n 2014, many Americans became engaged in serious self-reflection and discussions related to race and class and also about the relative scarcity of books written by and about characters outside of mainstream culture. These discussions ranged from national news accounts of protests over police shootings of unarmed, black teenaged boys, to messages written on the coffee cups at Starbucks, and to the kinds of observations made by author Walter Dean Myers. Myers was our earliest and most prolific black author for teens, and his death in 2014 inspired many of us to take a second look at his lifetime of work and at his belief that “We need to tell young people that America was built by men and women of all colors and that the future of this country is dependent on the participation of all of our citizens.” This quote is featured on the opening page of the Winter 2015 issue of the ALAN Review, which is dedicated to Myers’s life and work.

Today’s interest in multicultural literature reminded me of how after the amazing success of J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books, we had a surge in the popularity of fantasy. In 2006, I asked fantasy author Tamora Pierce if she thought the success of the Harry Potter books had inspired a generation of authors to try their hand at fantasy. She answered in the negative by saying that all along there had been many talented authors writing wonderfully imaginative books, but until the success of the Harry Potter books, publishers and critics just hadn’t paid much attention to fantasy.

I suspect that something similar has happened with multicultural books, at least judging by how many such books won big prizes in 2014 and/or made their way to “best book” lists, and subsequently to our Honor List, which every year we put together after consulting numerous lists of “Best Books” and winners of prizes. See the individual reviews for specific information regarding each book. We were surprised this year to notice that at least half of the books on our list deal in major ways with issues related to multiculturalism. Even the one nonfiction piece on the list examines situations of disastrous misunderstandings resulting from people closing themselves off from the realities and the emotions of people different from themselves.

Anyway, in concluding this introduction, here is our usual warning. Please do not think that if a book is not on our Honor List, it is not a good book. There are way too many excellent books for all of them to be put on each year’s Honor List, but rest assured that all of the books listed here in alphabetical order have been strongly recommended by at least four—probably more—highly respected sources. APN
The multiple stories, which are told in alternating chapters, circle around each other and overlap in interesting ways. First is the story of 18-year-old Darcy Patel, a sophisticated and Americanized daughter of immigrant, well-to-do parents from India. Darcy writes a teenage novel and sends a carefully prepared query to the Underbridge Literary Agency. Seventeen days later she has signed a contract not only for her first book, but also for a sequel.

This is the wish-fulfilling part of the story apparently inspired by all the ambitious young writers that Westerfeld has met on promotional tours and on his visits to schools, bookstores, and libraries. We say this not only because of the plot, but also because he dedicates the book:

TO ALL YOU WORDSMITHS, YOU SCRIBBLERS, YOU WRIMOS IN YOUR VAST NUMBERS, FOR MAKING WRITING A PART OF YOUR READING.

And once inside his book, who among these “vast numbers” wouldn’t envy an 18-year-old who gets invited to go along on a book tour with two other YA authors, including the slightly older and more sophisticated Imogen, who provides the love interest in the story? Even though Darcy’s book is still “in press,” she is invited to be the third and last speaker at a high school assembly. When Darcy stands up and sees “the hundreds of eyes staring at her,” she says:

Hi, I’m Darcy Patel. Unlike these guys, I haven’t written novels. I’ve only written one. Not novels. Novel; singular . . . I guess that’s because I’m only eighteen. A year ago, I was a senior in a high school kind of like this one, and I wondered what would happen if I wrote two thousand words a day for a month. Turns out, you wind up with sixty thousand words. (369)

This sounds a little too glib for us, since we can barely type two thousand words a day, much less think of how to organize them into something coherent, which is why we describe this part of the story as wishful thinking.

