

CHAPTER 5 Poetry, Drama, Humor, and New Media



Focus Box 5.1

Stories Told through Free-Verse Poetry

Fortune's Bones: *The Manumission Requiem* by Marilyn Nelson. Front Street, 2004. Nelson tells the true story of a slave who in the late 1700s was owned by a Connecticut doctor. When he died, the doctor dissected his body and boiled down the bones to use for anatomy studies. Nelson's rich telling of this unique story could be an effective reader's theater production.

Frida: *Viva la Vida!* by Carmen T. Bernier-Grand, Marshall Cavendish, 2007. Free-verse poems, each paired with one of Frida Kahlo's paintings, do a good job of introducing a new generation to this famous Mexican painter.

Heartbeat by Sharon Creech. HarperCollins, 2004. Middle school readers will enjoy the rhythm of the verses in this story of twelve-year-old Annie who loves to run, not to win a race, but to feel the earth and sky.

Hoop Kings by Charles R. Smith, Jr. Candlewick, 2004. Shaq O'Neal's shoe sole (actual size) is featured as a fold-out in this gorgeous book of sports poems. The pages feature twelve super-heroic basketball players with equally vibrant poems.

Locomotion by Jacqueline Woodson. Putnam's, 2003. Woodson uses a teen voice to create the free verse, the sonnets, and the haiku that tell Lonnie's story as he moves through group and teen homes.

Make Lemonade by Virginia Euwer Wolff (Holt, 1993), winner of the National Book Award, was one of the earliest books in which the author lent dignity to a problem novel by using a spacious free-verse format. In the sequel, *True*

Believer (2001), LaVaughn's horizons extend beyond her neighborhood, but she does not lose her determination.

Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse. Scholastic, 1996. In diary-like entries, Billie Jo tells how her dreams get lost in the swirling winds of the 1930s Oklahoma dustbowl. The book won the Newbery Medal.

Split Image by Mel Glenn. Morrow/HarperCollins, 2000.

Poems from observers show how Laura Li, a dutiful Asian daughter, has a hard time figuring out how to manage her heritage and her new life. Glenn's other poetic stories include *Foreign Exchange: A Mystery in Poems* (1999), *The Taking of Room 114: A Hostage Drama in Poems* (1997), *Jump Ball: A Basketball Season in Poems* (1997), and *Who Killed Mr. Chippendale?* (1996).

The Voyage of the Arctic Tern by Hugh Montgomery. Candlewick, 2002. Unlike most of the new prose poets who are writing realistic problem stories, Montgomery spins a high-seas adventure story.

The Way a Door Closes by Hope Anita Smith, illustrated by Shane W. Evans. Holt, 2003. The first twelve poems are about the happiness that C. J. experiences in his family, but the thirteenth, "The Way a Door Closes," lets readers know that the father of the family is leaving. The rest of the book (twenty-two more poems) describe C. J.'s up-and-down emotions.

Who Will Tell My Brother? by Marlene Carvel. Hyperion, 2002. Carvel's sensitive story treats the issue of offensive Indian mascots used by sports teams.

Young Adult Authors Speak Out

Naomi Shihab Nye on the

Poetry Bridge



To cross the Mississippi River when I was a child, my family could drive over a noisy bridge with a strange surface that made tires rattle and squeal, or a silent humming bridge with elegant spires. Of course, we all cheered for the noisy bridge, but once I started reading and writing poetry at age six, I realized quiet bridges had a deeper appeal.

Simply by reading a poem written long ago, one could feel transported into the heart and mind of another time. Emily Dickinson or William Blake offered startling wisdom-sparks that made a whole day swerve, sit up, take on a shinier, more attentive tone.

Or by reading a poem by a poet from another country—Rabindranath Tagore of Bengal was a childhood favorite of mine, and Robert Louis Stevenson from Scotland—one felt connected. Distances dissolved as the bridge of shared experience and insight linked us. I also knew what it was like to swing high in a swing or stare into a stream. So these far-away people were my secret friends.

Of course, the reality of connectedness is only one of the tragedies that haunts devoted readers during a time of war. How many details and impulses do we really have in common with all the people who are dying? What shared understandings might have moved us past whatever desperation leads human beings to commit acts of violence against one another? What could we have done better?

I am interested in the bridges between images and ideas, layers of thinking, reality and metaphor—the unexpected seams that writing helps us sew. I am interested in how writing about one thing so often opens a door to another thing. The act of writing itself is an opening. Even if you don't like what you write first, you may move around within words on a paper and allow them to lead you somewhere else. I am interested in placement of parts of language, and the shining unspoken stream of meaning that often flows brightly right below the little bridges we carefully construct.

When I write about the Middle East, or anywhere else on earth, the poem or story is only trying to shine a little light on human realities which exist for all people in the world, not just some of us—that is the ground the poem grows out of. Not a “message”—not a “slogan”—as in politics—but creation of a simple scene. The people in the Middle East appreciate their homes, like good food, love children, want to water their plants and tend their trees and have friends in school and be respected in work, just as we do over here. It is impossible to explain the desperation that creates so much violence, but it is *possible* to describe regular human life and its hopes and fears.

I would hope readers feel at home in my poems, wherever the poem is taking place. “Oh, I know that feeling” or “That’s sort of like me.” Poetry is not just a surface glance at something, it is a deeper gaze. It tries to look *into*, not just at something. It slows us down, which is good, since we usually move too fast anyway. It helps us see something worth seeing everywhere, whether inside or outside us.

A girl in Calgary, Canada, wrote to me that after reading my work she could never look at the world headlines in the same way again. She would always be thinking about “regular people” everywhere—not “enemies” or “foreigners” or “strangers.” Her letter, in which she also mentioned she had asked her mom to cook only Middle Eastern food for her while she was reading *Habibi* the second time, was the best review I ever got.

My happiest moment as a writer is when someone else sees something of their *own* in one of my stories or poems.

That’s the bridge—and it doesn’t make a lot of noise.

* Naomi Shihab Nye’s books include her *Habibi* (Simon and Schuster, 1997), *19 Varieties of Gazelle—Poems of the Middle East* (Greenwillow, 2002), *A Maze Me* (Greenwillow, 2005), and *I’ll Ask You Three Times, Are You OK?* (Greenwillow, 2007).



The Teaching of Poetry

When we ask our college students about their in-school experiences with poetry, on the negative side they tell us about teachers who did not like poetry themselves and so flooded lessons with technical terms or turned poems into guessing games that made students feel stupid. On the positive side, they tell us about teachers who seemed to take genuine pleasure in poems and shared them with students as a gift. Their actions match the advice of Richard W. Beach and James D. Marshall:

1. Never teach a poem you don't like.
2. Teach poems that you're not certain you understand. Teach poems about which you may have some real doubt.
3. Teach poems that are new to you as well as your store of "old standards."
4. Become a daily reader of poems, a habitué of used bookstores, a scavenger of old *New Yorkers* and other magazines that contain poetry.
5. Give students the freedom to dislike great poetry.⁶

Books about teaching literature inevitably give suggestions on teaching this or that genre, but readers can almost palpably sense the urgency of suggestions for teaching poetry. Recommended books include Louise Rosenblatt's seminal *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*; Patrick Dias and Michael Hayhoe's *Developing Response to Poetry*; and Stephen Dunning's *Teaching Literature to Adolescents: Poetry*. See Chapter 11 for helpful ideas on writing poetry. With the help of these books and poems gleaned from teachers' reading, any teacher can soon have several hundred poems worth reading and using in class. Here we offer some other suggestions.

1. Avoid units on poetry. Poems deserve to be used frequently but not en masse. It is better to use poems in thematic units where they can be tied in with short stories or drama.
2. Drop a funny poem—or a monster poem—into class just for the fun of it.
3. Let students, at least occasionally, help choose the poems that a class will study.
4. Remember that poetry takes time and plan accordingly. This is not to see how many poems you can knock off in one class, but to allow students to hear poems again and again and to talk about them. We saw one teacher who obviously hated poetry set a record by killing thirty-six Emily Dickinson poems in less than one class period. It takes time to recognize kinship with a poet, to find someone who expresses a feeling or makes an observation that the reader has come close to but has not quite been able to put into words.
5. Surround your students with as many beautifully designed poetry books as you can borrow from libraries, scrounge from friends and neighbors, or buy. For suggestions, see Focus Box 5.2, More Poets and Poetry.

Even though the age range of those who can read and enjoy a particular poem is usually much wider than for prose, there is still a subtle dividing line between children's and young adult books. While teenagers may be amused by the humorous poetry of Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelutsky, they are likely to feel slightly insulted if offered serious children's poetry. Many young adults are ready to read and enjoy the same poetry that educated adults enjoy, especially if teachers smooth the way by first providing access to poets whose allusions they are likely to understand and then gradually leading them into poetry representing cultures and times different from their own. It may help to ease students into appreciating the work of some poets by first offering various kinds of biographical reading, as with Neil Baldwin's *To All Gentleness: William Carlos Williams, The Doctor-Poet*; Jean Gould's *American Women Poets: Pioneers of Modern Poetry*; or Paul Janeczko's *Poetspeak: In Their Work, About Their Work*. In a similar way, someone who has read Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* will probably be ready to appreciate the poems in her *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning: Poems*. Readers of Ray Bradbury's science fiction may want to read his fifty-plus poems in *When Elephants Last in the Dooryard Bloomed*. Students who have read Maya Angelou's autobiographical *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* will probably be interested in her poetry.

One of the delights and challenges of working with modern poetry is that students (and teachers) have no source to turn to for determining the meaning or worth of the poems. Comments on a T. S. Eliot poem are easy to come by, and a glance at criticism tells us whether this poem is major Eliot or minor Eliot. We hardly need to read the poem to comment on it, to determine its place in the canon, or to chase down all those wonderful symbols and allusions. With a modern poem, teachers and students must fall back on honest responses to the poem. Years ago, Luella Cook, one of the great people in English education, warned teachers about the dishonesty of canned responses to literature, and although she referred to students alone, her warning might be extended to teachers as well.

The problem of teaching literature realistically faced, then, becomes one of widening the range of responses to literature, of guiding reading experience so that reaction to books will be vivid, sharp, compelling, provocative. The great tragedy of the English classroom is not that students may have the "wrong" reactions—that is, veer from accepted judgment—but that they will have no original reaction at all, or only the most obvious ones, or that they will mimic the accepted evaluations of criticism.⁷



Making Drama a Class Act

We used to say that playwrights did not write plays for teenagers because teenagers were not the ones buying tickets to Broadway plays or flying to London on theater tours. That's still true, but as we discussed in Chapter 3, teenagers make up a healthy portion of television and movie audiences, so that talented writers are now writing serious plays designed for young people either to read or to perform.



