

Hooked

A Book Group for
Teachers and Librarians

on YA Lit!

▶ C. J. BOTT

Young adult literature provides my favorite reading. A fresh excitement starts inside me every time I hear Chris Crutcher has a new book out, or Laurie Halse Anderson or James Howe or Walter Dean Myers or any other notable YA author. Fortunately the list is endless. I also like adult books, but none compare to the books that tell stories with gutsy detail and the raw emotional angst experienced when facing many different problems. Perhaps YA books are more personal for me because I still feel like that adolescent I once was. I have always found my role models and escapes in books, and I love connecting with young characters who pour out their hearts into mine. Sometimes when I finish a YA book, I absolutely must talk about it or I can't sleep or go on with my normal adult life. I am lucky enough to be able to share the books with my husband, author, editor, and anthologist for young adult short stories, Don Gallo, but sometimes even that is not enough.

Eight years ago, Don and I started a book group that would read only teen literature. Our goal was to lure already busy middle school and high school teachers and librarians into more current young adult titles. I was still teaching high school English and looked at my teacher and librarian friends as potential members. Don announced the book group at workshops he presented in the area. Soon we had five to eight willing teachers and several school and public librarians.

At the first meeting, we talked about wanting the group's structure to be flexible and forgiving. We adopted only one real rule: We would consider young adult titles exclusively and as much as possible only recently published books. We agreed to select one title each month for all to read, with the option to read additional personal choices to share and inspire the group. Over the years, we were selecting our monthly titles from several main focus areas.

- Books by a group-selected author.
- Books from a particular genre such as historical fiction, fantasy, science fiction, novel in verse.
- Books by an author from a specific country or area of the world.
- Short story collections.
- Graphic novels.



FRONT ROW: ROLLIE WELCH, MARY ARNOLD. BACK ROW: DARLA WAGNER, C.J. BOTT, AND JEFF HARR. PHOTO OF SOLON BOOK GROUP.



FRONT ROW: KAREN NASH AND CHRISTINA GETROST. MIDDLE ROW: ROLLIE WELCH, MARY ARNOLD, AND LAQUITA TIMBERLAKE, CHERYL KUONEN. BACK ROW: RENEE CAMINATI, BRENNA FRIESNER, DARLA WAGNER, C.J. BOTT, AND JEFF HARR. MISSING: PHOTOGRAPHER DON GALLO, NANCIE SKONEZNY, JUDY MONTGOMERY, JENNY GREEN, CINDA WILLIAMS CHIMA.

Once we used an article from *The ALAN Review*, a publication of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), that discussed books written about girls growing up around the world. Group members chose the book that most interested them. Discussing the topics of female genital mutation and sex trafficking made that night's discussion one of our most upsetting but also most informative.

We have examined lists of books nominated for the Newbery Award, the Young Adult Library Services Association's (YALSA) Printz Award, the Coretta Scott King Award, the National Book Awards, and the Ohio Buckeye Book Award, and have had long debates about award selection processes. We have read books written by some of our author members.

Each month we start with the usual small talk and sharing, followed by a discussion of the evening's selected book. We are pretty spirited and casual. Although we try not to cut anyone off or get too far off topic, the discussion can last from thirty minutes to more than an hour. After that discussion, those who have read other teen books share a summary and a personal opinion. Sometimes we choose our next book from these suggestions. At the end of the evening, we decide on our next title and meeting date, which Don includes in a reminder e-mail to the whole group the next day.

As word has spread about our group, new members have joined, and although some have dropped out for various life reasons (babies, job changes, retirements, added family and/or

professional responsibilities), we have grown to about twenty members, including several authors, with the remainder evenly divided between teachers and librarians.

At the very least, the book group has enriched my reading and introduced me to others with whom I can discuss young adult literature. Although I have retired from classroom teaching, I still feel very much a part of my professional teaching community as well as the library community, becoming involved in the classrooms of several book group members—a valuable bonus.

