

## Introduction

We dedicate this first issue to Dr. Jeff Kaplan for his tireless support of young adult literature on many fronts: for readers young and old, for teachers, and, for what we most appreciate, for scholars. His column in *The ALAN Review*, which highlighted critical and empirical dissertations, showed us that critical and empirical scholarship of young adult literature was not only valid but also vital.

When Steve Bickmore organized the first Louisiana State University Young Adult Literature Conference & Seminar in June 2014, we envisioned a new, rich ground that would connect secondary school English teachers, educators, young adult literature (YAL) scholars, and writers. We anticipated that research projects—articles, book chapters, and edited collections—would come spinning out of the event.

The conference was not successful because it had overflowing crowds of participants; only 10 to 12 people attended each workshop and breakout session. However, those small groups became intensive learning centers that spawned meaningful conversations inside and outside the sessions—at lunch, at dinner, and at the readings at East Baton Rouge Library. These conversations produced numerous ideas for short- and long-term collaborations among participants. For one, participants expressed a need for a new publishing outlet focused on extensive empirical and critical studies around YAL. From this seed grew the idea of *Study and Scrutiny: Research on Young Adult Literature*.

In many conversations, we noted a shift in YAL scholarship, especially in its primary publications. *The ALAN Review*, *SIGNAL*, *English Journal*, and *Journal of Adult and Adolescent*

*Literacy* have been publishing a broader range of scholarship alongside the traditional articles and have been focusing on implementing YAL in K-College classrooms. The emerging scholarship asked whether these implementations were working or not —and, if not, why —and whether YAL indeed met the literary standards we value in our classrooms.

We are not just satisfied with the maxims we've been using for decades: YAL provides a mirror; YAL engages readers in ways that canonical texts do not; YAL connects fictional and lived realities; YAL is a bridge to the classics; YAL wins over reluctant readers; YAL improves reading fluency; YAL provides background/fodder for vital discussions around social issues (gender, sexuality, race, violence); YAL sparks life-long reading; and the many other arguments we have been making for decades justifying the place of YAL in classrooms.

But does YAL accomplish these goals? We have anecdotal and some preliminary empirical data to answer that question in the affirmative, but we have yet to assemble a persuasive body of evidence. *Study and Scrutiny* will help us build that body of evidence. The journal will invite qualitative and quantitative research on YAL, small and big “N”; explore classroom, library, and other contexts; and enable us to conduct studies of YAL through a variety of critical lenses (e.g., critical race, youth studies, disability studies).

With this vision in mind, we sent out the first call for manuscripts and welcomed writers whose work would further promote YAL and its literary merit. As a result, our inaugural issue includes the following pieces: 1) two empirical studies conducted by Victor Malo-Juvera and Susan Groenke, Allison Varnes, and Stacey Reece; 2) four critical studies from Ashley Boyd and Summer Pennell, Michelle Falter, Louise Freeman, and Sarah Thaller; and 3) an interview conducted by Rodrigo Joseph Rodriguez with Benjamin Alire Sáenz.

The issue opens with Victor Malo-Juvera's mixed-methods study on preservice teachers' attitudes toward LGBTQ-themed texts. While including LGBTQ-themed literature into English classes is not a new idea, argues the author, some teachers still resist employing it in the classroom. Malo-Juvera aims "to gather data and generate typologies in order to inform teacher education programs" and to "increase pre-service English teachers' willingness to utilize LGBTQ themed young adult literature in future instruction" (p. 5)

Susan Groenke, Allison Varnes, and Stacey Reece shift attention to the readers of YAL, specifically to young men of color. The researchers ask such essential questions as, "What is it in young adult texts that motivates readers to read them voluntarily? Which texts motivate which readers? What makes a young adult text "relevant" to a reader?" (p. 46). In this study, the researchers carefully explore "three young Black male adolescents' motivations to read in a voluntary summer reading program." They also examine the boys' attitudes toward reading, how each boy perceives himself as a reader, and how each boy makes text choices.

The next group of articles presents critical studies of YAL. The section begins with Ashley Boyd and Summer Pennell's article "Batteries, Big Red, and Busses: Using Critical Theory to Read for Social Class in *Eleanor & Park*." The study takes a social-justice approach to explore power structures within contemporary American society and aims to prove that linking social-justice education and YA literature "can be a rich and engaging experience for students, as these contemporary texts afford for multiple layers of analysis" (p. 97).

Michelle Falter's "A Re-Vision of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*" "re-visions" two YAL novels and examines the ways in which race is

constructed/deconstructed. The article views race in relation to such societal elements as parental figures, family advice, and the history of land ownership. By juxtaposing the works, the author identifies differing racial ideologies in American society.

In the next article, Louise Freeman takes the readers into “a wizarding world” with “Harry Potter and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual: Muggle Disorders in the Wizarding World.” This critical study examines four examples of mental illness accurately depicted in the *Harry Potter* series: 1) major depressive disorder (personified by dementors), 2) senile dementia of Alzheimer’s type (Frank and Alice Longbottom), 3) post-traumatic stress disorder (Mad-Eye Moody), and 4) Stockholm syndrome (Winky) (p. 161). Freeman argues that the sympathetic portrayal of characters with psychological disorders may enhance moral development and promote understanding of mental illness among the readers.

Sarah Thaller continues the theme of mental illness in YAL with “Troubled Teens and Monstrous Others: Problematic Depictions of Characters with Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature.” The author places two novels’ depiction of mental illness in a larger social context. Specifically, she argues that negative portrayals of mental illness reinforce social norms and encourage fear toward “others.” She cautions readers that texts depicting mental illness as educational, social, and moral tools often “completely disregard human experience and compassion for others” (p. 250). As readers, teachers, or educators, we must not forget that mental illness impacts human beings and that people with mental illness have a rightful place in our society.

The first issue concludes with “*A riot in the heart*: A Conversation with Author Benjamin Alire Sáenz,” Rodrigo Joseph Rodriguez’s interview with the titular writer. This

frank, extensive conversation covers such topics as Saenz's connection to his characters, borderland situations and the desire to fit in, and love and friendship.

You are about to delve into this inaugural issue, the outcome of many conversations begun among teachers, readers, and scholars of YAL in Baton Rouge but one year ago. Enjoy reading. Let us know what you think. Our readers' feedback is welcomed and will be invaluable in our growth as a scholarly journal.

### **Acknowledgments**

*Study and Scrutiny: Research on Young Adult Literature* is an open access journal. It provides immediate access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge. Subscribers worldwide will have access to the scholarship published in this journal.

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*Crag Hill, Leilya Pitre, and Steve Bickmore*