More Poets and Poetry

Crush: Love Poems by Kwame Alexander. Word of Mouth, 2007. Naomi Shihab Nye wrote the title poem; other featured poets are Pablo Neruda, Nikki Giovanni, and Sherman Alexie. An intriguing variety of verbal formulas may inspire teens to submit their own poems to a related website.

Good Poems, compiled by Garrison Keillor. Viking, 2002. After a lighthearted introduction, Keillor presents three hundred poems that he has read on his PBS radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*. They range from the well-known to the obscure, but they are all accessible.

Heart to Heart: New Poems Inspired by Twentieth-Century American Art, edited by Jan Greenberg. Abrams, 2001. In this Printz Honor Book, Greenberg commissioned poets to write in response to some of the greatest twentieth-century American paintings. She arranged the paintings and the poems according to the poet's approach.

I Am the Darker Brother: An Anthology of Modern Poems by African Americans, revised edition, edited by Arnold Adoff, illustrated by Benny Andrews. Simon & Schuster, 1997. Since its publication in 1968, this has been the premier anthology of black poetry. Twenty-one new poems are

included with pieces coming from nine women, including Rita Dove and Maya Angelou.

I, Too, Sing America: Three Centuries of African American Poetry, edited by Catherine Clinton, illustrated by Stephen Lalcorn. Houghton Mifflin, 1998. This attractive, large-sized book is a good resource for classrooms and libraries.

Immersed in Verse: An Informative, Slightly Irreverent and Totally Tremendous Guide to Living the Poet's Life by Allan Wolf, illustrated by Tuesday Mourning. Sterling/Lark, 2006. This is both a how-to and a book of encouragement for anyone who's even slightly tempted to write a poem. The illustrations add an upbeat tone.

Love Speaks Its Name: Gay and Lesbian Love Poems, edited by J. D. McClatchy. Knopf, 2001. The 144 poets include Sappho, Walt Whitman, Frank O'Hara, and Muriel Rukeyser.

Pierced by a Ray of Sun: Poems about the Times We Feel Alone, selected by Ruth Gordon. HarperCollins, 1995. These seventy-three poems all explore human loneliness. Also recommended are Gordon's earlier collections including *Time Is the Longest Distance* (1991), *Under All Silences* (1987), and *Peeling the Onion* (1993), all HarperCollins.

Be warned, however, that these are not the kinds of nondescript plays that were found in books for high school students a generation ago. In an *English Journal* article, "Toward a Young Adult Drama," Rick E. Amidon described them as "works which question fitting in, popularity, sex, drugs, making choices, taking chances." He labeled Jerome McDonough the "father of young adult drama" because of his dozen "powerful, practical-to-produce, and effective plays for the young adult stage."⁸ His plays differ from those typically produced at high schools in that they are shorter (fifty to seventy minutes long); they deal with topics dear to the hearts of teenagers; most of the casts are flexible, so the plays can be adapted to how many actors are available; and they have contemporary settings. Hindi Brooks, who has been a writer for television's *Fame* and *Eight Is Enough*, has also written plays specifically for young adults. (Both McDonough's and Brooks's plays are available from I. E. Clark in Schulenberg, Texas.) Samuel French in Hollywood and Dramatists Play Service in New York also offer play scripts written for teenagers. For the first time, the ALAN Workshop was held in New York City in November, 2007, and included a panel of playwrights talking about their

Poetry Speaks: Hear Great Poets Read Their Work from Tennyson to Plath, edited by Elise Pashen and Rebekah Presson Mosby. Source Books, 2001. A bonus to this book are the three CDs presenting many of the forty-two poets doing interpretive readings.

Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle, edited by Stephen Dunning and others. Scott, Foresman, 1967, reissued, 1994. A landmark book, this collection proved that young readers could enjoy modern poetry without the help (or hindrance) of teachers. Its sequel, *Some Haystacks Don't Even Have Any Needles and Other Complete Modern Poems* (Lothrop, 1969) is almost as good.

Red Hot Salsa: Bilingual Poems on Being Young and Latino in the United States, edited by Lori M. Carlson. Holt, 2005. Continuing along the lines of her popular 1994 *Cool Salsa*, Carlson has gathered another wonderful collection of poems in both Spanish and English.

Revenge and Forgiveness: An Anthology of Poems, edited by Patrice Vecchione. Holt, 2004. Contemporary poets including Naomi Shihab Nye, Lucille Clifton, and editor Vecchione join "classic" poets ranging from the creator of a Native American myth song to William Shakespeare and Ezra Pound in illustrating different ways of dealing with grief and anger. The collection was inspired by the events of September 11, 2001.

Tour America: A Journey through Poems and Art by Diane Siebert, illustrated by Stephen T. Johnson. CIP Chronicle, 2006. Children, teens, and adults can all enjoy this book of poems and paintings that take readers to 26 of the author's favorite places in America—ranging from Alaska and a view of the aurora borealis to Chicago and a view of the El.

Truth and Lies: An Anthology of Poems, edited by Patrice Vecchione. Holt, 2001. Vecchione adds illuminating notes to help young readers enjoy the poems that she carefully chose from across centuries and across cultures.

Wáchale! Poetry and Prose About Growing Up Latino in America, edited by Ilan Stavans. Cricket Books/Carus Publishing, 2001. A reviewer described the vivid word pictures in this bilingual collection as speaking from the heart and lingering in the mind.

Walt Whitman: Words for America by Barbara Kerley, illustrated by Brian Selznick. Scholastic, 2004. Beautiful pictures and a generous format make this a good book for introducing one of America's most famous poets.

Why War Is Never a Good Idea by Alice Walker, illustrated by Stefano Vitale. HarperCollins, 2007. Folk art paintings make Walker's poem especially powerful. Skilled teachers can use the book to bring both an artistic and a thought-provoking experience to groups from ages eight or nine on up.

scripts. Aaron Levy (see his statement on p. 158) was responsible for bringing the event together.

Without encouragement from teachers, few teenagers read drama because it needs to be read aloud with different voices and it is hard to visualize the scenery and the stage directions. One of our graduate students, Alison Babusci, who came to study in Arizona State University's well-known program in Children's Theater, drew up these five suggestions for teachers who are planning to have students read and study such plays as those listed in Focus Box 5.3.

1. Make students feel like they are "on the inside" of the theatrical world by bringing in photocopies of sets and costume designs. Obtain a stage diagram and teach students stage directions; the more they know about the production of a play they are reading, the more interested they will be.
2. Become "friends" with the cast by having students copy the cast list (dramatis personae) from the beginning of the play and then write their own descriptions of the characters and their relationships.

Young Adult Authors Speak Out

Aaron Levy, Dramatist

Speaks to English Teachers and Librarians



Once we admit that theater is an endangered species, we can get to work, especially if we realize that our last shot at creating patrons of the theater happens at the high school level. The problem isn't that teens prefer movies, malls, and skateboarding over plays; they just prefer these activities over the theater they currently know. Most have stumbled and fumbled over the language of Shakespeare, misunderstood the romanticism of Tennessee Williams, ho-hummed at Neil Simon's coming of age, and poked fun at the silliness of most musicals. Before us is the eerie reality that once out of high school, our students may choose to never see a piece of live theater. And with their current history, why should they?

I can identify with their attitude because I have a similar history. In high school, I didn't even know where the theater was, but then in college I started writing dialogue and so I ventured over to the theater. On many a night, I was surprised at the magic of a live story unfolding before me. I connected with the actors and the characters they portrayed in a way I've never done with a movie. In the one-woman play by Jane Wagner, *Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, one of the characters played by Lily Tomlin is the bag lady, Trudy, who admits that going crazy and dropping out of corporate America was the best thing she ever did. The play has Trudy taking visiting aliens on tours of our universe. They end their visit with a night in the theater where her charges wind up watching the audience instead of the play because Trudy hadn't thought to tell them otherwise. At the end of the evening one of them shows Trudy his goose bumps. Trudy reflects, "Yeah, to see a group of strangers sitting together in the dark, laughing and crying about the same things . . . that just knocked 'em out. . . . So

they're taking goose bumps home with 'em. Goose bumps! Quite a souvenir."

That's a great lesson that the aliens teach us about our own theater—the audience is the real art, and it's our job to make sure with every production (and every reading in our classrooms) we keep it that way. When I work with students either in class or on the stage, we talk every day about audience. Unlike other literary forms, without an audience, theater does not exist.

Too often, high school theater perpetuates archaic notions about theater with slow-moving dramas, repetitive musicals, and plays that don't speak to the teenage experience. We do not need to acquiesce to the MTV style of telling stories in quick snippets, but we have to be aware of certain trends in the teenage attention span. If we want them to actually turn their cell phones all the way off and sit there for an hour-and-a-half, we had best deliver goose bumps or lose them forever.

Before we can deliver the goose bump experience and make it so teenagers leave high school craving theater, we've got to figure out a way to get them into high school auditoriums in the first place. We also have to make it so that when we read plays in English classes, it feels like something stronger than a requirement. We need to read drama with such fervor that students are actually curious to see it produced.

Here are a few suggestions for ways that English teachers and drama teachers can work together.

- Invite the drama teacher to your very first English department meeting. Get acquainted and make plans for him or her to come to your class to pro-

mote the first play. Some teachers send students around to pitch the play or perform a scene, but I think that's risky because students often feel silly performing without the benefit of a stage. If their performance falls flat, the visit has had adverse effects, and even when it succeeds, it has taken away some of the surprise of the performance.

- ④ Offer extra credit for students to attend the plays. If you don't believe in extra credit, make two assignments for homework, one a textbook type and the other attending the play. Inform students early and often of the play dates so they can get off work and/or make other arrangements. Most productions run three or four performances so students should be able to attend at least one if they plan ahead.
- ④ Attend the performance yourself. This is big. I know (believe me I know) that an English teacher's job, if performed perfectly, would never end. We could grade until our heads drop into our morning cereal. But think of your attendance as a built-in lesson plan. If you attend, your students are twice as likely to attend, and you can use the performance as an actual piece of literature. Your theater teacher might be able to provide you with some background information, study guides, or quizzes.
- ④ Suggest and support a theater teacher's opportunity to select some riskier plays that speak closer to the teen experience or tell a story in a nontraditional structure. If you and/or your theater teacher scout the catalogues, you can order several plays besides the usual ones that are produced over and over, sometimes by schools in the same district during the same academic year.
- ④ As a way of returning the favor of your tireless support of the theater program, many theater teachers are willing to work with their students to perform a scene or two from one of the plays in *your* curriculum. After reading and dissecting a play like *Death of*

a Salesman, wouldn't it be a breath of fresh air to see and hear Willy Loman on his feet?

