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Metaphors for the Classroom

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NARRATIVE

Metaphors for the Classroom

ROY BLACK

Metaphors are a way to make sense of the world around you. When you are unsure about your place in the world, a metaphor can help you to process and contextualize all of the conflicting information. I have a number of metaphors that drive my philosophy of teaching. Some of them are borrowed from music that has spoken to me, like this line from Jimi Hendrix:

“I used to live in a room full of mirrors;
All I could see was me.
So I took my spirit and I crashed my mirrors.
Now the whole world is here for me to see.”

Based on the metaphor of a “Room Full of Mirrors” representing a person who only sees reflections of his-herself, I strive to show my students a variety of different viewpoints, approaches, and cultures. It may have even helped me to find the diverse, urban school district that I teach in.

There are many pervasive metaphors in Education. Most schools are patterned on the “Factory Model,” a 20th Century construct that is not only outdated but may not be the best way to serve our students, our educators, or our communities. That said, far too many standard practices in schools are reflections of the Factory Metaphor:

- Factory workers (students) are given a repetitive task to complete each day, which they complete at the same spot, in the same manner, each day.
- Foremen (teachers) supervise the work being done, assist students when they struggle with a given task, and from time to time evaluate progress toward stated performance goals (grades).
- Factories (schools) are constantly pressured to increase their productivity (graduation rate, test scores) so that the Board of Directors (School Board) can keep the stockholders (politicians and the community) happy.

If you haven’t seen the TED Talk “Do Schools Kill Creativity?” by Sir Ken Robinson, he does a much better job of explaining the Factory Metaphor than what I could attempt. Better yet, find the RSA Animate version, called “Changing Education Paradigms.”

While I have a number of metaphors that I use in my classroom on a regular basis, there are two important metaphors that shape my classroom. I use the first—The Black Hole—to find an identity, a “brand,” if you will, for my classroom. The other, The Workshop Classroom, has an influence on everything I do, and how I look at everything and everyone who comes into or comes into contact with my classroom.

The Black Hole: a surname leads to a metaphor

When I first began my practice of teaching, I wanted to name my classroom. For years, the utilitarian “Room 32” or “Mr. Black’s Room” bugged me. Katie Sluiter, a friend and colleague of mine, has taught in “Sluiter Nation” for years—regardless of the classroom that housed “Sluiter Nation,” that was what her class was called. My last name, Black, posed certain challenges. “Black Nation” would have mis-placed overtones that I wanted to avoid. By adopting a metaphor, I could use my surname to my advantage. One finalist was, “Black Lands,” a Scots-Irish term used for fertile soil which has been untilled.

After some trial and error with other names, I found the perfect metaphor: The Black Hole.

Black Holes have such a strong gravitational pull, that not even light can escape—much like the alluring aspect of the learning that goes on in an effective classroom: the learning just sucks you in. Calling my classroom The Black Hole has been the perfect metaphor, providing a way to describe the irresistible draw of what I hope is an engaging, interesting learning environment.

When I recently relocated from one building to another, I chose to christen the new room “The Black Hole,” and have used that name ever since.

The Workshop Classroom

I was first introduced to the idea of a classroom as a workshop as an undergraduate. Nancie Atwell may have been

Metaphors for the Classroom

my first exposure to the Workshop Metaphor; reading *In the Middle* gave me an opportunity to think about teaching and learning in a way that I had not experienced much as a student, but wanted to create as a teacher. While others' reactions to Atwell have been to admire what she's done but criticize the environment in which she was able to do it—"Sure, anyone could do that if they had a school of hand-picked students"—the text opened up a new way to look at my practice of teaching. The metaphor of a classroom as a workshop was what I got most out of reading Atwell, rather than a pessimistic view of how it couldn't work in school-where-I-teach. My reaction, probably a result of the fact that I was still a pre-teacher and had no real-world place to alter my thinking about how one would implement such a concept in one's classroom, was to say, "why not?" The belief that the Workshop Metaphor was the right way to visualize and contextualize my classroom more than overshadowed any problems or resistance that I might have encountered.

Metaphors work best when one takes the time to fit together as many elements of the two things being compared as possible. Building upon the basic principle, what follows is an attempt to link as many elements of a Workshop as I can with the elements of a Teaching Practice.

