

5-1-2015

## The Absolutely Relevant Remedy for Part-time Readers: Pairing Classic and YA Literature

Claire Sauter

*St. John Fisher College*, [csauter\\_no@sjfc.edu](mailto:csauter_no@sjfc.edu)

[How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/journal3690>

---

### Recommended Citation

Sauter, Claire (2015) "The Absolutely Relevant Remedy for Part-time Readers: Pairing Classic and YA Literature," *3690: A Journal of First-Year Student Research Writing*: Vol. 2015 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/journal3690/vol2015/iss1/2>

This document is posted at <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/journal3690/vol2015/iss1/2> and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact [fisherpub@sjfc.edu](mailto:fisherpub@sjfc.edu).

---

# The Absolutely Relevant Remedy for Part-time Readers: Pairing Classic and YA Literature

## Abstract

**Overview:** During seventh and eighth grade, I read seventy-six young adult novels aside from required reading, with book logs from middle school to prove it. But, ask me what I *enjoyed* reading in high school, and I would have to think for a while. High school curricula forced me to read Shakespeare and classic novels without a hint of modern young adult literature involved. Not only did the uninteresting and outdated novels make classroom reading and assignments excruciating, but the distance between my life and the books that I was required to read discouraged my willingness to read much more. Barbara G. Samuels, a professor at the University of Houston, reports in her article, “Young Adult Literature: Young Adult Novels in the Classroom?” that, based on a 1975 study of English classrooms, the most commonly used novels were *A Separate Peace*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (86). Now, these titles are from 1975, but they were the staples of my English curricula from 2010 to 2014. Thirty-five years later, I was a student sitting in a classroom still reading, analyzing, testing, and writing essays on the same old characters, the now *historical* context, and the unfamiliar language and syntax that required decoding. As Junior from Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* would say, “I couldn’t believe it. How horrible is that?” (31). I still can’t believe it, it’s still horrible, and I’m still not much of a reader.

**Author’s Reflection:** My name is Claire Sauter and I am a Media Management major with an Ethics minor at St. John Fisher College. I am also a Service Scholar, the marketing chair for Students Who Advocate Volunteering (SWAV) club, a Peer Colleague for an English 101 course, and a member of the Teddi Dance for Love committee. I grew up in the small town of Carthage, NY, but my family is moving to the Adirondacks in the coming year.

Professor Barry began the Young Adult Literature RW course by asking the class questions about our favorite books, discussing novels we read in middle school and high school, and helping us to define YAL. I found that one of my challenges was shared among other students in my class – the high school English curricula did not help to inspire reading outside of school work. Turning my experience into a thesis, I argued that integrating modern and relevant young adult novels into the instruction of the English canon may help students continue to read for pleasure or curiosity even after their class is over. Developing the structure of this argument and balancing it with examples was difficult. However, the 199 course emphasized different outlining processes that greatly helped me and my peers. The freedom of the course allowed me to practice different writing styles, which is something that I never thought would be flexible within research writing. I enjoyed taking a risk and creating a conversation between characters within *The Absolutely True Diary of Part-Time Indian* and my own voice.

The 199 Research Writing course is integral to a college student’s development of writing skills. As part of the Fisher Core goals, the course has taught me how to develop an argument, navigate libraries and databases for relevant research, read critically for quality information, and compose long-form pieces of writing. Each skill is applicable to all educational programs at St. John Fisher and has helped me to analyze readings and write for classes ranging from Ethics and Multimedia Writing to Public Relations and Business Communications.

**Mrs. Barry’s Summary:** Claire came into my class with the skills of a good writer. What this class enabled her to do was couple those skills with her research skills to produce a writing that is not only worthy of 3690 but worthy of the attention of high school English teachers struggling to get their students to read the Classics. As

---

far as my role in her writing, it was more of a conversation about her paper - where she wanted to go with it, how she went with it and what she might need to do more to make her argument solid. These conversations could be compared to what an editor might do with any good writer because Claire, herself, edited, re-edited and edited her work again before even coming to see me. So, in our meetings, we actually talked. It was truly a pleasure “talking” with Claire.