- ④ Suggest and support library collaboration with theater productions. When I produce a play, I always visit our librarian and explain the play's plot and themes to see if she can help us set up a promotional display. When I did Jim Leonard's *The Diviners*, a humorous and touching story about a mentally challenged teenager who had a gift for divining, the librarian displayed books about the Depression (that's when the play is set) and about the art of divining.
- ④ Help with press releases for promotion. While newspapers won't write articles on high school plays, they will if you spin it in an interesting way. When we produced my comedy-drama about teen suicide, *Pizza with Shrimp on Top*, we wrote the header for the press release something like, "Valley students reach out to community to fight against teen suicide." Both reporters and photographers showed up at our rehearsals.
- ④ Invite and engage the community. Too often we produce plays whose quality suffers supposedly for the sake of "education." But I wonder if we're teaching our theater students the right things when we choose boring scripts, produce them at a low level of cost and effort, and then present them in half-filled arenas.

When I am teaching theater, I try to include my students in every aspect of production, especially marketing. The most important marketing lesson we learn is that if we are going to invite the whole school and the community, our product needs to make patrons want to see our next play.

- ④ As a prize-winning playwright and director, Aaron Levy specializes in plays for the teen audience. He is on the faculty at Kennesaw State University and can be reached with comments and questions at Levycurio@aol.com. His *Pizza with Shrimp on Top* is published by Dramatic.



Focus Box 5.3

Plays Commonly Read in English Classes

Children of a Lesser God by Mark Medoff. Dramatists, 1980.

Especially since the success of the movie, students appreciate this Tony Award-winning play about a deaf young woman and her relationship with a hearing teacher.

Driving Miss Daisy by Alfred Uhry. Dramatists, 1988. The impressive film serves as a backdrop for reading this play that helps students learn what is involved in a lasting friendship.

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds by Paul Zindel. Dramatists, 1970. This moving story of the damaging forms that parent-child love can take brought Paul Zindel to the attention of the literary world.

Fences by August Wilson. Drama Book Shop and New American Library paperback, 1995. Wilson's play won the Pulitzer Prize for the way it shows an African American family losing its dreams in the 1950s.

Inherit the Wind by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee. Dramatists, 1955. Based on the Scopes trial, this play is especially interesting in relation to current controversies over creationism versus evolution. The lines are easy to read aloud, and there is a good balance between sharp wit and high drama.

Les Misérables by Tim Kelly. Dramatists, 1987. With eleventh and twelfth graders, the boys like action, the girls like romance, and they all like music. So here's a play that answers everyone's needs.

A Man for All Seasons by Robert Bolt, 1960. Baker (also French), 1960. It's good for its portrayal of one of the most famous periods of English history and for its exploration of a hero. Interesting comparisons can be drawn to works treating heroes of noble birth, as in *Antigone* and *Hamlet*, and heroes of ordinary birth, as in *Death of a Salesman* and *The Stranger*.

"Master Harold" . . . and the Boys by Athol Fugard. Penguin, 1982. This powerful one-act play asks students to examine the psychological effects of racism on whites.

The Miracle Worker by William Gibson. Baker (also French), 1951. Students love the poignancy of the story of Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan, but it is also a good illustration of flashbacks, foreshadowing, symbolism, and dramatic license when compared to such biographies as Nella Braddy's *Annie Sullivan Macy* and Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life*. Gibson's *Monday After the Miracle*, a continuation of the story, is also a good read.

Sorry, Wrong Number by Lucille Fletcher in *Fifteen American One-Act Plays*, edited by Paul Kozelka. Pocket Books, 1971. Because it is a radio play written to be heard and not seen, it is ideal for reading aloud.

A Storm in Summer by Rod Serling in *Great Television Plays*, Vol. 2, edited by Ned E. Hoopes and Patricia Neale Gordon. Dell, 1975. Students like the way Serling relates an encounter between a ten-year-old Harlem boy and a bitter, sarcastic, Jewish delicatessen owner in upstate New York.

The Teahouse of the August Moon by John Patrick. Dramatists, 1953. The way Patrick lightheartedly pokes fun at American customs and values is refreshing.

Visit to a Small Planet by Gore Vidal, in *Visit to a Small Planet and Other Television Plays*. Little, Brown, 1956. Because this play was written for television, the action is easy to visualize and the stage directions simple enough to discuss as an important aspect of the drama itself.

What I Did Last Summer by A. R. Gurney, Jr. Dramatists, 1983. As Anna tells fourteen-year-old Charlie in this play about the last summer of World War II, "All choices are important. They tell you who you are."

3. Involve students by leading them to form their own opinions and images.
4. Let students see the play. Before deciding on what play to read, contact theater groups in your area and find out what plays they will be producing over the next year, or choose a play available on video.
5. Instead of always having students read parts aloud, try letting them improvise selected scenes. Also think of ways to combine drama with

music, fine arts, dance, or other physical activities. People do not fall asleep when their bodies are active.

Her concluding advice was that teachers have to be excited by drama. Students will quickly identify and adopt the teacher's attitude: If the teacher is bored, students will be bored. Because so many students work after school and are involved in extra heavy academic loads, some high schools are trying alternative ways to get drama included; for example, offering theater programs during the summer or as extracurricular events.

Paul Zindel's career (see his Margaret A. Edwards Award write-up on p. 164) as a popular playwright, screen writer, and author of young adult books is a good illustration of how teen readers appreciate the immediacy and the directness of characters talking with each other as they do in films and plays. See Focus Box 5.4, Books Recommended for Reading Aloud or Adapting into Reader's Theater for books that include this kind of vivid language.

A favorite play for reading aloud is Reginald Rose's three-act television play *Twelve Angry Men*, the story of a jury making a decision on the future of a nineteen-year-old boy charged with murder. Some classes affectionately refer to the play as *Twelve Angry People* because girls as well as boys are assigned parts. Teachers have offered the following reasons for the play's success, which can serve as guides when predicting the potential of other scripts.

1. It calls for twelve continual parts, enough to satisfy all students who like to read aloud.
2. It teaches practical lessons of value to students' lives.
3. It may serve as a springboard for research and further discussion on how the judicial system works.
4. It creates a forum for students to prove the psychology of group dynamics and peer behavior.
5. It sparks student excitement from the beginning and sustains it throughout.
6. It can be read in two-and-a-half class sessions.
7. The "business" is minimal and can be easily carried out as students read from scripts.
8. Pertinent questions can be asked when the jury recesses after Acts I and II.
9. Students are attracted to the realism, and they can relate to a motherless slum youth of nineteen.
10. The excellent characterization allows students to discover a kaleidoscope of lifelike personalities.

Play scripts are sold through distributors, most of whom will happily send free catalogues to teachers who request them. A typical script price for a one-act play is \$7.50 with a typical royalty charge of \$75.00 for the initial production and less for each subsequent production. Teachers wanting scripts for in-class reading rather than for production should so note at the time of ordering so that no royalty is charged. If the play is to be produced, whether admission is charged or not, the producer should pay the fee when the scripts are ordered. A royalty



Focus Box 5.4

Books Recommended for Reading Aloud or Adapting into Reader's Theater

Black Cat Bone: The Life of Blues Legend Robert Johnson by J. Patrick Lewis, illustrated by Gary Kelley. Creative Editions, 2006. This story of Robert Johnson, a blues musician, could be used as a wonderful introduction to a music event.

Talkin' about Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman by Nikki Grimes, illustrated by E. B. Lewis. Scholastic, 2002. An unusual biography is presented through twenty-one poetic speeches given at the funeral parlor where people have come to mourn the early death of the first African American woman to become a licensed pilot. See also Grimes's *Stepping Out with Grandma Mac* (Scholastic/Orchard, 2001) in which poems capture and celebrate the experiences shared by a teenaged girl and her grandmother.

Carver: A Life in Poems by Marilyn Nelson. Nikki Giovanni praised this winner of the 2001 Boston Globe Horn Book Award by writing, "Oh, Marilyn Nelson, what a magnificent job you have done to bring the past so alive it looks like our future." The individual poems make for an easy way of dividing up this biography of George Washington Carver for a class presentation.

A Gift from Zeus: Sixteen Favorite Myths by Jeanne Steig, pictures by William Steig. Joanna Cotler Books/HarperCollins, 2001. William Steig's drawings, as in *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, and his Dr. DeSoto books have always been brute art. Now that he is in his nineties, his style is even more succinct and could serve as a model for kids to do their own giant-sized drawings to assist them in storytelling.

Here in Harlem: Poems in Many Voices by Walter Dean Myers. Holiday House, 2004. Myers did for Harlem what Edgar Lee Masters did in his 1915 *Spoon River Anthology*. The rich text and the variety of voices (up to fifty) make it appealing either for choral readings, individual presentations, or a mixture of both.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams. Ballantine, 1980. Arthur Dent and Ford Prefect are on a perilous and very funny journey through the galaxy. The stories were originally produced in England as radio shows and so work well as read-alouds.

Keesha's House by Helen Frost. Frances Foster Books/FSG, 2003. These first-person accounts from seven teenagers

show that kids who are pushed out of their own homes and are dealing with such "heavy" issues as abandonment, racism, addiction, delinquency, and sexual consequences can still come together and help each other.

Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices by Paul Fleischman. HarperCollins, 1998. Fleischman designed his book as a way of "forcing" readers to approach poetry out loud because he had such fond memories of the storytelling and wordplay his family participated in when he was a boy.

Short Circuits: Thirteen Shocking Stories by Outstanding Writers for Young Adults, edited by Donald R. Gallo. HarperCollins, 1992. Several of these suspenseful and ghostly stories can be used for humorous read-alouds. Alvin Schwartz's *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, *More Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, and *Scary Stories 3: More Tales to Chill Your Bones* (HarperCollins, 1981, 1984, and 1992) are also the kind that will make the hair on listeners' arms stand up straight.

The Song Shoots Out of My Mouth: A Celebration of Music by Jamie Adoff, illustrated by Martin French. Dutton, 2002. Jamie Adoff is the son of Virginia Hamilton and Arnold Adoff and as a musician has put together a poetic tribute to all kinds of music.

Tough Boy Sonatas by Curtis L. Crisler, illustrated by Floyd Cooper. Boyds Mills/Wordsong, 2007. Driving through the Industrial town of Gary, Indiana, will not be the same for readers who absorb these thirty-eight fierce and muscular poems about the boys who run in this harsh town and who, like LaRoy, sing "I am not a failing flashlight. I am an Inspired/Inspiration."

What My Mother Doesn't Know by Sonya Sones. Simon & Schuster, 2001. These free-verse poems can stand on their own, but when read all together they tell the story of fourteen-year-old Sophie's longings as well as her adventures.

