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## For the Love of Literature: Awards

Laura Apol

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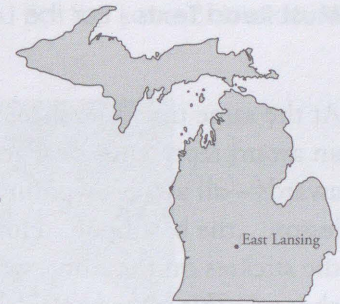
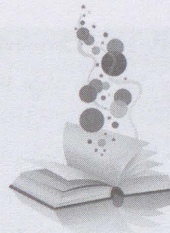
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# For the Love of Literature: Awards

by Dr. Laura Apol,  
Michigan State University



And the winner is.....

I'm writing this column *before* the American Library Association (ALA) has announced the winners of the most prestigious of the awards granted to children's literature: the Newbery Award and the Caldecott Award. These awards (and many others) are announced at the ALA Midwinter Conference (this year, on February 2); they can be viewed, live, as they are announced, and listservs, blogs, tweets and other social media will be providing informal coverage.

I could have waited to write until after the awards were announced, or I could have filled them in after. But I'd prefer to let that remain unsaid—to talk more about awards and the award-granting process in general rather than focus on any particular book or award.



First and foremost, let me say—there certainly are a lot of awards for literature for young people (or for authors and/or illustrators of that literature). The ALA gives many awards, but so do other organizations and individuals. I could list the range of awards here, and keep listing: Sydney Taylor, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Phoenix, Orbis Pictus, Printz, Schneider Family, Children's Choice, National Book Award for Young People's Literature, Theodor Seuss Geisel, Zora Neale Hurston, Stonewall, Coretta Scott King, Pura Belpré, Sibert, Carnegie, Fleischman, Greenaway, Tomás Rivera, Boston Globe-Horn Book, Jane Addams, Children's Africana, Golden Kite, American Indian Youth Literature, Arab American Literature for Children and Young People, Lee Bennett Hopkins, YALSA... The list goes on and on.

The criteria for the awards go on and on as well. Some of the criteria are broad ("artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children") or more restrictive ("Latino/Latina writer and illustrator whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth.") An award may encourage new authors and illustrators (e.g. the John Steptoe New Talent Award); it may spread out across time (the Wilder Award); it may encompass an entire career (the Hans Christian Andersen Award); it may look back (the Phoenix Award).

Many of the awards are directed toward authors, illustrators, readers or topics that might otherwise be overlooked or marginalized. These awards are granted based on an author's or illustrator's race, ethnicity, religion, dis/ability, sexuality, or on the book's portrayals of such a group. The power of these awards is that they focus directly on a group that might otherwise not receive attention; the world of awards—like the world of children's book publishing in general—is often skewed heavily toward white middle-class authors, illustrators and values. Awards that pay special attention to work by and about non-majority groups are a necessary antidote to these historic (and all-too-often present-day) inequities.

Other awards focus on genre: historical fiction, informational text, poetry. They, too, help us notice books that we might seek for a particular reason and help us broaden our reading to include books that might not otherwise have caught our attention.



At the same time, the sheer number of awards can overwhelm. It's sometimes hard to know what an award represents, or whether, in fact, it indicates what we might expect. It's easy to imagine that awards—all awards—point to “the best”: the best illustrations, the best text, the best portrayal, the best lesson...the best book. However, sometimes when we as readers look more closely at the books with the stickers on the front, we're surprised at the choice. We can't imagine that *this* is the book that was chosen! *This is the best??*

It's important to remember that “best” is a slippery term—best for whom? When? Where? Under what circumstances? Just as we may not agree with the Best Picture in the Academy Awards, or *People* magazine's Sexiest Man Alive, we may not agree with the decisions of award committees. These committees are, after all, made up of human readers with their own perspectives, reading histories, preferences, values, and life experiences. (This idiosyncratic and highly personal nature of reading and evaluating literature is one reason it is imperative to have award committees that represent diversity of all sorts, in order to represent a range of readers and reader orientations.)

