For the first time in our almost 30 years of hunting through the end-of-the-year announcements to find which YA books were chosen the most often as “best books for teen readers,” we have a list that we think English teachers might want to share with their friends who teach history or social studies. This is because more than half of the six books that rose to the top of the various lists that we looked at are historical fiction. The one that is probably the easiest to identify with (because of its relatively recent setting) is John Lewis’s graphic novel, *March: Book 3*, which won the National Book Award for Young People. Its story is about public protests in the 1960s over desegregation in the American South. It is told from the perspective of Congressman John Lewis, who at the time was under the age of 25.

Ruta Sepetys’s *Salt to the Sea* is set during World War II, while Julie Berry’s *The Passion of Dolssa* is set in the 1200s. Frances Hardinge’s *The Lie Tree* is partly fantasy but also partly history, and it is set in the late 1800s when people were fascinated with the kinds of things that Charles Darwin thought and wrote about. The only contemporary book is Nicola Yoon’s *The Sun Is Also a Star*, which is set in New York City and is about two immigrant teenagers—one from Jamaica and one from Korea. The one from Jamaica is scheduled for deportation on the night of the story, which makes this book as up-to-date as the six o’clock news hour. The sixth book, *Scythe* by Neal Shusterman, makes a giant leap in time. It is a futuristic piece of science fiction.

We hope you will enjoy our reviews so much that you will be tempted to go out and find the books, not only for yourselves and for your students but also for your fellow teachers of history and social studies.

*The Lie Tree*


This old-fashioned (mid-1800s) supernatural mystery set in Britain has a modern feminist heroine, 14-year-old Faith Sunderly, the daughter of Reverend Erasmus Sunderly and his wife, Myrtle. When the book opens, the family, which includes Faith’s six-year-old brother, named Howard, plus Uncle Miles, her mother’s brother, is on a passenger boat leaving from Kent to move to the island of Vane. There is a heavy rainstorm, and Faith’s mother is offending all of the other passengers by putting their mountain of luggage—and making Faith sit on it—under the only bit of shelter on the deck of the boat.

Faith’s usual job is to watch over her brother (five other brothers had already died). At first, her main job appears to be keeping Howard from using his left hand. For his writing lessons, she even has to make him wear a shirt with the left sleeve sewn to...
the body of the shirt. Myrtle insists that Howard is not left-handed but “just in a phase” because at the time, “Left-handedness was seen as ill-mannered and defective, even a little twisted and unsavory” (258). Myrtle is afraid that a left-handed Howard would be excluded from the high levels of society, which she seems to live for.

Uncle Miles turns out to be one of several villains in the story. In their hometown of Kent, Reverend Sunderly had been not only a highly respected clergyman but also a famous naturalist and collector of fossils. One of Faith’s happiest early memories was finding an interesting fossil on a beach. She had been photographed and interviewed as a precocious child, already showing “the talents” of her father. But as Faith sadly learns, her father had altered a sea shell to make the special fossil that he placed on a beach so that Faith would find it. He knew it would get more press if it were found by an innocent child, rather than by him.

Faith and her brother, Howard, think they are going to the island of Vane because her father is needed to help in a significant “dig,” but actually they are leaving Kent because he has been disgraced by the uncovering of dubious archeological “tricks.” Uncle Miles has arranged their move to the island by convincing the men doing the dig that Reverend Sunderly’s experience and skills could be helpful. However, the men are not really digging for fossils but instead for treasure that pirates are rumored to have hidden in the nearby sea caves.

Even before they get to the island, Faith suspects that her father is in some kind of trouble, so in the confusion of the move, she takes the opportunity to snoop into some of his personal papers, which she then hides in the bottom of their snake’s cage. On page 7, readers are told that there was a “hunger for knowledge” in Faith, but girls are not “supposed to be hungry . . . their minds were supposed to be satisfied with a slim diet. . . . A few stale lessons from tired governesses.” However, that was not enough for Faith, who found a “delicious poisonous pleasure” in stealing knowledge from all kinds of sources and about all kinds of things.

