Disabling Characters: Representations of Disability in Young Adult Literature
Reviewed by Mark Letcher, Lewis University, Romeoville, Illinois (letchema@lewisu.edu)

Over the past 10 to 15 years, we have witnessed an explosion of young adult literature published in the United States. New and veteran authors are consistently offering more high-quality titles to their audiences. As part of this increase, more attention (but still not enough) is being paid to diverse characters. If we want readers, and particularly our students, to understand and celebrate the diversity inherent in their lives and communities, then issues of disability should be included when we consider what it means to be diverse. If, as Rudine Sims Bishop has suggested, we seek mirror and window books to describe how we see both ourselves and others when we read literature, then we must seek out books that authentically represent issues of disability, as well as serve to push our thinking about how disability is represented in our society. With so many titles, and so many ways of looking at texts, selecting appropriate books can be difficult.

Thankfully, we now have an outstanding guide to navigating this field. In Disabling Characters, Patricia A. Dunn examines classic and contemporary young adult titles through the lens of disability studies, a theoretical approach “that examines society’s role in exacerbating whatever impairments individuals may have” (4). Disability studies has been applied to a range of disciplines in recent years, particularly composition studies; however, as Dunn notes, the approach has been relatively slow in affecting practice in K–12 schools. It is this gap that Dunn’s work so expertly addresses. Disabling Characters offers a highly readable, theoretically grounded, yet practically applicable text that can be used by a wide range of teachers, scholars, and students.

After a thorough and thoughtful introduction, which describes her terminology, her approach to texts as cultural artifacts, and theories that inform her own critical eye, Dunn devotes the book’s remaining chapters to themed discussions of classic and contemporary YA novels. Books such as Ron Jones’s The Acorn People (1976), Wendy Orr’s Peeling the Onion (1996), Sherman Alexie’s The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (2007), and Francisco Stork’s Marcelo in the Real World (2009), among many others, receive careful examination as vehicles that can reveal powerful assumptions about disability.

Dunn has chosen her titles well, and readers will see that each chapter opens up new awareness of the books individually, and in conversation with each other. I found myself learning things about books I have read (and taught) many times. The lenses that Dunn uses, and the questions that she asks, have influenced the way I look at any titles that discuss disability, and include disabled characters. For example, I appreciate (and have borrowed) the term “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer stories” to describe books in which a character’s impairment allows her or him to make an almost super-human contribution to the story, a contribution that moves the character from
Rhythm and Resistance: Teaching Poetry for Social Justice
Reviewed by Tim Gillespie, Lake Oswego High School, Lake Oswego, Oregon (gillespi@teleport.com)

Few books have made me more eager to try out a slew of its ideas than Rhythm and Resistance. This rich resource offers rhyme and reason: a wealth of strategies to explore writing and reading poetry with students and a thoughtful perspective on the value of doing so.

Rhythm and Resistance was put together by two writer-editors for Rethinking Schools, the activist nonprofit organization and publisher that promotes a vision of an American school system that is effective and equitable and that produces critical, caring students with the skills and moxie to make their country a more just place for all. This book fits that vision hand-in-glove.

Linda Christensen, a long-time public school teacher, is currently director of the Oregon Writing Project site in Portland; her books include Teaching for Joy and Justice and Reading, Writing, and Rising Up. Dyan Watson is a former high school social studies teacher who is now assistant professor of education at the Lewis and Clark College Graduate School of Education. She authored the widely published “A Letter from a Black Mom to Her Son.”

