

INTERVIEW

Contending with Gun Violence: An Interview

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On October 1, 2017 a gunman opened fire on concert goers from a hotel balcony on the Las Vegas strip. He killed 58 people. Four months later, on February 14, 2018 a gunman opened fire at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida killing 17 people. Reeling from the tragedy first in his own community, then in a school, Dr. Steven Bickmore, an associate professor of Teaching & Learning at the University of Las Vegas, Nevada felt called to action.

Together with English Education professors Dr. Shelly Shaffer (Eastern Washington University) and Dr. Gretchen Rumhor (Aquinas College), the trio worked tirelessly to get a book proposal together that could be used by English educators, classroom teachers, and pre-service teachers to bring the conversation about gun violence to the forefront of English Language classrooms. Bickmore, Rumhor, and Shaffer are no strangers to the Young Adult Literature (YAL) field. They have all published and presented extensively in their field on the topics of using YAL to drive instruction and engagement. They enthusiastically and unanimously agreed to be interviewed about their book—now out in paperback—and their process.

Katie Sluiter (KS): How did you each decide to focus on young adult literature in your careers and publications.

Steven Bickmore (SB): I was always a giant reader, and when I went to Georgia, we taught all the undergrad classes in a cohort and then we were each a professor of record. None of them wanted to teach the young adult lit (YAL) so I said “I’ll teach it.” A lot of my work initially was about why a lot

of people don't take it up. Why pre-service teachers and practicing teachers seem reluctant to do it? Then I became really interested in it and took classes with Joe Traxel. The first thing I ever published alone was something I sent to *The ALAN Review* from that class. My training is as a methods guy. I know a ton about teaching methods. It's just not as interesting to me anymore. I keep coming back to kids and what they are reading.

Gretchen Rumohr (GR): I didn't really get into YAL until I was in graduate school. I think it's really unfortunate that I didn't because I was a classroom teacher. I took a class with Gwen Tarbox (a study of the Harry Potter series). That laid the groundwork for my thinking that there is this wide body of children's lit that is worthy of study and is legitimate to study. Like, I could make a career out of this. It's been in the past twelve or thirteen years that I got even more into YAL because I started teaching YAL and I started doing more work with Penny Kittle's work. And when you do work with Penny Kittle you just pretty much decide that you have to join the other side. That was a point of no return for me. I'll never go back.

Shelly Shaffer (SS): As a middle and high school teacher I was interested in YAL for a long time. Using it in my classroom and in my classroom library and things like that. When I went into my PhD program I was with Jim Blasingame and because I was with him it felt like there was so much research being done in that area already. So I didn't do a lot of writing about it then. But I was interested in reading motivation, so I went about it a little bit different way and to look at the types of books kids were interested in and motivated to read, and of course that was YAL.

SB: The reason we are sitting here talking about this, Katie, you almost always have to write a rationale for why you're doing it because it's still some ways marginalized because you're just playing with things that people like to read. And the people like Penny Kittle who have really made a career out of it aren't really engaged in the scholarship.

SS: I'm working with some of my colleagues to write outside the choir, though. A lot of it we're writing to all the English teachers and all the people who are reading the books we are publishing chapters in right now, we're preaching to the choir right now. And a lot of those people are doing the same work, or similar work. My colleague and I published in a social studies journal. I think

there's room to write about YAL that is not the ALAN Review and some of these places. That we need to expand to where we are publishing so that other people in other areas of education start to think about it too.

KS: How did the three of you come together on the topic of gun violence?

SB: That's my fault. Gretchen and I had a friendship and we found that we had a lot in common, so we were trying to find things to write about. I knew that she was a really good editor and I knew that Shelly had written about YAL around school shootings. And she had written on my blog about that. But then I had started responding to school shootings on my blog. Especially when you live in Las Vegas and that happened. I had written a blog post, but I couldn't post it without someone else reading it. Which I don't usually do, but I'm a quick sloppy writer, I have good voice, but I'm not careful—especially when I'm blog writing.