Faith, and her parents, soon learn that they are not welcome by the townspeople on the island of Vane. In fact, Faith’s father is killed almost immediately, and then the town refuses to let him be buried in their churchyard cemetery because his killers set it up to look like a suicide, and anyone who has committed suicide is “unholy.” On the night of their arrival, Faith’s father had surprised Faith by asking for her help in taking something to one of the seaside caves, which Faith had seen from her perch on the luggage as they sailed into the island’s harbor. Faith’s father needed her to guide him—he had to concentrate on rowing the boat—into the biggest of the caves and then to help him bring in a mysterious bundle, which turns out to be “The Lie Tree.” This mysterious “tree” is painted as a real tree on the British book cover, but on the US book cover, it is represented by a partially peeled apple with enigmatic words about love and forgiveness scratched inside the peelings. These words are never fully explained, but they tie in with the mysteriously heavy bundle that on their first night, Faith and her father had hidden in the sea cave. He made Faith keep their lamp covered so there was only a smidgeon of light, which was never allowed to shine on what he called the “The Mendacity Tree.” It must have been more of a bush than a tree, but the symbolic image of a tree is important to the story for reminding readers of such symbols as the apple that Adam and Eve bit into from the “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.” The idea of the “Mendacity Tree” is that if someone feeds the tree a lie, especially one that people would like to believe, then the tree will, in turn, grow a new little fruit that when eaten will provide a new lie to be shared with the community. Faith discovers that the community members are more than happy to help the tree grow other “untruths.” (APN)

**March: Book Three**

March: Book Three is the final book in a trilogy of graphic novels that tell the story of Congressman John Lewis and his participation in the 1960s protest marches in the American South. The book starts with the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham on September 15, 1963, and ends on August 6, 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the 1965 Voting Rights Act. This did not mean that the story was over, but as Lewis wrote:

At the signing ceremony that afternoon in the Capitol—in the shadow of Abraham Lincoln—I felt DIFFERENT. I was deeply moved, yes, but I felt something change, something SHIFT. That day was the end of a very long road. It was the last day of the movement as I knew it.

Andrew Aydin is a co-author who has worked with John Lewis for several years and composed his master’s thesis at Georgetown University on the history and impact of The Montgomery Story. The idea of writing Lewis’s story as a graphic novel came to him after learning how Congressman Lewis, as a teenager, had been deeply touched by the 1950s comic book Martin Luther King and The Montgomery Story.

Aydin and Lewis collaborated on what turned out to be a trilogy, with the illustrations done by Nate Powell, who was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1978. He graduated from the School of Visual Arts in 2000 and was recruited by Lewis and Aydin because of the skill he had already shown by winning an Eisner Award, two Ignatz Awards, and four YALSA Great Graphic Novels for Teens awards. Aydin and Lewis made a good choice when they invited Powell into their partnership as shown by the fact that the March trilogy book has been so highly honored, we didn’t have space to list all of the awards it has won.

As an adult reviewer, not accustomed to reading graphic novels, I was amazed at the book’s efficiency. I loved being able to look at a drawing and immediately see the mood of the person speaking, as well as of the listeners. As a side note, I was also surprised to see an occasional swear word, and even more disturbing statements (including one from President Lyndon Johnson), that in a different kind of book would have brought cries for censorship. But since the statements were being quoted from real-life characters, readers seemed to accept them, not as an author’s invention but instead as an author’s true account.

I was also happily surprised at the variety in the format of the pages. Instead of being divided into regular boxes, as with pages in a comic book, these pages were wildly different in design. Some were basically black with white print, while others were white with black print and maybe a couple of box-like shapes that provided variety. A few pages were plain and simple, having only a single or maybe two drawings, supplemented with a few words. As expected, quotes from the characters were connected to the speakers in the standard fashion, but occasionally these lines would be drawn in a lightning shape to emphasize something shocking. Also, some of the statements that were from public news announcements would be attached to a drawing of a radio, a telephone, or a church tower to show its origin. If information needed to be presented by the author, rather than by one of the characters, then the message would be printed in a couple of lines on the page with no frame around it. When something really horrible was happening, the message might be printed in big capital letters as with the word THWACK (in the middle of page 175), which appeared in black letters on a white swath that was shaped like leftover light from a rifle swishing through the air as its owner clubbed a protester.