Young adult literature—edgy, revealing, exciting, gentle, sensitive, innovative, comforting, risk-taking, and hard-hitting—is the star in our group and has influenced many of us in ways we didn't expect. I will let some of the others tell their stories.

Rollie Welch

Collection Manager
Cleveland Public Library
Technical Services

For the past five years, I have been attending the monthly book-discussion group. Because I live about seven miles from Don and C.J.'s house, it is an easy fit for me. I jumped at the chance to join, primarily because I wanted to be exposed to more young adult titles. I also recognized that although I try to read a wide variety of books, I tend to focus on adventure, war, or gruesome horror novels. I figured this book group was my chance to somewhat upgrade my reading habits.

What I did not expect to find—and was quickly blown away by—was the knowledge of young adult literature that the group brings to each discussion. I tend to read a book and evaluate the story as it stands by itself. Did it have a fast pace? Did the author connect all the dots and wrap it up with a satisfactory ending? Did I like the characters? The book group has introduced me to taking time and evaluating the literary techniques that authors employ in their novels. It was uncharted water for me. Because I do not have a strong background in literature or grammar, I find myself paying close attention to statements such as, “This author does a wonderful job of incorporating great visual imagery” or “His overuse of metaphors sometimes becomes annoying.”

In addition, several members of the group are strong advocates of fantasy, a genre that I try but often am unable to appreciate. Many teens read fantasy voraciously and are eager to share their favorite titles with any nearby adult—often me. The book discussion group has provided me with, at the very least, a go-to list of current and popular titles that I probably would not pick up and read on my own.

Along with discussing the content of a selected title, our conversation often delves into the author's personality and mindset, which gives readers that “ah-ha” moment when a certain scene or section of dialogue makes sense. Without the group, these little golden moments would not be possible.

Part of my professional position is to order new young adult books for a major metropolitan library system. The book group often gives me a “heads-up” on forthcoming titles, which I jot down and order when I return to my work station.

The group's major benefits for me, however, are the members' varied viewpoints. It is a wonderful cross section of teachers, school librarians, and public librarians who serve very different populations. Sometimes as a librarian, you only see the trees and not the forest. You forget that there are books out there with broad appeal to teens but maybe not the immediate teen population you see every day. The group's members make sure to mention which books, regardless of literary quality, are “hot items” for the teens with whom they come in contact each day.

I often hear teachers lament the fact that, in the face of the many new young adult titles being produced, they wish they could keep up. Nobody can read every new title. The best by-product of the group enables professionals who work with teens and teen reading to keep abreast of what is new, what is great, and what is coming on the horizon in the world of teen books.

Darla Wagner

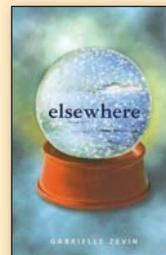
Assistant Principal
Ballard Brady Middle School
Orange City Schools
Pepper Pike, Ohio

I spent several years early in my teaching career trying to figure out why my students weren't excited about reading. At the time, I was teaching high school English and offering students such works as *Hamlet*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *The Last of the Mohicans*. I wasn't really *offering* so much as *forcing*, and although a few students enjoyed the texts, I have to admit that my one-size-fits-all was not a very successful way to develop lifelong readers and writers. The same type of curriculum structure followed me to the middle school classroom as I accepted a position as a middle school language arts teacher. Teaching seventh and eighth grade students provided me with an opportunity to see the dramatic difference in how reading is typically handled in districts. There is a huge disparity in the philosophy among most elementary teachers who are encouraging children to read and high school teachers who are requiring children to read.

I realized a few things. Readers of all ages want choice; they want books with characters who remind them of themselves or others in their lives. Teens want to read about teens. I also realized that I had some freedom because the reading teacher's role should be one that helps build skills and strategies rather than one that knows all the nuances and interpretations of the literature being used in the classroom.

