

# How might YA reading help teens in troubled times?

By Dr Anne Whisken

## Snapshot

Dr Whisken explores the role Young Adult (YA) literature plays in the worlds of teenagers, and more particularly, what roles it might play in their lives in times of crisis. This article presents the views of seven teacher librarians in response to questions about YA literature, the roles it might play and whether it should have a message or purpose.

## Introduction

'Troubled times' for teenagers can take many forms apart from those currently presented by Coronavirus, and the challenge for teacher librarians is to find the right book to meet their needs – and not always a Young Adult (YA) title. An interesting example is a YA book, Malla Nunn's *When the Ground is Hard*, in which two girls unite through a reading of *Jane Eyre* (a non-YA title) to fight back against ugly hierarchies. Set in 1960's Swaziland at a 'mixed-race' girls' boarding school, the story is based on the experiences of her mother and aunt who faced race-based bullying. There were few YA titles in those days, but the author used the power of that more adult narrative to show how books can help teenagers endure in troubled times.

In 2020 I responded to an invitation to join an international panel to discuss how promotion of YA reading might support teens in troubled times. Dr Mary Ann Harlan convened the panel, titled 'Reading When the World is on Fire' for YA Studies Around the World Conference, Nov 2020. Other panelists were Lucas Maxwell, UK; Sabrina Elliott, UK; Dr Shelly Buchanan, USA; and Shannon Greene, USA. Like so many conferences in 2020 and 2021, it was online. When we had this discussion in 2020, I hoped that we were reflecting on a situation that had passed, but it continues in 2021 (Merga, 2021) to add to young people's concerns about climate change and now daily news about the horrors facing young women in Afghanistan.

Dr Harlan's goal for the panel was twofold. One was to 'explore how gatekeepers such as school librarians share and promote literature during a stressful time such as COVID or other localised stressful moments ... are we using YA literature to teach in the moment about the moment, or do we promote joy?' She referred to the idea that YA literature has "to do something" or that it has a pedagogical imperative and if so, how do we handle that idea in promoting it. The second goal for the panel was to open a conversation between scholars of YA and readers/promoters of YA.

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How important are the critiques of YA scholars to those teaching YA?

The focus questions were:

1. What is the role of YA literature in the world? For teens, and adults?
2. For teen readers does YA have to have a message? Does it have to 'teach' something – a pedagogical imperative?
3. When times are universally (mostly) stressful like they have been in 2020, or are specific to countries, how do you think it is important to promote reading? To put events in context? To encourage joy?
4. When you recommend YA to teens to help them make sense of the world, do you rely on your own readings? Or do you engage with criticism?
5. Are there barriers and what are they to engaging YA criticism?
6. What are you excited to share with teens to promote joy?
7. What are you reading and excited about?

To prepare for the session I shared the questions with seven other teacher librarians in Victoria so I could ensure I was representing what was happening in school libraries in what became the first year of the Coronavirus pandemic, with school lockdowns and home schooling. Six were from secondary schools and one from primary.

The following sections present their responses to each question, with identification of key themes. The teacher librarians are identified by codes (TL1, TL2, etc. where TL refers to Teacher Librarian) to ensure anonymity.

## 1. What is the role of YA literature in the world? For teens and adults?

Key themes to emerge in response to this question were that YA literature's role is to engage and to 'hook' teenagers so they continue to read. The teacher librarians felt it does that best when characters are similar to their own ages and when it relates to real and current issues in their own lives. Reading for pleasure, of being entertained, was seen as an important element in this engagement, as well as the way this leads to the sustained immersion in reading which plays an important role in literacy development. Another role is to redress the negativity towards reading developed when students have been traumatised by being forced to study texts in poorly structured English classes. The way that reading enables development of empathy for others and changed perspectives about their own and others' circumstances was emphasised.

*TL1* said that student wide reading can be seen as a continuum, with about 10% of students reading because they are drawn to it, and the rest somewhere along a line of diminishing interest. 'It would be rare for a student to think: I have a problem or there is a problem in the world, and I need to find a book to help me deal with it.'

She saw the role of YA literature in the world as being to engage students in reading, and the function of the teacher librarian is to help them find the book which will help them engage and then continue to read. 'Any good literature text is written with a purpose – to inform, entertain and/or teach. All fiction and text worth its salt has purpose and meaning.'