If you want to teach the book (either just Book Three or the whole series) in a class, you can go online and find many discussion ideas as well as back-up news stories, but you might also want to invite students who are interested in art to analyze the book from a design standpoint. Study the pages and see what items stand out on each page. Why do they stand out? Journalism students who are accustomed to fitting the school newspaper into predetermined page layouts will probably be fascinated to see how many different page layouts they can count. Other students might want to list non-standard spellings and explain why they are there, while someone else might make a list of symbols that were used. For example, some of the marchers carried and waved toothbrushes as a symbol that they had come to the march prepared to go to jail. In a different kind of symbol, a highly educated and well-to-do African American took off his suit and
2016 Honor List of Prize-Winning YA Books

tie and dressed in overalls to show that he identified with the farm hands who were marching. (APN)

**The Passion of Dolssa**  

*The Passion of Dolssa* is about the peasants of Provençal in Southern France. These are the same peasants who are honored in France's national anthem, "La Marseillaise," which tells about the storming of the Bastille in Paris. They also produced the troubadour poets and the artistic movement known as impressionism made famous by Cezanne and others. Provençal became part of the Kingdom of France in 1271. The language of Provençal is called "langue d'Oc" ("oc" means "yes").

During the 12th and 13th centuries St. Francis of Assisi founded the Franciscan order, which was dedicated to living the simple life of poverty that Jesus and his apostles had lived. Rather than seeing the role of Jesus as a judge and captain of the Armies of Heaven, the Franciscan Order saw Jesus in terms of his compassion, empathy, humility, and suffering. These are qualities that women could relate to, and many women became healers and mystics, taking vows, leading religious lives of prayer and meditation, having visions and visitations, and sometimes performing healings and other miracles. They practiced seclusion and wanted no husband but Jesus at a time when women's only chance for success was thought to be through marriage. Sometimes these mystics developed their own followings and were embraced by the Church and even sainted, but others were executed because the Church felt that any woman who claimed to have divine inspiration and visions was usurping authority belonging to the patriarchy of the Church.

In 13th-century Provençal, there were many mystics and *bons oms* (good men) and *bonas femnas* (good women), and *amicx de Dieu* (friends of God) with strong beliefs in God and in the teachings of Jesus, but with no desire to engage in the Sacraments, the Ceremonies, or the preachings and biblical interpretations of the Catholic Church. While the terms *bon ome* and *bona femna* were applied to the rich and the influential such as nobles and landowners, the terms were also applied to holy men and women. The *amicx de Dieu* dressed and ate simply and spent much of their time in prayers, greetings, rituals, and spreading the gospel. In Provençal, they were highly respected and were often asked by others to present prayers and blessings in their behalf. The Catholic Church was so certain that they were an organized religion that they gave them the name of “Cathars,” but the Cathars never existed as a secret and organized religion dedicated to overthrowing the Catholic Church. Such a concept would have been foreign to the peasants of Provençal, who were farmers and independent in nature. The Church had already been criticized for its wealth and ostentation, which was in sharp contrast to the humble ways of the peasants. Also, the Church despised the notion that holiness and reverence could be found in one's own neighborhood without the help of a priest or the holy sacraments of the Church.

Many of the concepts and references in *The Passion of Dolssa* are legitimate. Count Raimon VI, Bishop Raimon de Fauga, and Prior Pons de Saint-Gilles are names borrowed from history. The terms *heretic* and *heresy* were coined to refer to believers of any unorthodox or unsanctioned religious ideas. During this time, Provincia (the name later changed to Provençal) was a hotbed of heresy. In 1204, Dominic de Guzmán visited Provincia and was so horrified that he founded the “Order of Friars-Preachers” (later called the Dominican Order) in Toulouse specifically to combat heresy, and Pope Innocent III placed pressure on Raimon VI, the Count of Toulouse, to purge his lands of heretics. The resulting Crusade occurred in 1209. This was the first holy war in which Christians were guaranteed salvation for killing other Christians. The Inquisitors were allowed to use torture to obtain confessions, but they never burned anyone. Rather, they would recommend such actions to the lords and their bailiffs (bayles), who carried out the punishments in fear of offending the Church and thereby losing their lands and positions of respect.