These two editors begin Rhythm and Resistance with an argument for bringing poetry into classrooms. We know students are drawn to the rhymes and flow of hip-hop, the high voltage of spoken word and poetry slams. But besides simply offering opportunities to grab students’ attention, say the editors, poetry can give students a voice, help them learn more about each other, strengthen their classroom communities, and provide opportunities for practicing empathy. Furthermore, in this era of stress on nonfiction and the subsequent danger of retreat from what is sometimes marginalized as “creative writing,” the editors convincingly argue that working on poetry can also give young writers habits—a fidelity to specific details and active verbs, a passion for figurative language,
a sense of cadence and rhythm—that can enliven their expository and persuasive essays. In addition, the topics explored in *Rhythm and Resistance* offer plenty of opportunities for students to find and define meaningful issues, a prime mover of any compelling nonfiction writing.

**Classroom Accounts from Teacher-Writers**

The beating heart of *Rhythm and Resistance* is a collection of accounts by teacher-writers working in elementary, middle school, and high school language arts and social studies classrooms. Many of the activities can be adapted to writers of any age.

Most chapters start with a triggering poem to give students a word-generating model. (One of the gifts of *Rhythm and Resistance* is the abundance of classroom-tested poems. Dozens of gems, contemporary and historic, are included.) The mentor poem is accompanied by a description of the strategy the teacher used to work with the text and topic. Most often, the lesson starts with ways to encourage students first to appreciate the poem and then to analyze the poet’s moves with questions such as, How did the writer build this poem? Lessons therefore incorporate both critical reading and writing strategies. Next comes the meat of the matter—the invitation for students to write. Using the mentor poem as a springboard—for topics, tactics, and patterns—students are always given plenty of room to find themselves, their concerns, their own words and worlds, and their own writing moves in their poem-crafting. Finally, most chapters include a collection of inspiring student poems written in response to the exploration. This structure makes the book exceedingly practical for teachers.

The book’s first section, “Roots: Where We’re From,” offers starting places for cultivating a classroom poetry habit. All these chapters invite students to honor their own lives in their writing, exploring aspects of their names, family backgrounds, languages, traditions, and stories. The contention here is that constructing a classroom around students’ lives and cultures is a cornerstone of raising academic expectations. Through these activities, students can also learn more about their classmates, discovering common bonds and instructive differences as the teacher works to build a classroom community.

Subsequent sections include “Celebration: Lift Every Voice and Sing,” which focuses on poems of joy; “Poetry of the People: Breathing Life into Literary and Historical Characters,” which asks students to take a step outside their own lives and start trying to poetically imagine other people unlike themselves, whether literary or historical; “Standing Up in Troubled Times: Creating a Culture of Conscience,” which explores the ways poets use their work to respond directly to injustice; “Turning Pain into Power,” which talks about poetry’s value for expressing heartbreak and defiance as an alternative to fists, drugs, or other self-destructive behavior; and “The Craft of Poetry,” which offers a variety of technical lessons, a chapter by YA author Renée Watson on using music to help students think about revision, advice on pulling off successful classroom poetry read-alouds, and a helpful resource list.

Is there anything about *Rhythm and Resistance* I’d improve? I do wish the book included more discussion about the possible pitfalls or challenges of many of these lessons and how teachers addressed them, since failure and complication are part of the reality of any classroom, even with the best of lessons. In one of the later chapters in the book, there is a paragraph titled “When It Doesn’t Work.” And in Tom McKenna’s account of using Raymond Carver’s poem “Fear” in his English classroom on a high school completion campus, McKenna shares both the part of his classroom assignment that soared and the part that took a complete nose-dive. This sort of honesty is refreshing and convinces me that these are real teachers who have tested these lessons in the crucible of the classroom.

**A Book for All Students**

Since the stated mission of Rethinking Schools is to focus attention on problems facing urban schools, some potential readers might worry that *Rhythm and Resistance* would not work in suburban or rural classrooms. As a veteran of many decades working in both urban and suburban schools, I can attest that *Rhythm and Resistance* is ripe with activities that would work in classrooms anywhere.
Jago’s With Rigor for All to revisit her commonsense ideas about what and how to teach English today. With Rigor for All is an important book for secondary English teachers to read and share with colleagues. It reassures me, a veteran English teacher and teacher leader, to read Jago’s vision of what and how an English teacher teaches.