**Keywords**

MLA, Writing



---

THE ABSOLUTELY RELEVANT REMEDY FOR PART-TIME READERS:  
PAIRING CLASSIC AND YA LITERATURE

---



I certify that this paper is my work with appropriate feedback according to the  
St. John Fisher Academic Honesty Policy

*Claire L. Sauter*

Claire L. Sauter  
Professor Barry  
ENGL 199  
8 April 2015

Claire Sauter

Professor Barry

ENGL 199

8 April 2015

The Absolutely Relevant Remedy for Part-Time Readers: Pairing Classic and YA Literature

“All right, kids, let’s get cracking,” Mr. P said as he passed out the geometry books. “How about we do something strange and start on page one?”

I grabbed my book and opened it up.

I wanted to smell it.

Heck, I wanted to kiss it.

Yes, kiss it.

That’s right, I am a book kisser.

Maybe that’s kind of perverted or maybe it’s just romantic and highly *intelligent*.

But my lips and I stopped short when I saw this written on the inside front cover:

**THIS BOOK BELONGS TO AGNES ADAMS**

Okay, now you’re probably asking yourself, “Who is Agnes Adams?”

Well, let me tell you. Agnes Adams is my mother. MY MOTHER! And Adams is her *maiden* name.

So that means my mother was born an Adams and she was still an Adams when she wrote her name in that book. And she was thirty when she gave birth to me. Yep, so that means I was staring at a geometry book that was at least thirty years older than I was.

I couldn’t believe it.

How horrible is that? (Alexie 30-31)



Figure 1 imgarcade.com

Well, Junior, it is horrible. It is horrible that you have been sent to a school that uses materials from over thirty years ago to educate students and prepare them for the modern world. However, this experience that you've shared with us in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* may be more relevant to adolescent students than one thinks. Even I have my own story to tell.

During seventh and eighth grade, I read seventy-six young adult novels aside from required reading, with book logs from middle school to prove it. But, ask me what I *enjoyed* reading in high school, and I would have to think for a while. High school curricula forced me to read Shakespeare and classic novels without a hint of modern young adult literature involved. Not only did the uninteresting and outdated novels make classroom reading and assignments excruciating, but the distance between my life and the books that I was required to read discouraged my willingness to read much more. Barbara G. Samuels, a professor at the University of Houston, reports in her article, "Young Adult Literature: Young Adult Novels in the Classroom?" that, based on a 1975 study of English classrooms, the most commonly used novels were *A Separate Peace*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (86). Now, these titles are from 1975, but they were the staples of my English curricula from 2010 to 2014. Thirty-five years later, I was a student sitting in a classroom still reading, analyzing, testing, and writing essays on the same old characters, the now *historical* context, and the unfamiliar language and syntax that required decoding. As Junior from Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* would say, "I couldn't believe it. How horrible is that?" (31). I still can't believe it, it's still horrible, and I'm still not much of a reader.

### **The Classical Canon**

The current curricula that commands English classrooms is a problem for the students

sitting at the desks, for the teachers standing in front of them, and for the students like me, who have graduated from the high school English classroom without a will to read. Lorna Collier, a freelance author and editor, argues in support of the value that young adult literature (YAL) has to offer English classrooms in her article, “YA Literature – Where Teens Find Themselves.” Collier collaborates with *ALAN* co-founder, Don Gallo, and notes his observation that, “There are some school districts where YA is used in middle school but not high school because in high school we do the REAL literature” (10). This alleged “REAL” literature at the forefront of high school English classrooms is classic literature.

Classic literature often brings to mind titles, such as *The Scarlet Letter*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Frankenstein* and novels of the Twain era. But, Susan P. Santoli, a professor at the University of South Alabama, and Mary Elaine Wagner, a language arts teacher at Theodore High School, give classic literature a definition: “...novels that have been traditionally used in English language arts classrooms because of a belief in their timelessness...” (66). I and many other students have read multiple novels defined as classic literature, and I think that we would all agree that, while the themes of hypocrisy, prejudice, and human nature are timeless, the authors’ techniques of conveying these important themes are not. This is where the problem lies with the classic canon of the English classroom – “You can read the words; you just lack the proper prior knowledge to make meaning” (Gallagher 40). The current English curriculum is outdated and, therefore, novels like these are misunderstood and unappreciated by teens. For that very reason, the pairing of young adult literature with classic works can preserve the timelessness and standards of the traditional English classroom while offering a modern relativity to students that encourages reading beyond the ringing of the school bell.