Witness by Karen Hesse. Scholastic, 2001. It is 1924 and a small town in Vermont is caught up in intrigue and prejudice. Hesse uses carefully constructed free verse to present a little-known piece of U.S. history through the eyes and voices of eleven different townspeople.

contract is mailed along with the scripts. Check online for information from such distributors as Samuel French, Dramatists Play Service, Inc., Anchorage Press, and Contemporary Drama Service.



Margaret A. Edwards Award Winner (2002)

Paul Zindel and His Legacy

Paul Zindel's Margaret A. Edwards Honor Books include *The Pigman*, *The Pigman's Legacy*, *The Pigman and Me*; *My Darling*, *My Hamburger*; and *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds: A Drama in Two Acts*. Zindel also wrote many other books and several successful screen plays including the 1972 *Up the Sandbox*, the 1973 *Mame*, and the 1986 *Runaway Train*.

Zindel graduated from Wagner College on Staten Island where, even though he majored in chemistry, he took a concentrated ten-day course in playwriting from Edward Albee. At the time, Albee was well known for his one-act plays *The Zoo Story* and *The Death of Bessie Smith*, and would soon be even better known for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Zindel was entranced. He said he wanted to be Edward Albee. He wanted his career, and his popularity, and most of all, his money!

After graduation, Zindel taught chemistry for ten years at Tottenville High School on Staten Island, while moonlighting by writing plays. In one of his classes, a girl had answered an ad from the back of a comic book that promised for one dollar to send seeds that had been exposed to gamma rays at Oak Ridge Laboratories. She got the seeds and grew them for her science fair exhibit, which she named "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds and Celestial Cabbage." Zindel loved her title—once he dropped off the part about cabbage—and his first successful play grew out of his love for this title. It was the story about the relationship between a sensitive girl, her epileptic sister, and their bitter and controlling mother. It opened in 1965 at the Alley Theatre in Houston and went on to win the Pulitzer Prize, a New York Drama Critics Circle Award, and an Obie. When, in 1970, it opened off-Broadway, it played 819 performances. In 1966, a shortened screen version was produced on public television. Harper and Collins editor Charlotte Zolotow saw it and was so impressed at Zindel's skill in creating interesting and believable teenage dialogue that she contacted Zindel and convinced him to try his hand at writing a book for young adults. Her invitation resulted in *The Pigman*, which was published to widespread acclaim in 1968.

At the time of the invitation, Zindel was saving on his rent money by living in and "guarding" empty houses that were up for sale and when he saw a teenaged boy trespass onto the property he went out to scold him, but instead ended up listening to the boy's many adventures. Zindel thought of a girl in one of his classes who was named Lorraine and who was so sensitive that she would cry at any mention of death or sadness. He was struck with the idea of putting two such different people in a book and having them interact with an eccentric, old man whose character Zindel based on an Italian neighbor that he remembered. Zindel later wrote more about this same neighbor in *The Pigman and Me* and in *The Pigman's Legacy*.

Both Robert Cormier and M. E. Kerr acknowledged that before they decided to enter the field of young adult literature they read Zindel's *The Pigman* and weighed the fact that a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright was putting forth his best efforts for teenagers. Joan Bauer has said that the first respect as an author that she received from her teenage daughter was when in 1994 she was asked to be on a panel about creating humor with Zindel. And at the time of his death in 2003, other writers of YA books spoke about his influence on their own careers. Will Hobbs described Zindel as a "chemistry teacher turned alchemist," and went on to say that Paul was "so good I couldn't stand it; I had to try writing young adult novels of my own." Alex Flinn said that Zindel was one of only three YA authors that he remembers reading when he was young. He feels as if he "met John and Lorraine just yesterday." Lauren L. Wohl, the marketing director for Roaring Brook Press, thanked Zindel in the June 2003 VOYA for allowing her to finally score with her teenaged son when she mentioned that she was working with Paul Zindel.

"The Pigman Paul Zindel?"

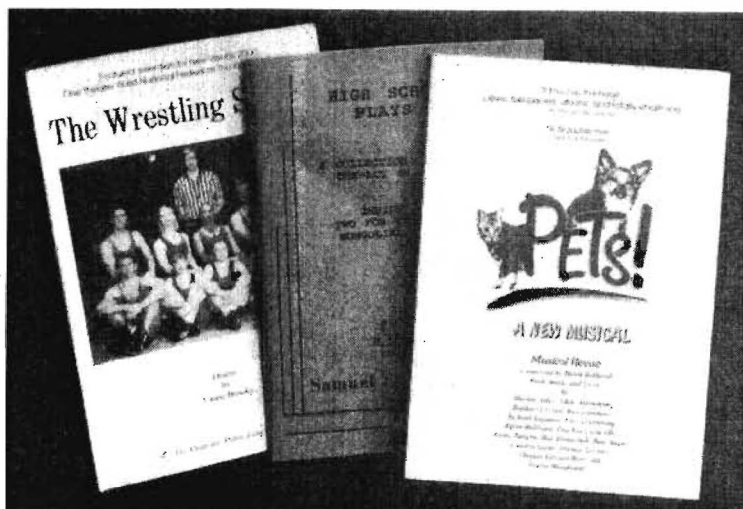
I nodded.

"You're kidding."

"Nope. Really!"

"Cool!" ●

Dramatic Publishing (www.dramaticpublishing.com) has printed scripts for several new plays aimed at young adult audiences including *The Wrestling Season*, *Everyday Heroes*, and *Deadly Weapons* by Laurie Brooks; *Zen Junior High* by Kirk Lynn; and *The Bully Show!* by Brian Guehring. Paul Fleischman has also adapted his book *Seek* into a play that the company is offering.



From Chills to Giggles

Something in the human mind encourages crossovers between fear and amusement, as shown by how often people who have suffered a fright burst out laughing as soon as the danger is over. Humor about death can be traced back at least as far as the early Greeks. English speakers refer to this blend of humor and horror as Gothic because they associate it with the grotesque gargoyles and other frightening figures in tapestries, paintings, sculptures, and stained glass windows, which were created to represent the devil and to frighten people into “proper” beliefs and behavior. Instead, people coped with their fears by turning such icons into objects of amusement.

People still do this at Halloween with spiderwebs, skeletons, black cats, bats, rats, ghosts, coffins, tombstones, monsters, and haunted houses. Halloween developed out of the sacred or “hallowed” evening preceding All Saints Day, which falls on November 1. The holiday is now second only to Christmas in the amount of money expended for costumes, parties, and candy to be given to trick-or-treaters.

The world has had great fun with Mary Shelley’s story *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus*, but when it was written many people viewed it as a cautionary tale against medical experimentation. Shelley’s story followed close on the heels of the development of autopsies and of dissection for purposes of medical study. Such practices made people nervous and fearful. One way of calming such fears was by laughing at them. While Shelley’s story was itself rich in Gothic details with a complex plot and fully developed characters, hundreds of parodies and imitations are comic in nature.

Gothic novels underwent a similar kind of transformation from scary to funny when the same year that Shelley published *Frankenstein* (1818), Jane Austen published *Northanger Abbey* as a gleeful parody of the earlier novels.

Later Gothic stories in the mid and late 1800s included some darkly humorous moments caused by visits from the dead as in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, and Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* with its Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future. In *Bleak House*, Dickens creates a character who spontaneously combusts; in *Little Dorrit*, the prison resembles a haunted castle; and in *Great Expectations*, Pip meets the criminal in a graveyard and has a hallucinatory vision of Miss Havisham's hanged body "with but one shoe to the feet."

Bram Stoker's 1897 *Dracula* is not the first story about a vampire, but it is the one that established such Western traditions as vampire's need for periodically sucking blood, the requirements of a prolonged relationship before a human can be turned into a vampire, vampires sleeping in coffins during the day and arising for action only after dark, the impossibility of killing vampires with ordinary human weapons, and the use of such conventional techniques for repelling vampires as garlic, a silver crucifix, and a wooden stake through the heart.

Bud Abbott and Lou Costello were among the earliest film comedians to take advantage of the possibilities of film for stretching viewers' emotions between the frightening and the ridiculous. Their 1948 *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* still appears on all-time best comedy lists. In the mid 1960s, *The Munsters* was a popular television show. Also, Charles Addams's ghoulish cartoons, which had been published in the *New Yorker*, were adapted into the pseudoscary *The Addams Family*. Laughs come mostly from the surprise of seeing ordinary family life conducted in a spooky old mansion by scary-looking individuals with such names as Uncle Fester, Morticia, Gomez, Wednesday, and Pugsley.

Other Gothic movies that made people both shiver and laugh include the 1973 *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, a spoof of a Gothic novel, which originally failed at the box office, but soon developed a cult following. The 1984 *Ghostbusters* starred Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd, while the 1986 *Little Shop of Horrors* starred Steve Martin, Rick Moranis, and a plant that eats people. Also in 1986, *The Witches of Eastwick*, based on John Updike's novel, starred Jack Nicholson, Cher, Susan Sarandon, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Veronica Cartwright. This fascination with horror led right into the Batman movies of the 1990s, in which New York City was renamed Gotham City. Its underground tunnels and sewer systems were made to serve as modern substitutes for the secret passageways, hidden entries, and basement crypts of the castles and mansions in Gothic novels.

In 1975, folklore collector Alvin Schwartz was happily surprised when his 1981 *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* and its sequels, *More Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* and *Scary Stories 3: More Tales to Chill Your Bones*, started winning state contests where children voted on their favorite books. Today, Schwartz's books are still on the American Library Association's list of frequently banned books, but kids still love them. They are kids' versions of some of the scary urban legends published in such adult books as Jan Harold Brunvand's *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings* and Joseph C. Goulden's *There Are Alligators in Our Sewers and Other American Credos*. A similar, but newer, book that includes such stories as "The Stolen Kidney," "The Scuba Diver in the Forest Fire," and "Aliens in Roswell, New Mexico," is Thomas Craighwell's *Alligators in the Sewer: And 222 Other Urban Legends*. In

the mid 1980s writer Robert Lawrence Stine, who had written joke books for Scholastic as well as a *How to Be Funny* manual under the pen name of Jovial Bob Stine, created the Goosebumps series for eight-, nine-, and ten-year-olds and the Fear Street series for young teens. Although by now, interest in Gothic humor has peaked, Stine is still a publishing phenomenon. We recently heard that when Laura Bush was invited to a book promotion event with Mrs. Putin in Russia, she offered to bring an American author with her. She was told that the only author Russian children would know was R. L. Stine, and so Mrs. Bush and Mr. Stine went on a goodwill tour to Russia.

