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Tough Talk: Books about Bullying

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Carpe Librum: Seize the (YA) Book

Tough Talk: Books about Bullying

At NCTE's Annual Convention in 2011, I attended a particularly powerful session titled "Stop the Bullying." The keynote speakers, combined with round-table discussions, presented a sound argument encouraging teachers to actively engage students in conversations around the subject of bullying. While some schools have moved to curriculum-centered approaches, researchers have found these so-called "bullying in a box" curricula to be an ineffective substitute for intentional, student-focused engagement strategies (Office of Justice Programs). This makes a strong case for the use of authentic and engaging texts, such as YA lit from a variety of appealing genres, such as fantasy, science fiction, and contemporary realistic fiction. It also suggests that the individual educator must invest in developing an anti-bullying approach unique to his or her classroom and not solely depend on a bullying in a box curriculum. To that end, I've sought out submissions that tackle the theme of bullying across several subgenres of young adult literature. The first review is a fantasy series called Song of the Lioness Quartet; the second text

is a contemporary realistic novel, *Empty*; and the final selection is the genre-blurring *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

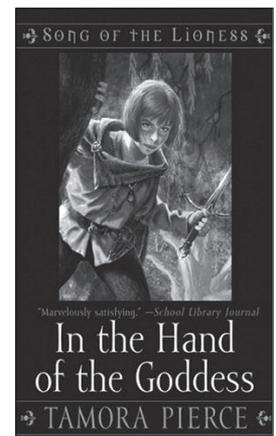
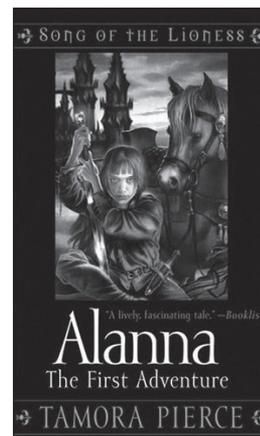
Song of the Lioness Quartet by Tamora Pierce

Reviewed by Jennifer Stuntz

The four stories in this series are titled *Alanna: The First Adventure*, *In the Hand of the Goddess*, *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man*, and *Lioness Rampant*. The books introduce a ten-year-old Alanna who copes with a patriarchal society that would have her receive training as a lady of the court, rather than becoming a knight. To achieve her goals, she hides her gender and appears as a boy so she can receive the necessary training to pass the trials of knighthood and become a hero, since all knights are considered heroic in this world. During the series, Alanna also endures the challenges of overcoming obstacles, which include being smaller than her peers, bullying, a dangerous enemy, and the choice to love.

Although the character of Alanna exists in a fictional and fantasy domain, her experiences

with bullying are highly relevant to teens today. On her first day of training, she is immediately targeted because she stands out against her fellow squires for having red hair and a smaller build. This scenario has played out for many young people on their first days of school, whether they have glasses, appear over- or underweight, or even dress differently from everyone else. Alanna also encounters the dilemma of having her friends stand up for her, which only serves to make the bully continue his actions in a less overt way. Thus, she must decide whether to confront her much larger aggressor (risking her safety) or complain to her teachers and possibly lose the respect of her peers. Ultimately, practicality and the knowledge that a knight would not back down from



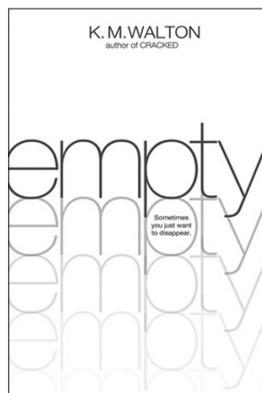
an obvious threat triumph over intimidation and fear.

For a YA reader, these books represent a strong female character to which I could relate. Even though Alanna is mainly decisive and confident, she also struggles with her personal fears of love and of her own magical and physical abilities. Rather than being a cold and mindless warrior who functions as a team of one, she seeks help and support from a reliable network of friends and confidants. While other heroes end their journey after they achieve their goal, Alanna pushes to learn and achieve more. Lastly, she demonstrates that sometimes the norms of society have to be pushed and/or challenged to achieve personal goals.

