“You can't change how other people think and act, but you're in full control of you. When it comes down to it, the only question that matters is this: If nothing in the world ever changes, what type of man are you gonna be?”

—Stone, p. 152

It’s no secret that one of the appeals of young adult literature is that it explores questions that matter to youth. Whether it is exploring what it means to be a monster in Walter Dean Myers’s *Monster*, how to cope with mental illness and addiction in Laurie Halse Anderson’s *The Impossible Knife of Memory*, what homelessness can look like in Jennifer Richard Jacobson’s *Paper Things*, or how to react to injustice in Nic Stone’s *Dear Martin*, youth read these books to learn more about the world around them and to figure out who they’re gonna be. So, if you are a white girl who witnesses the mistreatment of black boys by boys who look like you, what type of woman are you gonna be? If you are a friend or family member who experiences the pain of losing someone you love because of hate and bigotry, what type of grown-up are you gonna be? If you are a young man mischaracterized due to the color of your skin, what type of man are you gonna be?

While these questions guide the characters in *Dear Martin*, they also have the potential to guide its readers. Surface questions such as “Who is Melo Taylor?” and “Why does Justyce end up in handcuffs?” are often posed by teachers, but these are not the questions that should be asked. In fact, teachers should not be posing the questions at all. Rather, students should be free to explore the powerful questions posed by the book itself and to formulate the questions that matter to them—the questions that help them determine who they’re gonna be.

**Inviting Questions through Explorations with Text**

Unfortunately, students are not often invited to ask their own questions. To put into perspective what a typical novel experience is for middle school students, Kirsteen, one of Sarah’s eighth grade students, describes her previous novel units:

> Throughout my English classes I have studied a series of novels. A lot of them were worksheet-based such as reading *A Long Way from Chicago* and *Holes*. I never really liked the worksheet-based learning while reading a book because it took the fun out of reading it. I couldn’t really enjoy the book because I knew at the end of the chapter I would have to do a worksheet. I thought the worksheets were silly because they would ask questions that we didn’t really care about. For example, when I read *A Long Way from Chicago*, we had to answer questions like comparing old prices to new prices today. We had to look up how much a mailbox was back then. These details were not important to us because that’s not what the book revolved around. Another book that was fully worksheet based was *My Brother Sam Is Dead*. There is not much to talk about because all we did was worksheets and took them for a grade. They were long worksheets. Lots of questions. This book was really hard to enjoy because after every chapter we had to do worksheets about it.

For students with experiences similar to Kirsteen’s, novel study in the ELA
classroom becomes drudgery—something to endure rather than enjoy. Four years ago, we were determined to create a framework designed to discourage trivial teacher-directed questions and encourage students to develop their own driving questions. But developing their own questions around texts is not a skill that comes readily to most middle school students because they have not had the opportunities to ask them. To scaffold this process, our framework begins by asking students to rotate through three anchor activities during the three weeks they read the novel: blogs, personal interviews, and social media. Here, we share our most recent iteration of the framework using Nic Stone’s *Dear Martin*.

**Blogs**

Our novel study required students to think about the text in three sections as they ventured through the anchor activities. Blogging about one section not only allowed students the interaction with multimodality—constructing a text that infused written components with links, video, recordings, and other authentic materials—but, it also permitted students to think critically about the text they were reading that week with regards to specific curiosities.

As students ventured through the weekly text, they had the freedom to construct a blog post related to their questions about many of the concepts occurring within the text. Students formulated their blog writings as a synthesis, pulling from both the novel and a piece of nonfiction text in efforts to make connections to real life. *Dear Martin* inspired students to create blogs such as “Racial Profiling is REAL,” “Racial Perceptions and Stereotypes,” and “Media’s Spin.”

**Personal Interviews**

Student groups also had the opportunity to interact with someone in real life who represented a voice from the fictional text. Prior to the interview—typically conducted at the end of the week—student groups collaborated with one another to research background knowledge on the person of interest, generate a series of questions related to both the research and the novel, plan how the group would present the questions, and perform technology checks so that the use of digital tools would not obstruct the interview process. Student groups who did not participate in the live-interview experience were required to watch the recording that the interview group uploaded to the class webpage.

This learning experience proved to be exceptionally powerful because students had the freedom to think critically about how fact and fiction may or may not always coincide. Additionally, students used this opportunity to ask pressing questions in safe spaces. Throughout this unit specifically, students who conducted their interview with a representative from our local Black Lives Matter organization also had a chance to listen to the perspective of the local police chief. By structuring this experience for students, it provided a means to understand perspectives and how perspectives play such a significant role in how everyone reads the world (Freire, 1970/1982).

**Social Media**

While each anchor presents a unique experience to the novel study, interacting with social media throughout the reading time frame seemed to create the most agency for our students because of our interactions with the author, Nic Stone. At the beginning of the three-week study, the first student group to work with social media established the accounts that the other groups continued to manage throughout our anchor experience. Social media platforms for this study included Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Blending social media into this study not only allowed students to construct authentic digital texts for a global audience beyond their peers, but it also permitted students to have the freedom to post material they thought would help make connections to the text. While some posts were strictly novel based, other posts floated outside of the novel in terms of articles, videos, infographics, student-created memes, and embedded songs.