In this well-written book, Dolssa de Stigata is a mystic, who like many of the mystics of 13th-century Provençal has healing powers and visions...
from God, and is charismatic enough to have a following of believers. She considers herself married to Christ and that with his help, she can get along perfectly well without the sacraments, the ceremonies, or priestly advice. For this, she was branded as a heretic and ordered to be burned at the stake. Her mother was burned first, and then just when she too was to be pushed into the fire, a mysterious man creeps up behind Dolssa, cuts her bonds, and tells her “Run, run!” which she does. She is chased and hunted and after some close calls is found lying in a riverside close to death. Her rescuer is a wily, clever, and witty 18-year-old peasant girl named Botille Flasucra. Botille is the tavern wench and matchmaker for the village of Bajas, where she takes Dolssa and hides her from Friar Lucien, who is a member of the newly founded Dominican Order. Several other members of the Dominican Order join in the hunt and are assisted by Count Raiomon VII, the Count of Tolosa, and Senhor Hugo de Miramont, a knight. Spoiler Alert: It was Senhor Hugo who early in the book, while everyone’s attention was on Dolssa’s burning mother, ran up and cut Dolssa’s bonds while whispering “Run, run!” (DLFN)

Salt to the Sea

Ruta Sepetys writes historical fiction. Her Between Shades of Gray, about the beginning of World War II, was on the 2011 Honor List, while Salt to the Sea portrays a time much closer to the end of the war. In 1941, Germany invaded Russia, and for the next four years the Germans and the Russians committed unspeakable atrocities against each other and against innocent civilians who got in their way. Closer to the end of the war, Hitler was not only exterminating Jews but was also expanding his list of undesirables who were being imprisoned and killed, while at the same time, Stalin was killing many of the people in Poland, the Ukraine, and the Baltic region.

The story begins in the winter of 1945 when the Nazi Reich is collapsing in East Prussia, and people are trapped between the Germans and the Russians. Sepetys tells about a group of 15 or so refugees who are making a long walk in hopes of boarding a ship named the Wilhelm Gustloff, which they have been told is waiting to rescue them if they just get to the port on the Baltic Sea. In this Canterbury Tales-type of story, readers get acquainted with a smaller set of the characters in this group. Nearly everyone in the group avoids using their own names in hopes that their anonymity will help protect them. Fifteen-year-old Emilia Stožek is known as “the Polish girl.” She has no papers and is pregnant from having been raped. She meets “the knight,” whose real name is Florian Beck. “The nurse” is Joana Vilkas from Lithuania. She goes from person to person offering whatever help she can from the contents of her leather bag. Readers are never given the name of the old man who is known simply as “the shoe poet.”

Florian Beck is a young Prussian officer who has excellent skills in restoring (and counterfeiting) art for the evil German Commander Koch. Florian is using his connections with Koch to help pretend to be a German officer. He has been wounded, and when the nurse peels off his shirt, she finds it stuck to his body by congealed blood. His body is infected and, in fact, is still harboring two pieces of shrapnel that need to be taken out. There is no anesthetic because the little bit of liquor that she has must be used to sterilize the wound. The Polish girl wraps her handkerchief around some snow, which she uses as a cold compress on Florian’s forehead. She also finds a stick for Florian to bite down on while Joana performs the surgery.

The “shoe poet” got his name when he looked at Joana’s shoes and after telling her that “shoes always tell the story” (14), he observed that Joana’s boots are expensive and well made, which means she comes from a wealthy family. But they are of an old style, made for an older woman, which means they belonged to her mother. And the fact that Joana’s mother had sacrificed her boots means that Joana is loved. And the fact that Joana’s mother is not with Joana means that Joana is sad.

The little group first got acquainted with the “shoe poet” when he noticed that the heel on Florian’s boot had been tampered with. Florian
confesses to having hidden something in the boot, but he doesn’t tell the others that he was really an artist and an archivist for the great art collection called “The Amber Room.” When he found that no one was paying any attention to the careful records he had been making for years, he stole a small amber sculpture, which was thought to be Hitler’s favorite, and after hiding it in his boot, disguised himself as a German officer and joined the refugees walking to the great ship.

Our refugees make it to the ship and manage to get on board with something like 10,000 other people, but before it could leave the port, the ship was struck by three Russian missiles. When the ship sank, more than 9,000 people perished in the icy Baltic Sea. Statistically, this was quite likely the deadliest maritime disaster in history, but few people know about it even though the ship still lies off the coast of Poland, where it is close enough to the surface that the letters spelling out the name of the ship can still be seen through the deep and icy water. Sepetys wrote *Salt to the Sea* in hopes that it would preserve the memory of the forgotten and the drowned. (DLFN and APN)

**Scythe (Arc of a Scythe Series #1)**
Grades 9 and up.
ISBN 9781442472426.
Winner of the Printz Award, YALSA Top Ten, School Library Journal, and Publisher’s Weekly “Best Books” for teens.

