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Carpe Librum: Seize the (YA) Book

Will You Go Out with Me? Why First Loves Are Painfully Important to YA Lit

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When we think of *love*, our minds tend not to conjure images of Mother Teresa or of the Greek *agape* love, but we typically prefer the butterfly-stirring, heart-breaking, often-fleeting romantic notion of *love*. It is the love that fairy tales tell of, that cynics swear off forever, and that some become contestants on reality shows to find. Whether true, tortuous, or artificial, the idea of love is something we all know *something* about, even our young adult readers. Perhaps it is the young adults who have the most ideas about love, especially their first loves.

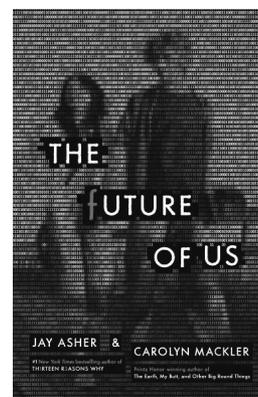
And, while young adults are sorting through the rush of scents and emotions of adolescence, it is refreshing when young adult literature approaches first love with a broader scope of life's realistic complexities, including living in the present when faced with the complications of the future, valuing authentic relationships beyond romantic impulses, and,

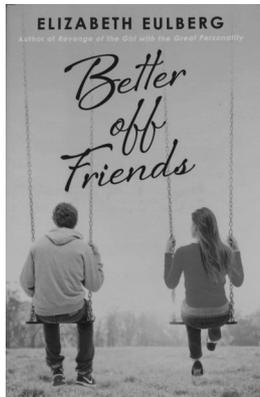
ultimately, seeing beyond gender and even appearance to experience *true* love of another person.

The question of the future rarely crosses the mind when the heart is fluttering with the heat of a blossoming relationship, and, it seems, even less often of the impulsive adolescent mind. Nevertheless, Jay Asher and Carolyn Mackler's co-written novel *The Future of Us* (Penguin, 2011) takes the reader into the past, into the lives of Emma and Josh who, in 1996, are experimenting with dialup Internet only to find an unexplained gateway to the future of Facebook statuses and the inevitable over-sharing of social media. In 1996, Emma and Josh are next-door neighbors who had been close friends until Josh's romantic feelings complicated their friendship. Fifteen years later, Josh's Facebook profile shows him married to the most popular girl in high school, and Emma finds she can prevent her future failed marriages by manipulating her 16-year-old inner thoughts and her college choice. While Emma becomes preoccupied with managing her future by how her high school self acts, mostly through self-mantras about refusing to settle for the undesirable features she sees in her Facebook husbands, Josh becomes a person he doesn't recognize to

preserve the seemingly perfect future he peeked at through Facebook. *Peek* is the key word, as Josh and Emma both realize that their preoccupation with the future is stealing the precious time of their youths. Despite being a bit too cynical for its age at points (as Emma, the 16-year-old, says, "I've always protected myself when it comes to love"), *The Future of Us* works to sketch its theme of not worrying about the future just short of encouraging the carelessness adolescents enact when bypassing the consideration of a decision's consequences.

The Future of Us brings our potential futures into focus in a thoughtful way. The young adult reader will engage in its discussion of the impact of decisions beyond the isolated world of high school, and the older reader will chuckle at the nostalgia of dialup





Internet, the graphic overload of the Facebook interface, and, yes, the easily developed dependency on social media.

In her 2014 novel *Better Off Friends* (Point), Elizabeth Eulberg tackles the age-old question of whether or not heterosexual males and females can really just “be friends.” Also alternating perspectives each chapter as *The Future of Us* does, *Better Off Friends* tells the story of Macallan and Levi as they grow together as best friends late in junior high, work through the complications of being “just friends” throughout high school, and finally to the point where they must admit their feelings to themselves and each other. Despite sounding predictable, Eulberg crafts an engaging text with mature voices and a plot that makes the reader wonder, “What if they *are* just friends?”

When Levi’s family moves to Wisconsin during his eighth-grade year, Macallan befriends him on his first day in the cafeteria. They discover they have similar interests and sparkling senses of humor, and they are soon close friends—no surprise there. What is surprising, though, are the characters of Macallan and Levi and the believable maturity they display at the pen of Eul-

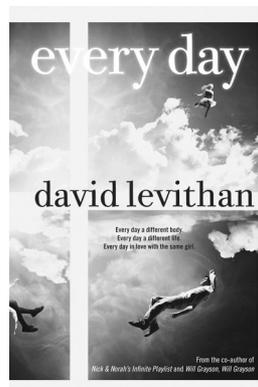
berg. Macallan, as a quirky, keen teenager, takes interest in cooking lessons and underground British television shows rather than being consumed by the concerns of her friend Emily’s boy-craziness. Levi, when he first arrives from California with his bleached blonde hair, works through his desire to fit in with “the guys,” despite his reluctance to yield to their less-than-refined humor and roughness. Both characters, when faced with the legitimate trials of high school, remain authentic examples of two young adults who, despite everyday challenges, are confident in their identities. And, while romance is central to the novel, the novel gains merit beyond its story of flimsy first loves to tell the story of two complex, captivating, and confident young adults who display true love through friendship and romance.

