Meeting the Standards: Criteria for Great YA Literature

"So many books, so little time," goes one adage. Those of us who read in the field know that hundreds of books are published for adolescents each year. How can we determine which of those books to purchase for our classroom libraries? Which might be good for classroom study?

Dr. Ted Hipple, a leader in the field of YA literature, has suggested some criteria for evaluating YA literature. Since this issue is devoted to how we can help our students meet standards, it seems fitting to report those here and provide some examples of recent YA books that meet the stated criteria.

Criteria: The book beats others at the common games: vocabulary, character development, and authorial moral concern. From the dozens of books I read this spring, the following immediately sprang to mind when I thought of books with rich language, three-dimensional characters, and themes that explore rough territory with honesty.

Becoming Joe DiMaggio. Maria Testa. Candlewick, 2002, 51 pp., $13.99, ISBN 0-7636-1537-4. The summer of 1936 is a magical time for Papa Angelo. The Yankees' new center fielder promises that the team has a bright future. The birth of a new grandson holds the same promise. Joseph Paul, named for that nearly mythical figure of a ballplayer, Joe Di Maggio, spends many summers listening to the play by play on the radio. Despite the troubles in his own family and the looming threat of war with Japan, Joseph Paul and his grandfather find magic sitting and listening to the ball games. This testament to the importance of family is another novel in poetry, part of a growing trend in literature for adolescents. Team this with John H. Ritter's *Choosing Up Sides* to continue on the baseball and family aspects of the story. Take a chance and offer other novels in prose poems such as *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse. Another interesting play might be to match this book to another tale of World War II such as *Under the Blood Red Sun* by Graham Salisbury.

Rat. Jan Cheripko. Boyds Mills, 2002, 201 pp., $15.95, ISBN 1-59078-034-5. Jeremy Chandler is known as a gym rat. He spends hours hanging out in the gym shooting baskets. Born with a deformed right arm, Jeremy has had to overcome tremendous obstacles. None of those, though, is as devastating as what faces him after he testifies against the basketball coach accused of molesting a cheerleader. He is no longer a gym rat but a rat fink in the eyes of the players on the team. Jeremy learns that telling the truth is not always easy. An interesting pairing for *Rat* might be *The Moves Make the Man* by Bruce Brooks. It, too, explores, the nature of truth.

Simon Says. Elaine Marie Alphin. Harcourt, 2002, 258 pp., $17.00, ISBN 0-15-216355-7. Ever since he was a young boy, Charles Weston displayed an incredible talent for painting. Charles's artwork is not typical; he paints what he sees in his imagination. His images go beyond the observable to explore what is beneath the surface. For years, Charles searched for acceptance of his vision. As a teen, he has learned instead to hide his work from everyone. Perhaps at Whitman School for the Arts he can find someone who will share his vision and appreciate his talent. Charles hopes that teen author Graeme Brandt will be that person. After all, Graeme's first

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book, *The Eye of the Storm*, published when he was a mere freshman, speaks to Charles on a visceral level. The relationship between Charles and Graeme, however, goes very much wrong. Instead of becoming Charles's savior, Graeme leads Charles into tragic consequences. Alphin's debut novel, *Counterfeit Son*, probed disquieting issues; this new novel follows suit by examining the inner lives of gifted adolescents. Chris Lynch's Printz Honor Book, *Freewill*, focuses on another teen tormented in part by his creative ability. Mature, gifted readers will find both books a challenging read.

Tree Girl. T. A. Barron. Philomel, 2001, 138 pp., $14.99, ISBN 0-399-23457-8. Anna is drawn to the forbidden. Her guardian, the cranky fisherman Mellwyn, will not permit her to enter the forest that borders his home. Yet Anna finds the lure of the woods irresistible. When she succumbs to the temptation, Anna finds friendship in a strange green-eyed bear named Sash who is not what he appears to be. Though this novel is slim, the richness of the detail is typical of the careful crafting readers expect from the author of The Lost Years of Merlin Epic. Smells of the mossy forest floor waft from the pages of this enchanting story and mingle with the crystalline images of a young girl who discovers her true nature and her true home. Natural tie-ins to this novel are Barron's tales of the young Merlin. For something a little different, ask students to compare and contrast the imagery of the trees in this book with those in *Drawing Lessons* by Tracy Mack or *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson.

Criteria: The book has classroom usefulness. In addition to locating good books for students to read independently, we always are on the lookout for books that can assist us in meeting curricular needs. The books that follow can help us teach the objectives of the English curriculum. Consider using one or more of the following in lieu of a more traditional title.