So maybe these award-winning books are best, but maybe they're not. There's a lot of room in the equation for human opinion and even human error. Sometimes that makes us distrust awards; after all, the “human” part of it means “best” is really just a matter of opinion, right? Well, that's not really the case either. There's a lot of experience and expertise represented on awards committees—teachers, librarians, booksellers, professors, publishers, readers, parents and sometimes children who are thinking hard, working with a set of criteria, bringing their best personal and professional judgment to the task. Committees are made of humans with human perspectives and predispositions, it's true; but they're also made up of individuals selected because someone believes they have something to contribute to a conversation about an award.

What use, then, are awards? I think of them as a starting place, a point of entry. They don't merely *reflect* the values of the field—they *shape* that field. They show us where we've been and where we are, but they also point the way forward. When innovative books by innovative artists and illustrators are called to our attention—particularly when they're not by and about mainstream America, or when they present information in ways that are particularly accessible and engaging—we're all the richer for it. We are rewarded for interacting with books we might not otherwise have found, and those books may lead us further into areas we might not otherwise have explored.

I don't like every book or film or restaurant my friends recommend; why would it be any different with my “friends” on an award committee? Still, sometimes those friends point me to something I might not otherwise have tried... and I'm glad there's someone out there, sampling words and pictures, helping me decide what I'll try next and where I'll spend my time and focus my attention.

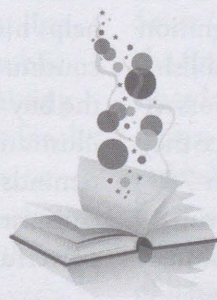
After all, who has time to read *everything*? So many books; so little time... You can be sure my reading list for the next few months will include some of the winners receiving attention from awards.





Lisa Domke, Ashley Johnson, Laura Apol, Jeanne Loh, Tracy Weippert

This column is created by Dr. Laura Apol of Michigan State University, in collaboration with a team of faculty and graduate students who teach children's and adolescent literature in the teacher preparation program, who research issues relevant to the area of children's and adolescent literature, and who have been or are themselves teachers in preK-12 settings.



Note: We are in the process of receiving books for review. Once we get the review system up and running, the reviews will appear on the MRA website. If you'd like to be considered as a reviewer, please send an email to Laura Apol at [apol@msu.edu](mailto:apol@msu.edu). Please include in the subject line "MRJ book reviewer." Include the following in your note: 1. A brief (100-word) bio; 2. A list of the sorts of books you would be most qualified to review—i.e. age/level, genre, special topic(s); 3. Your résumé, attached as a Word doc or pdf.



## Children's Literature: Awarding and Exploring New Worlds of Books

—Tracy Weippert and Lisa Domke

Last column, we started a conversation about matching students with books. But readers have diverse needs, so how can you find the just-right book for that special reader, when so many books look so much alike? Too often the books displayed are from big-name publishers with large advertising budgets to make sure their books are visible and promoted. The result is that we see the same series and characters over and over due to their record of being a “good seller.” These can still be great books, but where do we find a book unlike any other—a book that is new and different, that piques a reader’s interest or provokes a reader’s thoughts? A starting point might be to check out awards given to children’s books—not just the big names, but the lesser-known awards too. They can open doors to new worlds of books.

### Independent Publishing Awards



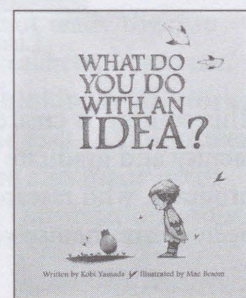
One such award is the **Independent Publisher Book Award** or **IPPY Award**. This award, in existence since 1996, aims to increase the recognition given to books published by independent publishers, university presses, and independent authors as these books often receive less promotion since they come from smaller publishers. There are over 78 categories of gold, silver, and bronze medal winners, with at least eight of the categories dedicated to juvenile and young adult books. Additional information can be found at <http://www.independentpublisher.com/ipland/IPAwards.php>.



A related award is the **Moonbeam Children's Book Award** which Independent Publishers and the Jenkins Group (a publisher in Traverse City, Michigan) have presented since 1997. This award aims to “bring increased recognition to exemplary

children’s books and their creators, and to support childhood literacy and life-long reading.” Like the IPPY, the Moonbeam Children’s Award presents gold, silver, and bronze medals, but it has 42 categories for print children’s books and six categories for e-books. The wide range of categories includes board books/cloth books, pre-teen fiction--mystery, young adult fiction (mature issues, multicultural non-fiction) chapter book, picture book 4-8 year old, children’s poetry, Spanish language book, environmental issues, and best book by a youth author, to name just a few. The award is presented yearly in Traverse City, Michigan in conjunction with the Traverse City Children’s Book Festival. More information can be found at <http://www.moonbeamawards.com/>.