What became the turning point for critical thought and student agency throughout the time that student groups interacted with these social media platforms was when author Nic Stone first liked and commented on a post. This made our classroom work more than just an assignment—it made learning real. Knowing that the author established a presence within the work we were formulating as a class increased its importance. Over time—and because of Nic’s presence—students grew comfortable in reaching out to her as a reference for their questions or clarifications as they navigated their own understandings of the text. For example, when the class erupted into a friendly debate over how to correctly pronounce Melo’s first name, Nic Stone’s voice enabled students to receive clarity from a primary source.

**In-Person Presentation**

Once students experienced all three anchor activities as well as completed the novel study, they ventured into
Moving toward Questions That Matter

We have found that when students have the opportunities to explore novels through a framework such as this, they have multiple opportunities to consider who they want to be by trying on the personas and participating vicariously through the characters’ experiences. Through the blogs, students make connections to real-world events, and through the lens of the characters in the novel, they are better able to understand the complexity of what they read in the news. Through the personal interviews, students gain insights into character motivations, and through the lens of these professionals, they are better able to understand the complexity of the story. And through social media, students weave in and out of current events and the story, making sense of the world with a little help from the author who serves as a guide to assist them as they grapple with the very real questions raised in the novel.

This year, the grappling was made even more visible by the face-to-face interaction students had with Nic in St. Louis. Here, they posed questions that demonstrated how actively they had read the novel. The questions dug much deeper than the surface level questions often posed to them by teachers, and Nic responded in kind by engaging in a give-and-take dialogue that valued the students as equals. Thus, through these experiences—the blogs, the interviews, the social media posts, and the dialogue—students began to ask questions that addressed the gaps in their understanding. This gap analysis inspired the beginning steps of the inquiry process as students ventured into wanting to learn more about the social topics they started to care more about.

Embodying What Matters

As we consider the impact this approach to teaching novels had on our students, we reflect upon our early years as English teachers, and we invite you to reflect upon where you’re at, where you’ve been, and who you want to be as a teacher of adolescents. We recognize that we’ve made some missteps along the way, and we recognize that many of those missteps are a result of who we’ve situated as mattering. If we focus on ease of grading, on multiple-choice tests, on canned programs, on doing what we’ve always done, we are signaling to our students that they are not the ones who matter—we are. And if they don’t matter, how are we going to help them discover who they’re gonna be?

We’ve presented this framework, not as a template, but rather as an approach that has helped motivate students to uncover the questions that matter to them as they consider and shape their own paths toward adulthood. Through its various iterations, with or without the opportunity to forge relationships with an author, our students have learned something about themselves as they studied the selected novel and engaged in the inquiry it inspired. For Charlotte (all names other than Kirrstein’s have been changed), who read Monster, she learned how important it is to be proud of her mixed heritage despite living in a monochromatic small town. For Liam, who read The Impossible Knife of Memory, he learned how to process his father’s experience with PTSD after coming back from Iraq when his family did not know exactly how to navigate such a tough situation. For Mia, who read Paper Things, she learned that homelessness is not just something that exists in bigger cities; it is an issue that even teenagers can help solve, thus, spurring her to create a school-wide campaign to inspire others to champion her cause. And for Kirrstein, who engaged in our most recent exploration of Dear Martin, she learned that she wants to share her own stories as an author herself.

By demonstrating to students that they matter, we
empower them to make decisions that matter to them. In this case, our students realized they can make an impact on the world when Nic posted pictures of their work on her personal Instagram page. Here, their work inspired conversation among people outside their small town, encouraging them to build upon this work and consider other social injustices. This experience permitted our students to think of themselves as change-makers rather than simple bystanders. This was demonstrated by projects such as bullying prevention and activism in professional sports created during the next semester’s Genius Hour. In addition, our change-makers pushed aside their personal stances on gun control in order to ask questions in the wake of the Parkland shooting to view other perspectives.

So now, we invite you to consider how this framework and the other novel lessons featured in this issue can inspire you. For while this issue encompasses literal novel lessons that have been created by teachers just like you, it also focuses on another meaning of novel—innovative lessons that capture the potential YA novels have to guide students toward who they’re gonna be. Our hope is that when we all respond to the challenge of designing innovative lessons, what was once novel becomes common and students like Kirrstein will experience a very different language arts classroom.

**References**


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2018 NCTE Richard W. Halle Award for Outstanding Middle Level Educator

Author, literacy specialist, and blogger **Dr. Rozlyn Linder** is the recipient of the 2018 NCTE Richard W. Halle Award for Outstanding Middle Level Educator. This award honors a junior high/middle level educator, not necessarily a classroom teacher, who has worked to promote understanding of the developmental needs and characteristics of young adolescents, especially in the English language arts.

Awarding Dr. Linder posthumously, the committee recognizes the incredible life of service she lived and her example to middle level educators of the dedication, scholarship, and passion our students, colleagues, and profession deserve. The award presentation took place at the Middle Level Luncheon during the 2018 NCTE Annual Convention in Houston, Texas. Learn more about Rozlyn at http://www2.ncte.org/awards/richard-w-halle-award/.