Ethnic-Based Humor

Discussions and news stories about political correctness have made everyone aware of the fact that ethnic-based humor can be used in negative ways. However, the other side of the coin is that such humor can also be used for positive purposes. Among members of their own groups, people use ethnic-based humor as a way of bonding and as a sign of solidarity and group pride. For example, humorous undertones often run through the Spanglish that young Hispanics use and through the exaggerated slang that is part of Black English.

An important point is that positive uses of ethnic humor usually come from within the group itself. This does not mean that all elements of criticism are avoided. Just as individuals sometimes use self-deprecating humor, they also use group-deprecating humor. The difference, when such humor comes from inside versus outside a group, is that the insider is probably chiding the group to change, while the outsider is making fun of, and cementing, old stereotypes.

When ethnic-based joking finds its way into books or films, thoughtful readers or viewers can learn a lot about each other. Henry Spalding has described the way that Jews use self-deprecating humor as “honey-coated barbs” at the people and things Jews love most. He says they “verbally attack their loved ones and their religion—all done with the grandest sense of affection—a kiss with salt on the lips, but a kiss nevertheless.”¹⁰ Sherman Alexie’s 1998 movie *Smoke Signals*, based on a short story from his book *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, has some of this same kind of humor in it. The story is set on the Coeur d’Alene Indian Reservation in northern Idaho, and while it is about such serious problems as alcoholism, alienation, and broken dreams, it does not shy away from wry humor. When we went to see the film in Scottsdale, Arizona, the audience was almost equally divided between whites and Native Americans. Both groups laughed at such parodies as a T-shirt advertising “Fry Bread Power” and at “the miracle of the fry bread” when Victor’s mother magically feeds a crowd that is twice as big as she had expected. She simply raises her arms heavenward and solemnly rips each piece of bread in half. Both groups also laughed at the KREZ radio station announcer who sounds like Robin Williams when he shouts, “It’s a great day to be indigenous!” Indian viewers seemed more amused by Victor’s telling Thomas to shut off the television, “There’s only one thing more pathetic than Indians on TV and that’s Indians watching Indians on TV.”

Indian viewers also laughed uninhibitedly at the two gum-chewing, soda-drinking sisters who sat sideways facing each other in the front seat of their old car as they listened to rock music and drove backward. While white viewers were

troubled by such practical questions as, “Is the gear shift broken?” and “Can’t they afford to get it fixed?” the Indian viewers appeared to accept the women as genuinely funny versions of contrary clowns. Several tribes rely for humor on contraries. These are clowns that do the opposite of what is expected. They dress in buffalo robes in the summer and go stand naked in winter snow. In Thomas Berger’s 1964 *Little Big Man*, made into a film of the same name, a contrary clown arrives riding backward on a horse with his body painted in motley colors. He says “Goodbye” for “Hello,” “I’m glad I did it!” for “I’m sorry,” and cleans himself with sand before striding off by walking through the river.

The point is that humor is a powerful literary technique that can be used for a multitude of purposes as in the books listed in Focus Box 5.5, p. 170. Because humor is so intimately tied to the culture of particular groups, it will probably be one of the last things that outsiders catch onto. Nevertheless, it is well worth whatever attention we can give to it, whether working with middle-school readers (see Focus Box 5.6, p. 172) or with older students.

Teaching Literary Humor

Students are sometimes disappointed because an adult recommends a “funny” book. When they read it, they don’t feel like laughing all the way through. The fact is that for people to laugh, they have to be surprised, and there is no way that an author can surprise a reader on every page. Instead, authors sprinkle humor throughout their books. The greater the contrast between the rest of the book and the humor, then the bigger the surprise and the more pleasure it will bring to the reader. Our job at school is not just to repeat the same kinds of humor that students get on the Comedy Channel or through lists of jokes on the Internet but to help students mature in their taste and appreciation. We need to educate students to catch onto a multitude of allusions and to have the patience required for reading and appreciating subtle kinds of humor.

At one of the International Society for Humor Studies meetings, Jacque Hughes, who teaches at Central Oklahoma University in Edmond, presented an example of how drawing relationships between raucous humor and more subtle humor can help students move to new levels of appreciation. She was having a hard time getting her eighteen-year-old freshmen to understand the dark humor in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” Then she happened to see National Lampoon’s *Vacation* starring Chevy Chase. It was wonderfully funny, and because most of her students had seen the movie, class members were able to compare the personalities and the incidents. When they realized that the similarities were too extensive—and too funny—to be coincidental, they gained a new appreciation for O’Connor’s skill to do only with words what cost the movie producers millions of dollars to do with words and film.

It takes skill and practice, along with a broad, cultural background of knowledge, to understand a full range of humor. In *New York* magazine (July 17, 1995), readers sent in some thoughtful letters as a follow-up to an article on today’s depressing state of stand-up comedy. One writer answered his own question of “Why were the Bennys, the Aces, the Allens (Steve and Fred, both), Berles, Benchleys, Parkers, Woolcotts intuitively brilliant and where are their kind now?” with

the observation that these earlier comedians “were the products of a literate society, widely read or with extensive cultural experience, which gave them backgrounds upon which to draw. . . . They knew how to think and were well edited, either by erudite editors or by perceptive audiences.” Another reader wrote that the place to look for delightful wit today is not in the comedy clubs but “in written form, in comic novels and essays.” Most of our students aren’t going to find this kind of humor unless we help prepare them.

Several creators of humor for general adult audiences can be appreciated by young readers if their teachers genuinely enjoy bringing their work into class and sharing a few paragraphs. Richard Lederer’s *Anguished English* is fun, and so are stories written by Garrison Keillor and the newspaper columns written by Dave Barry and Erma Bombeck.

While few people appreciate having jokes explained to them, analyzing humor can be a good way to entice students into other kinds of literary analysis. Humor is an obvious emotion, and students are genuinely interested in figuring out what causes them to smile or laugh. While philosophers, psychologists, linguists, anthropologists, writers, actors, and comedians have all tried to answer this question, no one has come up with a proven system. All the reviewers we know, however, have come to agreement that Louis Sachar’s *Holes* is a very funny book. It won both the Newbery Medal and the National Book Award and was listed on practically every “Best Book” list created for 1998. *Holes* consists of two stories. One is set in the present and features young Stanley Yelnats, while the other one is set in the past and is about Stanley’s ancestors. When the contemporary story got too grim, Sachar would slip in a chapter from the past.

As explained very early in *Holes*, Stanley and his family seem to have more than their share of bad luck “all because of his no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather!” The very next line says that Stanley smiled when he thought of this because “It was a family joke,” but as shown in a later statement by Louis Sachar, some readers are just like Stanley and his family in forgetting that this is a joke.

Stanley is mistakenly accused of theft, found guilty, and sentenced to Camp Green Lake Juvenile Correction Facility, where every day each of the boys must dig a five-foot-by-five-foot hole, supposedly to strengthen their character. Actually, the warden is forcing the boys to help her (yes, the warden is a woman) look for buried treasure. Stanley figures he’ll lose weight or die digging, but his friend and fellow criminal Zero tries another way: He runs away. Stanley sets out after Zero, knowing little about the environment and forgetting to fill up his canteen. Stanley and Zero save themselves, partly through their own devices and partly through a series of coincidences that even Sachar admits is a bit much. However, he lets readers in on the joke by entitling his denouement “Filling in the Holes.”

To illustrate the complexity and the interrelatedness of narrative humor, in Table 5.1 (p. 173) we list several of the features that humor scholars identify as being what people find funny. We illustrate them with examples from Sachar’s *Holes*. The chart will, of course, be more meaningful to those who have read the book, so if nothing else, we hope it will encourage you to do just that.

Evidence of the power of Sachar’s humor is the difficulty we had in pulling out succinct examples of humor because a well-developed book differs from



Books to Make Readers Smile

Angus, Thongs, and Full-Frontal Snogging and *On the Bright Side, I'm Now the Girlfriend of a Sex God: Further Confessions of Georgia Nicolson* by Louise Rennison. HarperCollins, 2000 and 2001. There's also a third book in the series, but it doesn't have quite the sparkle of these first two British imports.

Bucking the Sarge by Christopher Paul Curtis. Random/Wendy Lamb, 2004. "The Sarge" is Luther's mother who is a big-time landlady and a master at running scams on both her tenants and her business associates. Luther has to use his own creative abilities to establish his independence and break free from his mother's deviousness.

Gilda Joyce: Psychic Investigator by Jennifer Allison. Dutton, 2005. Gilda is a cross between *Harriet the Spy* and the 2007 *Nancy Drew* film, especially in relation to moving to California and living in a grand old Victorian mansion that appears to be haunted.

How Angel Peterson Got His Name: And Other Outrageous Tales about Extreme Sports by Gary Paulsen. Random/Wendy Lamb Books, 2003. Paulsen is at his storytelling best in these entertaining sketches. His *Harris and Me: A Summer Remembered* (1993) and *Lawn Boy* (2007) are equally funny—and exaggerated.

Lemony Snicket's Series of Unfortunate Events from *Book the First: The Bad Beginning, or, the Orphans!* (1999) to *Book the Thirteenth: The End* (2006) by Daniel Handler (under the pseudonym of Lemony Snicket). HarperCollins. Written and illustrated as old-fashioned melodramas, the series, with its wry humor and unexpected allusions, began as books for children, but by and large Handler managed to retain his audience as they grew older by writing longer and more sophisticated stories. Handler's smart allusions refer to such pop culture icons as Monty Python and Isadora Duncan and to such authors as Edgar Allan Poe, T. S. Eliot, J. D. Salinger, George Orwell, Virginia Euwer Woolf, and Sappho.

I'm Not Joey Pigza by Jack Gantos. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. In his Joey books, all from FS&G, Gantos walks a fine line between creating humor and empathy for a hyperactive boy with more than his share of family troubles. Titles include *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* (1998), *Joey Loses Control* (2000), and *What Would Joey Do?* (2002).

Martyn Pig by Kevin Brooks. Scholastic, 2002. The humor is pretty dark, but it's here in the story of a boy and the girl next door (an aspiring actress) who work to cover up the accidental death of Martyn's drunken and mean father.

stand-up comedy in being more than a series of one-liners. For example, Sachar carried some of his jokes throughout the entire book as when Stanley first gets to camp and the guard tells him, "You're not in the Girl Scouts any more." The guard regularly repeats this idea sometimes by just reminding the boys they aren't Girl Scouts, while at other times he asks, "You Girl Scouts having a good time?" Near the end of the book, when Stanley's lawyer and the attorney general drive into the camp and the warden wonders if it's "them," the guard tells her, "It ain't Girl Scouts selling cookies." This all leads up to the ironic denouement when readers are told that the camp is "bought by a national organization dedicated to the well-being of young girls. In a few years, Camp Green Lake will become a Girl Scout camp."