So I contacted both of them and said would you read this? Does it sound too whiny? So the blog post—I first posted after the Parkland shooting, I had both of them talk about it. I was just expressing my angst and anger. And I don't really know if it was so much anger as a little bit of despair. I've got kids that went through schools, I have grandkids now. And so they (Gretchen and Shelly) were both interested. I think we had a proposal within four weeks to Rowman & Littlefield.

I don't know who said, "Hey is there a book in this." but structurally it's not like any of the YAL books out there because it doesn't depend on YAL. YAL is kind of a sideline. It depends on other issues that are important in English Ed.

I value the opinion of others in my own work and also try to see my position as someone who has been in education for over 40 years now to help sponsor the work of others who are going to be doing it past me, right?

SS: Parkland happened and Steven emailed me maybe that day or the day after and said, "Hey. We need to write about this. We need to write about it now." He said, "I know this girl Gretchen. I think you should meet her," and so we started emailing back and forth.

I knew of Gretchen, but I hadn't really talked to her or anything like that and so we just started working on it and brainstorming. Gretchen said she was in and so we were excited. Then we started brainstorming who we would ask to help us. And how we would organize it. There are two

sections that really focus on using YAL books and teaching around that, but the rest of the book is not. It includes writing, it includes, you know, some opinions, and some teacher education stuff.

Even before Parkland, I had been researching and reading YAL books around school shootings for a while and looking at commonalities and how authors approach the topics and all that. And Steve knew I was working on that. So when this happened, he knew I wanted to write about it. We were also trying to decide how to approach it so we were creating this space for conversations about what to actually do and how to make the situation better.

GR: I think that among the three of us there was a sense of urgency. I felt that at least by submitting this proposal, I as a teacher, I as a parent, I as a writer could say, “Ok at least I am doing something about this problem instead of just posting something on Facebook or whatever.” I posted less and I complained less while I was working on this project because I felt like I was contributing in a very meaningful way. And I think the challenge now is getting the book out to an audience of people who really need to read it.

KS: Steve and Shelly mentioned the structure of the book. Was that something you had in mind beforehand as you talked about it, or is that something that came about as submissions came in? Or did you have people in mind already?

SB: We deliberately solicited mostly people who were either associate or full professors. We were looking for people who had established reputations in writing or in teacher education. There’s quite a few people that wrote for the book that had been associated with CEE/ELATE, so we were looking to target not just YAL, but how classrooms could learn to write and think about the topic. This was not an edited book that was peer reviewed. We were soliciting people we thought were experts.

GR: And nearly everyone we asked said yes. Pretty much everyone was like, “THANK YOU for asking! That is a great idea!”

SS: We included a few early scholars, but it was people we knew were doing work around YAL and people we knew would have something good to contribute. But we actually went through and brainstormed and asked them specifically to write a chapter about writing or write a chapter about

this book or write a chapter for allies. So we curated as we were asking the people specifically what we thought they could contribute.

SB: And we knew that Chris Crutcher was ranting all the time on Facebook. I had a relationship with David Belbin who is a British young adult writer and poet, and who has written about gun violence. We wanted that world perspective of people looking back at us. Certainly people die or are mass shot around the world, but the specific thing of someone wandering into a neutral place with a gun...I mean, it happens in other places, but not to the frequency that it happens here. And so we wanted David's take on this. His take adds a little more global view to it. The first section is looking specifically at education and social activist movements. It's unique in its structure for things that are associated with young adult literature.

KS: The structure and the flow felt intentional. I was wondering about the books that were chosen for the parts about reading. Were those the authors' choices or were you looking for specific books that wanted to feature?

SS: For the most part, the authors chose their books, but we wanted to have a section that had the books that focused more on the plot with school shootings versus the books that had more allies and how to intervene in different ways.

When we solicited the authors, I think that we--like we knew James Blasingame would have a book in mind and he was like "Oh, I'm going to use this book" because he knows Tom Leveen personally, so he knew that was the book he wanted to use. Gretchen knew right away which book she wanted to use. I actually hemmed and hawed a little bit because I was looking for something that didn't repeat anything that anyone else was writing, but Keplinger--that book--I actually got an advanced reader copy of it from Scholastic. I didn't have it, but I knew that it was coming out, so when that book came it just happened to--it really spoke to me, so that was just a lucky break that that one had come out. We considered publishing a chapter that had Ellen Hopkins' new one, but we just didn't.