Quiver. Stephanie Spinner. Knopf, 2002, 160 pp., $15.95, ISBN 0-375-81489-2. Here is the story of Atalanta, gifted hunter and swiftest mortal alive. Abandoned by her father, a king, Atalanta has grown up free to pursue her talents. Now the king has demanded her return. Atalanta is also told she must select a suitor to marry so that she can produce an heir to the king's throne. Determined she will not marry, Atalanta devises a test of all would-be suitors: they must defeat her in a foot race. Those who lose the test must forfeit their lives. A conspiracy between the gods allows Hippomenes to win the hand of Atalanta. However, the story does not end with their marriage. Hippomenes and Atalanta are changed into lions and forced to live as wild beasts for the rest of their lives. What sets this retelling of the myth apart from others is Spinner's skill as a storyteller. All of the elements of the oral tradition are present in this slim novel. An interesting addition is the inclusion of several conversations between various gods as they observe Atalanta and interfere in her life. Suggest Donna Jo Napoli's variations of folktales such as *Lazy Jack* or *Spinners* for readers who enjoy this genre.

Seeing the Blue Between: Advice and Inspiration for Young Poets. Compiled by Paul Janeczko. Candlewick, 2002, 132 pp., $17.99, ISBN 0-7636-0881-5. The title says it all. Here is a compilation of letters from poets who write for children and young adults. Their letters contain advice about writing poetry, about looking at the world through poets' eyes, about becoming a better writer of poetry. Following each letter are poems for readers to enjoy. Kalli Dakos talks about the inspiration for a poem about a potato chip and peanut butter sandwich. Kristine O'Connell George, whose poem provides the title for this book, talks about her transition from keeping a scientific notebook to a writer's notebook. Poetry, she says, is full of astonishing discoveries about the world around each of us. Lilian Moore includes a poem entitled "Poets Go Wishing" that compares poetry to casting a line for fish. For would-be poets and even for those more resistant to the genre, this collection of letters and poems offers words of wisdom that teachers will find a welcome addition to a classroom study of the genre. For older readers, pair this with *Poetspeak*, also edited by Paul Janeczko. Another excellent compan-

ion collection might be *The Place My Words Are Looking For*.

Trout and Me. Susan Shreve. Knopf, 2002, 144 pp., $15.95, ISBN 0-375-81219-9. Ben, a fifth grader with attention deficit disorder, feels isolated at his school. Enter Trout, a new student, also diagnosed with ADD. Despite a bumpy start, Ben and Trout become friends quickly. The two boys manage to get into trouble at school, and teachers feel it would be best to separate the boys. Ben decides to fight for Trout and to stand up to his parents, teachers, and peers. In a remarkable act of courage, Ben helps others to see Trout for the troubled boy he is. Finding books for intermediate age readers is a tough task. Some are either too childish or too mature in subject matter. Shreve strikes just the right note with her novel, a skillful blend of humor and pathos. Combine this book with Louis Sachar's *There's a Boy in the Girl's Bathroom* and Jack Gantos's books about Joey Pigza, *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* and *Joey Pigza Loses Control* for text sets.

Criteria: The book reflects real life and has artistry in detail. Books that contain a forthright portrayal of life out there in the real world are invaluable. Sometimes the reflections of real life are painful. Occasionally, they contain good humor. Here are books that represent both ends of the emotional spectrum.

America. E. R. Frank. Atheneum, 2002, 242 pp., $18.00, ISBN 0-689-84729-7. [Due to language and sexual content, this is most certainly a book for your more mature readers.] America has seen quite a bit of trouble and pain in his 15 years. People that he trusted betrayed him. Family abandoned him. Now, at Ridgeway Hospital, a doctor attempts to help America put his life back together. Frank's examination of the rescue of a lost teen may disturb and challenge readers. However, it is the hope she holds out to readers, the hope that they can surmount obstacles and deal with life's tragedies, that ultimately will assure teens. Consider pairing this with *I Am the Cheese* by Robert Cormier or *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphey* by Margaret Peterson Haddix.