The other part of the book, which is more believable—even though it’s a fantasy—is the story that Darcy writes and gets a contract for. When Darcy writes her email letter to the agency, she describes her book as being different from other teen romances because it is a combination fantasy, horror, and Hindu paranormal story. The protagonist is a girl name Lizzie (who seems a lot like Darcy). When she is coming home from a visit to her father (he had left the family and moved to New York with a younger woman) Lizzie is changing planes at the Dallas airport. It’s almost midnight and she is in a deserted wing of the airport when terrorists launch an attack. Lizzie survives only because when she called 911 a very calm voice told her to pretend to be dead. Lizzie is so good at “faking” death (the blood on her forehead helps) that instead of dying, she “crosses over” and becomes a “psychopomp,” which is a creature living half in this life and half in the afterlife. She will have the responsibility of communicating with ghosts and of guiding souls to the afterlife. Fortunately for the sake of the story, Yama, the Hindu Death god, has assumed the body of a 17-year-old boy who, of course, takes a prominent role in this story, which delves into Gujarati culture and Indian religion, along with American customs of writing, publishing, and promoting the sale of books to young readers. (DLFN)

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**Brown Girl Dreaming**


We may have missed some of the awards given to this wonderful memoir, which is told entirely through free-verse poetry, because it was officially released as a children’s book, and to find our Honor List books we mostly go to sources evaluating young adult books. *School Library Journal* recommended **Brown Girl Dreaming** for readers in grades 4 through 6, but when we skimmed the 144 customer reviews that had been submitted to Amazon.com, they seemed to have come from adults, people much like my husband and me. We both read the book and listened to Woodson’s reading of the 179 free-verse poems that are divided into five chapters. Even though we have lived long enough to observe the tremendous changes related to race and culture...
that took place in the United States during the 1960s and the 1970s when Woodson was a child, we were mostly observing them from a distance, and we never had the privilege of talking candidly to an observant child who had been born in her father’s home state of Ohio and then spent some of her early childhood living with her mother’s family in South Carolina before growing up in Brooklyn, where her mother chose to make a new home for herself and her children.

Jacqueline’s father was part of a prominent Ohio family, rumored to have descended from the first son born to Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Her great, great grandfather, William J. Woodson, was born free in Ohio and as shown on the Civil War Memorial in Washington, DC, fought for the Union in the Civil War as part of “Company B, 5th Regiment of the United States Colored Troops.” In family pictures, his great grandson, Jack Woodson (Jacqueline’s father), was always taller than the people surrounding him, and as Jacqueline noted on page 12, he also looked,

mad about something,
or is it someone
we cannot see? (12)

Anyway, her father went to Ohio State University on a football scholarship. Ohio State was just 60 miles away from the big Woodson family home in Nelsonville, where Jacqueline lived for her first three years, but with trips to South Carolina, to be with her mother’s family. After her mother and father separated, Jacqueline lived off and on with her South Carolina grandparents but then her mother moved to Brooklyn so she could make a home of her own and a new life for her children. This is where Jacqueline grew up. She did not meet her father again until she was 14, which she described as having “a puzzle piece dropped from the air” and landing “right where it belonged” (324).

If I were still teaching teenagers, I would play a few excerpts in which Woodson reads one or two of her beautifully crafted poems. I would encourage students to use them as models for writing their own memoirs of similar experiences. But already in my mind’s ear, I can hear students complaining that they couldn’t write anything that interesting because they weren’t born with a memory like Woodson’s. I would then lead them to the “author’s note” at the end of the book and to the part titled “thankfuls,” where she acknowledges all of the people who assisted her memory “when it needed help on the journey” (327). I would also speculate with students on what kinds of historical information Woodson might have found through Internet searches and what they could learn about their own childhoods by using their computers to check on various details. (APN)

The Crossover

The Crossover is written in free verse, as is Jacqueline Woodson’s Brown Girl Dreaming, but the tone differs from Woodson’s book in that it is a hip-hop novel about twin brothers, Josh and Jordan, who thanks to their talented dad/coach are basketball “phenoms,” even though they are just graduating from junior high. Josh is the one who tells the story, part of which is how he got his nickname of Filthy McNasty.

Even non-basketball players are going to appreciate the appearance of the book, with its ample white space and its lively layout as shown with the printing of the opening poem titled “Dribbling,” where such words and phrases as “MOVING & GROOVING,” “POPping and ROCKING,” “CRUNKing,” “CrissCROSSING,” and

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form pictures at the same time they advance the plot.

Alexander wrote 109 poems and organized them into six parts: Warm-up, First Quarter, Second Quarter, Third Quarter, Fourth Quarter, and Overtime. Reviewers caught the spirit of Alexander’s metaphorical language play as they relied on such terms
as action, pulse, sizzling, slam dunk, and rhythm. Our favorite comment came from Naomi Shihab Nye, who in relation to the book being a finalist for the National Book Award, described it as a “sizzling heartfelt” story that “gives readers that rich sense of SWISH! that we feel when a basketball drops perfectly through a net.”