What if you had the power of life and death over your peers? What if you had this power over everyone around you? What if it was your career and moral responsibility to mete out death to a certain quota of people on a regular basis, and it was your responsibility to select them? Would you knowingly choose this path in life? Would you survive it?

In a not-too-distant future, our world has conquered all diseases and fatal injuries. Old age is no longer a concern; in fact, people can “reset” themselves back to their prime years of early adulthood when they start to feel a little worn out. Nanotechnology has created tiny repair devices that can bring a damaged body quickly back from the brink, and all disease has been eliminated. But with no figurative Grim Reaper to control population, the world must invent an army of literal Grim Reapers (Scythes) to control the surplus population, an act they refer to as “gleaning.” These Scythes are rigorously trained in the art of killing and free to apply whatever system they devise to decide who will next fall victim to their fatal attention. Surprisingly, they act not out of a fascination for death, but in fact, just the opposite, they kill out of a sense of duty to mankind.

When Rowan Damisch, a teenager on the outer fringe of high school society, fearlessly confronts Scythe Faraday, who has come for his school’s star quarterback, he earns the Scythe’s respect to such a degree that he invites the young man to apprentice with him. Faraday is also impressed by Citra Terranova, a young woman whose sense of justice and capacity for compassion make her just the sort of person a Scythe should be, one who loathes death and killing so much so as to glean selectively, judiciously. He convinces the teens that they should accept his challenge because the rules say that their own families will be immune from gleaning as long as a relative is a Scythe. The Scythe congress has given Faraday one position to fill, and his plan is to give one of the two the job after a year of training with and competing against each other. He makes it clear from the beginning that the person who abhors killing the most is the person most likely to succeed.

The Scythe vocation is a bundle of contradictions, and so is Faraday. He is a kind and thoughtful killer who faithfully follows the mandated Scythe lifestyle of austerity and humility. Faraday meticulously strives for absolute justice in his gleaning, choosing his victims according to statistics from the time when people could still die a natural death. Drink and drive, for example, reveling in your immortality, and Faraday is likely to take you out for good. He wants to make death as quick and painless as possible, but at the same time, his victims must know they are about to die, and the fate of their families can come down to how fatalistically they accept their impending demise. As the two apprentice Scythes come to know Faraday, they (and the reader) will find his counterintuitive approach to killing and his monastic lifestyle both interesting and ironic.
The ingenious plot premise will have readers contemplating the quality of a human experience in which life is neither precious nor treasured. If we need not value our lives, how can we savor them? The author uses the example of art from before the "post mortal" times, back when art imitated life with all its passion and chaos. Viewing this ancient art is a passionate experience for the teens. Art at the time of the story, however, is bland and boring. This begs a number of questions about this imagined future: Will people take life too much for granted in this post mortal society? Can human beings truly be given the power over life and death without at some point crossing into abuse of this power? Will wanton killing/gleaning result? Faraday, Rowan, and Citra are about to find out. (JB Jr.)

The Sun Is Also a Star

We've all heard of things happening in a "New York Minute," but in Yoon's book the action happens in a "New York Day," which is much longer but still leaves readers' heads spinning at just how much can be crowded into this one day. The two main characters are Daniel Ja Ho Bae, a Korean American who is on his way for a college entrance interview, and Natasha Kingsley, a 16-year-old girl from Jamaica who is on her way for one last try at getting her family's deportation orders changed (they are scheduled to leave that night).

During this one day, Daniel and Natasha become star-crossed lovers. Daniel is “Italian-opera-singer good” at Norebang (Korean karaoke), while Natasha is tone deaf, that is, “Any note she does hit is purely coincidental” (168). However, they are both dealing with their immigrant parents' expectations. Daniel is applying to Yale (“second-best school”) specifically because his older brother, Charles, went to Harvard (“best school”). Daniel is jealous of Charles and is secretly pleased that Charles has been asked to take two years off from Harvard because of bad grades. Their mother expresses her frustration with “Why you grades so bad? They kick you out? Why they kick you out? Why not make you stay and study more?”

Eight years ago, Natasha's father came to America two years ahead of his wife and Natasha (who was eight at the time, but is now 16) because he wanted to become a Broadway actor. In his frustration at not quite making it, he began drinking and recently received a DUI, which is why the family, including a little brother who was born in New York, are scheduled for deportation on the night of the story. Natasha had earlier appealed their deportation orders, but her lawyer (Jeremy Fitzgerald, “the fixer”) was on his way to a date with his paralegal assistant at the time of the hearing and was hit by a drunk driver in a BMW. This means Natasha's case was never formally heard, hence the family is undocumented, in spite of Natasha's frequent visits to Immigration Services.