A 2014 gold medal winner of both the Independent Publisher Award and the Moonbeam Children’s Book Award is *What Do You Do with an Idea?* by Kobi Yamada. This is an inspiring story of what a boy does with an idea even



when it seems strange and even when others think it is a silly waste of time. The boy sticks with his idea because its presence makes him happy and helps him see the world differently. As his idea continues to grow (both literally and figuratively), the boy learns the idea’s true power. Mae Besom’s illustrations enhance the story’s message, which reminds all of us, children and adults alike, to embrace ideas and creativity because they can be powerful, positive, life-changing forces.

### Awards Given by Children

Usually, adults decide which books are best for children; however, the **Children's Choice Book Award** gives children that power. It began in 1974, is overseen by the International Literacy Association and the Children’s Book Council, and is the only national book award that children (grades



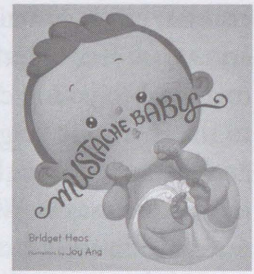


K-6) decide. Information can be found at <http://www.reading.org/resources/booklists/children-schoices.aspx>, <http://www.cbcbooks.org/ccba/>, and <http://www.bookweekonline.com/about-CCBAs>. (The Michigan Reading Association also has a similar award titled **Great Lakes Great Books** for which K-12 Michigan students vote for their favorite books from a list of nominees—<http://michiganreading.org/studentinvolvement/great-lakes-great-books>.)

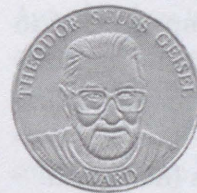
Each year, over 10,000 children (divided among five United States geographic regions) vote on their favorite books based on publisher submissions. Regional educators affiliated with the International Literacy Association distribute books and monitor the process. Children's top five choices in each category—Best Book for Grades K-2, 3-4, and 5-6—become finalists. Children then vote for their favorite finalist online during the voting window. Children also vote for two other awards: Author of the Year and Illustrator of the Year (but these finalists are determined by the year's bestseller lists). As discussed previously, large publishing houses have a lot of money to spend on advertising, which can influence the stock carried in stores and the bestseller lists. For the 2014 Children's Choice Awards, enough people voiced concern over the potential manipulation of bestseller lists that the Children's Book Council wrote a public letter legitimizing those concerns, but explaining they could not change the on-going process for the 2014 awards (<http://www.cbcbooks.org/a-letter-from-the-cbc-and-ecar-about-the-childrens-choice-book-awards-finalists>).

In 2014 the Children's Choice Kindergarten to Second Grade Book of the Year winner was *The Day the Crayons Quit* written by Drew Daywalt and illustrated by Oliver Jeffers. However, one of our goals for this column is to highlight books that are both quality literature and deserve further exposure. Since it is our belief that *The Day the Crayons Quit* has found its way into many elementary and preschool classrooms already, we would

like to introduce one of our favorite runners-up for the 2014 award, Bridget Heos's *Mustache Baby* in which Baby Billy's family is shocked to discover that he was born with a mustache. A nurse explains that they will have to wait and see if Baby Billy's mustache is a "good guy mustache" or a "bad guy mustache," and fun ensues as Billy takes on various personas depending on his mustache's attitude. His family waits to see whether their baby brother is one of the good guys. With a humorous plot and illustrations, *Mustache Baby* is sure to become a favorite of young children!