TL2 felt that YA books should enable students to connect with literature by representing issues in the world they know, rather than the world we think they should be in. It should be promoted as dealing with issues in their lives, so it must be engaging and relational. She referred to the negative impacts which can arise from text study in English classrooms, reported also by Merger

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(2020) and Stivers and Torrens (2020). 'Reluctant readers often come to reading with previous experiences of reading which give them negative attitudes to themselves as readers. They have been traumatised by being made to read and respond in poorly designed learning activities.' In such circumstances it can be difficult to present YA literature as providing positive experiences and messages for them.

She saw that there is a role for teachers and teacher librarians to overcome such attitudes by 'finding the hooks which will encourage them to put a toe in the reading waters – and often this might require using the more engaging content or format of non-fiction books and Manga'. This 'disruptive role' which can be played by teacher librarians in overcoming traumatic reading experiences is also referred to by Torrens (Stivers & Torrens, 2020), Merga (2020 a, b, c) and Merga and Mason (2020).

TL3 saw many roles for YA literature. 'Firstly, and I think it's important not to forget this, it's to entertain. As educators we often get caught up in making sure kids read "literature", which can often take the fun out of reading.' She saw nothing wrong with reading just because a book is entertaining, and that part of the important role of the teacher librarian is to encourage students not only to read, but to read for pleasure. 'Some kids need to be shown that reading can be a fun and entertaining activity.'

She said that another role of YA (like all literature) was to be both a mirror and a window – a wide representation of experiences to enable readers to see themselves in the books they read, but also to expose them to the experiences of others.

One of the most important things reading can do is encourage and foster empathy and having a wide range of perspectives available is imperative. YA can offer comfort, it can challenge. It can broaden perspectives or it can narrow them but it should also offer a young person's view of the world (whatever world that may be).

TL4 had found that while most teenagers seem more interested in characters who are about their age, there are also capable readers wanting to read adult characters and more mature stories. Also, 'Adults tell me they like a YA novel from time to time. It does potentially provide a window to the teenage world'.

She said that if a YA writer asked her what to write about she would suggest focusing on the things a broad spectrum of kids are worried about these days, for themselves and their world. Writers who only write about the world they experienced risk writing a book just for themselves. 'I think it is a huge challenge for YA writers to keep up with the changing face of the teenage world. I wouldn't attempt it!'

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TL5 saw the role of YA as being to value add to the reading experiences which engage and build readers by presenting topics, settings and characters to which they can relate.

TL6 felt that there are myriad 'roles' for YA in the world and they are the same as reading for any age group.

We all read to escape, to explore challenging ideas, to occupy or distract our minds, to find out about different experiences of the world, to reconsider or reflect on our experiences. All are valid and no one way of reading a text is more important than any other. Often, we can get more than one 'role' out of a particular reading experience.

She said that as educators, what we have to ask ourselves is: what is the role of YA reading in the context of school libraries and our educational role? She felt that predominantly our purpose in that regard is to improve literacy.

Research across many years has shown us that school libraries and Tls have a vital role to play in this area. It is different to, but complementary to, the role of the English classroom. The majority of the library inroads into literacy support are through wide reading classes, although one-on-one and ancillary interactions (book clubs, enrichment activities) are also important. Research has told us that to do this well we need to 'engage' students in the reading process if we are to create readers who will come back to reading continually. This reading habit is what creates readers and consequently improves skills both surreptitiously and in clear, obvious ways. Therefore, Tls who are intent on creating readers will utilize YA as an engagement role.

Her opinion was that there is no doubt YA reading can enrich and extend a young person's views of the world and themselves. She saw it as a safe way to explore difficult emotions and ideas, and to play out scenarios that they may not want to experience. But it is not particular to only YA or only reading. 'Other media can also play this role and it is something we all want on occasion'.

TL7 said that as a primary teacher librarian she saw that a critical role for literature written for three- to 12- year olds was to get the chance to walk in someone else's shoes - be that in a realistic setting like *Figgy in the World* set in modern-day Africa, *Millions* set in the UK or *Harry Potter* in a totally fictional world.

This year, when our lives have become, of necessity, very narrowly focused on our homes and immediate families, the opportunity to think of others, and not just ourselves, is really important. We live in a very connected world and a job of literature is to open us up to that world - good, bad, and in between.

