

# Standing Up for YA Literature



**Author and educator Jennifer Buehler believes “good things happen when teens read young adult literature.”**

Reading young adult (YA) literature as a teen meant so much to **Jennifer Buehler** that she has championed its use in the classroom her entire career.

“Reading YA lit had been so important in my own life,” says Buehler, associate professor of English education at Saint Louis University and president of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE (ALAN).

“Those books gave me something my assigned readings didn’t. I appreciated and respected the school books, but YA spoke to me in a deeper and more personal way.”

Happily, Buehler says, she discovered the work of Nancie Atwell (*In The Middle*) and Linda Rief (*Seeking Diversity*) after her first year of teaching.

“They changed my life,” says Buehler of Atwell and Rief. Buehler had an “intrinsic belief” in YA lit because of her own experiences, but *In the Middle* and *Seeking Diversity* strongly advocated using YA lit in the classroom, giving Buehler “permission to step away from the classics, toward literature that was more teen friendly.”

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## Honor Adolescence

YA literature’s ability to help adolescents make sense of their world and how to navigate it is central to its appeal, says Buehler. And because YA lit often addresses timely topics and topics that concern them, students become deeply invested in discussing and writing about the books they read.

“Adolescence is a deeply complex time,” says Buehler. “Students are trying to become adults and find their place in the world. That is a struggle that should be honored, not, as our culture often does, dismissed or ridiculed.”

When students are motivated by the subject, they are willing and able to tackle more complex and difficult texts. This is a finding reported in the NCTE policy research brief *Reading Instruction for All Students* (<http://bit.ly/Reading-brief>), and Buehler says it’s in sync with what she’s seen in the classrooms of middle level and high school English teachers who use YA literature.

Students trying to find their place in the world also benefit from reading about diverse characters, whether

those characters are like them or not. Buehler recalls an exchange with Jalen, a student who had just finished Matt de la Peña's novel *We Were Here*. The novel is about three boys in the juvenile detention system who escape to Mexico. Jalen told her, "I've been through a lot of the things [Miguel] has been through. I see through his eyes as I'm reading the book. He has his issues and I have mine as well. I can feel what he's feeling."

"You can take a kid who doesn't even want to be in school, give them something that makes them feel like you know them," and it can be transformative, says Buehler. The right book "makes conversation possible. Books provide a safe place to make sense of the world."

Buehler's own book, *Teaching Reading with YA Literature: Complex Texts, Complex Lives*, is being published this fall by NCTE as part of its Principles in Practice imprint. In it Buehler argues that educators should "move beyond a simplistic view of adolescence and honor the importance of the questions teens are asking. That's the way we enter into intense, genuine conversation with young people."

## But Where to Start?

"There are lots of ways for teachers to try out using YA lit without jettisoning what they already do," says Buehler. Teachers can start by simply reading out loud a YA book they've loved.

"You don't have to read the whole book. You don't have to create an assignment. Just ask your students to share their reactions to the characters, the language, the story. Just invite them to talk!"

Or a teacher could pair a classic novel with a YA text on the same theme. Having students read multiple texts focused on the same topic and teaching different reading strategies for different kinds of texts are two ways that *Reading Instruction for All Students* recommends teachers can improve comprehension and foster students' engagement with complex texts.

Buehler has many suggestions for where to find good YA books. You'll find some of these in the archives of her *Text Messages* podcast, sponsored by ReadWriteThink ([http://bit.ly/RWT\\_Buehler](http://bit.ly/RWT_Buehler)), in which she discusses how to use specific books in the classroom.

To teachers worried about picking the "right" books, Buehler recommends starting small and finding just two or three that you would go to the mat for. The key is to be able to articulate "why these texts, for these students, in this context?"

Buehler built her own library "book by book." She's an advocate both for reading about new YA titles (on

the American Library Association YALSA-BK listserv and elsewhere) and for asking your own students.

"Students have their own knowledge base," she says.

## Good Pedagogy Is Good Pedagogy

Buehler acknowledges the occasional tension between fans of the classic literature canon and proponents of YA literature. Some critics argue that, while YA lit might get students reading, it doesn't teach them to work with and learn from complicated texts. Some ask if YA lit can do any more than engender conversations about how a book made you "feel."