In our present climate, I am distressed about the politicizing of our curriculum, the proliferation of objective tests and assessments dictated from outside the classroom, and many teachers’ backgrounds that seem to lack grounding in a literary canon, even a loose one, that gives students some common knowledge as well as a much-needed historical and sociological perspective about the human journey.

Jago’s book is an excellent corrective to current policy directions. It might have given one English teacher I know the support to counter her principal’s request to abandon a poetry unit in favor of more nonfiction. In her book, Jago supports an English curriculum where all students read literature including the classics and contemporary texts. Step into her room in September and students are reading The Odyssey; in the winter they are reading Julius Caesar (29).

“Rich literature allows students to appreciate the universality of human experience” (67), she says, and her book is filled with ideas to help modern students keep turning the pages, engage in rich discussion, and write creatively and analytically. Jago asks students to read contemporary literature for independent reading, but she warns that this diet alone can mean that students “only consume books about teenagers caught up in the very same dilemmas they themselves face, [and] they miss the chance to experience other lives” (1).

Thus, she argues for teaching the canon using direct instruction with strong support for contemporary students who spend seven hours a day on their electronic devices instead of reading literature. I wish all secondary English teachers, whether they teach ESL, special education, AP or basic courses, had a grounding in serious literature, texts similar to those Jago mentions, including a survey of American and British Literature. I find many people who teach English classes come to their jobs with scant background in literature or with some form of alternative certification. If their own secondary courses did not inform them about the traditional content of English class, and if they did not major in English or English education, how can these teachers expose their students to the kind of rigorous literature Jago describes?

Students must closely read hard texts that challenge their thinking and reassure their hearts about the universality of human experience. Besides reading for challenge and reassurance, I believe students need to read to gain a historical perspective so they know where we’ve been, what ideas propelled our actions, and what essential human themes guided us on our journeys as we picked our ways, sometimes...
falling down and sometimes performing acts of heroism.

A Book with Bonuses

In addition to affirming the importance of reading serious literature, Jago’s book gives the reader three bonuses. First, she reminds us of the National Council of Teachers of English’s rule of thumb that English teachers have a class load that does not exceed 80 students, affording English teachers the necessary time to read and respond to student writing. Second, she advocates all students have both an English class and a reading class where, for 55 minutes a day, they read self-selected texts recreationally. The reason? To read well, students need to double their reading time. Third, the book contains a discussion guide for teachers, so they can read and grow together.

This book also tackles perennial concerns for English teachers: keeping track of student independent reading; scaffolding rigorous texts so students can understand and respond with enthusiasm; engaging students in discussions; and using writing—both jots and essays—to deepen their understanding. Furthermore, Jago advocates teacher-made writing assessments rather than objective tests with multiple-choice answers.

“I see it as my mission in life to turn students into readers . . .,” Jago says, “to see their own lives as a hero’s journey” (61). That’s what I want: Because they shared time in my class, I hope students are more empathetic, more aware of the universality of human experience, and more clear-eyed about their place in the world.

A Search Past Silence: The Literacy of Young Black Men

Reviewed by Kelly Wallace, University of Tennessee, Knoxville (kbailes@vols.utk.edu)

As a high school English teacher, I have sat through countless faculty, department, and personal learning community (PLC) meetings that have centered on data in relation to the Black/White literacy gap. It’s there. It’s real. It exists. In fact, according to the 2013 Nation’s Report Card on eighth-grade reading scores, 53 percent of White students scored proficient or advanced, while only 17 percent of Black students scored proficient, with merely 1 percent scoring advanced (USDE). In my teaching experience, this is where the conversation stops—with the data. The looming question for teachers, especially English teachers, is: “What do we do about it?” While David E. Kirkland’s book, A Search Past Silence: The Literacy of Young Black Men, does not offer fell down and sometimes perform acts of heroism.