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She saw that another role for literature was to connect us to one another, by sharing texts we love and encouraging others to read them. This was more difficult to facilitate in remote learning and she had to think creatively to make it happen, such as live online sessions with different year levels.

I read picture books and we talked about them in terms of identifying what different characters were feeling at stages during the story and why. Or I organised an online Book Club with the year 5's in which we read x chapters of the same book each week and then chatted about it.

She had found that literature gave younger children a reason to learn to read. 'It can be a tough job - understanding that the better you read, the more the world of books opens to you, gives students a reason to persevere with learning this skill.'

She referred to a poem by Julia Donaldson about reading a book – the way it can be an escape portal from our homes, bedrooms and families during lockdown. 'Literature has the power to take us places that we can't physically get to, its most important role at this time.'

## **2. For teen readers does YA have to have a message? Does it have to teach something?**

The main themes to emerge in responses to this question were that while all good literature has a message, they are best absorbed by engagement rather than an over-emphasis on finding them, and to do that we as TLs ensure collections are relevant to the student cohort and are entertaining. There was also the idea that simply providing different perspectives can be a message in itself.

TL1 said there has to be a message, otherwise it is not literature. The role of the teacher librarian is to enable the connection for engaged reading, and by reflective immersion in the text the student will gain new knowledge. When considering whether YA literature has to do something, she replied, 'Yes, if it is literature, otherwise it is just empty story-telling for entertainment.'

TL2 however, was concerned about an over-emphasis on finding the message or theme in fiction, pointing out that this can further embed the negativity developed by students in response to poorly designed English text study. She felt it was better to approach development of reading strategies and skills from the perspective of engagement. Stocking the collection with good YA titles is part of that process. Well written YA fiction will contain messages of relevance to teenage issues, and TLs with

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knowledge of both the student demographic and quality YA fiction will choose appropriate titles. She said, 'Students need to experience being immersed and enjoying their reading to encourage them to continue.'

*TL3* felt that YA doesn't have to have a message, but it often will.

A good author will not write if they don't have something important to say. That said, a message doesn't have to be overly didactic (preferably, it will be the opposite) and it doesn't have to be complex. Simply showing readers that they are not alone in their feelings and experiences can be very powerful.

She said that the more obvious the message in YA literature, the less likely that teen readers will connect with the book. Forcing teens to read "high literature" is a sure way to not only reinforce any negative feelings about reading, but it is an easy way for readers to feel as though any other reading is not as valid. 'Readers who connect with a story – whether it be classic literature, graphic novels, manga, fantasy, etc – will come away with an enjoyable experience and may have learned something along the way.'

*TL4* also questioned whether YA books necessarily have to teach something.

I am more interested in seeing them engage with story in novels or non-fiction. I like them being curious and able to manage the book format. They already seem able to easily engage with and manage films, online tv and even podcasts, so if they can just engage in the book format, whether it is hard copy or e-book, I'm happy.

*TL5* said that providing a story through which students can explore different ideas and issues is important, 'But I have a wariness about YA which seems to jump on the bandwagon of popular themes and churn out stories to meet a perceived market.'

*TL6* was of the opinion that if our main aim is to engage teenage readers in order to build the reading habit, then the answer is that it does not have to have a message. 'That said, I can recall readers who were disappointed if a book did not have a message, so there are obviously some for whom this is important.'

She said she wanted young readers to have access to diverse opinions, different ideas and options in what they read, and in so doing, providing a learning experience which is also a pleasurable and engaging activity. Single sex schools can be insular and reading a diverse range of books can offer some of these students an experience of other views, cultures and ideas beyond their life experiences.

But, there are many different ways to read any text and readers bring their own views so we are kidding ourselves if we think we can always be sure of what a reader takes away from a reading experience. With this in mind, any attempt to 'teach' through YA reading or to offer particular 'messages' is fraught with danger.



TL7 said that for younger readers in the three- to 12- year-old category, a message is not important, but it is a complex situation. She said that picture books can teach about how we should behave in our family, how to look after the world and each other, how to be inclusive of people with different backgrounds and ways of looking at things including how to recognise our own and others' emotions.

But lots are also just for fun. It is a bit tricky in a primary school because many adults read to primary students, and if it is in the context of literacy, then each book is chosen specifically to teach some skill. Students can come to library expecting each book will have a lesson or a point to discuss like in class, but it is lovely to play the role of 'reading just for fun' in library sessions.