With this newfound freedom, however, came a fear of not knowing enough about what is currently out there for students at a variety of reading levels. At about that time in my career, I met C. J. Bott and her husband, Don Gallo. They invited me to be part of the book group in their home once a month. The world of young adult literature burst open before me. Meeting with other teachers and librarians to discuss the latest literature for teens empowered me to offer my students more choice, help struggling readers connect, and better satisfy the appetite of the avid readers in my room. Following such meetings, I would return to my classroom eager to tell teens about the latest James Patterson adventure, or intrigue them with first lines of Zevin's *Elsewhere*, or tempt them by holding up the latest novel in a well-loved series. I began to find titles that would meet a variety of my students' needs, including a collection of books that dealt with harassment and bullying to use in literature circle discussions. The concept of differentiating my reading instruction to better meet my readers' needs became more manageable and comfortable as I built my own knowledge base about young adult authors, titles, and content. Not only would I bring back titles for students to read, but I also began modeling the book discussion format and enabling my students to participate in such discussions with one another.

Being part of a book group has enriched my life in other ways as well. I found myself talking to teachers about the group. The excitement was infectious, and although a few of them actually joined the same group, I knew that there was power in helping



them create book groups of their own. So we began meeting at a local coffee house, inviting teachers from all school levels, and modeling the process of sharing, connecting, and moving one another forward.

These discussions helped me to realize that each group has a variety of goals. It is important to identify the purpose of the group from the beginning. Although some adolescent book groups' main goal might be gaining and sharing a deep understanding of one text, the teacher groups that I have worked with are looking for as many titles as possible to recommend to students for independent reading and to use in the classroom for help in meeting state reading standards. In those groups, we try to choose topics, genres, or themes to read each month, rather than have everyone read the same text. In addition, discussions in the group often include strategies for using the text in the classroom or alignment to grade level indicators.

Most literature teachers chose their area of education because they love to read and discuss books. In the daily pressures of teaching and the age of achievement testing, however, we seem to have pushed aside the very thing that ignited the spark. But we cannot allow time to be the roadblock. Although I believe that it would be difficult to find anything to replace the emotional and social enjoyment of a small group of people sitting around in comfortable chairs talking about books, there are other ways to develop book groups that make adjustments for busy schedules. Certainly the Internet, with blogs and online forums, presents itself as a possible solution to getting everyone together at the same time and place. I also know of one group of teachers who each choose a different book to read, set dates on the calendar to mail the book to the next person, and used Post-it notes as a way of corresponding their thoughts, ideas, and questions. Although everyone isn't able to sit and talk about the same book at the same time, the "mail-it-on" practice has an element of surprise as participants await the next book, and it provides an extra benefit in that readers get to keep the last book as their own.

The desire to share good literature should be strong enough to enable teachers to find a way to discuss books with one another. If we want our students to truly love literature as an enjoyable part of their lives, then it's time that we get back to making room for it in our own.

Mary Arnold

Cuyahoga County Public Library
Teen Services Manager, Maple Heights Branch
Maple Heights, Ohio

"So many books, so little time" is merely a cliché because its sentiment has become more and more valid. At a library conference in 1994, I heard publishers and young adult librarians sound a death knell for YA books, while at the same time, they shouted out a rallying cry to save and revitalize their organizations. We're now more than ten years into celebrating Teen Read Week each October, when teens and fans of YA lit are encouraged to "read for the fun of it," and the advent of the Young Adult Library Services Association's (YALSA) Printz Award for outstanding writing for teens in 1998 has ushered in a boom time for YA publishing. With more than 3,000 YA titles published in 2007, no wonder we constantly read, while still feeling that we miss out on much that's good out there in YA literature land.

So when I learned at the Youngstown State University literature festival that Don Gallo was retiring to northeast Ohio, I quickly made contact with the guru of YA short stories. I learned that his and his wife's commitment to spreading the joy of YA literature extended

to involvement in the best YA lit conference around when I met them at the ALAN workshop (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English). It didn't take much arm twisting to convince me to join ALAN or to acknowledge that librarians need to partner and participate with classroom English teachers to advocate for YA books in the curriculum. And what better incentive to delve into my bulging bag of teen titles than an invitation to join a book group devoted to YA lit!