Alexander’s book is as much a family story as it is a sports story. The boy’s mother is well-educated and is, in fact, the principal of the boy’s junior high school, but even without her salary the family could have had a comfortable life because their father was careful to save his earnings from when he played pro ball. However, it is obvious that he needs something to do besides coaching his two boys. When the boys snoop in his “treasure” box, they discover that their dad left basketball at a relatively young age because he refused to have surgery on his knee. He has a morbid fear of doctors and hospitals because he remembers his own father, at age 45, entering a hospital and never coming out.

The loving relationship between the parents is one theme in this book, but a bigger part of the story is the sibling rivalry that develops between the two brothers just when their team is about to win a championship based on how well the twins have mastered “the crossover.” But then a new girl comes to school and both Josh and Jordan are attracted to her, which sets off a bad case of sibling rivalry. Sibling rivalry also plays a relatively small part in Woodson’s Brown Girl Dreaming, but it plays a huge part in Jandy Nelson’s I’ll Give You the Sun. Readers of all three books might enjoy comparing and contrasting how the respective authors developed this theme of sibling rivalry and how it might compare with readers’ experiences. (APN)

“I smiled at this, because here in the Southwest where in the 1950s I attended Phoenix Union High School, my mother, along with the mothers of my friends, would question us about “looking Mexican” if we wore jewelry the least bit gaudy or hiked up a skirt or pulled down a neckline so as to show a little more skin. Gabi is self-deprecating, but readers appreciate her candor and her quick wit as when she describes what happened when her friend Sylvester told his parents that he was gay. “His mom took a telenovela approach” and “tried to slit her wrists,” which made Gabi laugh because if she had really meant to kill herself, surely she would have picked up a real knife instead of a butter knife (22). We need to talk with readers of books set in minority cultures about the fact that no one book can represent a whole culture, and also that readers need to think beyond the most obvious stereotypes in the book. If readers do not learn enough about the characters and their motivations, a book might simply reinforce old stereotypes. For example, it’s good to ponder why it is Gabi’s mother instead of her father who keeps the family together, and why her 16-year-old brother (two years younger than Gabi) begs her to take him to buy new supplies when he gets in trouble with the police and is

Gabi, A Girl in Pieces

On the first page, readers learn that Gabi—short for Gabriela—is named after her grandmother “who—coincidentally,” Gabi explains, “didn’t want to meet me when I was born because my mother was not married and was therefore living in sin” (7). Her grandmother’s reaction to learning that Gabi’s mother was pregnant was to beat her, even though she was 25 years old. Gabi, who is almost ready to graduate from a California high school, explains that this sad story, which she has heard over and over again, forms the basis of her “sexual education,” which might also be summarized as Ojos abiertos, piernas cerradas, that is, “Eyes open, legs closed” (7). Quintero frequently relies on Spanish words or phrases, which she sometimes translates, but with the simpler ones she leaves it to readers to figure out from the context.

Readers know that Gabi is smart and ambitious because she has already been accepted to the University of California at Berkeley. She wants desperately to have an honest discussion about friendship and sex with her mother, but she doesn’t dare to approach the subject because she’s sure that her mother will think that Gabi is bad, or what would be even worse, that she’s trying to be “White.”
forced to give up his brushes and the cans of paint that he uses for tagging and graffiti. Gabi’s father is an addict who disappears from home for weeks at a time, and near the end of the book Gabi finds him huddled in a corner of their garage. She can see that he is dead, but nevertheless she reaches out and holds his hand, which is still warm. She is such a take-charge girl that without even calling for her mother or her brother, she calls 9-1-1 on her cell phone and then is surprised that it takes her a couple of tries before she can bring herself to say, “My father is dead!”