She felt that borrowing should also be seen in that light – what do you want to read? What are you interested in finding out more about?

### 3. When times are universally (mostly) stressful like they have been in 2020, or are specific to countries, is it important to promote reading? To put events in context? To encourage joy?

**Teacher librarians noticed that students were often drawn to 'comfort' reading of familiar titles and authors, while others chose dystopian titles to suit the strange times.**

Key themes in responses to this question were that reading is always important for teenagers, whether in times of international and national stress or not, and it is for teacher librarians to provide the spaces, programs and collections where they feel safe and supported to engage with reading that is relevant to their lives. The isolation of CoVid lockdowns drew forth many creative ways to provide that experience online, seeking to engage students in any reading by any means. Teacher librarians noticed that students were often drawn to 'comfort' reading of familiar titles and authors, while others chose dystopian titles to suit the strange times.

TL1 emphasised that reading is important whether or not the world is on fire. 'A teenager's world is always on fire!' She said that the wide reading habit is a fundamental for informative and reflective engagement with the world. Teachers and teacher librarians as the reading enablers must ask ourselves: what are we doing to ensure that what we are promoting makes sense and is well-facilitated so that students can easily engage and access the books that will provide reading experiences to build the wide reading habit.

During ISO our school library reviewed ways they could use their systems and platforms to facilitate access to fiction and non-fiction resources. The library system enables federated searches across multiple platforms. The homepage is used to promote eBooks, database resources and book reviews. Videos are made to promote ways to access collections remotely. Staff undertook a review of metadata to ensure subject authority files would enable accurate search results.

TL2 said that wellbeing programs and associated student counselling initiatives demonstrate that many students deal with high levels of stress on a daily basis, not only during national or international crises. The library can provide a safe space for such students to escape the pressures of the school yard and classroom.

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If they are encountering wide reading programs which promote relevant YA, then students can develop the resilience strategies which enable them to seek out suitable titles of their own choosing – as long as the collection is suitably arranged and such titles are made ‘findable’ by excellent meta-data application in the library management system.

TL3 felt it is important to do both these things, but 2020 had seen more discussion about how reading can be great for relieving stress – using reading to take time out, listening to an audio book while going for a walk or shooting hoops, etc. During lockdown, her library provided e- and audio books for home access. She was able to continue her library classes with years 7 and 8, but a difference was that whereas usually she would insist that they read a novel, or hard copy book, in this period she focused only on giving students a chance to engage with stories, via audio books, e-books or hard copies.

I tried to give them lots of opportunities to explore new books and genres but also encouraged them to read whatever they wanted for pleasure. I noticed that there was a lot of comfort reading happening – lots of re-reading of *Harry Potter*, *Cherub*, *Alex Rider*, etc – so we discussed why reading for comfort is important.

If she saw that students were engaging with broader current issues such as Black Lives Matter, she pulled together a collection of books so they could jump on them while the interest was high. ‘I also do this with TV shows and movies. At the moment *Enola Holmes* is popular, so I tend to promote those books along with other mystery/crime books.’

TL4 noticed that a number of students had been reading dystopian at this time and others had been interested in the Black Lives Matter movement, but a lot hadn’t been reading at all during the lockdown periods. She felt that her reading program was back at the beginning of the year with some students and classes.

TL5 said her library had been using online means to bring attention to the fiction and information resources students can access for remote learning during the lockdowns, however, library staff reflected that the online one-on-one conversations had been the most valuable aspects of such communication.

Staff reported having developed a deeper rapport with some students than might have normally resulted in the usual interactions in the library space. It seemed that freedom from the constraints of peer pressures had given shy students the confidence to be more fully self-expressed about their reading.



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TL6 felt that regardless of the world and the state it is in, reading remains for many a way of understanding ourselves and the world around and beyond us, a way of working through ideas and situations, a solace, a disruption, or even a way of avoiding thinking about what is going on. All are valid.

While there is no doubt that reading can become even more important to some during difficult times, I would suspect that this happens mostly for those who already have a reading habit. This makes an argument for ensuring our young people have reading as part of their lives so that in both good times and bad it is something that supports and enriches their lives.