Another difficulty in making the chart was matching specific examples with the designated features because many of Sachar's jokes serve several purposes. At the same time Sachar is surprising readers or making them feel superior to a particular character, he is puzzling them with incongruous details, which he later

No More Dead Dogs by Gordon Korman. Hyperion, 2000.

Twelve-year-old Wallace is tired of reading books in which the dog always dies. He gets in trouble at school when the drama club decides to put on a play about Old Shep and Wallace takes steps to keep the fictional dog alive.

Son of the Mob by Gordon Korman. Hyperion, 2002. Television's *Sopranos* has nothing on this story about seventeen-year-old Vince Luca, whose "family" business keeps interfering with his regular life.

Surviving the Applewhites by Stephanie S. Tolan. Harper-Collins, 2002. As a last resort, twelve-year-old Jake Semple, complete with spiked hair, numerous body piercings, and "attitude" is sent to an extremely loose and creative "academy" run by the Applewhite family.

The Misadventures of Maude March, or, Trouble Rides a Fast Horse by Audrey Couloubis. Random, 2005. This historical piece resembles a dime novel, partly because the pioneer heroine has grown up reading such stories and therefore uses them as the basis for decision making. She and her sister steal two horses and head out for Independence, Missouri, where "nobody cares about your past."

The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13¾ and **The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole** by Sue Townsend. First published in England in 1982, reissued as HarperTempest, 2003. These very funny books are taken from Adrian's

diaries as he recounts his life struggles, in which no one (especially the BBC) fully appreciates the value of his sensitive writings, in which the beloved Pandora does not long for Adrian's caresses as much as Adrian longs to caress Pandora.

The Vacation by Polly Horvath. Farrar, 2005. As she did with her 2003 National Book Award winner, *The Canning Season*, Horvath places a parentless young person under the care of some very strange, but not purposefully harmful, relatives. Readers probably find the situations funnier than do the characters, who are forced to rethink some of their basic beliefs about adults and how they act.

Uncle Boris in the Yukon and Other Shaggy Dog Stories by Daniel Pinkwater, illustrations by Jill Pinkwater. Simon & Schuster, 2001. In his usual style, Pinkwater starts with a smidgin of autobiography and then adds large helpings of exaggeration.

Zen and the Art of Faking It by Jordan Sonnenblick. Scholastic, 2007. Middle schoolers love the unpretentious style of Sonnenblick's writing. Here he tells the realistic story of San Lee, an adopted Chinese kid whose con-artist father is in jail. As San Lee starts a new school he vows to stand out instead of slinking into the background.

resolves, thereby bringing more smiles. For example, on first seeing this description of the animals who share the amenities of Camp Green Lake Detention Center, readers probably do not realize they are being let in on a crucial plot element. Instead they just sit back and enjoy a standard three-part joke in which a comedian sets up a pattern and then surprises listeners by breaking the pattern.

Here's a good rule to remember about rattlesnakes and scorpions: If you don't bother them, they won't bother you.

Usually.

Being bitten by a scorpion or even a rattlesnake is not the worst thing that can happen to you. You won't die.

Usually. . . .

But you don't want to be bitten by a yellow-spotted lizard. That's the worst thing that can happen to you. You will die a slow and painful death.

Always.



Sources of Information about Humor and Graphic Novels

The American Library Association website. Use any search engine to find the American Library Association, then type in *graphic novels* and you will find a wealth of information coming from three different units of the organization: The Intellectual Freedom Committee, the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), and the American Association of School Libraries (AASL). The Intellectual Freedom committee has a site on "Dealing with Challenges to Graphic Novels," which is part of a larger project, "Graphic Novels: Suggestions for Librarians" (PDF), created by the National Coalition against Censorship, the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, and ALA. YALSA prepares yearly lists of "Great Graphic Novels for Teens," including an annotated and a "Top Ten" list. The "Graphic novels—Professional Tips" (http://wikis.ala.org/professionaltips/index.php/Graphic_novels) is especially helpful, providing a bibliography of recently published articles and a guide to current sources of reviews. AASL, which works mostly with elementary school librarians, also has a helpful site, "Graphic Novels, Manga, and Anime: What's New and Cool for Your Library."

Art Spiegelman (<http://lambiek.net/artists/s/spiegelman.htm>) provides a good discussion of graphic novels and underground comix in general, as well as of his Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus*.

Attack of the Political Cartoonists: Insights and Assaults from Today's Editorial Pages, edited by J. P. Trostle. Dork Storm Press, 2004. Trostle gives a short history of political cartoons and then discusses the work of 150 members of the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists.

Best Editorial Cartoons of the Year, edited by Charles Brooks. Pelican, 1979–2007. Every year, Charles Brooks publishes a selection of the best political cartoons of the year in such categories as "The Administration," "Iraq/Terrorism," "Natural Disasters," "Media/Entertainment," "Foreign Affairs," and "Society."

Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide, 2 Volumes, edited by Maurice Charney. Praeger, 2005. The humor of ethnic groups, geographies, genres, nationalities, periods, and social groupings are discussed in great detail.

Comic Books for Young Adults (ublib.buffalo.edu/lml/comics/pages). This site explores the question, "Do comic books belong in libraries?" Geared toward comics

for young adults, the site is maintained by Michael R. Lavin of the Lockwood Memorial Library at the State University at Buffalo.

Encyclopedia of 20th Century American Humor by Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L. F. Nilsen. Oryx, 2000. Chosen as an ALA Best Reference book, this encyclopedia treats humor in children's and adolescent literature and also discusses humorous poetry, irony, parody, and satire.

Graphic Novels (www.graphicnovels.brodart.com) Brodart, a supplier of books to libraries, sponsors this commercial site, which includes core lists of "must have" graphic novels as well as a monthly evaluation of "the best, most appropriate new materials."

MAD Magazine (www.dccomics.com/mad) presents a tongue-in-cheek view of current politics, movies, television programs, books, and social movements.

No Flying, No Tights (www.noflyingnotights.com). Robin Brenner, a library technician and graphic novel enthusiast at Brookline Public Library in Brookline, Massachusetts, maintains this site, which reviews graphic novels especially for teens.

The Onion (www.theonion.com) looks so much like a regular news site that it is often mistaken as legitimate even though its main purpose is to satirize the news. A couple of years ago in Florida, a clearly identified excerpt from *The Onion* tripped up high school students when it was put on the state's high-stakes test.

The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach by Rod A. Martin. Elsevier, 2007. Psychology is demonstrated to interact with a number of other disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, medicine, and anthropology.

Topsy-Turvy Optical Illusions by Al Seckel. Sterling, 2006. Al Seckel is the world's leading authority on visual and other types of sensory illusions. His other books include *Ambiguous Optical Illusions* (Sterling, 2005), *Impossible Optical Illusions* (Sterling 2005), and *More Optical Illusions* (Carlton Books, 2002).

Wry Harvest: An Anthology of Midwest Humor edited by Chris Lamb. Indiana University Press, 2006. Lamb shows how the humor of people as different as Mike Royko, Erma Bombeck, Garrison Keillor, and James Thurber has been influenced by their Midwestern backgrounds.

TABLE 5.1 Some Features of Narrative Humor as Illustrated by Incidents in Louis Sachar's *Holes*

Ambiguity	<p><i>Stanley Yelnats</i> is the name of either Stanley, his father, or his grandfather.</p> <p>The whole story would have collapsed if <i>Zero</i>'s name hadn't been a shortened form of <i>Zeroni</i> instead of a reference to the contents of his brain.</p> <p>When Stanley finds the gold cap with <i>K.B.</i> on it, he thinks it might be the cap to the pen of a famous writer, but readers figure out that the <i>K.B.</i> stands for both <i>Kate Barlow</i> and the <i>Kissing Bandit</i>.</p> <p>Upon seeing the name <i>Mary Lou</i> on the back of the sunken boat, Stanley and Zero imagine a boy rowing across the lake with a beautiful girlfriend; readers know that <i>Mary Lou</i> was a fifty-year-old donkey who lived on onions.</p>
Exaggeration	<p>The digging of five-foot-by-five-foot holes every day by every boy was surely an exaggeration.</p> <p>The characters are eccentrics, especially those bigger-than-life ones from the 1890s including the Kissing Bandit, Kate Barlow, who "died laughing," the mean sheriff, the too-good-to-be-true "onion man," and the too-bad-to-be-true townspeople including Trout Walker and Linda.</p> <p>Equally exaggerated is Stanley's great-grandfather who carried his wealth in his suitcase and after losing it to Kate Barlow spent three weeks wandering in the desert. He was saved by the "Thumb of God," and married the nurse who took care of him at the hospital because he thought she was an angel—literally.</p>
Hostility	<p>There is enough hostility to go all around. When Stanley first gets to camp, the guard asks him if he's thirsty and when Stanley gratefully says, "Yes, thanks," the guard tells him to get used to it because "You're going to be thirsty for the next eighteen months."</p> <p>Stanley fantasizes about his new "friends" coming to his old school and intimidating his nemesis.</p> <p>The warden puts rattlesnake venom in her nail polish so when she slaps Mr. Sir and scratches his face, he writhes in pain and his face is swollen for days.</p>
Incongruity	<p>There could hardly be a more incongruous set of characters ranging from Clyde "Sweet Feet" Livingston to Warden Walker and from Madame Zeroni to poor lovesick Elya Yelnats.</p> <p>Stanley had thought about becoming an F.B.I. agent, but he realizes the group meeting with Mr. Pendanski is not "the appropriate place to mention that."</p> <p>Readers laugh right along with the other boys when Stanley innocently responds to Mr. Pendanski's lecture about there being only one person responsible for Stanley's predicament: "My no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather."</p>
Incongruity Resolution	<p>The whole story revolves around Sachar's resolving such incongruities as the boys being covered with the dreaded lizards but not being bitten, why the warden made the boys dig so many holes, why Zero never learned to read, how Zero and Stanley were tied together by "fate," how Stanley's great-grandfather was saved on the desert, and why the curse is now lifted.</p>
Irony	<p>Not only is there no lake at Camp Green Lake, there is no greenery except in the two trees whose shade is owned by the warden.</p> <p>The townspeople of Green Lake said that God would punish Kate Barlow for kissing a black man, but instead God punishes the town so that no rain falls and the Lake dries up so that not only its shape but also its surface is like a frying pan.</p> <p>In his search for Zero, when Stanley comes up on the old, wrecked boat, he realizes that someone probably drowned in the very spot where he might die of thirst.</p>

(Continues)

TABLE 5.1 Some Features of Narrative Humor as Illustrated by Incidents in Louis Sachar's *Holes* (Continued)