I recently read a small news item about a state legislature discussing—or maybe they had already passed—a bill declaring that any teacher who brings a book to students that uses vulgar language, mentions sexual intercourse, or even brings up the topic of “sexual feelings” will be dismissed. I am sorry that such a bill was being seriously considered because teachers and librarians need to be encouraged and rewarded, rather than punished, for bringing a book this good to the attention of young readers and helping them to go beyond the stereotypes. (APN)

Jude and Noah Sweetwine are fraternal twins who in ways are totally like each other, but in other ways are totally different. The title comes from the way that as artists, they decide to carve out different domains to work in. They have an artistic grandmother and mother, and they also identify themselves as serious artists, which is fine in their childhood, but then comes puberty and they find themselves competing not only for the same boy (a fellow artist who is gay) but also for admission into the California School of Art, which the locals call the “California School of Aliens,” because so many outsiders come to study there. The idea that they should go to the school supposedly comes from their artistic grandmother, who is now dead, but who comes back to share the good idea with the twins’ mother, who is a professor of art history. Their practical father is also a professor but he never wins teaching prizes like their mother does, and he is not at all excited about the idea of the twins going to art school instead of to a regular high school. However, the mother is so insistent that he finally agrees and both Noah and Jude fill out applications.

As it happens, when the family goes to mail them at the post office, Jude is the one told to hop out of the car and run them inside. On her way in, she makes a spur-of-the-moment decision and drops Noah’s application into a trash can while putting her own in the mail slot. As the story develops, this is an act that has more of a disastrous effect on Jude’s conscience than on Noah’s future.

The story is told through alternating chapters from each of the twins. The book starts with a chapter from 13-year-old Noah, who is being beaten up by two high school thugs. The next chapter is from Jude at age 16. The technique of telling the story mostly from the older Jude and the younger Noah reinforces the idea that Jude is the older sister. Actually she is “only two hours thirty-seven minutes and thirteen seconds” older than Noah, but she always makes him feel like her little brother, which he hates. Nevertheless, he is quick to describe how “from the very first cells of us, we were together, we came here together,” which is why people don’t notice that “Jude does most of the talking” and that they can play the piano only when all four of their hands are on the keyboard (17–18). But even though Jude appears to be brave on the outside, when it comes to her art she has so little self-confidence that she is never satisfied with her work. An extreme example is how she builds joyful and whimsical sand sculptures but hides them in a cove where the ocean waves will soon wash them away. Noah secretly takes photos of them and sends them to the art school, which helps Jude get accepted.

But once Jude is firmly enrolled in school, she has terrible problems in that her ceramic sculptures can’t stand up to the heat of the kiln. They break so often that fellow students reverse her initials to CJ, for “Calamity Jane,” and talk about her work as “serious Humpty Dumpty” (27). By this time, the twin’s mother has died in a different kind of
tragedy, and Jude is sure that her mother is coming back from the other world to break her sculptures because she is so angry and so disappointed in Jude. Jude decides that the only way she can make amends is to make a perfect stone carving of her mother, and so she sets out to convince a master sculptor, Guillermo Garcia, to be her teacher, a decision fraught with a whole new set of challenges. In a published article, her mother had once described Garcia as “the kind of man who walks into a room and all the walls fall down” (37). As a child in South America, he had carved angels on tombstones so sweet that at night neighbors near the graveyard swore they could hear them singing. But sadly, time has not been kind to Guillermo Garcia, and he is now a drunken and bitter old man hiding from the world.

In her unusual story, Jandy Nelson relies not only on the uniqueness of twins (both together and individually) but also on the mysteries of sexual attraction, the influence of guilt on memories, the hold that old superstitions can have on modern people, visits from the dead, instances of comic relief, and the power of art and photography. This long and fascinating story about Jude and Noah and how they alternate between hating and appreciating each other is not for the casual reader or the faint of heart. (DLFN and APN)
The 2014 Honor List: A Medley of Cultures and Characters

trauma of living with a veteran whose PTSD left a family in shambles. Anderson’s father was only 18 when his Army unit liberated the Dachau concentration camp and he and his fellow soldiers were assigned to bury the dead and to take care of the living survivors of the Nazis’ atrocities. These living nightmares led to many of the problems associated with PTSD, all the more disheartening for Laurie when her father’s suffering peaked during her adolescence.

The story is as authentic as they come, even including one small nod to the recent improvement in the Veteran’s Administration’s delivery of medical services to those who served our country. And yet, the book is not without hope, celebrating the resilience of youth, the determination of a young woman, and the power of a father’s love, and it is one of the best books of the year. (JB Jr.)