My Workshop

The classroom is my workshop. In it, I make readers, writers, thinkers and listeners. My workshop is filled with the tools of my trade. There are the hand tools: pencils, pens, paper, books. Over the years, our workshop has evolved to include power tools as well. Gone are the overhead projector and the Vis-a-Vis markers, replaced by an LCD projector. That projector is attached to a computer which has replaced countless teaching-hand-tools, including most of the files, TV and DVD player, attendance sheets, and grade book. How-to manuals called textbooks are rare, but can still be found on my bookshelves. The desks in my room are a throw-back to the Factory metaphor, but they can be arranged and re-arranged to suit the task at hand. When we discuss a text we have read in common, they are in a U-shape or a circular arrangement. When students work on projects together, they move the desks into small triangular or circular pods. When students read in class, they often ignore the desks altogether.

The Master Craftsman

I have been a reader and a writer all of my life. When the time came for me to choose a profession, I gravitated toward teaching. My time as a writing tutor showed me that I could

help others to write, and at that point a well-timed nudge from one of my professors landed me in an Introduction to Education course. From the first day in that class, I knew what I wanted to do for a living. Eventually, teaching became more than a means to make a living—it became my profession and my calling. After a rigorous teacher-training program as an undergraduate, I became a teacher of my craft. As a young, inexperienced Craftsman, I taught reading, writing, thinking and listening to the best of my ability. After years of classroom teaching experience and further post-graduate training, I am neither new nor inexperienced. If it takes 10,000 hours of successful practice to become an expert at what you do, then I became an expert at teaching reading and writing after about 10 years. Now 23 years into my practice of teaching, Master Craftsman is hopefully not too arrogant a title.

As a Master Craftsman, I focus on two main tasks: helping my student-apprentices to build their skills as readers, writers, thinkers, and listeners; and continuing to practice and refine my skills in reading, writing, thinking, and listening. Lately, though, I have taken on a new group of apprentices, those who would also teach, building workshops of their own. Once teachers have reached a certain level of expertise, it is only natural that they should pass on the knowledge of the craft to further practitioners of the teaching craft.

If I would have my Student-Apprentices read, I should be a reader as well. The same goes for the other skills that are central to our workshop. Only by showing them that what I am asking them to do is still relevant once they leave my room can I foster their appreciation of our craft. So I often show them what I'm currently reading, or the latest writing piece I'm working on. When Student-Apprentices are asked to read and then write a poem, they often have an example of mine to prod them. If a student leaves my workshop thinking that reading, writing, speaking, and listening are classroom-only endeavors, then I have failed as a teacher. On the other hand, if they leave with better skills and an appreciation of how reading, writing, speaking and listening make them more aware as people and more informed as citizens, then I have succeeded.

That is difficult to measure on a test, so I prefer to assess their progress as much as possible with practical, real-world, authentic assessments. The skill they build on those tasks not only prepares them with the skills that they will need on standardized assessments, but it also prepares them for the world beyond the Classroom-Workshop.

The Student-Apprentices

Student-Apprentices come into the Workshop Classroom with a variety of goals. When I took Wood Shop as a student, I had no desire go beyond the basic Birdhouse project, even when I saw my classmates building cabinetry and works of delicate woodworking. Today, however, I am glad that I know enough about working with wood to do basic repairs around the house and more ambitious projects. My students may never go on to be famous writers, but hopefully someday they will appreciate that they are able to express themselves clearly and efficiently. They may not point to their time in The Black Hole as its cause, but if we have done well, they will have a lifelong love for reading.

Their work in our Workshop-Classroom is set up much like the work in whatever career they choose. The Factory Metaphor dictates that all students learn the same thing, on the same day, in the same way, normally by doing the same repetitive task in the same chair in the same place. Since most of my students will no longer spend their entire working lives on an assembly line, work for them in the Workshop-Classroom is set up differently. They have a number of tasks that they need to accomplish; those tasks include traditional classroom tasks like note-taking and tests, but also include projects and online work; they have a deadline attached to major tasks, like tests and projects; they are given the support through various means and resources to complete the work assigned; they have the guidance of a Master Craftsman to guide them as they work in the Workshop-Classroom; and they have ample time to finish the task.