GR: Well we were over our word count! We still have that chapter and it's pretty much ready to go, so now we need to find a home for it.

SB: There were word count issues, yeah. People forget that it's right after *Long Way Down* (by Jason Reynold) was just barely out and Sarah [Donovan] had used it as a whole-class read with her students. She was using the metaphors and the ghosts, so that was a natural fit.

SS: I suggested a couple books to some of the authors and said, "Hey maybe one of these?" Alice [Hays] had done some work with *All American Boys* already, so she was able to draw on her knowledge with that.

GR: But we didn't want a lot of overlap. That was important to us. I want to reiterate that there was a desire to take this work beyond just reading about literature and thinking about literature to actually using writing and using rhetoric as a way to understand the issue better but also as a way to help students advocate for themselves. And I'm really happy with how that last section worked to help students move beyond feeling apathetic after reading all this literature and moving them toward actually figuring out how written rhetoric works.

KS: Is there a confluence that you have seen of books that are written about gun violence with the actual acts and events of gun violence? Have we seen more books that address these things aimed at kids and young adults than we have seen before? And are there titles that are problematic that you would hope to avoid?

SS: I can speak to that since that is about a lot of the research I have been doing about what has come out. As far as the history of YAL and books that have shootings...so there was a Stephen King book that came out a long time ago and he actually pulled it so it's not in print anymore. You can't get a copy of it. He pulled it because he thought school shooters were modeling their actions after him, and so there wasn't really anything out until after Columbine.

Chris Crutcher had something ready to publish and then Columbine happened. Because there was a school shooting up here in Washington and Chris had written a book about it and it was actually sitting on his editor's desk when Columbine happened. He called his editor and told him to throw it away.

Following Columbine, Walter Dean Myers, [*Shooter*] had a book come out, [Todd] Strasser, [*Give a Boy a Gun*], and so there were a few, but it was not a lot. But it feels like in the past four or five years there have been a lot more. As far as if we look at years of publication of all the books that I've studied, there are more within the last five years than there were in the first twenty.

SB: Yeah. I think it's escalated. I think people are not shying away in a way that Stephen King and Chris Crutcher did initially. I think they are taking it head on. I actually like the moderated world views that are in *People Kill People* from Ellen [Hopkins] because she's really liberal and you might think the book would be really anti-gun, but it's not really anti-gun. It's how people approach and use and think about how guns are used in their lives and what propaganda or influences can be brought to bear on people to think about guns in a certain way. So it would have been good, but we ran out of space, right?

SS: There are a couple books that I've read that I am not as crazy about. There are a couple that are not U.S. settings, so those are a couple I haven't included. There was one book called *Crash and Burn* [by Michael Hassan] that was a good book, but it had some really problematic stuff in it.

GR: Like tons of explicit sex and drug use.

SS: Yeah, and the thing is it was totally believable and I wouldn't mind someone reading that book one on one, but as far as a whole class read? So I really do think that there are some books that are not whole class reads.

But then I also feel like it sort of depends, I guess, how close a community is to a school shooting that happened—which of those books you would choose based on those points of view. Like I like *Mockingbird* [by Kathryn Erskine] that Steve brought up, but I actually don't really like it for a young adult audience. I think it's too young. It doesn't really go into the conversations I would like to have with my kids. But there's also Jodi Piccolt who wrote *Nineteen Minutes* and I don't think that IS a young adult book—that's an adult book. So there's all of these kinds of factors as I'm figuring out which ones to include and which ones not to include. There are some that are written from the school shooter's point of view and there's some communities that wouldn't want to humanize that person in that way.

SB: So there are those categories, right? Shelly have you done that? Like there are the ones from the point of view of the school shooter, and the ones that deal with the aftermath vs books about guns and potential violence. *People Kill People* and *Long Way Down* feel related because guns are hovering around potential action. So you're in that moment of anxiety--what's going to happen with the gun and what should happen. It would be interesting to see how you classify the subcategories within the genre.

