Jennifer Buehler is wise in her approach to YA lit. One of the things that I like best is that Buehler acknowledges “that some of our colleagues will look down on [YA] books” (23) and thus, she reminds readers that “we who teach YA literature have a responsibility to think carefully and strategically about how our teaching will complement, extend, or fill gaps in what students have done in other English classes” (70), and “[a]s we choose [YA] books, we need to rehearse what we’ll say when we’re asked to speak about their value and why we’ve committed to teaching them” (88). This book wasn’t written to convince YA lit opponents that they are wrong; it’s been written to empower and enrich the teaching of those who already know YA lit has tremendous potential for improving students’ literacies. In fact, Buehler’s final chapter—my personal favorite—is a 20+ page guide for YA advocates to help address their colleagues’ reservations about YA lit.

Creating a Comprehensive YA Literature Pedagogy

Buehler suggests the power of YA lit pedagogy is not as much in the books themselves as it is in “what students are doing with the books as YA readers” (134; italics added). She uses her book to “highlight the unique role that YA lit can play in fostering teens’ reading lives” (132). Even with the reemergence of discussion-based literature pedagogy, when students work with traditional texts, they too often “sit back and wait to be told what the book means” (13). But with engaging and complex YA lit, teens are more willing to develop a personal relationship with a text and take on the labor of more rigorous thinking. As Buehler points out, though, simply assigning YA books isn’t enough:

If we’re honest, we must acknowledge that reading YA lit . . . may draw more students to books, but without a pedagogy designed to ask more of them, it doesn’t necessarily push students to improve as readers of complex texts. (14)

The book offers a “Conceptual Framework for YA Pedagogy” (which is more interesting than it sounds) based on three elements: (1) “A classroom that cultivates reading community”; (2) “Teachers as expert matchmakers who bring books and students together”; (3) “Reading tasks that foster complexity, agency, and autonomy” (8–11). A chapter is devoted to each of these elements, and Buehler offers clear explanations (with ample scholarly
support) and an impressively wide range of creative classroom activities.

Teachers will especially appreciate the chapter on “Tasks That Promote Complexity, Agency, and Autonomy” (89–109), which includes many activities that engage students in high levels of critical thinking based around themes and concepts in YA lit. In one chart, Buehler recasts into a far more engaging YA pedagogy complex kinds of work more often associated with classic literature: literary analysis, reader response, thematic units, genre study, literary periods and literary history, and writing process/writing craft (93).

In another show of savvy, Buehler devotes a chapter to assessment. Pedagogies that are fun are often stigmatized as non-rigorous, and Buehler’s book helps teachers avoid that pigeonhole with rigorous yet engaging assessment strategies that include having students create themed reading lists, “brown bag exams,” “Meeting of Minds” presentations, and more. Most of Buehler’s suggestions are authentic assessments that require concentrated research and real writing and presenting to real audiences.

Teaching Reading with YA Literature also makes frequent reference to real classrooms, teachers, and students, and it discusses straightforwardly the potential and pitfalls of approaching YA lit in Buehler’s complex and disciplined manner. Readers will also come away with many more YA titles to explore, and Buehler’s many sidebars include definitions for those new to YA pedagogy and new directions for more advanced teachers.

If you already enjoy reading and teaching YA lit or if you are open to learning more about the intellectual power of a literacy pedagogy based on teens’ lives and interests, this book is for you.

**Hacking Assessment: 10 Ways to Go Gradeless in a Traditional Grades School (Hack Learning Series Volume 3)**
Reviewed by Leigh Herman
The Weber School
Atlanta, Georgia
lherman@weberschool.org

The words going gradeless may be music to many English teachers’ ears; the phrase hints at relief from countless weekend and evening hours spent poring over student writing. While I personally enjoy reading student work, I am far less excited about assigning it a number or letter and fielding questions about why I took points off. While the idea of throwing away the current system of grading may cause anxiety, Starr Sackstein’s Hacking Assessment: 10 Ways to Go Gradeless in a Traditional Grades School not only makes the theoretical case for change, but it honestly assesses the problems associated with implementing a new system for feedback. Although slim, Sackstein’s no-nonsense book offers comprehensive and practical information to wean students and communities from defining achievement through grades.

Although going gradeless clearly has benefits for teachers, at the heart of Sackstein’s book is a sincere focus on creating a better system for providing feedback and encouragement for students. Sackstein begins by narrating her own struggle with demonstrating student growth in the classroom. Noting that “a gifted student who does little work may receive the same grade as a struggling student who has improved steadily throughout the course or a student who started off strongly but performed poorly in the last quarter,” Sackstein resolves that students “need to understand how to make improvements and how to recognize when legitimate growth has occurred” (13–14). Although Sackstein is upfront about the pitfalls of going gradeless, she is equally forthright about the positive outcomes. Despite some initial pushback, students in her classroom became more willing to take risks and embraced being challenged.

**Implementing Gradelessness**

In Hacking Assessment, each of the ten chapters presents a “hack,” or solution, for changing how teachers assess students. Sackstein walks readers through the process of rebuilding their assessment systems with anecdotes and examples from real classrooms that illustrate how to provide clear expectations.

Beginning with hacks for shifting the grade mindset and promoting community buy-in, Sackstein recounts scenarios from her own AP Literature and Journalism courses at World Journalism Preparatory School in New York City. She offers templates for changing the way we talk about assessment to students, parents, and administrators to begin changing stakeholder perception. She also outlines how she assuaged the fears of those who are skeptical.

Integrated throughout the book are narratives from several teachers, also demonstrating best practices when making such a seismic shift. For anyone who progresses beyond the theoretical stage of implementing a gradeless classroom, the subsequent chapters offer example assignments, strategies for time management, and methods for tracking student learning. For example, in “Hack 5: Digitizing Data,” Sackstein manages to make data collection seem unobtrusive and efficient through the use of Google Forms. Offering step-by-step instructions for using technology to individualize feedback, she concedes that “data in education is never going to go away, so if we can find more efficient ways to gather and use it, then our practice and our students improve” (75). For a gradeless classroom, maintaining detailed records of student mastery and metacognition is essential.

The complexities of going gradeless are many, and the process cannot happen overnight. Sackstein’s years of researching and tweaking her process are a wonderful resource to learn from and use. Ultimately, Sackstein respectfully acknowledges that “there will always be someone who is unsatisfied or doesn’t agree,” but she provides a multitude of strategies for dispelling any myths about shifting from traditional grading practices (42). Based on a seemingly impractical notion, the book concretizes an approach to learning that I now believe I can implement in my own classroom. As Sackstein states, “If you’re ready to see your students thrive and to bring joy and curiosity back to your classroom, take a risk: Make the change to a no-grades classroom and watch it happen. The work will be worth it” (131).

Ken Lindblom is the dean of the School of Professional Development and faculty member in English teacher education at Stony Brook University, and he is a member of the Executive Board of NCTE’s Conference on English Education. A member of NCTE since 1989, Ken was editor of English Journal from 2008 to 2013. Follow him @Klind2013. Leigh Herman teaches high school English and journalism at The Weber School in Atlanta, Georgia. She has been a member of NCTE since 2009.