As students progress through their training, grades are used to measure their progress and mastery. While for many students the goal is passing the class, my goal for them is to build the skills that they will need in the future, whether in other classrooms or in their lives after schooling.

True, not all of my students will be professional readers or writers. In fact, very few of them will. They will, however, need to be able to express themselves effectively and accurately in words—sometimes spoken, sometimes written—and they will need to be able to read, understand, interpret, and evaluate the words that they encounter in their daily lives.

The Guild

The Craftspeople/Teachers in my building are organized into Guilds by specialty, called Departments. The purpose of a guild is to support others within your area of expertise,

while in turn receiving support from the group. Everyone brings something to the group—Katie is our YA Literature expert, Becca brings an enthusiastic approach to implementing technology, etc. Within my Department, people tend to look to me for help teaching and understanding grammar. When Guilds/Departments work well, it is with a spirit of support and mutual improvement. When they struggle, it is often due to personal insecurity or a feeling of competition among the people involved. When one is forced to take a defensive stance with one's peers, the energy that could go into innovation or creativity goes in negative directions, and that negative focus takes away from the effectiveness of the group, rather than synergistically benefitting all involved.

There are larger guilds, too. Belonging to professional organizations like the National Writing Project, the NCTE, and their local affiliates has helped me to find professional connections and support outside my school and community. One might also consider teachers' unions to serve the same purpose. When I am with any gathering of people from these groups, we can have discussions about the practice of teaching that can't happen in other groups.

The Product

The Product produced by a Factory is expected to be consistent, uniform, and adherent to a number of specifications. The assumption of the Factory Model is that all students not only can, but should all have the same identical set of skills and abilities upon graduation. Students who do not live up to this standard are considered failures—the “scrap” of the Factory Metaphor. Factory Model teachers who have a greater percentage of “scrap” are considered ineffective.

In a Workshop Model, Teachers build strong members of society who can read, write, speak, listen, and think for themselves. The Product varies, because society itself needs citizens who can cover a variety of different careers and roles. Teachers in a Workshop Model are facilitators, ensuring that students are proficient in the skills that they will need, while at the same time helping them develop their abilities in the areas that they do well, regardless of whether those abilities will be measured on a standardized test.

Just as the Product of the Factory Model was appropriate to a factory-based 20th Century, the Product of the Workshop Model—a self-directed, curious, innovative, flexible, independent thinker.

Customers

Who are we making things for? In the Factory Model, we created factory workers, who could stay in one place and do the same repetitive task all day, every day, for their entire career after school. Today's student needs to be trained differently. They may well end up in a repetitive, mundane job—but they may also have a job where they need to think and adjust quickly. We need to prepare our students for both possibilities. We are not programming robotic automatons, we are building independent minds.

So who is our customer in the Workshop Model? The student, who directly benefits from the efforts of the learning community? The parents or the community, who get better citizens as neighbors? Society at large? Perhaps it is a combination of all of these.

Day-to-Day Differences in a Workshop Classroom

Once the Workshop metaphor has entrenched itself, the work of a classroom changes. Rather than aiming to prove that one has “covered” the material, assessments focus on giving the student the opportunity to display what they have learned upon thinking about the material. Coverage is necessary for thinking, therefore an authentic assessment in a Workshop Classroom measures not only whether or not a student has read and understood the material, but also how deeply they have thought about that material, and the quality of the result of that thinking.

As a Master Craftsman in the Workshop Classroom in the Black Hole, I spend less and less time directly instructing my students, and much more time guiding them, and encouraging them to think more deeply, write more clearly, and read and listen more actively. When they need my expertise on the fundamentals of English class, they have me for that, too—whether individually or collectively.

The Black Hole has a gravitational pull—the learning pulls you in. At the beginning of each class, students from other classes or other hours need to be shooed off to their classes. Often, when we are in full Workshop Mode, passersby in the hallway are drawn in, just to see what's going on. As they scan the room, they see a variety of students working on a variety of tasks, each one making progress toward completing one project or another. Some argue about which Thinking Map to use to complete a grammar project, others collaborate on a presentation. A student competes a review of an Independent Reading book on GoodReads.com, while another group gathers definitions for a Vocabulary assignment.

Chances are, there some students who are ahead on their work who have curled up in a corner of the Black Hole with their Independent Reading book. Every student is engaged and on task, working on any number of different things, with the autonomy to choose what they work on and when.

