

2019), is rooted in aspects of the ELA classroom in which teachers already invest time and care: classroom community, book matchmaking, and apprenticing students to the core tasks of our discipline. YA pedagogy is a matter of stance, and real-world contexts are key. Teaching with YA pedagogy means we connect our work in the classroom to the work of YA lit award committees, school and library marketing departments, and YA authors themselves. We make the most of YA lit as a field, even as we continue to use YA titles to help kids develop passion for books.

This approach to teaching YA lit felt fresh and purposeful. The argument about complexity resonated: Teachers appreciated it; authors did, too. (For an example of an author's take on complexity, listen to Jason Reynolds [Enni, 2019]). But even as I employed YA pedagogy in my own classroom at the university, something still seemed to be missing. Our discussions focused on finding and making complexity in whole class novels as well as choice books read independently, but out in the world of writing and publishing, industry professionals were debating urgent topics like whose stories are and aren't being told in YA lit (#WeNeedDiverseBooks), who is and isn't doing the telling (#ownvoices), which stories are and aren't told about certain kinds of people (Magoon, 2019), the impact of textual worlds on the reader's imagination (Thomas, 2019), and patterns of sexism in the book business (www.kidlitwomen.com).

I followed these conversations nightly on Twitter. I read about them in *Horn Book Magazine*, *The New York Times*, and *The New Yorker*. I listened to authors grapple with issues of race, diversity, and power in person at conferences and online in podcasts. Given these contexts, our class discussions about complexity in YA lit felt disconnected and apolitical. The emphasis on finding and making complexity missed an opportunity to connect the study of YA lit to the real world of publishing, not to mention to daily life in America. I wanted a framework for teaching YA lit that invited talk about writing craft as well as Black Lives Matter; coming of age as well as #MeToo. I was searching for a teaching stance that was both complex *and* critically engaged, but I couldn't locate the intersection between the two.

Does the Book Do Good Work?

This past fall, my college students were reading *Dig*, the newest YA novel by A. S. King, which explores five teens' experiences grappling with whiteness, white privilege, and toxic family history. In the weekly analysis paper she prepared before class, junior communications major Eva France wrote:

The whole structure of this book [asks] the question: Is thinking about race through the lens of whiteness more or less productive than reading about other cultures and learning empathy for other races? I think yes, it does good work to put a microscope on how white people relate to race in the world.

I was struck by the phrase "it does good work." We posed it as a question during class that day: Does the book *Dig* do good work? (The class's unequivocal answer was yes.) I brought the phrase up again the following week during our discussion of David Yoon's debut YA novel *Frankly in Love*, the story of Korean American teens' experiences with racism, first love, and cultural identity. The question of whether a book does good work became a touchstone for us for the rest of the semester.

Without ever defining precisely what we meant by "good work," we shared a general sense of the concept; we were getting at issues of representation and the underlying ideology of the text. We began to ask questions such as, Does the book do good work in representing the experience of a race group? In interrogating heteronormativity? In challenging oppressive gender roles? In naming and critiquing class hierarchy? We'd read about the Youth Lens (Sarigianides, Lewis, & Petrone, 2015), so we also applied the question of the book's work to depictions of adolescence. Does the book do good work representing teenagers, or does it fall back on reductive and demeaning stereotypes?

Asking about the nature and quality of a YA book's work was a game changer for my students and for my teaching of YA lit. The question fostered shared habits of mind in our classroom community. We became more active and critical as readers, better able to articulate the things YA books did well, the places where they fell short, and how they stood to shape worldviews. Focusing on whether a book does good work created space for students to have different conversations about YA lit than we'd had in the past. The questioning process connected our conversations to larger issues in the YA lit book industry that had caused my dissatisfaction with YA pedagogy in the first place. Now we were able to ask whether YA publishing is doing good work in general and what work has yet to be done.

These questions are vital. The diversity gap in YA lit is real (Thomas, 2018); so, too, is the need to help kids become ever more critical about the texts they're consuming in our information-saturated world. Middle school students are not too young to be talking about these things. Why shouldn't they be positioned as experts on their own lives and on books that depict what and how they live? Of course, young people don't come to this expertise automatically; they need tools, space, and time

to cultivate it. Who better to guide them than English teachers?

We can invite middle school students to examine the questions a YA book asks; the stance it takes; and how it puts itself in conversation with other books, texts, and issues. We can ask them to judge individual YA titles based on the degree to which they give us new or altered ways of viewing ourselves, other people, and our current world. We can challenge them to evaluate whether a YA novel tells the truth, and whether something was at stake for the author who wrote it. We can ask them to consider what it means to present human beings as complex and flawed in YA lit—as neither good nor bad, but a mixture of both. We can ask, what are the consequences of this work for readers? What are the consequences of the ways readers go on to understand other people and the world we collectively inhabit?

We can challenge the status quo in both teaching and YA publishing, and we can invite middle school students to join us.

What's Next?