SS: There are several books that have the family members of the school shooters and how they are chased out of town even though they didn't have anything to do with it. It also sets it up in your class to talk about "Well, who do we blame? And why we make the families of the shooters the scapegoats because that does happen in real life too? Then there's *Endgame* [by Nancy Garden]. *Endgame* is like whoa. I mean, you read that one and it's from the shooter's perspective the whole way and you understand why he did it but you are still disgusted by him. It shows how complicated it can be too. He's a kid who doesn't feel sorry for what he did at all. He feels completely justified.

There's a lot of different ways that authors have approached it that show the complexity of the issue and a lot of people don't want to humanize the shooter. But I don't know. I get it, but there's also if we always look at him afterward in this way...we need to think about how we're looking at him even before this happened. Because I really do think some of these books could create conversations in classrooms that teachers and kids start to think about how they're treating people and how things could change. Reacting to the shooting afterward is not the solution.

SB: As we think about our presentation there, we know we could very well have people who fall on either line of the issue on gun control in a state like Michigan. In some ways it's easy to demonize the gun, but that doesn't solve anything. (Note: Bickmore, Rumohr, and Shaffer were slated to present at the Michigan Council of Teachers of English Think Spring Conference at Western Michigan University on March 13. It was cancelled due to COVID19).

SS: It feels like things happen and then people react. And actually, they don't always react if it's not nearby. And so if it's not nearby, people don't even mention it in schools. Like teachers don't even know how to talk about it. I was reading books about school shootings a whole year before Parkland

and I went into class the day after Parkland to my future secondary teachers, maybe it was a couple days later, and I said, “How many of your teachers talked about this with the kids?” Not one. Not one even mentioned Parkland. And I don’t know why. They don’t have the words or they’re afraid. I don’t know why.

GR: Part of it could be they don’t want to scare the kids.

SS: But the thing is, the kids were thinking about it already.

GR: Totally. No, I agree with you. But by talking about it that means we acknowledge that it exists.

SS: So part of my frustration was just that we’re just having these reactions to the shooting, and the books or using YAL to talk about it provides a forum where maybe those conversations can happen in the classroom and can happen ahead of time. And kids can start thinking about things and maybe even thinking about how they treat other people. There was a shooting up here about twenty miles from our university a couple months before Parkland and only one—it was a special needs kid that was killed because he went up to the shooter and asked him, “What are you doing? You’re going to get in trouble!” And the kid shot him. There was one death, and you didn’t really hear about it on the national news because not enough people were hurt, not enough people died.

KS: I wonder one other thing: as you look back at the writing process and putting the book together, do you feel like there are any voices missing?

GR: The word count was really frustrating. I feel like we could have had like five more chapters.

SB: We could have dealt with more books for sure, but I think there’s one voice that’s missing. I think having a counselor educator also write about it, having a chapter deliberately for the teacher. How do you deal with this, ya know? What kind of advice would be there for the teacher? So I think of that as kind of a missing voice.

SS: We had originally planned to have that in there, but our word count! There is so much talk about marginalized voices and we only have one voice of someone of color, but school shootings--school shootings, not gun violence--are really a white issue. It's something to think about. We have some authors of color as far as books that we included, but as far as scholars of color, Maria Hernandez Goff's it.

GR: I would be curious to hear Katie's perspective on this too. Because even though, Katie, you are the interviewer, you and I have talked about this. Gun violence is not limited to school shootings. There are kids who deal with gun violence daily outside of school.

KS: This is true. The number of students who were somehow affected by gun violence in my class was heartbreaking. And none of it shows up on the news or media. Other than *Long Way Down*, there wasn't much in the way of gun violence that didn't show up at school.

SB: There certainly could be another book about how gun violence generically affects the life of kids, right? And I still think there is a difference between how the rural kid and the urban kid, and the eastern kid and the western kid think about it. I think the West has a different sensibility about guns, which in some ways is even more shocking. Columbine was shocking because people have guns! People hunt! The fall break in Utah is for hunting season. So I think there's issues around that too.

GR: I think there are some ways to engage that topic further. I feel that in some ways that's the value of critical teaching if we consider that last section in terms of helping students to recognize what their situations are and figure out the tools to best engage this topic. And advocate for themselves. Then to take it one step further, there could be writing that could be done for that very specific audience of teachers in urban settings that are dealing with gun violence but not on a school shooting level.