For the past several years, I've loved my participation in this book group as a way to focus my reading, and after all, what's more satisfying than sharing a response to a book with like-minded folks? As a professional teen librarian, I'm committed to knowing how to put the right book into the hands of the right reader at just the right time, and that requires reading—a lot of reading. Through the example of my voracious and knowledgeable reading colleagues in the book group, I've challenged myself to read at least two or three books a week, which greatly expands my readers' advisory repertoire. As a manager with the responsibility of mentoring new teen librarians in this skill and as the "go-to" person in my branch for YA reading suggestions, the book talks I enjoy around our congenial gathering, and the reading suggestions I scribble on scrap paper for next time mean that I've got a fighting chance to make that reading match. The teachers always make helpful suggestions about readership and whether particular titles will appeal to or be appropriate classroom reading for middle school. I use this information with my local school librarians and classroom teachers.

Like Rollie, I find that I read more consciously, knowing that this savvy group of readers will take the discussions beyond surface reactions. And still, there is always that moment when someone's comment will trigger a realization that the author had more going on and that a re-read is in order!

Our book group is strong because we have such a variety of people involved—writers, teachers, curriculum directors, school and public librarians—who each have particular likes and "less likes" in YA books but come together to cover the gamut of genres. Although we like to focus on what's new and hot in the field, we also make time to read or re-read the classic authors and titles. How do today's YA authors like Green, Dessen, and Flinn build on the foundation of Cormier, Peck, Duncan, and Myers? I come away from book group each month excited and never sated by how many more books there are to know and love.

Jeffrey Harr

English Teacher
Theodore Roosevelt High School
Kent, Ohio

I have been a member of the book group for almost four years now. I was attending a reading and writing festival where some of my then middle school students were meeting authors, attending workshops, and doing some writing of their own. At the festival, I met Don Gallo, who was a presenter. His wife, C. J. Bott, introduced herself to me and within minutes invited me to attend their book group. And just like that, I was in.

My first night, we had read **Trouble Don't Last** by Shelley Pearsall. Pearsall, who lives close to where the group meets, attended and totally blew me away with the amount of insight she provided about the writing of the book, her tireless research, and the more difficult problems she encountered along the way. It would have been one thing to have read the book and discussed it with a group

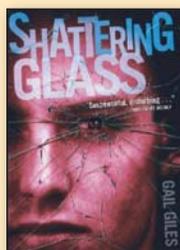


of intelligent, critical readers, but to have the author there was beyond cool.

As a result of having met Pearsall, I decided to use the book with my eighth grade classes and invited the author to come out for a day. She worked with our 120 students, teaching them research skills, the writing process, and giving them the same insights about her award-winning book that she shared the night of our book group. In addition, both Don and C. J. have worked with my students, providing invaluable experiences for the readers and writers of tomorrow.

Before joining the group, I was one of those English teachers who read the occasional YA novel if a teen came to me and said, "Hey, Mr. Harr, you've got to read this book! It's awesome!" I had taught the time-tested classics—**The Outsiders**, **The Hobbit**, **Summer of My German Soldier**—but had never heard of Chris Crutcher, Neal Shusterman, or Laurie Halse Anderson.

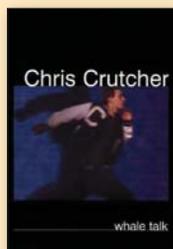
So for the first few meetings, I feverishly wrote down nearly every title discussed, and before long, I had a phenomenal list of books to read. Just like that. Within a few weeks, I had read **Shattering Glass**, **Feed**, **Speak**, **Catalyst**, and **Whale Talk**. I came into the next meeting with mixed emotions—



embarrassed that I had never before read some of the best books ever written for teens but also excited to share my love of these stories. But I wasn't just excited to share with my new friends, I also had teens to talk to about the books—a hundred or so. For

the first time in my fifteen-year teaching career, I was able to offer books to my students—awesome books that they actually love to read—with stories whose characters affirmed the experiences of their readers instead of alienating them.

