

Discussing the Classics of Young Adult Literature

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I am an extremely biased guest editor. I love the books treated within this special issue of *First Opinion, Second Reaction*, which is a retrospective look backwards at novels that might be part of “classic” young adult literature (YAL). Let me explain; I have been teaching in high schools or preparing teacher educators for 35 years. Okay, I am a really old guy; nevertheless, the books reviewed in this issue kept surfacing in my personal and professional life. I see them listed in the syllabi of young adult literature courses, they are in classroom libraries of pre-service and in-service teachers, and, more importantly, they stay in the hands of young readers. Adolescents read these books.

I have first opinions and second reactions about all of these books. I encountered *The Contender* (Lipsyte) in middle school (1968–970). I was assigned both *The Outsiders* (Hinton) and *I am the Cheese* (Cormier) in a course associated with my teacher training (1977–979). I found *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!* (Kerr) in a box of books I inherited as a first year teacher (1980). I discovered *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (Curtis), our newest “classic,” because somebody was foolish enough to ban the book in a neighboring school district shortly after it was a finalist for the Newbery Medal in 1996. These books have stayed with me for many years. I always consider them when I build a syllabus for a YAL course. When I argue that YAL is established as a viable field, these are some of the texts I mention. Come on, who can read *I am the Cheese* and not consider it literature? It is well-crafted, contains a complex narrative, and embodies themes that resonate in the political culture of 2014.

Many critics mark the “birth” of contemporary young adult literature as 1967; well, that means we can see its fiftieth birthday peaking over the horizon. YAL, as opposed to earlier versions of juvenile literature, has grown-up. Aside from those we have included here, there are other authors (Judy Bloom, Paul Zindel, Scott O’Dell, and Virginia Hamilton) and books [*The Slave Dancer* (Fox and Keith), *My Brother Sam is Dead* (Collier and Collier), *Z for Zachariah* (O’Brien), and *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* (Head)] that shaped this current era of young adult offerings. All of these books helped established YAL’s legitimacy. There are other authors or books that you might nominate for inclusion in this issue. That is the point, isn’t it? There are so many authors and books from that formative decade that still capture adolescent imaginations and keep them reading.

Each book integrated in this issue features two contributors—a first opinion and a second reaction—with two exceptions: both M. E. Kerr and Robert Lipsyte provide a reflection on the creation and reception of their respective books. The contributors of the first opinions in this issue revisit the initial reception of each novel and offer context and commentary on how the book was received. Those offering the second reaction were asked to consider the book in terms of how it “holds up” in the world of young adult literature today. Is it widely used, is it ignored, how can and do contemporary critics and teachers treat it today? The scholars who wrote on each novel didn’t collaborate, yet in each instance they seem to speak to each other. The qualities of the book that make it a classic come through and resonate in each essay.

I want to briefly acknowledge the contributors for each book in order of first opinion and then second reaction. I am going to avoid interpreting or editorializing beyond what I have done above. Their work speaks for itself, you should read each. You should also take the time to familiarize yourself with their other works. We have a healthy collection of seasoned scholars and some who are emerging talents. Crag Hill and Mark Lewis discuss Cormier’s *I am the Cheese*. We then have Jennifer Dail and Sophia Sarigianides tackle one of the most widely read and discussed books in our field, *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton. Our third book, Kerr’s *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!*, is first treated by Jeffery Kaplan, followed by Barbara Ward. Essays by Chris Crowe and Alan Brown discuss the history of Lipsyte’s *The Contender*. We conclude with *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (Curtis). While the novel is not quite twenty years old, its plot contemplates and centers on a pivotal moment in the history of American civil rights that occurred fifty years ago and somehow just seemed to fit in our desire to look backwards into the history of YAL. KaaVonia Hinton and Sybil Durand provide our final contributions. I love these books, and after reading what these scholars have written, I have new insights and renewed appreciation for the craftsmanship, quality, and thematic impulses they represent within the world of YAL. They represent some of the best of the past and model what I hope will appear as the field forges forward.

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About the Author

Steven T. Bickmore is a newly minted associate professor of English education at Louisiana State University—the final board of regents’ approval was in April of 2014. He is the founder and director of the annual LSU Young Adult Literature Conference and Seminar, <http://chse.lsu.edu/administration/YALConference.shtml>. He is also a co-editor of *The ALAN Review*, a journal about the teaching and research of young adult literature. His research interests include the induction and mentoring of novice teachers and how preservice and novice English teachers negotiate the teaching of literature using young adult literature, especially around the issues of race, class, and gender.