SB: You're helping us frame another book! And that's another thing, Katie, it felt so immediate. It had been around in some ways my whole career as an academic. When Columbine happened--the summer before the basketball team from our school had played at Columbine. They hosted a summer tournament. It felt immediate for our kids because they knew the building. They'd been in

the building! They knew some of the kids. This kind of thing plays out in your mind; it sort of haunted around the edge of our school for a few days, right? Those trench coats--people wore those hunting or outside, but they became "uhh. You don't wear that."

KS: Where should the research go from here? What should be the next steps?

GR: I think what we just discussed is a really good step. This research is going to change according to the canon and according to what continues to enter the field. Think of *Long Way Down*. That is a really interesting way to engage this topic of gun violence. I think the research will be adaptive. Shelly, what do you think?

SS: Following Parkland one of the interesting things was how the students took up the activism. So I feel like that is a direction: the student voices. We haven't looked too much into how the students are reacting, right? My colleague and I wrote about violent ends in social studies and how to fit it with the second amendment and talking about how some of these issues cross over into other content areas.

GR: That's the next step! How to engage in nonviolence across content areas!

SS: I do think when you think about it with the second amendment and even the NCSS standards--they have civic standards where kids are actually taking on these roles as civic actors in their communities and taking on democracy and things like that. I felt like it was a little bit of activism, us writing this book, right? We're getting it out there and we're doing our little piece. But I really, really want teachers and kids to talk about these things, and I don't want only the scholars talking about it. I want it to be in the communities and I want teachers thinking about it and talking about it and not shying away from it. And I don't know how we create that.

SB: I think you're right. Both of you. What comes next matters. Other subjects matter. I've thought as much about Melanie Shoffner's chapter--so when does the methods class go past the content area into the health and well-being of both students and teachers? We'd like to think we are teaching the child first, but we don't address teaching the child. We address teaching the subject area. I wondered

if there could be even a small questionnaire to the English Ed educators about what percent of the time do they spend on teaching for social justice or talk about the hazards of being in a school or the emotional well-being of students. How often do they mention those things? Or how are they incorporated into English Education class?

I know when I was teaching—even after Columbine—I wasn't thinking about how will you confront the next trauma in your community? And that is certainly a white privileged view of the world because people who are teaching in inner-city Detroit or Philly are thinking about those things because they're realities, right? What about the trauma of poverty? What about the trauma of everyday living as part of an English education methods course, right for pre-service teachers. How do we write about student self-sponsored activism? So I think there are other things besides young adult literature. Maybe preparing English teachers—or any teachers—becomes more about the health and welfare of students—the whole child—rather than any given subjects.

SS: And honestly, that goes all the way back to Katie's first question because the thing is—even though you're talking about the whole child, I think young adult literature does that, Steve. That's why I always gravitated toward it because when I was still in the classroom whatever story, whatever short story, whatever poem, whatever novel that I read, it had to have a social justice theme. Something. Something that would get us talking about right and wrong and get kids thinking about issues. I actually do think that is the place. If we're talking about the well-being of kids, then bring in literature that has those issues. Then we can talk about it. Bring in literature that provides a space for students to talk about those things. And to look into other people's lives even if they're not experiencing it. So actually, YA is the tool, in my opinion.

SB: I'm not going to argue with that.

GR: I agree! What Shelly said!

I am so grateful for this field because I feel like it's brought so much meaning to the methods that I teach. I cannot imagine teaching methods without YAL. I can't even conceive of it, ya know? I'm a better methods instructor because of YAL.

SB: I think there are a lot of things that can be done both structurally and analytically for meeting the needs of a kid who might identify more rapidly to these characters and themes than they would.

SS: I agree. It can be that vehicle. The next steps for gun violence--there are lots of ways we could approach it: another book--maybe next year, Gretchen. I think there are so many directions for YAL going forward too. Gun violence is one of the huge issues that's out there but there are so many other issues too. There are so many directions we could go that still haven't been explored.

SB: There's always an issue, but if it doesn't come back to how we're helping the life of kids then it doesn't matter.

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