These two unfortunate teenagers don't know it, but they are heading for the same big New York skyscraper. However, they dawdle for a few minutes in Times Square, which is described as a “kind of hell . . . a fiery pit of flickering neon signs advertising all seven deadly sins” (49). They both wander into the “Second Coming” record store, where Natasha sees Rob (her ex-boyfriend) making out with Kelly (the girl he cheated with while he was still Natasha's boyfriend). Rob and Kelly are trying to “eat each other's faces” when Kelly's hand sneaks out and snatches a record, and then another record, and hides them in her “very bulky, perfect-for-stealing jacket” (53). Daniel, who is all dressed up, even wearing a red tie, happens to be standing close to Natasha as she watches this scene unfold. He asks Natasha if “Sticky Fingers” is a friend, and she responds that she's her boyfriend's girlfriend. Daniel responds, “Great pair, a cheater and a thief” (53).

Natasha asks Daniel why he's wearing a suit and tie, and he says it's because he has an interview with someone from Yale. They part, but a little later, Daniel sees Natasha stopped at a cross-walk. She is wearing super-pink, noise-cancelling headphones and swaying to her music. Just as the light turns green, she steps out into the street where a car runs a red light. Daniel yanks Natasha by the arm, saving her life but breaking her headphones.
They separate once again, but that wouldn’t be much of a story, so they meet again and readers learn that *The Sun Is Also a Star* when Daniel the poet has real conversations with Natasha, the data scientist. Poets and scientists don’t think the same way. Scientists are rigorous and objective. Poets are playful and emotional. *The Sun Is Also a Star* is about the inner-dependence of the arts and the sciences. On page 1, Yoon quotes Carl Sagan as saying that “If you want to make an apple pie from nothing at all, you have to start with the Big Bang . . . . You need chemistry and biology. For a really good apple pie, you need the arts.” And “For an apple pie that can last for generations, you need the printing press and the Industrial Revolution and maybe even a poem.” (DLFN and APN)

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 executive director of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE. These three, along with the late Ken Donelson, are coauthors of *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*, now in its ninth edition.

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**How to Survive Your Father’s Death**

“I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be.”

T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

Focus on your father’s meanness, insensitivity, entitlement. The overall absence of caring.

Remember when he punished you without considering what you were going through, my god, you were a teenager, didn’t that count for something?

Uncover his wild youth, his betrayal of one girlfriend, then another, then a life partner, then his series of lovers, and finally what he did that made your mother love him. His seeing into the life in her and defying those who judged him.

Connect the dots of these seemingly random passions to draw the shape of his character. Fill in this outline with neon highlighters in your least favorite colors.

Remember at least one time when you were alone with him. (Make sure it’s a time when you remember clearly how much you had looked forward to being with him.)

Imagine what you thought he would be like when no one else was around—concerned for your smallest feelings, gently humorous, making things seem alright no matter how bad, and entirely focused on you, only you, no one but you.

Then make a two-column list with those wishes on the right and images from memory on the left: his cell phone, his assurance that “the problems you have are something everybody feels,” your folding inside yourself, his acting like silence was fine, if that’s what you wanted, his excusing himself to “take care of something.” The not knowing when he would come back.

Take detailed notes on the first signs of his illness, on how he seemed even more irritable than usual, got angry at the slightest interruption, until he spent more and more time alone, staring into space, exhaling deeply, consuming his silence at the dinner table, drinking his own absence as if he couldn’t wait for it to be gone.

How you assured him, when he cried, when he was afraid, wasn’t ready to die, that “everybody feels that way.” And then his leaving the room, and your feeling that it was okay if that’s what he wanted. And how you took care of a few things and felt much better once they were resolved.

Repeat until you fall asleep: “It’s easier this way. It’s better this way.”

—Thomas C. Crochunis

Thomas C. Crochunis (TCCroc@ship.edu) is an associate professor of English at Shippensburg University. While most of his creative writing is dramatic, his recent poetry has emerged from collaborating with his wife, Madeline Brown, on creative writing workshops for local teens. He has been a member of NCTE—with some lapses—since he began teaching in the early 1980s.