## **Eradicating “Readicide”**

While classic literature may have been canonized for its literary merit, classic novels have also been *timelessly* applicable to state standards and testing. Kelly Gallagher is a teacher at Magnolia High School in Anaheim, California. He admits, “On my desk is a copy of the Los Angeles Unified School District’s guide to teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*... If I were to follow this curriculum guide step-by-step in my own classroom, there is little doubt my students would exit my class hating *To Kill a Mockingbird* – and possibly all reading – forever” (39). As a teacher, Gallagher has first-hand experience with the impact that literature and the way that it is taught can have on students. Gallagher coined the “practices educators employ to raise reading scores that actually kill students’ love of reading” as “readicide” (37). The common English curriculum has involved dissecting and testing on the same classic literature year by year, molding essay formats to fit the canon, and training students to answer multiple choice questions. I believe Gallagher would agree with my readicide diagnosis of these practices. An appropriate remedy for the gap between students’ lives and classic literature, and to eradicate this symptom of readicide, is to integrate young adult literature into the classroom curriculum.

Yet, too often, school classrooms are characterized by shortsighted goals. While high test scores and skill development are necessary for advancement to the next grade level, the English classroom is also meant to foster reading relationships. Young adult literature is the mediator that is testable, developmental, and relatable to students. According to Chris Crowe, a professor at Brigham Young University, young adult literature is a genre “comprised of books that are written for and marketed to teenagers” (Collier 7). So, if YA lit is specifically for middle school to high school aged students, shouldn’t *these* novels be staples within their English curriculum, as well? It’s not just the newer binding of young adult novels that warrants them some

consideration – it’s their ability to convey the traditional themes of literature through characters that mirror students’ lives in modern and understandable contexts.

### **Context in the Classroom**

The concept of context is imperative to literature. Whether classical or young adult literature, Jill Adams, a lecturer on teaching, and John H. Bushman, a professor of teaching and leadership, claim that, “People need background to gain the most from different readings... And even in this age of testing, reading strategies, and standards-based education, sometimes a very basic, fundamental factor in the reading process is overlooked: activating prior knowledge in students before they begin digging into a book” (25-26). An understanding of the context of a novel is a prerequisite of absorbing the plot, themes, and symbolism that comprise the story. This “prior knowledge – what the reader knows, feels, values, [and] experiences” (26) – could be the difference between a student misinterpreting a classic novel and being enlightened with similar themes through a young adult novel.

Not only is classic literature out of context for students, but the messages are often obscured through archaic language, syntax, and satire that students lack an understanding of in their prior knowledge. Lorrie Moore, a writer for *The New York Times*, is critical of what types of literature should be studied in the classroom. She believes young adult literature should replace some of the challenging and racially overlaid texts - while I see all of the texts working together. However, Moore and I see eye-to-eye on the significance of having the prior knowledge to understand context. Moore suggests that when a teenager has an option of listening to an audio tape of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or “hip-hop” music that uses the same type of profane language, they will choose the music because “the speakers are different in each case, and the worlds they are speaking of and from are very distant from one another...the

listener knows which voice is speaking to him and which is not getting remotely close.” In today’s English classrooms, classic literature simply does not speak to students.

### **A New Voice: YAL**

Student exposure to classical texts should not be expelled but merely facilitated by a new voice – the voice of young adult literature. In their article, “Thematic Solutions Using Young Adult Literature to Increase Reading Comprehension,” Adams and Bushman present a method for integrating refreshing novels into the classroom that can enable the pairing of classics with YA lit. They propose that “thematic units” – designed around themes that students are interested in – can facilitate an improved reading environment (26). I propose that thematic units designed around the timeless themes of the English curriculum can be the vehicle through which a young adult novel complements a classic novel. For example, pairing possibilities that would rejuvenate the high school English classroom are the classic, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* segued by the YA novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* partnered with Suzanne Collins’ future version *The Hunger Games*, and the famous *Romeo and Juliet* recaptured in the modern tale of tragic fate, *The Fault in Our Stars* (“8 Modern YA Novels...”). By reading both types of novels in conjunction with one another, students’ attention, understanding of themes, and ability to analyze classic text may be engaged and elevated.