### Awards for Books for Young Readers

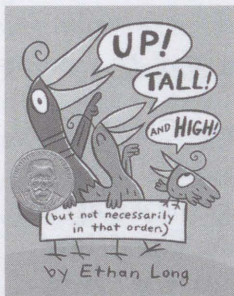


The **Theodor Seuss Geisel Award** focuses on books aimed to entertain and engage the youngest audience. Theodor Geisel, best known as Dr. Seuss, was a champion of young readers and was quoted as saying "a person's a person no matter how small." It is because of his commitment to writing stories that young children would enjoy that the Theodor Seuss Geisel Award was created in 2004. Though the first award was not bestowed until 2006, it has since been awarded yearly to authors and illustrators of distinguished English-language books published in the United States that provide children with positive first reading experiences. The award selection committee will consider any genre of literature provided the text is original and aimed at beginning readers. Specific attention is paid to the plot, rhythm, and potential story engagement; additional criteria can be found in the Theodor Seuss Geisel Award Committee Manual (available at <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/geiselaward>).

The 2014 award-winning title *The Watermelon Seed* by Greg Pizzoli certainly fits the selection



criteria, but it contains some potentially problematic areas. Though the plot of the book is likely to appeal to young children and the text adheres to the rhythmic language favored by the award committee, the text leaves something to be desired in its conclusion. When Crocodile swallows the watermelon seed, he immediately becomes concerned that it will grow inside him. The illustrations showing Crocodile's guts through an x-ray are likely to appeal to young children. They will also find his long, loud burp comical. However, the story never clears up the misconception that seeds cannot grow within a person or an animal. Regardless, *The Watermelon Seed* is likely to please preschoolers.



The previous year's winner, *Up! Tall! and High!* written by Ethan Long provides more of the expected components of an award-winning picturebook. Long's story is engaging as the birds attempt to discover who is tall and who is (not) small.

Children will appreciate the humor of a bird on stilts pretending to be tallest of all, illustrated through foldouts. This book is simultaneously a beginning chapter book, a concept book, and an interactive text for beginning readers. The book's sturdy pages are printed on thicker paper than typical picture books, making *Up! Tall! and High!* a good choice to transition children from board books to trade books.

### Outstanding Nonfiction for Children

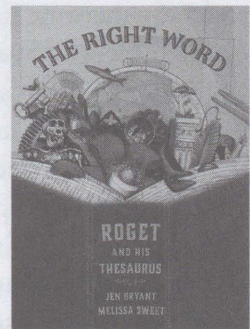
Finally, we would like to share one last award. While many are familiar with the American Library Association's Sibert Award for informational books, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) also recognizes excellent children's nonfiction books that encourage children to think and read more via the



Orbis Pictus Award. This award was first established in 1989 and was named after what is believed to be the first picturebook for children, *The World in Pictures* by John Comenius. Additional information can be found at <http://www.ncte.org/awards/orbispictus>.

The 2014 winner, *A Splash of Red: The Life and Art of Horace Pippin* written by Jen Bryant and illustrated by Melissa Sweet, encourages children to think as it tells the life of little-known artist Horace Pippin, who overcame a major war injury to pursue his lifelong passion in art. However, as this book has received a lot of press and multiple reviews, we would like to explore other collaborations between Jen Bryant and Melissa Sweet, which began in 2008 with their biography *A River of Words: The Story of William Carlos Williams*.

Their third collaboration was published in 2014—*The Right Word: Roget and His Thesaurus*. Throughout this book, Bryant carries the theme of lists, explaining how Peter Roget used them to organize his thoughts and emotions, describe the world around him, and gain confidence to speak precisely. Sweet's collages elaborate on Roget's lists of synonyms. The illustrations and text together create a coherent, interesting view of how Roget created the thesaurus.

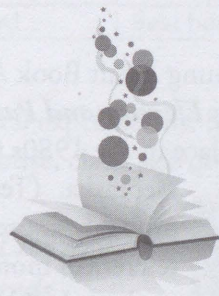


As we conclude, let's stay with the theme of Roget. According to the thesaurus, an award can be an accolade, an honor, a distinction, or a prize, but it can also be a judgment, a determination, an opinion, or a decision. As we have found, no single award is perfect because it is an opinion. As readers of and voices for children's literature, our *judgment* is powerful. Our *decision* to learn about various awards and explore those that are lesser known expands our horizons and can help us encounter other wonderful books.