The Port Chicago 50: Disaster, Mutiny, and the Fight for Civil Rights

In the Port Chicago incident of July 17, 1944, 202 African American sailors were killed and hundreds more wounded, but this is only half of the story that Steve Sheinkin reveals in his account of the predictable disaster that happened and the preventable human rights violations that followed. At the Naval base Port Chicago in San Francisco, four all-black divisions of sailors were given the assignment of loading explosives on ships. The men were never trained in safety procedures nor provided with written material about the safe handling of bombs. The local civilian longshoremen’s union offered training on loading and unloading explosives, but the Navy didn’t accept the offer. White officers raced their men, laying bets on the outcome. An accident was bound to happen.

And it did. The blast that took place on July 17, 1944, sent huge chunks of red-hot metal more than 9,000 feet in the sky as reported by pilots who witnessed the blast from the air. Hundred-pound chunks of metal rained down all over the Port Chicago Base. “The 1,200 foot pier was simply gone” (65). When roll was taken, it was determined that 320 men who had been on the ship or pier had been killed instantly, including 202 Black sailors who had been loading a ship at the time. Three hundred and ninety men were badly injured in the barracks.

The inquiry that followed was a travesty. Disregard for the men’s safety was judged irrelevant and the real problem, based on testimony by white “witnesses,” was “that the colored enlisted personnel are neither temperamentally nor intellectually capable of handling high explosives” (71). No black witnesses were allowed to provide testimony nor were they apprised of what was going on in the court of inquiry.

Three weeks later, 258 out of 328 sailors, many still wearing bandages from the previous explosion, refused to return to loading bombs on ships. These men were held prisoner and advised that refusing to obey orders was mutiny and in time of war punishable by a firing squad. Fifty men still refused. The Navy blamed their refusal on “irrational fear . . . agitators and ringleaders” (96) and proceeded with a court martial on September 14, 1944.

In the New York headquarters of the NAACP, an up-and-coming attorney, future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, was taking an interest in the case. As articulated by Marshall, “This is not fifty men on trial for mutiny. This is the Navy on trial for its whole vicious policy against Negroes” (138). He issued a statement from the NAACP calling on the Navy to conduct an investigation into the whole incident, regardless of the court martial. In it, he raised a lot of questions about why only African American sailors were loading the bombs and why no safety training was provided, and why the officers made bets on which division could load the most bombs in the least amount of time. The court martial came to an end; the men were found guilty and sentenced to 15 years of hard labor.

Thurgood Marshall refused to accept the results of the trial, pressing the Secretary of the Navy for answers about segregation and racism in the Navy. In April 1945 he presented an appeal. “Justice can only be done,” Marshall said, “by a
complete reversal of the findings” (151). Although Naval Secretary Forrestal told the previous court to review the case, leaving some shaky evidence out, the members of the court voted unanimously to uphold the conviction of the men who were coming to be known as “the Port Chicago 50.” Not much later, Eleanor Roosevelt took interest in the case, sending a note to Secretary Forrestal saying, “I hope in the case of these boys special care will be taken” (163).

Forrestal was not about to admit the Navy was wrong, but on January 7, 1946, the Port Chicago 50 were escorted out of prison and onto ships at sea where they returned to active duty. The Navy was the first branch of the service to completely integrate, and in July 1948, President Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9981, ending all segregation in the US military. The Port Chicago 50 never had the mutiny conviction expunged from their records. Although they were given a “discharge under honorable conditions” and were eligible for VA health care, they were not eligible for the GI Bill that put so many people through college for free and provided a ladder to a better life. The men have all passed away at this time, and although the Navy would eventually admit that racism was at fault in assigning the men to load bombs, authorities insisted racism was not a factor in their trial and the verdict would not be reversed.

The author’s extensive research on the Port Chicago 50 provides for no gaps or disparities in the information. Sheinkin has an engaging writing style and is never maudlin or manipulative. This is a must-read for fans of mislaid history. (JB Jr.)