### **Standing Up to Standards**

Even Collier backs me up on this revision of the English curriculum. She claims that, “YA lit can be paired with classics; sometimes a YA novel can open up a teen to the joy of reading or set the stage for understanding a specific theme. Nonfiction YA lit can answer the Common Core State Standards’ call for more informational texts” (6). It’s these very standards

and standardized tests that surface as the first challenge to the process of integrating young adult literature into the classroom. Jonathan Ostenson, an Assistant Professor for the Department of English at BYU, and Rachel Wadham, an Education and Juvenile Librarian at BYU, have collaborated on the paper, “Young Adult Literature and the Common Core: A Surprisingly Good Fit” to put to rest any claims that YA lit can’t satisfy the English standards. They waste no time in pointing out that:

[I]n light of these quantitative and qualitative requirements [of the Common Core State Standards], YA literature might be an option that is better than (or at least equal to) the titles in the CCSS exemplar lists. Works such as *Little Women* or *The Odyssey* (two texts from the lists) may satisfy the demands of complexity, but they may require significant scaffolding and teacher intervention for students to comprehend and appreciate them. With *The Odyssey*, for example, students will need to understand the historical background of the Trojan War, ancient Greek culture, and the identity of Greek gods and the relationships between them in order to make sense of the setting and conflicts of the poem. (9)

With a little investment of time and consideration from English coordinators and teachers, YA novels with just as much complexity and set in a context that is already instilled in students’ prior knowledge can be found to fulfill the demands of the state standards. Besides, the “CCSS suggests also looking at prior knowledge and experience” when choosing texts(10); it is apparent that novels that are at least thirty-five years older than the students are not in accordance with their prior knowledge and twenty-first century experience.

Certainly, the ideologies of the South in the 1800s, as dominating as they are in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, are not as prevailing in a teen’s life in 2015.

Whether it is escaping down the Mississippi River or forming a friendship with a slave, students don't have these experiences nor have they lived in this context. Sarah Dyer, a teacher and author of the article, "Read This, Not That: Why and How I'll Use Young Adult Literature in My Classroom" points out that one of the issues with the traditional canon of literature is that many novels were "written from a white, male, Christian, heteronormative viewpoint; in today's diverse classrooms, filled with young people who are part of an even more diverse global population, teachers need to recognize and show their students that other viewpoints are no less valid or prevalent" (34). Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* is just as Dyer described. While Twain is critical of society's prejudice and actions through Huck's adventures down the river, he composes it in a subtlety that students may often miss. Due to the historical context and disguised critique, the themes of independence from civilization and prejudice are more difficult to follow along Huck Finn's adventures.

To assist students with their impending challenge of classic novels, young adult literature is the English classroom's life raft. Writer Lorrie Moore testifies that there are novels that are "appropriate for an introduction to serious reading... Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, which vibrantly speaks to every teenager's predicament when achievement in life is at odds with the demoralized condition of his peer group," is one of these selections. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is the account of a freshman boy and cartoonist named Arnold, better known as Junior. He lives on the Spokane Reservation but resents the futile cycle of the Native American lifestyle (alcohol, unmet dreams, and death) that he is surrounded by. In the heat of frustration over his inadequate school system, Junior decides to transfer to practically an all-white high school off of the reservation. Junior's self-isolating decision to break the paradigm of his culture forces him to go back and forth between worlds of

“red and white.”