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## Finding Our Way to Great Books: A GPS for Award-Winning Young Adult Literature

—Ashley Johnson, Jackie Kerr, and Dr. Jeanne Loh

In our last column, we discussed the importance of knowing our students and finding literature that speaks to their experiences. *But where do we find these books?* Some of us fill our classroom libraries with books that inspired us as young adults. As important as it is to share our own love of literature with our students, the books that resonate with us might not do the same for them. Still, discovering new literature takes time—something that is always in short supply.

Browsing the bestsellers at our local bookstores or combing through the titles on YA library shelves might help us find the most exciting stories for our students. We might also join teaching organizations and subscribe to their journals to find the

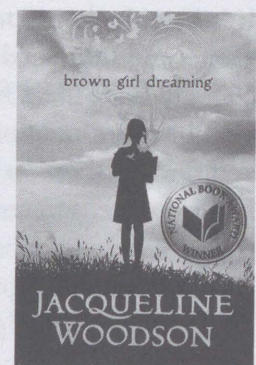
books stimulating discussion among teachers and researchers. Another place to begin is with young adult literature awards.

In this column, we'd like to help you navigate the complex world of award-winning books. To do this, we highlight four lesser-known young adult book awards and their recent winning books. We hope these might become the books to inspire the readers in your students.

### National Book Award

The National Book Award was created 65 years ago as a way to recognize and celebrate the American literary world. While most of us know it as a prize for adult literature, the National Book Award also recognizes writers of young adult literature in the Young People's Literature category. National Book Award judges include published writers, literary critics, librarians, booksellers, and past finalists or winners. Past winners include such notable authors as William Carlos Williams, Ralph Ellison, and Alice Walker. In recognizing young adult literature, the judges move beyond the best-selling popular fiction that most teens read toward fiction and nonfiction with the literary merit to become future young adult classics. More information, as well as past winners and finalists, can be found at <http://www.nationalbook.org/>.

The 2014 National Book Young People's Literature Award honored Jacqueline Woodson's memoir *Brown Girl Dreaming*. A moving memoir in verse, this indescribably beautiful book is a perfect example of the literary pieces chosen for the National Book Award; it is destined to become a YA classic. All of Woodson's books are rich with fictional characters immersed in intricately interesting storylines. Her





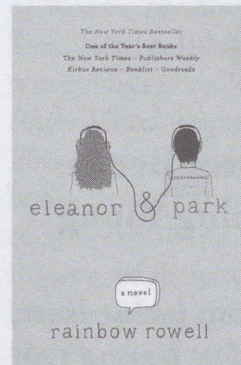
own story is similarly rich and interesting, and she situates it in the historical and cultural context of America in the 1960's and 70's. The book's inscription reads: "This book is for my family – past, present and future. With love." From that invitation to readers to join her "present and future" family through 337 pages of eloquent and elegant free verse poetry, Woodson creates an intricately woven mosaic of the personal and historical events of her life, excavating and parsing her own memories and those of the family members she consulted to explore her story both as a person and a writer. In her own words, "Maybe the truth is somewhere in between/all that I'm told/and memory."

This book offers much to readers of all ages, but it must be read closely and with attention to detail, for the love of literature. According to Woodson, "Words are my brilliance," so readers should approach her work as a treasure trove of brilliant gems to be held up to the light and appreciated. Young people who have read and loved Woodson's other books will welcome the opportunity to know the author and to see how she got her start as a writer. Young poets and poetry fans will feast on the lush and lyrical free verse poems that read so smoothly into story; other student readers might be thrown by the juxtaposition of factual memoir and poetry, and may need some guidance in navigating the text. This book would be an excellent literary choice to use in class as well as to have on the shelf for independent reading; classroom teachers will find any number of ways to use the book. It is a uniquely written memoir; it highlights events and influential figures from history, and its pages provide ideas for having students write their own histories/memoirs in order to explore identity and find their voices and gifts. Most importantly—for the character of Jackie who will become the author Jacqueline, as well as for readers of every age and background—the book provides the hope that we are all gifted in some way. "Maybe, I am thinking, there is something hidden/like this, in all of us. A small gift from the universe/waiting to be discovered."