The true testament to the gravitational pull of The Black Hole is when we were reading *Romeo & Juliet* together last spring. A colleague who was making copies next door was so interested in the discussion he heard, that he popped in and sat at an empty desk. The next day, this same Biology teacher—a self-professed non-reader—was in that same desk at the beginning of the hour, ready to go. He spent the next couple of weeks spending much of his planning hour reading, discussing, and even performing bits of Shakespeare.

We do not “cover” as much material as a classroom based on the Factory Model, but I firmly believe that we cover it more deeply. It is my firm belief that this better prepares students for life outside of the Classroom-Workshop, because they gain skills that will be useful to them for the rest of their lives, both in their work lives and in their personal lives. Even a Factory Classroom can't read every short story or poem or novel ever written, so by teaching students to think deeply about what they read rather than just proving that they read, a Workshop Classroom prepares students to be active participants in the world around them.

As I continue my teaching practice, it is my hope that those who would “reform” education consider whether they are looking far enough back into the past in order to find their metaphors. If they are looking to “reform” education using a factory metaphor, they might be better served to look at the pre-factory era before the Industrial Revolution, when individuals created master works in tiny little workshops.

Roy Black is a husband to Emily and a father to daughters Morgan, Adelyn, and Olivia. Roy is a teacher in Wyoming Junior High School in Wyoming, Michigan and an Adjunct Professor of English at Grand Valley State University. Roy claims he reads, exercises, and writes in his spare time—but he's more likely to be finding things to read, complaining about exercising, and talking about what he plans to write someday.

Review

Finding Community in Young Adult Literature

CARA ANDERSON, BROOKE GOLDSWORTHY, AND LEAH MACQUEEN

Ship Breaker by Paolo Bacigalupi, Little, Brown and Company, 2010.

Ella Minnow Pea by Mark Dunn, MacAdam/Cage, 2001.

The Graveyard Book by Neil Gaiman, Harper, 2008.

I am Malala by Malala Yousafzai, Orion Publishing Group, 2013.

Young adult literature often tells the story of teens' transitions from being seen as children to becoming part of the adult world. Critical to this is the idea of where young people will fit into society. What niche will they fill? Will they be left to fight for themselves? Who can they look to for support? What responsibilities do they have to the people around them? As young people's thoughts shift to focusing beyond themselves, they may question how their identity relates to the community around them. Quality young adult literature can provide a vehicle for facilitating the exploration of community, its role in young people's lives, and adolescents' place within it.

Four well-written novels that have strong themes relating to community are Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker*, Mark Dunn's *Ella Minnow Pea*, Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*, and Malala Yousafzai's *I am Malala*. Spanning genres from science fiction to nonfiction and with protagonists of varying ages and backgrounds, the stories center on a young person's battle to look beyond themselves and help those around them. The teens' communities and how the young people define them play a central role in each of the following books.

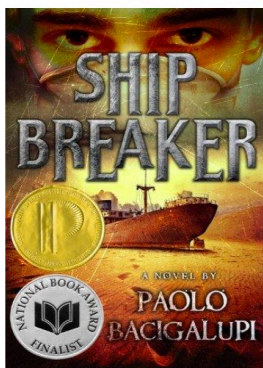
Set in a futuristic version of America's Gulf Coast region, Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* (2010) tells the story of Nailer, a teenage boy who works hard as a ship breaker scavenging for copper wiring. This dystopian novel takes place in a world

dealing with the effects of global warming. Oil is a scarcity, the sea level has risen, and extreme weather is commonplace. In addition to the threats of nature, the young boy has to face his drug-addicted and alcoholic father, Richard Lopez, who constantly mistreats and abuses his son. Nailer relies on the support of his ship breaking crew to survive the harsh environmental and corrupt social conditions of their dilapidated beach community.

When a hurricane wipes out the village and stops work, Nailer and another member of his crew, Pima, set out on their own to look for scraps to sell for food and supplies. Hoping for a "Lucky Strike," Pima and Nailer spot a wrecked clipper ship and decide to explore. Amongst the treasures and goods, they find a young girl trapped within the ship. Little do they realize, this girl, Nita, is about to drastically change their lives. The two are torn between letting the girl die and rescuing her. Nailer pities the girl and reminds Pima that because the girl is rich, she may be worth more money rescued than what they could get for taking her possessions. Luckily for Nita, Pima's allegiance to Nailer convinces her to go along with his wishes.