Junior offers a different character perspective than Huck that can add diversity to classroom literature. He represents the population of teenagers that have both harbored prejudicial tendencies or received prejudicial treatment. As “the most important goal identified by the [Common Core State Standards] is developing independent readers who can interpret complex texts on their own[,] [here] again, YA literature can help because it ameliorates some of the challenges that classic literature poses to teens while maintaining a sophisticated treatment of themes and characters” (Ostenson and Wadham 11). *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* allows the thematic unit of independence and prejudice to illuminate the issues of culture and race while transitioning students into reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

### **It’s all about the Time-“less”-ness**

The school year is only so long. While offering new novels to teenagers that are relatable to their own transitions in high school is ideal, I am sure many teachers are shaking their heads at a factor they think I have forgotten: time. Thus, pairing each classroom classic with a similar young adult novel may seem daunting and hopeful. Santoli and Wagner use G.M. Salvner’s 2000 study to ease the doubts. Salvner proved that “using young adult novels can save time in the classroom because most are not as long or as complex as classic novels” (69). The conclusion that can be drawn from Salvner’s report is that in the time it would take a teacher to develop student knowledge on the context of a classic and scaffold students through the new themes and confusion they may confront, students could read a YA novel, connect with the context and characters to grasp an understanding of the themes, and be prepared to identify similar and unique literary elements in the classic novel. Because young adult novels “are about adolescents and for adolescents, they put our students at the center of the learning experiences we devise.

Because they illustrate for young readers what literature can be, moving them and revealing to them how literature builds knowledge and perspective, they use our time effectively” (69-70).

There it is – integrating young adult literature into the classroom as complements to the classics is not only a preservation and invigoration of the English curriculum – it’s an effective use of time.

The time that is really of issue here is the lack of it that has been used by teachers, administration, and curriculum coordinators to investigate the value of young adult lit. Samuels reports,

Many teachers said students would not read ‘good literature’ unless it was assigned in school. While ninety percent agreed that young adult novels helped promote lifetime reading habits and teachers agreed that adolescent novels were transitions to adult novels (92%) and to classics (84%), many seemed unwilling to promote that transition. (88)

The *time* that teachers are so concerned with should be the use of their own. With a little time investment and self-involvement, teachers can find the young adult literature that is compatible to the canon of their classroom. They may even discover that these modern novels help to solve the issues of slow progression, narrow authorial perspective, literary gender biases, and student-novel disconnections during the year.

In relation to student-novel disconnections, I was a female student in a public high school that didn’t like world history that much. Yet, in tenth grade I had to read William Golding’s classic “young adult” novel, *Lord of the Flies*. Set during the time of one of the world wars, a group of British schoolboys survives a plane crash that deserts them on an island isolated from any other civilization. Without the guidelines of society, characters Ralph, Piggy, Jack, and others are dehumanized and tempted by the innate evil of human nature in their efforts to

survive. Through the emerging cruelty of little boys, Golding constructs a transparency on the relationships between savagery, loss of innocence, war and society. However, these undeniable themes are undercut by the novel's lack of female relativity and ambiguous context, which turns readers off and obscures the process of literary analysis.

Again, a pairing of young adult literature with a classic only augments what the students can gain from their English curriculum. To make up for the shortcomings of *Lord of the Flies*, Jessica Cook, a teacher and educational blogger, promises that:

In teaching *The Hunger Games*, you can get all of that good stuff too... But the catch is that your students will find it a LOT more interesting... The historical significance in this novel is a vision of the future, not the past. The darkness inside the characters is one we can already see brewing in the world today, not the remnants of another era.

After taking a look in the past, students may find greater meaning in the thematic unit of savagery, innocence, and war by entering Suzanne Collins' ring of *The Hunger Games*. Out of the working-class, twelfth district of Panem, Katniss is a strong, independent heroine for teenage girls to identify with. Male students can find their own selves in characters that embody images of providing for one's family, harboring sensitivity, or evoking fierce competitiveness. Lois T. Stover, chair of the educational department at St. Mary's College of Maryland, is cited in the article "Young Adult Literature in the English Curriculum Today: Classroom Teachers Speak Out" as pointing out that YAL "deals with themes and issues that mirror the concerns of society out of which it is produced. It does so in ways that help readers understand the complexities and shades of gray involved in dealing with these issues" (Gibbons et al 55). *The Hunger Games* is a vehicle through which students can easily identify the current barbarism of society and come to the realization that if we allow our innate evil to consume us, then our society may be headed

towards a version of Panem. We are not all British schoolboys – but we *could* end up being districts engulfed in a war between humanity and freedom.