Superiority	<p>Throughout the story kids feel superior to the adults, and well they might, judging by the Warden, Mr. Sir, and Mr. Pendanski.</p> <p>The whole adult society is made to look ridiculous so that readers agree with Stanley's "Well, duh!" when he reads the sign at the entrance to the camp declaring it "a violation of the Texas Penal Code to bring guns, explosives, weapons, drugs, or alcohol onto the premises."</p> <p>Readers cheer when Zero and Stanley, who are the lowest on the totem pole of the camp, are the ones who get out and become something less—"but not a lot less"—than millionaires.</p> <p>Everyone feels superior to the pot-headed Myra, who does not have sense enough to choose to marry Stanley's great-great-grandfather.</p>
Surprise or Shock	<p>Readers are as surprised as is Stanley at the sneakers falling from the sky and hitting him on the head.</p> <p>When Zero tells Stanley that he knows he didn't steal Clyde Livingston's sneakers, Stanley shakes his head because when he tells the truth nobody believes him, and now when he lies, he still isn't believed.</p> <p>Stanley and Zero's adventure is one surprise after another starting with Stanley finding Zero and Zero finding the "Sploosh" and ending with their finding the trunk with Stanley Yelnats's name on it.</p>
A Trick or a Twist	<p>An intriguing new setting is provided for the old trick of convincing someone that by lifting a calf every day, his strength will increase at the same rate that the animal gains weight.</p>
Word Play	<p>The recreation hall is named the <i>W-R-E-C-K</i> room.</p> <p>The boys all have descriptive names: <i>Zigzag</i>, <i>Magnet</i>, <i>Squid</i>, <i>Armpit</i>, <i>Caveman</i>, <i>Barf Bag</i>, and <i>Xray</i>.</p> <p>The macho guard is named <i>Mr. Sir</i> (he's doubly a man), while the boys call <i>Mr. Pendanski</i> ("pen-dance-key") <i>Mom</i>.</p> <p>Sachar constantly plays with the word <i>holes</i> as when Stanley finds the lipstick tube initialed with <i>K.B.</i> and "digs that hole into his memory," and Sachar entitles the denouement, "Filling in the Holes."</p>



Comic Books and Graphic Novels

The idea of telling continuing stories and showing the passing of time by drawing pictures in different boxes, as opposed to having just a single cartoon, was a turn-of-the-last-century innovation. In America, Richard F. Outcault is generally credited with the creation of newspaper comic strips. He had been a scientific and technical illustrator for Thomas Edison's laboratories but wanted to combine his drafting skills with his keen social observations and so began creating comic art. In April of 1895, Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* agreed to carry Outcault's *Hogan's Alley*, which started as a single panel but gradually evolved into a "strip." One of the characters was a buck-toothed street urchin named Mickey Dugan. He wore an oversized shirt and had his head shaved, which was a common practice to prevent head lice. What "The Kid" said was either printed on the front of his shirt or in a cut line underneath.

The newspaper had just purchased a color press with the intention of printing great art pieces and explaining them to the public, but the technology was not advanced enough to get satisfactory color separations and so the newspaper looked for other ways to get a return on its investment. Yellow was the easiest color to reproduce and a pressman took it upon himself to color Mickey Dugan's shirt yellow. Mickey Dugan became so famous as "The Yellow Kid" that the name of the strip was changed, and the bidding back and forth between Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst to print "The Yellow Kid" became so vitriolic and unethical that it contributed to the acceptance of the term *yellow journalism*, which was first used in 1898 to refer to the competition between Pulitzer's *New York World* and Hearst's *New York Journal* and the sensationalized stories that both papers were printing about Spanish atrocities in Cuba.

Bill Blackbeard, who edited a 1995 book celebrating the centennial of comic strips, *R. F. Outcault's The Yellow Kid: A Centennial Celebration of the Kid Who Started the Comics* by Richard Felton Outcault described The Kid as "the first great newspaper comic character" and the "lucrative predecessor" to such other characters as Maggie and Jiggs, Popeye, Blondie, the Gumps, Dick Tracy, Flash Gordon, Buck Rogers, and Charlie Brown and Snoopy. In the 1930s, such storytelling was banned in Italy by Mussolini, while in the 1950s comic books were investigated and castigated for their moral content in an investigation led by U.S. Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee. When radio arrived, comics were counted for dead; again their demise was predicted when movies started to talk, and then again when television programming was developed. Today's big threat to comic strips is the shrunken space in newspapers and the desire of editors to cram in a comic strip to please every taste. Some newspapers crowd as many as twenty or thirty strips onto a double-page spread, so that they all end up practically unreadable.

In November of 2006, Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Jules Feiffer spent a week as visiting artist for the Honors College at Arizona State University. When we talked with him, he questioned the idea that we are now in what some people are calling "a golden age of comics." He said that of course he is glad to walk into bookstores and see well-stocked comic sections and to see that after many years this art form is being recognized by the United States Postal Service with a set of stamps honoring superheroes, "but it's a bad set." Even Superman is not represented by the original creators: Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. They were two "Clark Kents" from Ohio, who brought their own dreams to a fantastic idea.

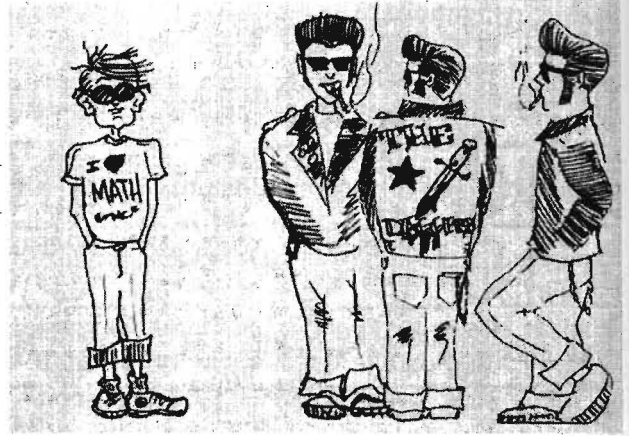
He thinks the golden age of comics was the 1930s when the Sunday supplements devoted whole pages to Prince Valiant, Tarzan, and Gasoline Alley. In the 1920s, cars were still relatively rare and people were obsessed with them, which made Gasoline Alley as exciting for its time as space travel is today. When he mentioned Skee-zix as the first baby to grow up in the comics, several people in one of his "older" audiences smiled because they remembered babies in their own families being called Skee-zix.

One of the points Feiffer made was how important writing is to comics. Of course the drawings are what people see first, but the comic strip has its own form of language. He said that when he first read Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot*, he recognized it as comic strip dialogue. He couldn't believe the way it resonated with him, the way the phrases stuck in his head. Becket was the best cartoonist he ever read—even though he did not draw.

The increasing popularity of comics and graphic novels inspires students to try their own hand at drawing as with this illustration of the metaphorical meaning of turf that students drew in one of our language classes.



SOMEONE ELSE'S TURF



Feiffer said he learned a lot from Becket, including that what you're not telling the reader is as important as what you reveal. Suspense is when you don't know what's happening. In *Waiting for Godot*, nothing is happening, like in Seinfeld, which would never have been on the air if it had not been for Samuel Becket. In a similar way, *Star Wars* would never have been made if not for Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon*.

Another aspect of comic strips that he finds fascinating is the crossover among genres. Milton Caniff, with his *Terry and the Pirates*, was a genius when he created the adventure strip by turning comic art into a storyboard. His Dragon Lady came straight from the movies and for generations circled back around in the popular culture. Soldiers in Vietnam were still using her as a reference point, and Anne McCaffrey (see her Margaret A. Edwards Award, p. 225) jokingly refers to herself as the Dragon Lady.

Comic books were a natural outgrowth of comic strips and almost from the very beginning newspapers began reprinting their strips, binding them together, and selling them through newsstands on a monthly, bimonthly, or quarterly basis. The term "comic magazine" was also used. It was the 1930s before original material was prepared and whole books were devoted to single characters.

The terms *comic strips* and *comic books* became so firmly entrenched that they continued to be used even when creators moved away from the kinds of humorous events and jokes that had been the norm in such "innocent" strips as *Mutt and Jeff*, *The Yellow Kid*, and *Krazy Kat*. What comic books have in common is their format and binding, not the subject matter or the attitudes that their creators take toward their stories. Every possible genre—adventure, romance, tragedy, informative nonfiction, horror, science fiction and fantasy—has been treated in so-called comic books.

Graphic novels are comic books that have gone off to college and come back with new sophistication and respect. Actually, many of them are not so different from comic books except that they have more durable bindings and cost more money. One of the reasons that the new term is coming into popularity is that it

is more accurate because it focuses on what such books have in common, which is the drawings. The *Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary* (tenth edition, 2001) dates the term *graphic novel* at 1978 and defines it as “a fictional story for adults that is presented in comic-strip format and published as a book.” Feiffer said while many graphic novels are junk, they are still the place where the most interesting forms of cartooning are being done today, especially with the alternative presses.

He thinks highly of Chris Ware (whose real name is Jimmy Corrigan) and The ACME Novelty Library series, which are being put together from Ware’s comic strips supplemented by a few extras. Michael Chabon, who won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, had an early love of comics, which he put into the plot of his adult book, set just before World War II when comic books were rising in popularity. Back in 1991, Jeff Smith, who was also a lover of comics, especially Walt Kelly’s *Pogo*, started independently publishing his Bone books (Sample titles include *Out from Boneville* and *The Great Cow Race*) for a general adult audience. The characters are a surprising mixture of human and imaginary creatures engaged in activities reminiscent of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

It’s not just boys who are reading graphic novels. Marvel Comics has published *Spider-Girl*, Volumes 1 through 6, by Tom DeFalco and Pat Olliffe. The subtitles are *Legacy*, *Like Father Like Daughter*, *Avenging Allies*, *Turning Point*, *Endgame*, and *Too Many Spiders!* The Spider Girl comics are the longest-running Marvel comic books starring a female superhero. A bonus is that they offer a world where even villains can find redemption and heroes can retain their moral scruples. The most charming graphic novel we’ve seen is *To Dance: A Ballerina’s Graphic Novel*, by Siena Cherson Siegel, illustrated by Mark Siegel. It is an autobiographical story being marketed to fourth through seventh graders, but we’ve seen older girls and adults enjoying it while also learning about the American dance scene in the 1970s and 1980s.

Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life, by Paul Gravett, is a good introduction to graphic novels appropriate for either adult or high school readers interested in learning about the genre and about the thirty graphic novels Gravett considers “classics.” Feiffer suggests we offer books to students that will give them some historical benchmarks from which to view today’s comics. He went back to Windsor McKay as a model for some of his early drawings and he also looked at the work of Thomas Nast, not for his style of art but to get the feeling of rage that Nast expressed. One of his happiest moments was to hear that both Woody Allen and Gary Trudeau have said that they went to some of Feiffer’s work for inspiration as they developed their own kinds of humor. For a different kind of graphic novel, see Stefanie Craig’s description of manga on pp. 178–179.

Video Games as Interactive Literature



Starting with the third edition of this textbook, we began mentioning interactive fiction, something that would go way beyond those Choose Your Own Adventure novels that kids had fun with back in the 1970s. But we always

A Young Adult Reader Speaks Out

Stefanie Craig, A Manga Lover

Speaks to Teachers



For the past ten years, I have been reading manga and watching anime—animated take-offs from Japanese manga. I know that if I pick up a *shoujou* (girls') manga I will most likely get a female-centered romance that could also involve fantasy, action, and adventure. A *shounen* (boys') manga will give me an action-packed story with some romance, but the romance will not be the sole focus of the plot. And of course, both *shoujou* and *shounen* have to be action-packed or there would be nothing on which to base the drawings.

Manga has many of the same archetypes (warriors, heroes, sages, magicians, creators, innocent fools, etc.) that are in Western young adult literature, but one difference is that because manga is produced over many years in weekly, biweekly, or monthly magazines, the creator has time to develop a larger supporting cast than is usual in a book. It is a process-approach to storytelling. For example, *Fruits Basket*, a graphic novel just published in November of 2006, ran for seven years in the *Hana to Yume* magazine in Japan. At least twelve important characters help the protagonist with her quest. *Bleach*, which has run in *Weekly Shounen Jump* magazine since 2001, has five protagonists and nearly twenty important supporting characters.

Another difference is that while manga has a wide range of “good” and “bad” characters, there are more char-

acters in between, which makes it harder to label them. For example, the “innocent fool” in American stories is often held up as a negative example—someone whose behavior should be avoided. In manga, this is less true, probably because in Japan it is considered rude to point out someone's flaws.

Also, the main character of a series is not going to be purely good. The protagonist from *Slayers*, which is a popular franchise that has spanned novels, manga, and anime, is Lina Inverse, a character who is rude, brash, selfish, and loud. She beats up her partner if he stops listening to her (maybe this is why she's one of my favorite characters). Lina is a grey, as opposed to a black or white, character. Although she has lots of faults, she looks out for not only herself, but others around her, and ultimately the world, although it is always through her own skewed sense of justice.

One of the reasons that the in-between or grey characters are more interesting is that they are often the targets of influence by other characters who want to convince the neutral character to join their side. Once grey characters come under someone else's control, they are no longer considered grey because they are working for other people's priorities and are being controlled by some type of magical or technological means.

sort of begged off from writing about it because the idea wasn't fully developed yet. But now that full-blown interactive fiction has arrived by way of video games played either on computers or on game platforms such as the Nintendo Game Cube or a Sony PlayStation, many of us hesitate to embrace it. We're frightened away by such names as Warcraft, Gears of War, Counterstrike, and Grand Theft Auto.

With manga, there are extra complications because symbols and practices commonly understood to mean one thing in Japan may be understood to mean something different in America. For example, in the United States nudity usually connotes some kind of a sexual situation, while in Japan nudity may simply be a matter of efficiency because of longtime traditions of communal baths and family living arrangements. Also, Japanese has several different writing systems from which creators pick and choose to achieve different effects. *Kanji* is a system based on Chinese characters, while *hiragana* and *katakana* are different systems of Japanese characters. Some writers might also borrow from English or Romanized Japanese, and today most of the manga brought to the United States keeps the right-to-left sequencing that is the standard pattern in Japan. Early on, Japanese importers rearranged the panels to go from left to right, but then characters in the drawings appeared to be going the wrong way, and besides, we fans like a little reminder that we are reading something "different."

Japan's current market for manga began shortly after the end of World War II when a young doctor named Osamu Tezuka began to write and draw *Diary of Ma-chan*. He later became known as "the god of manga" because of the way present day manga styles can be traced back to his original artwork. During postwar Japan the popularity of manga grew, both because of its accessibility and also because it was inexpensive.

Manga are published typically every week or every month in large magazines, which sometimes include over a dozen different stories, most likely aimed at a specific audience by age and gender, although some manga such as the ones by Rumiko Takahashi, are read by both boys and girls. Takahashi's current series, *Inuyasha*, is published weekly in

Shounen Sunday and is usually about eighteen pages long. Natsuki Takaya, creator of *Fruits Basket*, which ended its run in November of 2006, usually had thirty or more pages because her story ran only once a month.

Manga can be a single chapter of a short story or can run for decades. *Dragonball* by Akira Toriyama had a run from 1984 to 1995 and was collected into forty-two graphic novels in those eleven years. The longest-running manga in history, *This Is the Police Station in Front of Kameari Park in Katsushika* (not available in English), has been running continuously since 1976 with over 1400 chapters published. These types of publications are unusual, though, when you consider that other manga, such as Naoko Takeuchi's *Sailor Moon*, only ran for five years.

Unlike American comics, manga are almost exclusively black and white. Sometimes a creator will color the first few pages of a chapter for a week, but this is a rare occurrence. If a manga is considered successful and well liked by fans they are collected into *tankouban*, or graphic novels. It usually takes several months for this to occur because a graphic novel has many chapters of the weekly or monthly publication in it, and the magazine style publication does not stop once they are being republished. These graphic novels are what we Americans see when we go to buy our own translated manga.

Some of the most current manga hits are Rumiko Takahashi's *Inuyasha*, Kubo Tite's *Bleach*, Natsuki Takaya's *Fruits Basket*, Masashi Kishimoto's *Naruto*, and *Nana*, by Ai Yazawa. With new manga coming out each day there is something for every student, from science fiction and fantasy to romantic drama.

* Stefanie Craig may be the only college student in the United States who won a scholarship based on her knowledge of manga. Here at Arizona State University she won a Sun Angel Award because of her proposal to teach English teachers what they need to know about this new genre.

In the survey we took of 266 local high school students, we asked those who played video games to list a favorite and tell why they liked it. Eighty-four of the students responded, with hardly any of them listing the same game, which made us nostalgic for the old days when our grandchildren were all playing Pokémon

and we had a chance of joining in their conversations. One of the boys filling out the survey had obviously had experience with negative adult judgments because he appended a note after he wrote that Stalker was fun: “No—you don’t stalk people.” Another boy said he liked Day of Defeat because he owns *noobs*, which he kindly explained are “beginners, like *newbys*.” Another boy said he didn’t like to play the games, but he loved “hunting for them online.”

Besides the online card games, which seven students mentioned and which we understand are played by millions of women, there are basically four kinds of video games: first-person shooter games, fantasy role-playing games, real-time strategy games, and simulation games. The shooter games came first because they are the easiest to program, but as designers are getting more skilled and are figuring out how to let their characters talk, both the number and the variety of games have expanded so much that the video-game industry now makes as much or more money than does the film industry. We heard on an NPR broadcast that the 2006 Japanese economy was saved by the marketing of manga, anime, and computer games around the world, especially to the United States.

James Paul Gee makes the point, in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, that many adults are looking at the games from the wrong perspective. We think the games must be a waste of time because they are not teaching content as textbooks do. However, Gee says, in fact, some of them do teach content while at the same time involving players in the kinds of active and critical learning that prepares them for the decision making and the modes of operation that are an increasingly big part of modern life. He organizes his book around over thirty “Learning Principles,” a few of which he discusses in each chapter under such titles as Semiotic Domains, Learning and Identity, Situated Meaning and Learning, and The Social Mind.

A point he makes throughout the book is that video games often have a greater potential for learning than does much of what happens in school. His principles illustrate *active* learning. As an illustration of what he means by active learning, Gee says that when game players pick up the direction manual that accompany the games, they find the reading tough going. Younger players just start experimenting and playing the games in different ways, while older players who have grown up with different attitudes read the manuals over and over and fret if they cannot foresee exactly what they should do. Finally, out of frustration, they turn to the game and start playing. Then when they go back to the manual to check on some detail, they are happily surprised to discover that it is now much easier to read and understand.

We kept Gee’s claims about active learning in mind as we read the reasons that students in our survey wrote for liking particular games. Two students said they were learning history from Age of Empires, while several mentioned cognitive processes in relation to particular games.

- Feeding Frenzy: “It takes multitasking.”
- Warrior Worlds: “It’s fast paced and allows for strategy.”
- Ragdog Avalanche: “Because it’s challenging.”
- Gameball: “Because you have to pay attention.”

- Command and Conquer: “Strategic, real-time overview, fun and challenging.”
- Monopoly Tycoon: “Because it tests my brain.”

When we adults walk by and see kids focusing so intently on their computers, we worry that they are growing up as loners or as antisocial beings, but students countered this idea with comments related to particular games:

- Starcraft: “I love this game because I can verve my friends online and it’s strategic.”
- Guild Wars: “I can communicate with people around the world and build teamwork, skills, and strategies.”
- Infantry: “Because it’s a shooting game and you have to use strategy. Your opponents are other people online.”
- Runescape: “It’s fun. You walk around and talk to other players, get your skills up and do quests.”
- Gears of War: “I play with about fifteen of my friends.”
- Action: “I love the challenge and puzzles that come.”

The simulation games appear to come the closest to what English teachers would define as interactive fiction, and these were also the ones mentioned the most by girls as with these four who commented on some version of Sims.

- Sims: “It’s fun and challenging,” “Because you can control people. I get to build houses and the people who live in them, ha ha!” “Building and designing homes and defining what happens.”
- Star Wars 2: “It’s cool to change your characters and they’re funny.”
- World of Warcraft: “I like the fiction and the ability to create your own character.”
- Axis and Allies: “I like it because you can be either of these two teams.”

While twelve students mentioned having fun, only a couple mentioned humor. At the 2007 International Society of Humor Studies conference held at Salve Regina University in Newport, Rhode Island, we heard a panel presentation on the humor (or lack of humor) in video games. The presenters explained that because the figures are so small, it is hard to reproduce the facial expressions which bring much of the humor to comics and cartoons. And while some of the best designers are starting to bring in humor, for now the humor is coming mostly from the way players mock the characters and create their own parody stories.

Related to this, authors who grew up playing video games are bringing them into their writing as with Conor Kostick’s 2007 *Epic*, a fantasy story about a society where violence is forbidden and people must solve their differences through the game world of Epic, while simultaneously trying to accumulate wealth and status in both the real world and the fantasy world. See Chapter 7 on science fiction and fantasy for other books where the authors have used computer gaming as part of the plot.