Loyalty is an issue that confronts Nailer and several other characters throughout the novel. Much like Nailer's conflict of letting Nita live or following Pima's desire to let her die, many loyalties are tested. Throughout the novel, Nailer grapples with determining where his allegiances should lie with particular focus on the true meaning of family. Greed also plays an important role in the motivations of many characters and often shows itself in direct conflict with characters' loyalties. Men and women scavenge for materials, desperately hoping for a big break or stroke of luck. Greed leads characters to do reprehensible things such as stealing loot, abandoning crew in need of help, and even ruthless murder.

Ship Breaker deftly explores social class differences and tensions using the extreme difference in Nailer's and Nita's backgrounds. Nailer often feels twinges of hatred toward Nita because as a "swank," she hasn't experienced much of the trouble he sees as everyday life. Nailer comes to find that Nita

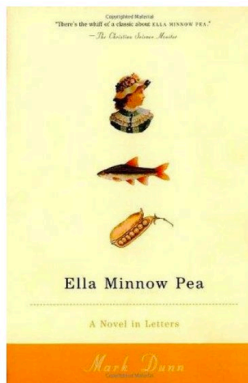


Finding Community in Young Adult Literature

has problems of her own. Through his strength and perseverance to do right in his world, Nailor makes a final decision to save his life and the life of his new friend, even if it means heartache and a sense of emptiness when it is all over. Ship Breaker is sure to bring out the best and the worst of emotions in oneself, wholeheartedly encompassing adventure and thrill in an intense, dystopian manner.

Ella Minnow Pea (2001) by Mark Dunn tells the story of its namesake, an eighteen-year-old resident of the fictitious island nation of Nollop. The country was named for one of its prestigious former citizens, Nevin Nollop. Nevin is the author of the famous sentence, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog," which contains every letter of the alphabet. Scholarship is of high importance in Nollop, and language is considered a national art form. Its citizens speak and write formally and modern technologies are not permitted in the country.

The novel begins when a letter tile falls off of the monument commemorating Nevin Nollop and his sentence in center of town. The Council governing their country interprets this as a message from Nollop himself that the letter should be banned from use. The letter Z is banned with severe punishments for those who use it including banishment from the island. What happens when a single letter is lost?



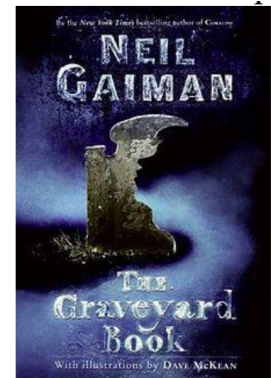
Citizens are dismayed by the ripple effects of the new law and the infringement upon rights they assumed were indisputable. As they grapple with the consequences, more letters fall and are banned. More and more people are being forced to leave, and the Council is becoming increasingly unreasonable. What will happen when all the letters

are gone?

As the task of communicating becomes more arduous, Ella and the other residents strike a deal with the Council. If they can create a sentence containing each letter of the alphabet that is shorter in length than Nollop's, the Council will rescind its irrational decrees. Can they succeed? What will happen if they cannot?

Ella Minnow Pea will enchant readers with a love for wordplay. Dunn's masterfully crafted sentences are rich in diverse and beautiful vocabulary, which becomes increasingly impressive as the allowable letters dwindle.

In *The Graveyard Book* (2008), the author Neil Gaiman tells a suspenseful and fantastical story of a boy named Nobody Owens. Nobody, or Bod for short, is raised by the ghosts and spirits of the graveyard after his mother, father, and older sister are murdered by a man named Jack. Bod, who was only around the age of one at the time, managed to escape his death and found his way into the nearby graveyard. Two ghosts, Mr. and Mrs. Owens encounter him on their evening walk and decide to raise him as their own child. Silas, a spirit who can leave and return at will, volunteers to be the boy's guardian. When the majority of spirits agree, Bod is granted the "Freedom of the Graveyard," which allows him to have many of the supernatural abilities that the spirits possess as well as being able to call the graveyard his home.