You may still be skeptical of integrating young adult literature into high school English classrooms. Let's remember that high school students *are* still young adults even if they don't like to admit it. At least one teacher already, Jessica Cook, has reinvested her time and used it to recognize the value that young adult literature has in the classroom and more importantly, in teens' lives. In her "Literacy Smack Down" blog, Cook reaches out:

Believe me, I enjoy torturing kids as much as the next English teacher, and I am in NO WAY trying to advocate any kind of "dumbing down" process here. I don't think *The Hunger Games* makes things easier in an English class than *Lord of the Flies* does. In fact, I think you can get just as much rigor out of your lessons with Collins's work as you can with Golding's. The difference is that you might actually get some kids who *like* the book if you teach *The Hunger Games*. And if they like that book, they might stick around for the sequel... They might even do something really radical, like read a book on their own, just for the fun of it. All because their daring English teacher took a risk and threw out an old classic to replace it with a more relevant and entertaining option.

I'm not even asking you to throw out or replace the classics as Cook suggests – just modernize them with YAL. Not only will novel pairing reinstate the relevance of the classics, but it will use classroom time effectively and may inspire students to be more than part-time readers.

### **Ignorance is [Lost] Bliss**

The most significant challenge to the emergence of young adult literature in the high school classroom is teachers' lack of knowledge and embrace on the genre. If only English teachers were as adamant about cultivating student reading beyond the classroom as they are

within it. Samuels found that “while a large majority of English teachers agreed that the young adult novel is a transitional form of literature which serves important developmental and emotional needs, many did not feel it is the role of the English teacher to introduce these books to students” (87). While there are teachers that are unaware of YA literature’s qualifications, substance, and value, there are others that feel YAL is not in their job description.

Jen Brooks offers an explanation for this challenge from a teacher’s firsthand experience. Within a matter of hours of each other, Brooks had finished reading *The Fault in Our Stars*, the YA novel by John Green, and Collier’s article “YA Literature – Where Teens Find Themselves.” This coincidental literary timing inspired her blog where she admits, “By the time I started teaching, my last encounter with young adult literature had been junior high school, when I was primarily concerned with questions of love and popularity.” Brooks is an example of the teachers in the field that were, or still are, in the dark about young adult literature. She justifies further, “It might seem obvious to you, if you are not an English teacher, that it’s important to keep up with the real world of books, but it’s not always so obvious to an English teacher. We are trained to teach the canon. We are trained to teach literary analysis, the five-paragraph essay, and (sometimes) grammar.” When teacher training revolves around the canon, the canon is embedded in the curriculum, and then student exposure to literature is limited to the canon. It is clear that the integration of young adult literature into the classroom is often stalled even before a teacher has a class of his or her own.

Although, teachers do have rights to creative licensing within their classes as long as standards are met and tests are administered. Brooks posts, “I was looking for professional development points in order to renew my teaching license, and it seemed about time for me to really learn about what my students were reading when I wasn’t assigning *Frankenstein* or

*Romeo and Juliet*.” A teaching license is not just a requirement needed to stand in front of students and regurgitate the curriculum – it is a representation of the qualifications a person has to make a lasting impression. Brooks started out teaching “by the book” of classical novels but now she claims, “The story of a cancer patient and her romance with another cancer patient, John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* is one book I would use with students at any high school level. It is the kind of literature I wish all high school teachers were using in their classrooms.” Once Brooks experienced young adult literature, she was able to embrace its value for a high school English classroom. But, *The Fault in Our Stars* doesn’t have to be just a casual and uncorrelated break in the English curriculum; the YA novel fits right in as the accomplice to William Shakespeare’s tale of tragic love, *Romeo and Juliet* (“8 Modern YA Novels”).