## *IRA's Children's and Young Adults' Book Award*

Hosted by the International Reading (now Literacy) Association, the IRA's Children's and Young Adults' Book Award honors newly published and promising authors. Fiction and nonfiction books are awarded in three categories: primary, intermediate, and young adult. Nominated books can be from any country, but must be published in English. More information is available at [http://www.reading.org/resources/awardsandgrants/childrens\\_ira.aspx](http://www.reading.org/resources/awardsandgrants/childrens_ira.aspx).

The 2014 IRA Young Adult Book Award honored Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor and Park*. Rowell's love story takes place in the 1980s in Omaha,



Nebraska. (Teachers will probably appreciate the '80's references more than their students.) Born into a middle class family, Park, who is biracial (he is half-Korean, half-White) buries himself in rock music and comic books. Tension in his family arises partly from Park and his father's inability to understand

one another. Newly relocated to the Flats, Eleanor, red-headed and large, appears to exude nonchalance through her conspicuous dress and lack of desire for social acceptance at school. Because her family of seven is poor and because she lives with an abusive, explosive stepfather, many aspects of Eleanor's life are out of control. She struggles to survive both the sharks at school and her stepfather's wrath and prefers to remain friendless. Park and Eleanor's love begins gradually as seat buddies on bus rides to and from school. Alternating between their points of view, Rowell deftly captures the passionate intensity of teen emotions. As her protagonists stumble through romance, they face both their own insecurities and the pressures of family and social expectations. This novel touches upon numerous topics that will spark students'



Award	Who/What's it for?	2015 Winners
Alex Award	The top ten books written for adults that teens enjoy	Find the list here: <a href="http://www.ala.org/yalsa/alex-awards">http://www.ala.org/yalsa/alex-awards</a>
Edwards Award	An author who has made a significant contribution to young adult literature	Sharon Draper for more than 20 YA novels including <i>Tears of a Tiger</i> , <i>Forged by Fire</i> , <i>Darkness before Dawn</i> , <i>The Battle of Jericho</i> , <i>November Blues</i> , and <i>Copper Sun</i>
Morris Award	The best book by a first-time published author of young adult literature	<i>Gabi, a Girl in Pieces</i> by Isabel Quintero
Nonfiction Award	Best nonfiction book written for teens	<i>Popular: Vintage Wisdom for a Modern Geek</i> by Maya Van Wagenen
Odyssey Award	The producer of the best audiobook for children or young adults	<i>H.O.R.S.E. A Game of Basketball and Imagination</i> by Christopher Myers
Printz Award	Best book written for teens	<i>I'll Give You the Sun</i> by Jandy Nelson

curiosity: parental expectations, fear, bullying, race, domestic abuse, class, self-doubt, and love.

### ***Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Awards***

YALSA is a division of the American Library Association, which also presents the famous Caldecott and Newbery Awards. The association, consisting mostly of librarians, supports library services in order to engage and inspire teens to read. As most practicing teachers realize, librarians are a great resource for book recommendations. And each year, YALSA recognizes books in each of six categories they believe reflect cutting-edge young adult literature. Ranging from the well-known Printz Award for best teen book to the Alex Award for adult books with special appeal to teens, YALSA's awards cover a broad range of titles, topics, and genres.

More information and complete book lists for each of the awards in the following chart can be found at <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/bookawards/booklists/members>.

While a number of these award winners (as well as the finalists) would be a great place to begin in adding to a classroom library, we decided to highlight *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* by Isabel Quintero.

Winner of the Morris Award, the novel is Quintero's first published novel and chronicles the senior year of Gabi, a high-achieving Mexican American living in the California town of Santa Maria de los Rosales. Struggling with the pressures placed on her by her mother and aunts to be



a "good" Latina and her own desire to be herself, Gabi copes with family drama, friend troubles, relationship questions, and body image problems. Told in a series of diary entries, the novel invites readers into Gabi's world as she tries to make sense of tragedy and triumph through humor, poetry, friendship, and food. While adults may be uncomfortable with Gabi's frank discussions of sex, teens will likely appreciate her honest assessment of both her own uncertainties and the hypocrisies of many of the people in her life. In addition to being an important story of what it means for Gabi to be a Latina in America, the novel touches on a number of social issues ranging from teen pregnancy to drug addiction to rape to the high cost of college. The novel should appeal particularly to anyone trying to navigate multiple worlds and find his/her place.