Being in the group has enriched my personal life as well. Don and C. J. invited me to present



with them at the 2005 NCTE conference in Pittsburgh. We did a workshop on recent YA titles and how to use teen literature to stop bullying. It sounds melodramatic (to which I am rarely, if ever, prone), but it was a life-changing experience. At the conference, I—the guy who had barely read a YA novel in years—was sitting on a panel with Graham Salisbury, James Howe, and Laurie Halse Anderson. Other than sweating oceans, I got through it and even got a compliment from James Howe during his presentation; he said that I had inspired him. I almost fell out of my chair. That night, from my hotel room, I called my wife; I was so giddy she asked me several times if I had been drinking.

I have since become a member of ALAN, and as a result, have met a veritable who's who of YA authors. At the 2006 conference in Nashville, for example, I talked with Gail Giles, John Green, and Patrick Hughes and had lunch with Robert Lipsyte. Robert Lipsyte! Amazing.

But that's not all. As with a few other group members, I am a writer. I write YA novels, and since meeting Don, I have been attending a writer's group that includes several published authors. Since joining the group, I have acquired an agent and have improved my writing in ways I never would have if I had not been meeting YA authors, reading their books, and discussing them with some of the most intellectually stimulating people I have ever had the pleasure to meet.

At NCTE that year, I met several editors and have made a great many contacts that, I have to believe, will definitely enrich my writing career, and if nothing else, have made me feel so much more a part of the greater literary community than I could have ever imagined. I cannot be sure I will ever see my writing published, but if I do, there will be an acknowledgment in there to Don and C. J. for opening doors.

What has being a member of this book group done for me? Everything. Because now, something happens to me that never used to happen before: I hand a student a book, and he hands it back a week later, saying, "That was the best book I've ever read. Do you have any more like that one?"

For an English teacher—for a reader and writer—that's everything. ■

MEMBERS OF THE GROUP

Mary Arnold is a past president of YALSA and a former member of the Board of Directors of ALAN. Mary is the Teen Services Manager of the Cuyahoga County (Ohio) Public Library, Maple Heights Branch, one of the nation's best library systems.

C. J. Bott has adjusted to retirement after teaching high school English for 30 years by consulting with school systems on the problem of bullying and harassment. Her first book, **The Bully in the Book and in the Classroom** (Scarecrow Press, 2004/VOYA December 2004), presents more than two hundred children's and young adult books that deal with the problem of bullying. She is working on a follow up, **More Bullies in More Books**, also from Scarecrow Press. She can be reached through her Web site, <http://www.bulliesinbooks.com>. C. J. lives in Solon, Ohio, with her husband Don Gallo, former junior high school English teacher, college professor, and currently one of the foremost and respected anthologists of YA literature.

Jeffrey Harr lives in Kent, Ohio, with his wife, Pam, daughter, Zoe, and a puppy named Daisy. He's been teaching middle school and high school English in Kent, Ohio, since 1991 and is madly searching for a publisher for his young adult novels.

Darla Wagner and her husband, Richard, live in Sagamore Hills, Ohio, with their four children. She is an administrator for Orange City Schools with sixteen years of classroom teaching experience. She is a National Writing Project fellow and an education consultant who works with literacy teachers across Northeast Ohio.

Rollie Welch is the Collection Manager of Cleveland Public Library and has been a librarian working with teens for twenty-seven years. He is currently the chair of YALSA's Best Books for Young Adults Committee and has served on the Quick Picks Committee. Outside of his workday, he reviews for several publications and volunteers to lead a teen book discussion group in a juvenile detention center. Rollie chooses to read rather than watch television, but he can be swayed to put down a book to watch Ohio State football.