In her debut novel, *T4*, Ann Clare LeZotte blends historical fact and her own personal experiences as a deaf person to create and tell the harrowing story of Paula Becker—a deaf 13-year-old growing up in 1939 Nazi Germany. Written in spare, first-person free verse poetry, Paula’s voice pulls the reader through the pulse-pounding terror and desperation of leaving everything one knows in order to escape Hitler’s ubiquitous Tiergartenstrasse 4 program: an edict which directed doctors to euthanize the mentally ill and disabled as “unfit to live,” no matter their age. Being different has always been dangerous, and few groups understand this fact more intimately than young adults. *T4*, however, lends a shocking historical context—as well as a believable and crushing sense of gravity—to what it could have been like for any young adult reader to face extermination simply for having been born different, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. This takes the concept of identification, for the reader, to a higher level. In addition, Paula’s struggle to understand and assimilate into hearing culture, a culture to which most of this novel’s readership will belong, feels real and palpable. For all of this novel’s shortcomings, it may very well be LeZotte’s gentle yet powerful illumination of this often-overlooked atrocity—delivered through Paula’s plainspoken language of
innocence lost—that saves her work as a whole and ultimately launches *T4* into the burgeoning YA cannon.

As much a coming of age novel as one that focuses on the gut-wrenching nightmare of eugenics, *T4* is rife with the themes of loss, transformation, sacrifice, fear, courage, and redemption. In the middle school classroom generally, and my seventh grade classroom in particular, students—roughly the same age as LeZotte’s main character—are familiar with these themes. Voracious and reluctant readers alike have previously experienced them as cornerstones of both book-length fiction and poetry. In YA literature, these themes are only as poignant as the characters, or the voices, that develop in the midst of the conflict created by the author addressing such themes.

Many YA readers, my students included, have come to expect that the themes which permeate *T4* so heavily can—and should— produce rich character development, complexity of conflict, vivid imagery, and accessible yet original voice. When these things are present, readers can easily suspend their disbelief and allow themselves to be swept away. *T4* manages to create a compelling character in Paula, who engages compelling themes through compelling conflict, all while addressing the uncomfortable social and historical truths of discrimination. Unfortunately, while this is more than enough to shine a light on the important issues that this book was clearly written to address, *T4* had difficulty accomplishing much of anything else, on an intimate level, with my students. One student wrote that, “The story ended almost as soon as it began, without much attention to imagery like good poetry should have, and without much attention to making any character other than Paula seem worth caring about. That’s a problem for any novel.” Another commented that, “It was kind of a disappointment because I wanted to care more about the characters than I actually did. There just wasn’t enough. There were a lot of poems or chapters or whatever that just told what happened—they didn’t actually describe or go deep. Authors can’t just hit the enter key in the middle of their sentences and call it poetry. Sometimes it seemed like I was reading lists of stuff that happened instead of reading poetry that got me thinking in new ways or made me feel something for the first time. It’s too bad because that’s why I like poetry. LeZotte has lots of good ideas, and the history is intense. I never really knew that a lot of these things happened, but the writing was just so plain. Maybe flat is a better word.” Many students, after reading *T4* and journaling their reactions to the book along the way, came to similar conclusions. The general consensus amongst students can be summed up in one student’s straightforward insight, “The good news is that it left me wanting more. The bad news is that it left me wanting more.”

All of this said, my students were in full agreement that our large group discussions of *T4* prompted the most complex and rewarding conversations we’d had all year. Even those who didn’t care for the book on a personal level saw it as an “amazing teaching tool” and acknowledged that, “It had superpowers when it came to getting kids to open
up and talk about difficult stuff that we may not have dealt with before.” Many students observed that LeZotte’s T4 would be a better complementary companion to their history books than a standalone novel.

While it is clear that LeZotte is in a unique position to contribute powerful insight regarding the horrors that faced people with disabilities during WWII and it is also clear that she creates a dynamic and accessible main character quite capable of bringing the visceral emotion of this insight to fruition, T4 falls short of fully capitalizing on these assets in the eyes of its target audience. The result is a worthy book that, because of its almost perfect blend of conscience-raising qualities, can earn its way into any middle school classroom . . . but noticeably struggles, on its own literary merit, to transcend those classroom walls.

About the Author

Jason Splichal is an award-winning teacher and writer. His poetry and short fiction have been published throughout the nation; he is the author of four books of poetry, most recently, The Disappeared (2005). Mr. Splichal lives in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and teaches English at South Middle School.