TL7 said had been important to promote reading during 2020 as something Primary students could do on their own, with older ones disappearing into a book and younger ones cuddling up with a carer to share the joy of reading and joy in life with their family. Plus, it was non-screen time and valued for that reason also.

I myself avoided books that had plagues or that sort of thing in them. I was living it, so I didn't want to read about it too. A few older students got quite scared about the whole COVID situation (still are in some cases) and wanted to read anything they could about it and trawled the internet in search of information, which was sad.

#### **4. When you recommend YA literature to teens to help them make sense of the world, do you rely on your own readings? Or do you engage with criticism? Would others' analyses change how you promote/recommend titles?**

The participants in my survey felt that while they followed various channels to keep abreast of the constant release of new publications, and read reviews, there was a strong sense that their own reading of titles was paramount to ensure their recommendations had validity.

TL1 said that it is important to know the books you are recommending, but as it isn't possible to cover all the possible new titles, then seeking well-credentialed reviews can provide good guidance, for example: *Spine Out*, *Inside a Dog*, *GoodReads* and literature journals. Good online sources help fast knowledge update and refresh.

TL2 saw the value of a broad knowledge of previously published as well as emerging YA fiction and authors so suitable titles can be selected to suit the interests of students, especially when dealing with students who have developed a negative view of their own reading abilities. Constant professional reading and monitoring author and conference presentations informs and enables reflective conversations with other teacher librarians.

TL3 relied a lot on her personal reading, because she felt it important to know the books she was promoting. However, she also read lots of reviews, though not necessarily academic ones. Would a critical article change her mind?

No, probably not. If I am aware of controversy surrounding a book it does not stop me from promoting it. Rather, I will mention the controversy to my students and we will discuss what it means. I will then encourage them to read the book to make up their own minds.

She used social media to stay informed about new books, following publishers, authors, reviewers, booksellers and other book organisations. 'I am actually not interested in engaging in constant academic debate over YA literature – while it is interesting, I don't think it is particularly helpful when actually choosing and promoting books to teens.'

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TL4 said she encouraged students to be critical of books, asking them if they think the writer has got it right or not, but during lockdown there hadn't been as much time for discussion. 'This came up as an issue when *13 Reasons Why* came out on Netflix. The book had been quietly digested by some students but after such big exposure it became such a troublesome book that I stopped recommending it.'

Her approach was that if she became aware of anything troubling in a book she would definitely consider restricting exposure, knowing how much impact a book can have and that students may not be able to see another side.

TL5 reflected that her experience and observation of teacher librarians promoting books with teenagers in a girls' school was that those who really know their books and their students do the best job.

Such teacher librarians can refer to particular titles with obvious deep knowledge and the students respect that and respond accordingly. They have an infectious enthusiasm for both reading and for the titles they are recommending and that engenders connection and relatedness that works particularly well with girls.

TL6 said she used both. 'I rely on my own reading, which is endless and varied and also on listening carefully to what the readers themselves are saying about their own and their peers' reading.' She thought it important to be aware of critical commentary and reflect on how this might relate to the students you are working with.

TL7 also mostly relied on her own reading, as she had been a teacher librarian for many years. 'I have come across, talked about, been recommended by colleagues, read myself, many books but I also rely on critiques from our trusted book sellers and magazines like *Magpies* that have many suggested newly released titles.'

## 5. Are there barriers and what are they to engaging with YA?

Themes in responses to this question included lockdown fatigue and the negativity created by over-emphasis on text study in poorly constructed English class activities, or in schools without skilled teacher librarians. The teacher librarians pointed to the many constructive ways barriers to engagement with YA can be overcome, including Harvard thinking routines and bibliotherapy ideas (Pledger, 2019). Directing students to areas where their interests already lay was referred to by many, such as book and movie tie-ins, Instagram, LGBTQI titles, modelling of reading by parents and teachers, and asking for student recommendations and student voice. This supports La Marca's thesis (2003) which showed that keys to creating readers and reading cultures are - access, attitude, ambience and relationships.

*TL1* had found many students have a negative attitude to wide reading, mostly due to poor experiences in schools not properly resourced with skilled teacher librarians, constantly refreshed collections and timetabled sessions in the library. She said that Harvard thinking routines can assist reflective engagement with the texts they are reading.

*TL2* referred to ideas involved in bibliotherapy as part of student-wellbeing programs and trauma-informed reading programs which can be instructive for teaching strategies to help students address difficult issues in their lives.