***Empty* by K. M. Walton**

Reviewed by Emilee Hussack

In two years, everything Adele Palmer knew to be stable in her life has fallen apart. Her father cheats on her mother and abandons her family, subsequently leading her mother and her baby sister to move into a cramped apartment. Simultaneously, her mother develops an addiction to prescription pills, and Adele (Dell) begins to binge eat



to fill the voids left by her absent father and numbed mother. When we meet Dell, she is struggling to hold onto the few treasures left in her life: her softball career and her best friend Cara. She sees both slipping away due to her weight and the brutal teasing she receives at the hands of the popular clique at her high school. A violent sexual encounter with her longtime crush further isolates Dell as rumors and untruths swirl out of control. Blaming herself for the attack and feeling silenced by the pressures of high school, Dell plummets into a dark depression of guilt and rejection. The novel escalates into a shockingly tragic third act, leaving the reader desperate to help anyone who has ever been bullied or ignored.

The reader can chart the devastating decline of Dell due to the cruelties of being teased and ignored; thus, the text is particularly powerful and effective. However, in parts, Dell's inner voice becomes wearisome, sometimes crossing a delicate line into overdramatic whining and teetering on superficiality. Nevertheless, Dell's narration does grant the reader access into the monologue of a stressed, traumatized young adult struggling with the common difficulties of obesity and a broken family, as well as the sorrows of rape and addiction.

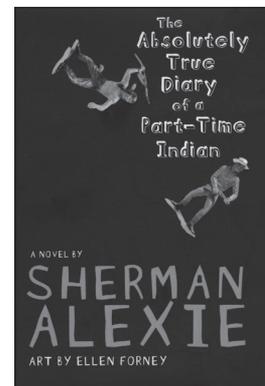
There are moments of forced vulgarity that push the novel into the upper levels of young adult fiction. As the novel progresses, the profanity increases, often in a meaningless way that, unfortunately, likely eliminates it from any school curriculum. Overall, the novel presents itself as a sounding board for rape, depression, and

bullying, stirring conversation through its realism. Critically, Walton engages the young adult voice of Dell in heart-wrenching encounters that, despite their tendency toward shallowness, spotlight true and present dangers.

***The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie**

Reviewed by Pauline Skowron Schmidt

Part memoir, part graphic novel, part humor, and part pure heart-break is the story of Arnold "Junior" Spirit. The first-person narration gives vivid details about what life is like for a teenager on an Indian reservation. Junior is bullied for not looking or acting like the other kids; his self-loathing voice compels the reader to learn more about this young man. The external conflict intensifies when Junior decides to attend the "white school" instead of the one on "the rez"; he is seen as someone who has rejected his culture and his home. What's worse is the internal conflict when Junior realizes he doesn't quite fit in at the white school, either; he expected to blend in based on intellectual ability but is isolated



because of his external qualities. He describes the dichotomy with a brilliant visual (on page 57) that illustrates the dual identities he inhabits: white and Indian.

Unfortunately, Junior is bullied in both worlds and struggles to define himself and come to terms with who he really is. He wonders about the possibilities his life may hold but also fears the obstacles he will face simply because he is an Indian. He is split between these two ideas: the paltry and miserable opportunities on “the rez” just seem to discourage him, yet

leaving and seeking out the great unknown is intimidating.

This text is rich in many ways and provides teachers with several topics and themes to discuss, yet the concept of the inner bully could be a powerful one to explore with students. The text is heart-breaking at times while humorous at others; adolescents will certainly enjoy the first-person narrative. Teachers could consider the theme of identity and defining yourself within the context of family, culture, high school, and society. 

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Pauline Skowron Schmidt is an assistant professor of English education at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. When she is not busy teaching and learning, she is reading YA literature. **Jennifer Stuntz** is a self-published author of an e-book and current freelance writer on several websites. Previously, she was a tutor and course assistant at the undergraduate level through SUNY Empire State College. **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.

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NCTE is seeking a new editor of *Language Arts*. In July 2016, the term of the present editors (Peggy Albers, Caitlin McMunn Dooley, Amy Seely Flint, Teri Holbrook, and Laura May) will end. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received **no later than August 29, 2014**. Letters should include the applicant’s vision for the journal and be accompanied by the applicant’s vita, one sample of published writing (article or chapter), and two letters specifying financial support from appropriate administrators at the applicant’s institution. Applicants are urged to explore with their administrators the feasibility of assuming the responsibilities of a journal editor. Classroom teachers are both eligible and encouraged to apply. Finalists will be interviewed at the NCTE Annual Convention in Washington, DC, in November 2014. The applicant appointed by the NCTE Executive Committee will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue in September 2016. The appointment is for five years. Applications should be submitted via email in PDF form to kaustin@ncte.org; please include “Language Arts Editor Application” in the subject line. Direct queries to Kurt Austin, NCTE Publications Director, at the email address above or call 217-328-3870, extension 3619.