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The author heart-wrenchingly illustrates the misguided normative assumptions that Black males do not value literacy in their lives. Kirkland, donning the role of ethnographer and discourse analyst, follows six Black males in Lansing, Michigan, as he discovers that there are far more factors than school and home that play into the place of literacy in these young men’s lives. Kirkland paints a nuanced picture, showing how the acquisition of literacy lies at the intersection of school, home, work, church, romantic relationships, the media, and pop culture. This literacy also manifests itself in different forms than traditional schooling calls for. It hides in plain sight in journals, freestyle rap, front porch conversations, ink on skin, and letters. If English teachers were willing to extend their definitions of literacy to include these media, they would see that literacy permeates young Black men’s lives in a multitude of ways.

Behind the Silence: Evidence of Literacy

When Kirkland began observing in a high school English classroom, he was immediately drawn to a group of young Black men
who sat in the back of the room and rarely participated. Initially, these students seemed disengaged from activities related to literacy. However, after a scuffle in the hallway, one of the boys, Derrick, dropped his journal, or as he referred to it, his “book.” On the front of the journal the word silence was etched. Inside, however, a world of literacy was in evidence. The contents ranged from freestyle raps to symbology to research to art. It read much like a multigenre autobiography. None of this was displayed in Derrick’s schoolwork, but this did not make him alliterate or in need of remediation. As a result of the constraints of the system and the White cultural expectations that dominated his classroom, Derrick’s literacy needs were not fulfilled in school.

After this introduction, the remainder of the text follows Derrick and his friends as their stories unfold. The focus is on the ways that Black men are silenced by society and on the ways that they seek to break that silence. Kirkland, through his poetic prose, illustrates the boys’ interpretation of life events such as being unjustly arrested, experiencing first heartbreak, and being abandoned by parents. The text is filled with artifacts from the boys’ conversations, interviews, writings, freestyle raps, tattoo designs, and storytelling. These multiple narratives create a counternarrative to what Chimamanda Adichie calls “the single story.” The abysmal literacy rates of Black males are used to create a narrative that portrays Black males as lacking basic literacy skills. This “single story” is harming the learning opportunities of this group of students.

The purpose of the book, in Kirkland’s words, is to give educators the “opportunity to lift up the veil of silence and exercise the courage to keep Black males in mind as we write new curricula and renegotiate our common core beliefs about practices” (149). As classroom teachers, we need to be aware that our traditional practices may be denying Black males their literacies. Kirkland encourages teachers to create counternarratives to the deficit perspective that standardized test scores are creating. While promoting a redefinition of literacy to include nontraditional forms is necessary, we, as teachers, are still held responsible for increasing our students’ standardized literacy scores.

This book does not provide teachers with concrete ways to improve their scores. But as educators read, I think they will begin to realize that acknowledging and encouraging and praising new forms of literacy that Black males have created will help them feel valued and validated in the classroom. And when students feel valued and validated, teachers have reached the entry point, a turning point for including these students into the fabric of the classroom.

Works Cited


Mark Letcher is an assistant professor of English education at Lewis University, where he teaches young adult literature, English methods courses, drama, and first-year composition. He is the director of the English Language Arts Teaching Program. Mark has been an NCTE member since 1999. Tim Gillespie is a veteran of four decades of public school teaching in Oregon. His recent book, Doing Literary Criticism: Helping Students Engage with Challenging Texts, was published by Stenhouse. He has been a member of NCTE since 1973. Sheryl Lain has spent 40 years in education, teaching English and working with teachers. She served as language arts coordinator, instructional coach, and director of the Wyoming Writing Project. She has been a member of NCTE since 1995 and is liaison between Wyoming and National Council of Teachers of English. Kelly Wallace is currently a doctoral student in Theory and Practice in Teacher Education at the University of Tennessee. She previously taught eleventh-grade English and Theatre Arts at a small high school in East Tennessee.

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