ChaseR. Michael J. Rosen. Candlewick, 2002, 152 pp., $15.99, ISBN 0-7636-1538-2. Told entirely through e-mail letters, this novel shares the story of 14-year-old Chase Riley. Chase and his parents have moved from the city to a rural community about an hour's drive away. Life in the country is a far cry from the world Chase has inhabited before this summer. However, Internet access and e-mail keep him in touch with his pals in the city. Chase relates all of the exciting action in his small community in a series of newsletters to his friends. As school opens in the fall, Chase discovers more about living in the country. Hunters cross his family's property in search of deer and other game. Chase becomes passionate about the subject when one of his dogs is accidentally wounded by a hunter. Breezy and sharp, Rosen captures the voice of a young man separated from some of his peers by distance and other peers by interests. The unusual format of e-mail makes readers feel intimately connected to Chase and his family and friends. Paula Danziger and Ann M. Martin's *P.S. Longer Letter Later* and the sequel *Snail Mail No More* are perfect go-togethers for this uniquely formatted novel.

Jinx. Margaret Wild. Walker, 2002, 228 pp., $16.95, ISBN 0-8027-8830-0. Jen is the reliable type. She does well in school, follows the rules at home, and takes good care of her sister. Jen becomes famous when her boyfriend, Charlie, is killed in a car accident that might have been partly suicidal. Then Ben, a new love, dies in a fight. Suddenly, Jen is Jinx, someone to avoid. Can she ever learn to trust another young man? How can she survive the hurt of losing two people so close to her? These and other questions are explored in this novel related in a series of poems. One of the trends we have seen in the past decade or so is the proliferation of the novel told in poetry. This genre has won critical acclaim (a Newbery for *Out of the Dust*) and has found an audience in the YA community of readers. *Jinx* is a welcome addition to this trend. Pair it with Mel

Glenn's *Foreign Exchange* for an interesting comparison of how the genre can be used to tell very different stories.

Never So Green. Tim Johnston. Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2002, 240 pp., $18.00, ISBN 0-374-35509-6. Tex Donleavy is facing a blissful summer until his father announces that, since he and his new girlfriend are going off on a trip, Tex must spend a few weeks with his mother and her new husband and family. Tex actually comes to grudgingly admire his stepfather and stepsister, especially when they take time to help him become a better ballplayer. Despite his deformed right hand, Tex begins to compete in Little League. He is finding success in many arenas this summer until a searing discovery shatters his illusions about his new family. Books that feature sports such as baseball may be one way to bring a renewed interest in reading to fans of the sports. However, to call books such as *Never So Green* or *Striking Out* by Will Weaver sports books is to relegate them to a lesser status. In these books, baseball and other sports serve as metaphors, as vehicles to not only relate story but to tell readers about how the lessons learned on the field apply in real life, too.

Up on Cloud Nine. Anne Fine. Delacorte, 2002, 151 pp., $15.95, ISBN 0-385-73009-8. Ian's best friend Stolly is in the hospital hooked up to machines in a struggle for his life. Only Ian and his family suspect that the accidental fall that placed Stolly in the hospital may not have totally been an accident. Stolly takes chances with his life, one he thinks is too miserable to bear despite Ian's attempts to persuade him otherwise. Ian hovers near Stolly's bed, recording anecdotes from the past as he attempts to piece together the puzzle that is his best friend. Fine's previous books such as *Alias Madame Doubtfire* and *Flour Babies* have examined family dynamics. This is familiar territory for her, one she explores honestly. Ian's recollections about his friend Stolly also help him understand more about his own family. This short book is perfect for intermediate and younger middle school readers but contains more than enough "meat" for older students as well. Students might enjoy doing a comparison of Fine's story about Madame Doubtfire to the movie starring Robin Williams. A good book tie-in is *Tangerine* by Bloor.

A Final Word about Words

Take 26 letters and combine them in hundreds of thousands of words and you have a story. Combine them one way and they might tell a funny story; another combination could result in a tragedy. Occasionally, the combination results in a story that is both. The stories I discuss in each column are the result of those same combinations. Just as you can have different genres and types of stories with each new combination, so each new combination might change the audience for the book. As always, I encourage you to preview the books I mention and determine which are the best ones to add to your collections. There is no one-size-fits-all book, one title that will meet the needs and interests of each middle school student. Teachers and librarians play an essential role in determining which books to share with which students. Take some time to read these and other books and share your passion for them with your students.

Look Who's Ten Years Old!

Voices from the Middle is celebrating its tenth anniversary this year. During its evolution from an inkling of an idea to a respected publication, it has represented the middle level teacher's unique perspective and influential position during this special time in kids' lives. Now the flagship journal for NCTE's newest and fastest growing section, readers find encouragement and insight from a diverse group of participants within middle school education. Look for special features that celebrate our growth and our pride in the coming year!