Buehler believes differently. She says not only are there many complex and engaging YA stories ripe for invigorating and insightful learning, but these books can be ideal for starting discussions about big issues—issues that teens can be asked to explore on many levels.

Ultimately, she says, good pedagogy is good pedagogy. "It's not a matter of putting books in students' hands; it's what you do with the books," she says.

One thing that can be problematic for readers—especially reluctant readers, says Buehler—is using books that students can't find their way into.

"When students are assigned books they can't understand, and when they sit in classrooms where they listen to others talk about literature instead of reading it themselves, they are shut out from the opportunity to be readers," she asserts. "Their reading lives stagnate. Or

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Photo: Scott Filkins

Jennifer Buehler and Matt de la Peña are shown catching up at the 2015 NCTE Convention. Read Jennifer's interview with Matt in *The Horn Book*: "Profile of 2016 Newbery Medal Winner Matt de la Peña": [http://bit.ly/Buehler\\_delaPena](http://bit.ly/Buehler_delaPena)

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they never get started.”

YA literature certainly has the power to open up opportunities for reluctant readers, believes Buehler, but it can also be “challenging and engaging”—fostering analytical, writing, and reading skills—for ALL students.

In *Teaching Reading with YA Literature: Complex Texts, Complex Lives*, Buehler profiles several classrooms where teachers are using YA lit. Each classroom is different, but there are similarities; books are everywhere and discussions are animated and lively. When teachers ask questions they aren't seeking one, specific, correct answer; they want to get students pondering. Teachers guide discussions by reminding students what they already know about what makes a good story, how a story is structured, why an author included a particular scene. The teaching approaches are designed to bring students into the process.

The teachers Buehler observes and writes about go beyond the workshop model to push students outside their comfort zones, by asking them, for instance, to read in a genre they're unfamiliar with. They are striving, says Buehler, to create readers who are “agents of their own reading lives,” who are motivated to pursue their passions and their curiosity through reading. In a sense, these teachers are growing “free-range” readers.

## Proactive Stance Creates Energy

Mention YA lit, with its potential for controversy and the fear of parental disapproval, and censorship concerns arise. But Buehler has found that taking a proactive stance has tapped unexpected energy.

Her position grew from her experience teaching ninth-grade English at Canton High School in Canton, Michigan.

Buehler was inspired in part by *Teachers Organizing for Change: Making Literacy Learning Everybody's Business*, by Cathy Fleischer, which encourages teachers to make a deliberate effort to enlist allies and to communicate about the principles that guide teaching in their classrooms.

Buehler interviewed her students and collected data about what was happening when she gave them YA books. She then created a handbook that included systematic classroom research, including descriptions of the design of the class and vignettes of scenes that occurred in her classroom. The handbook also featured quotes from students about the impact of YA literature on their reading lives. She had mainly intended the handbook as a resource for parents, but then she started hearing feedback from her colleagues.

“[The handbook] captured what was happening with kids, [in a way] that transcended what test scores can tell us,” she said.

Buehler's department administrator championed the handbook, and soon her colleagues began asking her for YA lit recommendations for their own classrooms.



**BOOK TREE:** Included in one of the classroom portraits Jennifer Buehler shares in her book is a shot of this tree at the back of Carrie Melnychenko's classroom. Adorned with student testimonials for YA novels, it's an example, she says, that this is “a room that calls students to be readers.”

Buehler was more than happy to share what she knew, and continues to pass on her passion for YA lit and its potential through her teaching and writing. But when asked why other busy English teachers should undertake advocating for this same cause, she has a response ready.

“The answer lies in the positive energy we gain by getting other people on board with these books and this pedagogy,” says Buehler.

“If we lead with outreach, we can turn the negative energy that comes from having to defend YA lit into positive energy. We can share the good things that happen when teens read YA titles!”

**Deb Aronson** is an author, freelance writer, and editor based in Urbana, Illinois. Her nonfiction book, *Alexandra the Great: The Story of the Record-Breaking Filly Who Ruled the Race-track*, will be published in March 2017.



Look for Jennifer Buehler at the ALAN Breakfast and at the ALAN Workshop at the NCTE Annual Convention in November!