“O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” Juliet calls into the night sky. Juliet Capulet and Romeo Montague are star-crossed lovers amidst a long-term family feud between the Capulets and Montagues. Fate takes its toll when a plan to unite Romeo and Juliet goes awry and results in the suicide of both teenage lovers. Teacher Kelly Gallagher uses *Romeo and Juliet* in his curriculum and he describes his process of relating the conflict within the play, in the form of long-standing feuds, to his students’ lives surrounded by gangs. This is one way to relate the questions that Shakespeare was asking over 400 years ago to the present world (40). Gallagher segues his students into the play comprised of old English by relating the theme of conflict to their modern lives. Even “timeless” gaps of more than 400 years may be bridged.

The young adult novel *The Fault in Our Stars* is another way to bridge that gap. Connected by a thematic unit that investigates the relationships between love, death, conflict, and fate, *The Fault in Our Stars* provides a modern take on a young relationship that is tragically cut short by the entanglement of fate and death. Hazel Lancaster, a teenage girl fighting thyroid and

lung cancer, is forced to attend a cancer support group where she meets Augustus Waters, a teenage boy with a prosthetic leg, a body in remission from cancer, and a love for Hazel. In the modern day adolescent context, Hazel and Augustus play around with the idea of smoking, they seek out answers to questions they feel they can't die without knowing, they are granted a last wish that allows them to travel, and they experience falling in love for the first time. However, despite the title's reference to Shakespeare's work, *Julius Caesar*, in which Cassius says "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves..." John Green's modern love story is centered on the conflict of cancer and its uncontrollable ability to take the life of Augustus Waters - who was supposed to be healthy and in remission. Hazel's and Augustus' cancers are faults in their stars. While the context and writing techniques of Shakespeare's play and Green's novel are radically different, a reading of *The Fault in Our Stars* is a relatable introduction to the themes of love, death, conflict, and fate that permeate *Romeo and Juliet*.

### **The Relevant Remedy of Classic and YA Literature**

When teachers do their own homework, such as Jen Brooks did by reading and instilling *The Fault in Our Stars* in the classroom, the challenges that have obscured the integration of YAL into the curriculum seem to dissipate. The current standard of young adult literature produces "good-quality novels written for teenagers [that] contain the elements of literature found in the classics: character and characterization, setting, conflict, theme, point of view, plot, style, crisis, climax, foreshadowing, flashback, figurative language, and so forth" (Santoli and Wagner 69). Composed of the same literary breadth as classical literature, YAL offers a platform of introduction, transition, and relation to students within the classroom in a manner that meets state standards and the timeline of the academic year. In a study presented by Gay Ivey and Peter H. Johnson, there were even "changes in students' test scores from seventh grade, which retained

the traditional curriculum, to eighth grade, with the engaged reading curriculum [using YAL]. The percentage of students passing went from 78% in seventh grade to 85% in eighth grade” (265). And, this seven percent improvement in students’ tests scores is merely at the middle school level. Imagine the impact that engaged reading with young adult literature could have on high school students’ understanding of literature, performance on exams, and willingness to read.

But while these statistics and implications are impressive, it is important to remember that tests aren’t everything – developing a will to read, learn, and connect is essential. The relevancy between students’ lives and young adult literature is encouraging to readers and makes them want to continue reading. In “Engagement with Young Adult Literature: Outcomes and Processes,” by Ivey and Johnson, one student, no longer a part-time reader, shared, “I usually read, like, all the time at night...if I hear [my parents] come upstairs, I’ll like, just put it under my covers, then they go away, and I’ll start reading again” (261). It is this kind of beyond-the-bell reading that English classrooms should be fostering through their curriculum. It is this kind of reading that can be initiated by the pages of a young adult novel. It is this kind of will to read that every student should be given the opportunity to nurture.

I was late to develop this will to read. But maybe if I were exposed to novels, such as *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, my experience would have been different. When Junior transfers from his “terrible” school on the “rez” to Reardan High School, he befriends an outcast just like him. Gordy teaches Junior and us all a little about learning from books, drawing, and passion:

“You read a book for the story, for each of its words,” Gordy said, “and you draw your cartoons for the story, for each of the words and images. And, yeah you need to take that seriously, but you should also read and draw because really good books and cartoons give you a boner.”