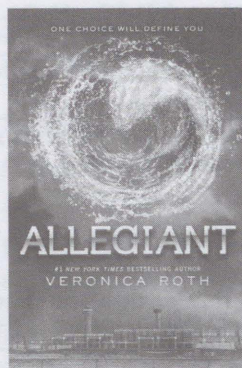


### Teen Choice Book Award

No classroom library should be considered complete without input from students. The Teen Choice Book Award, associated with the Children's Choice Book Award, gives teens three months to vote for their favorite book of the year. The award also allows teens to encourage others to vote and track how their friends voted. More information is available at <http://www.bookweekonline.com/for-teens>.

While we, as English teachers, might not always recognize as "quality" the books students love, we should consider emulating the process (or at least the intent) of this award to supplement the books we read with our students in ELA classes, prompting and encouraging them to read passionately and widely. Students can practice the reading skills we are fostering in class by forming book clubs to read and review popular teen books or, perhaps, by forming reading selection committees to literally and literarily assist in making decisions about future print and digital books to purchase. Involving students in reading, reviewing, and recommending books for their peers provides ways to generate enthusiasm about and engagement with reading, and fosters genuine reading communities within classrooms and schools. This ownership of reading materials with an emphasis on reading responsibility can inspire students to read popular book titles critically and carefully. Openness to considering their choices and challenges will result in an ongoing dialogue and exchange about books that will allow teachers and students to learn to love (or at least to *appreciate*) each other's tastes.

This idea of trusting young people to responsibly pick their own best books without adult intervention is the spirit of the Teen Choice Book Award. This category gives young readers a voice; based on their own reading experiences and resulting opinions about books, they decide which titles and authors will receive the teen stamp of approval. The 2014 winner was *Allegiant*, the third and final

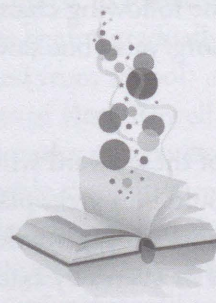


book of the hugely popular *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth. While teachers and other trained literary experts might be tempted to downplay this book's importance and literary merit as fleeting and negligible, we would encourage a different approach. The recent surge of popularity

for dystopian book series like *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *Chaos Walking* can and should be viewed as positive. It's heartening to see young people seeking out dystopian reading choices because their fascination with the genre speaks of a greater concern for the future of humanity and a recognition that change needs to take place. Perhaps these books won't leave behind pithy quotes to rival Shakespeare, create literary epiphanies for posterity in the manner of the Brontes or emulate Steinbeck's or Morrison's representation of lived experiences, but they do get teens reading and thinking and problem solving. If teachers can read these books with students to demonstrate support of their concerns, the sky is the limit for change and transformation. We will witness the birth of lifelong readers *for the love of literature*.

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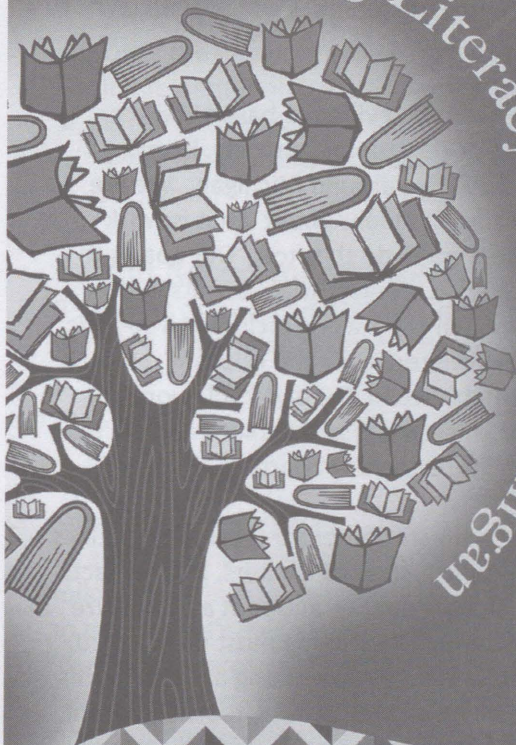






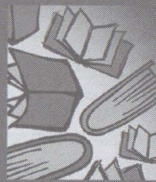
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