**Creating a reading culture throughout the school and at home was paramount, and male reading role models are especially important for boys.**

*TL3* teaches at an all-boys' school and had found there were many barriers, despite a well-stocked library. With so many other things central to the lives of teenage boys, reading is way down the list. She said they seemed to start the slip away from reading in about year 8. 'The biggest barrier is probably showing teens who may be borderline readers that reading is enjoyable and worthy of their time.' Creating a reading culture throughout the school and at home was paramount, and male reading role models are especially important for boys. 'Boys are trying to figure out how to be a man and if they don't see the men in their lives reading, it is difficult to convince them that it is an important thing to focus on.'

*TL4* said that library staff had felt very cut off from students during the period of remote learning in 2020. They had noticed that students were a bit overwhelmed with the experience of remote learning and therefore there was not much of a push with wide reading in that time. There were many ways they tried to overcome that barrier.

Staff created LibGuides with suggestions of e-books for each year level, with more focus on years 7 and 8 because they felt the older ones wouldn't be as motivated as the younger levels. However, although English teachers posted the LibGuides on their online courses, students still seemed unaware of them. 'Feedback we got from some teachers was that parents weren't keen

for their children to be reading e-books after spending all day on their computers and I think a number of parents ordered hard copy books for them to read.'

An Instagram was established at the beginning of term 2 to connect with the students in a different way. Some of the title choices have been very thoughtful and others more whimsical in an effort to spark interest. The emphasis has been on newish books but older titles have also been included regularly.

She said the library had moved to adding more diverse voices to the collection and this sometimes meant buying in from other parts of the world. Now it is commonplace to see same-sex couples on the covers of many books on display. They followed the suggestion from Adele Walsh (*Reading Matters*) to engage readers by getting in books of movies and online TV series, and that has drawn the attention of students as well. She also encouraged getting students to recommend books to the library. 'Whenever I hear students recommending to each other I loudly let them know how much I love it.'

TL5 felt that students need help to navigate the different genres so they can encounter and trial reading outside their preferred themes and topics. 'Girls tend to prefer books about relationships, which is fine, but to get them to engage with other genres it is important for teacher librarians to know the student well so that the connectedness of the relationship can help guide the student to a title in a new genre.'

TL6 reflected that there are always barriers because we work with diverse populations with varied experiences and views. 'Our aim is to create readers. To do this, firstly students must see themselves as readers and as part of a vibrant reading culture. This is hard work and there are many barriers to be overcome.'

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## 6. What are you excited to share with teens to promote joy?

Common themes across comments in relation to this question were: knowing the students and their interests; asking students to be the experts and to share their reading favourites; keep reading new releases to ensure we are refreshed and excited; and modelling how to be a reader excited about reading.

TL1 said it is important to know the students so that their interests can be used to hook them into particular books. This can be done by checking with their teacher to learn about the class, by reading out blurbs from particular books or reading exciting sections and asking questions of students related to their areas of interest.

TL2 felt that bringing a very broad variety of text to students enabled them to see that whatever their reading skills, there is material which can excite them.

TL3 found excitement in showing new books to students, especially if she came across something she knew they would love – a favourite author or a particular type of genre or story. 'This comes from knowing your readers and what they enjoy. I also love asking them for recommendations, particularly if it's within an area that I am not very familiar with (manga or graphic novels for example). They love to be the experts for once!'

TL4 gave an example of a year 9 girl who saw herself as not a great reader but wished she was more engaged because her best friend loved reading.

Then the girl herself found the key to loving reading. She told me that she came across a book that did engage her, *The Boy Who Steals Houses* by C.J. Drews, and she loved it from the very first pages and read it faster than any book in her life! I was so excited: social issues and joy! I told two girls in years 7 and 8 about the book, and both engaged very quickly.

TL5 referred to constantly reading new releases in order to bring the excitement of fresh reading into sharing with students. She said it is also important to not restrict our reading to our own preferences as that limits the possibilities of reaching the broader interests of the students with whom we are interacting. 'We can't rely on old titles with possibly dated themes just because we loved them at the time, nor can we rely on reading out a series of blurbs of books we haven't read – the students will not be impressed.'