I was shocked:



Figure 2 aduide.org

“You should get a boner! You have to get a boner!” Gordy shouted. “Come on!”...  
 “The world, even the smallest parts of it, is filled with things you don’t know.”  
 Wow. That was a huge idea...

“Okay, so it’s like each of these books is a mystery. Every book is a mystery. And if you read all the books ever written, it’s like you’ve read one giant mystery. And no matter how much you learn, you just keep learning there is so much more you need to learn.”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes,” Gordy said. “Now doesn’t that give you a boner?”

“I am rock hard,” I said.

Gordy blushed.

“Well, I don’t mean boner in the sexual sense,” Gordy said. “I don’t think you should run through life with a real erect penis. But you should approach each book – you should approach life – with the real possibility that you might get a metaphorical boner at any point.”

“A metaphorical boner!” I shouted. “What the heck is a metaphorical boner?”

Gordy laughed.

“When I say boner, I really mean joy,” he said. (Alexie 96-98)

Each novel within the English curricula holds a mystery that we can learn from – even the classics. Yet, in order for teachers and the curriculum to encourage a will inside of students to continue reading, the novels that students are exposed to must spark “metaphorical boners,” as Gordy would say. Beyond concern for standards, time, and merit, teachers and students should be concerned about the future of reading. Pairing young adult literature with classic novels of the classroom enhances the reality that students will graduate with novels that they connected with, themes they understood, mysteries they solved, and the approach to life and reading that anticipates the possibility of joy.

## Works Cited

- “8 Modern YA Novels to Pair With Classroom Classics.” *HuffPost Books*. The Huffington Post, 9 Jun. 2014. Web. 16 Feb. 2015.
- Adams, Jill and John H. Bushman. “Thematic Solutions Using Young Adult Literature to Increase Reading Comprehension.” *Middle School Journal* 37.4 (2006): 25-29. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Feb. 2015.
- Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007. Print.
- Brooks, Jen. “Reading John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars*.” *Jen Brooks*. N.p., 17 Dec. 2012. Web. 19 Feb. 2015.
- Collier, Lorna. “YA Literature – Where Teens Find Themselves.” *The Council Chronicle* Nov. 2012: 6-11. Print.
- Cook, Jessica. “Literacy Smack-Down: *Lord of the Flies* vs. *The Hunger Games*.” *Bright Hub Education*. iVillage, 17 Jan. 2010. Web. 16 Feb. 2015
- Dyer, Sarah. “Read This, Not That: Why and How I’ll Use Young Adult Literature in My Classroom.” *The Virginia English Journal* 64.1 (2014): 33-43. *Education Source*. Web. 16 Feb. 2015.
- Gallagher, Kelly. “Reversing Readicide.” *Educational Leadership*. Mar. 2010: 36-41. *Education Source*. Web. 16 Feb. 2015.
- Gibbons, Louel C. et al. “Young Adult Literature in the English Curriculum Today: Classroom Teachers Speak Out.” *ALAN Review* 33.3 (2006): 53-61. *ProQuest Central*. Web. 3 Feb. 2015.
- Ivey, Gay and Peter H. Johnston. “Engagement with Young Adult Literature: Outcomes and

Processes.” *Reading Research Quarterly* 48.3 (2013): 255-275. *Education Source*.  
Web. 16 Feb. 2015.

Moore, Lorrie. “Send Huck Finn to College.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times,  
15 Jan. 2011. Web. 19 Feb. 2015.

Ostenson, Jonathan and Rachel Wadham. “Young Adult Literature and the Common Core: A  
Surprisingly Good Fit.” *American Secondary Education* 41.1 (2012): 4-13. *Education  
Source*. Web. 16 Feb. 2015.

Samuels, Barbara G. “Young Adult Literature: Young Adult Novels in the Classroom?” *The  
English Journal* 72.4 (1983): 86-88. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Feb. 2015.

Santoli, Susan P. and Mary Elaine Wagner. “Promoting Young Adult Literature: The Other  
‘Real’ Literature.” *American Secondary Education* 33.1 (2004): 65-75. *JSTOR*. Web. 3  
Feb. 2015.