We Were Liars

We Were Liars is a modern sophisticated suspense novel about three generations of a grand old New England family consisting of a wealthy grandfather (the grandmother dies early in the story), his three adult daughters, and their offspring. The story is told by the oldest grandchild, 17-year-old Cadence, also known as Cady. She begins with a description:

WELCOME TO THE beautiful Sinclair family.
No one is a criminal.
No one is an addict.
No one is a failure.
The Sinclairs are athletic, tall, and handsome. We are old money Democrats. Our smiles are wide, our chins square, and our tennis serves aggressive. (3)

However, she goes on to explain that the muscles of their hearts have been shredded by divorce, the trust fund money is getting low, credit card bills pile up on kitchen counters, pill bottles sit on bedside tables, and there is always an undercurrent of tension related to who is going to inherit which house, especially the family’s elegant townhouse, when the grandfather dies.

The extended family spends its summers on their privately owned Beechwood Island near Martha’s Vineyard. The map, which is printed right after the title page, shows four luxurious homes, plus a Staff Building, a Boathouse, and separate docks for staff and family. The biggest house, Clairmont, is for the grandparents and their dogs; the others are for the daughters and their children. Their husbands have opted out from both their marriages and their chance to spend idle summers in this lap of luxury. However, Aunt Carrie has a relationship with Ed, who is an art dealer. The year that Cady is eight, Aunt Carrie asks if she can bring Ed along. The family members say yes, but they are surprised when Ed climbs off the boat and they see that “his skin was very dark: Indian heritage, we’d later learn” (9). Their second surprise is that Ed has brought along his eight-year-old nephew, as a playmate for Aunt Carrie’s Johnny. He is equally dark and is named Gat.

This is fine for the first few summers during which a close friendship develops among the four oldest children: Cady, Johnny, Mirren, and Gat. But as they grow into their teen years, Cady and Gat develop the kind of close friendship that deeply troubles the grandfather, as well as Cady’s mother, and also Gat, himself. Cady and Gat are both readers and once in a moment of serious discussion Gat tells Cady that her grandfather thinks of him as Heathcliff from Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights. Cady makes a different kind of literary allusion.
She remembers the complete set of fairy tales that her grandfather had given her years and years ago. She thinks their story is more like “Beauty and the Beast,” but then she also remembers a story that begins with “Once upon a time there was a wealthy merchant who had three beautiful daughters. He spoiled them so much that . . .” (167). We listened to an audio version of the story before we read it and when we heard this, we were reminded of the King Lear tragedy, an allusion that Lockhart might or might not have intended.

In keeping with the grandfather’s penchant for slogans, each of the four teenagers develop their own motto. Mirren was kind and so her motto was “Be a little kinder than you have to.” Johnny was a joker so his motto was “Never eat anything bigger than your ass.” Gat was a thinker and a social mover and so his motto was “Do not accept an evil you can change.” Cadence was spontaneous, so her motto was “Always do what you are afraid to do” (101–02). Only at the end of the book do readers understand the inherent foreshadowing.

Another highly acclaimed book that readers might enjoy comparing to Lockhart’s We Were Liars is Meg Wolitzer’s Belzhar (Dutton, 2014), whose title is an adaptation of Sylvia Plath’s Bell Jar. Wolitzer’s book too explores the deep secrets of the human mind and the tremendous efforts it takes to uncover them.

When we write reviews, we often give spoilers because we assume that busy teachers will be recommending more books than they can possibly read for themselves. But with this wonderful book, we aren’t telling the ending because that’s the magic of the story. If after you’ve read it and someone asks you for the ending, we suggest you follow the advice given on the inside front cover: “just LIE.” (DLFN)

Don L. F. Nilsen and Alleen Pace Nilsen, NCTE members since 1964, retired from the English Department at Arizona State University in 2011, but they continue to teach classes to community groups of senior citizens and in the spring of 2015 used Honor List books to teach a special topics class in the ASU Honors College on “Symbols, Archetypes, and Visual Literacy.” James Blasingame Jr., a member of NCTE since 1996, is the director of the English Education program at ASU. These three, along with the late Ken Donelson, are coauthors of Literature for Today’s Young Adults, now in its ninth edition.

NCTE Literacy Education Advocacy Day 2016

Join NCTE members from across the nation for NCTE’s Literacy Education Advocacy Day on Thursday, February 25, 2016. NCTE members attending Advocacy Day will learn the latest about literacy education issues at the federal level and have a chance to interact with people highly involved with those issues. See http://www.ncte.org/action/advocacyday for details.