TL6 said she was always keen to share her own enthusiasms and to model what it means to be a reader. 'There is a great joy in the gift of facilitating students to seeing themselves as readers.' She looked for ways to cultivate a safe and supportive reading environment where students can share with each other, in and beyond the classroom, and experience a community of readers.

**...Sharing a rhyming book brings joy, sharing a book about how butterflies hatch out of their chrysalis promotes joy...**

TL7 felt that for the 3- to 4- year-olds, living is joy, so 'Sharing a rhyming book brings joy, sharing a book about how butterflies hatch out of their chrysalis promotes joy, a story about a family that is the same but different from their family promotes joy.' She had found, anecdotally, that for older primary students there had been a keener uptake of fantasy in this time, with several students re-reading Harry Potter again when they ran out of books in lockdown. That led to an increased interest in the genre as well as being an escape from their 'same-ish' lockdown lives. 'Being back at school has promoted joy and connecting with peers and having the opportunity to browse and borrow books they haven't read before has promoted joy! Something they previously took for granted.'

## 7. What are you reading and excited about?

Themes to emerge in response to this question mostly focused on creating reading cultures. This involved reading widely and reading new releases so that title promotion had the validity of the teacher librarian having read the book and being excited about it; knowing the staff and students so books could be targeted; developing spaces for quiet immersion in reading; and creating opportunities for readers to share their own excitement about reading.

**...developing spaces for quiet immersion in reading; and creating opportunities for readers to share their own excitement about reading.**

TL1 said that she was excited about creating a space dedicated to quiet immersion in fiction, as that has its own very powerful engagement factor. She now has a quiet reading room where students relax in suitable seating, with walls wrapped in shelves of well displayed and arranged fiction. There was also excitement about the library's new lunchtime literature clubs where those students who do love reading can share their passions and create their own podcasts. An online staff book chat during lockdown was an exciting development and this connection with the library continued after teachers returned to school, including involvement in Book Week.

In terms of promoting fiction to teachers and older readers, current exciting titles she mentioned were: *Dictionary of Lost Words* by Williams, *Grenville's Room Made of Leaves*, Turnbull's *A Bigger Question*, Dalton's *Boy Swallows Universe*, and Newman's *When Time Stopped*.

TL2 had found that a broad knowledge of fiction was needed to diagnose students' interests and needs and to provide THE book which can hook a child into reading. For example, Holocaust literature was proving particularly exciting for her in these times because 'It teaches that good things can survive horror and that people's stories live on in books even if they don't. Such YA gives students a sense of humanity's global history.'

TL3 said that her time as a judge for the CBCA Older Readers' category had enabled her to be excited about sharing new Australian books and authors with her readers. 'My students tend to find the very popular books on their own (*Cherub*, *Hunger Games*, *Harry Potter*, etc) so I loved being able to show them a more diverse range of authors and perspectives that they would perhaps not discover on their own. Readers can find some real gems that way.'

TL4 reflected that when she promoted books she usually emphasised what she liked, and the aspects of the story that got her in.

Recently I have been enjoying some laugh out loud moments, some wonderful male characters, some empowering female focused books. If I don't find something I can engage with in a book I put it aside. I am always thinking, who will be interested in this book? What am I enjoying? What would I say to a student about this book, with the main goal just to get them reading?



TL7 was excited about the plethora of Middle Years books available to read, to add to her collection and share with students. 'I want to continue to expand our offerings of books that showcase different perspectives, ways of living, ways of experiencing the world, ways of thinking.'

## Conclusion

In late 2020 when I gathered reflections from teacher librarians about the role of YA literature and how it might help teenagers in troubled times, we in Australia had hopes that our closed borders might have saved us from the extensive spread of Coronavirus still ravaging much of the rest of the world. Alas, lockdowns and isolation were just a practice run for another bout, this time with the Delta strain. Once again, teacher librarians across the country are looking to how we might support our young people as they wearily confront more home schooling. A recent

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meeting of the School Library Association of Victoria (SLAV) Online Book Club (2021) provided members with opportunity to share valuable ideas for reading promotion. Although the focus for that session was on reluctant readers, the strategies and titles suggested by teacher librarians replicated many of the common themes in my interviews the previous year. And as we slip on masks and slide into more remote learning, the teacher librarian's role in connecting young people to literature that enables escape into other worlds, that gives understanding of others' perspectives, and which helps develop skills and hopes for brighter futures is even more important than ever.

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