As he ages, Bod encounters many interesting ghosts and learns about their lives and stories. He also has encounters with ghouls, night-gaunts, a witch, and an ancient sleer. One of the most memorable interactions is with a young girl named Scarlett when he is five. When Scarlett is no longer allowed to visit the graveyard as a child, Bod misses interacting with the living. Through sneaking out, attending school, and other interactions with the living, the older Bod gets, the more he craves communication and time with those who are not dead. Bod and his identity seem to be continually caught somewhere between the living and the dead.

Under the protection of Silas, Mr. and Mrs. Owens and other residents of the graveyard, Bod seems to have little worry about. However, the man named Jack has never forgotten the young boy who had escaped his knife and continues to search for him therefore posing a constant threat to Bod's safety. With the community of the graveyard to help him through, Bod will discover ways to grow, learn and persevere even through the direst of circumstances. Through his writing, Gaiman throws the reader into a mystical, magical place that comes alive through words and images. The characters that become a part of the story come alive, rising from their final resting places and create an entrancing world of ghosts, ghouls, and the supernatural.

Overall, *The Graveyard Book* is filled with adventure, mystery and suspense. Gaiman's words are poetic, taking an

erie and frightening setting such as a graveyard and bringing a sense of beauty through his use of imagery. Throughout the book, illustrations by Dave McKean occasionally fill the page or compliment the words to help paint a picture for the reader. Readers will find this captivating version of a modern day ghost story to be a suspenseful page turner with many interesting characters to meet along the way.

I Am Malala is the memoir of recent Nobel Peace Prize recipient Malala Youzafzai. When Malala and her town, Swat Valley, Pakistan, are faced with the trials of the terror group, the Taliban, she takes a stand against their beliefs and ideologies to portray what is right for the Muslim community. From just a young girl, Malala had the idea that change needed to happen within women's rights for education. With the Taliban infiltrating the education system, women's rights suffered.

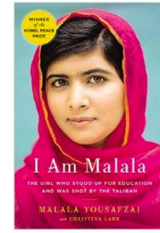
Malala saw her father, Ziauddin, as a hero figure, one who worked his entire life supporting women's equality. He was the son of a preacher, a teacher who opened a school where children were taught to reach their full potential. He saw something in his daughter when she was born and knew she could make a difference. She was praised and presented with gifts as a baby girl, an exercise usually saved for boys. Throughout primary school, Malala achieved what her father saw within her. She rose to the top of her class, becoming a wonderful speaker and writer. Malala and her father traveled throughout Pakistan, speaking at conferences and over the radio encouraging others to stand up for the true beliefs of Islam, without falling to the Taliban.

On October 9, 2012, a young Malala, just fifteen years old, endured the ultimate trial for standing up for herself and women like her. That morning she traveled to school via rickshaw, crammed with five or six girls. She was happy to be arriving a bit later that day due to exam week. Just before an army checkpoint on the way to her destination, Malala's life quickly changed. A young bearded man in light colored clothing stopped the van and marched inside to talk to the busdriver. Another man walked around the back of the van and yelled, "Who is Malala?" While no one answered, amongst blank stares, three shots were fired.

Fifteen year old Malala lives to tell her story of how even one person can be a voice in a hurting community. Visiting countries across continents and speaking to political leaders, Malala has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Presenting at conferences for the United Nation, Malala and her family reside in England, the place she was brought after the shooting. Although heartache, shootings, and bombings continue

in her country, she hopes to someday return to continue her fight for women's rights.

The process of finding one's role within a community is an essential part of growing up. Teenagers must endure the process of finding where they fit in and what roles they can play within their own communities. Young adults will enjoy reading *Ship Breaker*, *Ella Minnow Pea*, *The Graveyard Book*, and *I am Malala* while reflecting upon how community influences life and life choices. Much like our main characters, Nailer, Ella, Bod, and Malala, who struggled to find their role within their own community, teenagers will eventually be faced with the same dilemma. All four of these books will help teens work through these dilemmas in order to find themselves and their importance within their own lives.



Cara Anderson is a 7th and 8th grade Language Arts teacher at Aspen Ridge Middle School in Ishpeming, Michigan. She is currently enrolled as a graduate student at Northern Michigan University. As an avid reader, she enjoys reading a multitude of YA novels in hopes that she can share her love of reading with her students.

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