I believe this question about the work books do is what's next for those of us who teach YA lit. The question points the way forward to a different way of framing YA lit in the classroom and a different argument for why we should teach YA lit in the first place.

Asking whether a YA title does good work accomplishes two crucial things:

1. It allows us to shift the conversation from defending YA lit (and dancing around the uncomfortable truth that not all YA lit is worth defending) to analyzing the books and the larger field they are part of. In addition to discussing the mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors that YA lit provides (Bishop, 1990), we should be discussing the house itself—the strength of the edifice, cracks in the foundation, rooms in need of renovation. We can ask students for help in imagining a more habitable space for books and the readers who need them.

2. It challenges us to position students differently in English classes. Rather than answering questions *about* books, students should be asking questions *of* books. What would it look like if we shifted our stance as teachers from valuing adolescence to valuing the critical perspectives of adolescents? What might students gain if we shifted the focus of our teaching to engaging them in critical work that amplifies their sense of voice, agency, and power?

I am not the first person to call for a more critical English education (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Morrell, 2005), but it is unusual for YA lit to be included in the conversation about critical English teaching. Given that many of us were drawn to teaching because we wanted to prepare young people to read the word *and* the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987), we can choose to view YA lit as a space ideally suited for such work.

We can empower middle school students to draw on their lived experience alongside all the tools of English class to leverage arguments about books, representation, and the world they stand to inherit. Books are not static, and texts are not neutral. Neither is teaching. We can challenge the status quo in both teaching and YA publishing, and we can invite middle school students to join us.

In a conversation with *Horn Book Magazine* editor in chief Roger Sutton (Sutton, 2019), Christopher Myers, an author and illustrator who is now working to build new worlds in the children's and YA book industry, argued that asking ourselves what community we are defining with each book can be much more useful than finding what's "wrong" with a book. He explained, "I don't really believe there is such a thing as a book that has something 'wrong' with it. The question is, what is the community that we are trying to define by each book that we publish?" (para. 24).

This is what it looks like to examine the work

CONNECTIONS FROM readwritethink

Listen in to the *Text Messages: Recommendations for Adolescent Readers* podcast series hosted by journal article author, Jennifer Buehler. Podcasts in the Text Messages series provide families, educators, out-of-school practitioners, and tutors reading recommendations they can pass along to teen readers. Each episode features in-depth recommendations of titles that will engage and excite teen readers.

Lisa Storm Fink
www.ReadWriteThink.org

<http://bit.ly/15KFqtr>

that YA books do. This is what it means to engage in interrogating the work of YA lit as a field. It's not about tearing down books, authors, or publishing companies; instead, it's about considering what's there, what's not there, and the consequences of each. "I stand by the idea that complexity is a gift that we can give young people," Myers said (para. 26).

Complexity is also a gift that we can give ourselves as English teachers. We can keep looking for ways to build complexity into our thinking about YA lit, our teaching of it, and the spaces we create for and with middle school students. This will be work, and it will be worth it.

REFERENCES

- Atwell, N. (1987). *In the middle: Writing, reading, and learning with adolescents*. Heinemann.
- Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives*, 6(3), ix–xi.
- Buehler, J. (2014, April 1). Talking about text complexity (No. 73) [audio podcast episode]. In *Text messages*. www.readwritethink.org/textmessages
- Buehler, J. (2016). *Teaching reading with YA literature: Complex texts, complex lives*. National Council of Teachers of English.
- Buehler, J. (2019). *Teaching reading with YA literature quick-reference guide*. National Council of Teachers of English.
- Duncan-Andrade, J., & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. Peter Lang.
- Enni, S. (2019, October 8). Holding your square with Jason Reynolds (No. 214) [audio podcast episode]. In *First draft with Sarah Enni*. <https://www.firstdraftpod.com/episodes/2019/9/25/jason-reynolds>
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. Bergin & Garvey.
- Magoon, K. (2019). A vision for the CSK: Past, present, and future. *Horn Book Magazine*, 95(3), 51–55.
- Morrell, E. (2005). Critical English education. *English Education*, 37(4), 312–321.
- Rief, L. (1992). *Seeking diversity: Language arts with adolescents*. Heinemann.
- Sarigianides, S. T., Lewis, M. A., & Petrone, R. (2015). How re-thinking adolescence helps re-imagine the teaching of English. *English Journal*, 104(3), 13–18.
- Sutton, R. (2019, September 3). Christopher Myers talks with Roger. *Notes from the Horn Book*. <https://www.hbook.com/?detailStory=christopher-myers-talks-with-roger>.
- Thomas, E. (2018). Critical engagement with middle grades reads: Who lives? Who thrives? Who tells your story? *Voices from the Middle*, 26(2), 13–16.
- Thomas, E. (2019). *The dark fantastic: Race and the imagination from Harry Potter to The Hunger Games*. NYU Press.

Copyright of Voices from the Middle is the property of National Council of Teachers of English and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.