In the 2012 novel *Every Day* (Knopf), David Levithan somehow sorts through an elaborate plot of the body-less, age-less being named A and A’s story of seemingly unattainable love. With little explanation, A inhabits a new person each day for exactly 24 hours and, while A has a mind and a personality, there is a responsibility to disturb the inhabited person’s own life as lit-

tle as possible for those disrupted 24 hours. If the reader can let go of the unanswered mysteries of A’s background (How was A born? Does A have being-jumping parents? How does A age?), *Every Day* becomes a brilliant story of identity beyond gendered expectations and social roles. We meet A as the inhabitant of Justin, the boyfriend of Rhiannon. While in Justin’s body for just 24 hours, A comes to love Rhiannon and, for that day, treats her with a kindness atypical for Justin. The “love story” between A and Rhiannon is undeveloped, at best, with the reader questioning what A actually *loves* about Rhiannon, yet the narrative moves through A’s unconventional life with a sophistication that partly excuses the weakness of their “love.”

Inhabiting a new person each day, A experiences the lives of teens who are addicts, transgender, straight-laced, lesbian, bullied, athletes, and self-destructive, all as engaging narratives of young adults searching for their identities. Most notable, perhaps, are the love stories A encounters beyond the relationship with Rhiannon, love stories where appearance and gender do not matter but rather they “exist as individuals” (299). Even the character of A is free of a gendered body, allowing A to compile a personal history of daylong loves of all shapes, sizes, and genders. The central love story may be weak, but the supporting stories of love across all experiences make *Every Day* remarkable.

As members of a social media communities and cultures of entertainment, our senses are constantly flooded with ideas, images,



and expectations of love, and perhaps rightly so. *Love* cannot be defined by a greeting card or a romantic comedy film, but only by our personal experiences unique to each life and partnership. It is this uniqueness, this distinctiveness, which each romantic relationship holds, that I hope our young adult readers come to understand as they experience the coming and going of first loves. Levithan writes, “When first love ends, most people eventually know there will be more to come. . . . It will never be the same as the first, but it will be better in different ways” (317). For a love to be qualified as a first, we also understand that it will end and there will be others, but we should always remember the first, because, as Asher and Mackler write, “It was love because it was worth it” (53). 

Emilee Hussack is an MA student at West Chester University who recently completed her secondary certification. Her interests include composition and rhetoric, Modernist poetry, and hip-hop. Emilee can be reached at EH764303@wcupa.edu. **Pauline Skowron Schmidt** is an assistant professor of English education at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. When she is not busy teaching, she enjoys reading YA literature. Email her at pschmidt@wcupa.edu.

CEE Awards Announced

A number of awards were presented by the Conference on English Education at the NCTE Annual Convention in Washington, DC. The 2014 **Janet Emig Award** for Exemplary Scholarship in *English Education* was presented to **Marcelle Haddix**, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, and **Detra Price-Dennis**, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY, for their article, “Urban Fiction and Multicultural Literature as Transformative Tools for Preparing English Teachers for Diverse Classrooms” (*English Education*, April 2013). The 2014 **Richard A. Meade Award** for Research in English Education was presented to **Troy Hicks**, Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, MI, for *Crafting Digital Writing* (Heinemann, 2013). Beginning in 2013, **The James N. Britton Award** for Inquiry within the English Language Arts is presented in odd-numbered years. **The James Moffett Award** for Teacher Research was not awarded in 2014. **The 2014 Cultural Diversity Grants** went to **Steven Alvarez**, University of Kentucky, Lexington, for his proposal, “Trans-linguaging Tareas: Mexican Immigrant Families Brokering Homework Literacies,” and **Sana Ansari**, Chicago Public Schools, Chicago, IL, for her proposal, “What Does College Prep Mean for Black Students?: Examining Ideologies and Academic Socialization.” **The CEE Research Initiative Grants** were awarded to **Deborah Bieler**, University of Delaware, Newark, for *Staying to Talk, Talking to Stay: A Study of the Relationships between Teacher/Student Talk and Teacher/Student Retention*; **Mollie V. Blackburn**, The Ohio State University, Columbus, for *Exploring the Teaching and Learning of LGBT-Themed Young Adult Literature in a Queer-Friendly High School*; **Ryan M. Rish**, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA, for *Students Producing Critical Digital Media: Leveraging Social Media to Address Social Issues*; and **Terri L. Rodriguez**, College of St. Benedict, St. Joseph, MN, for *Conceptions, Goals, and Practice of Socially Just English Education: Who Are We As Activist Allies?*