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Voice in Verse: Four Outstanding Mentor Texts

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Carpe Librum: Seize the (YA) Book

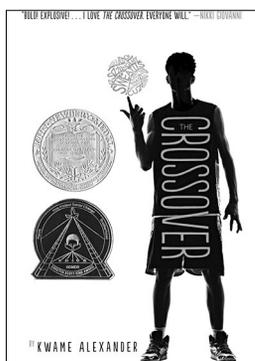
Voice in Verse: Four Outstanding Mentor Texts

One of the challenges English teachers face is engaging our students with literature that involves all of the senses. Poetry has the power to do that; moreover, it can serve as a mentor text as we encourage students to discover their own voices through writing. Ruth Culham suggests that for YA texts “to become true mentor texts, they must spark our writer’s curiosity and be studied for their techniques so we figure out how they can be applied to our own work to make it just as memorable” (44–45).

I’ve had the pleasure and honor to hear all four of these authors speak, and their memorable voices shine through the pages of these books. Students will delight in the words, the images, and the emotions poured into each of these amazing texts.

The Crossover by Kwame Alexander

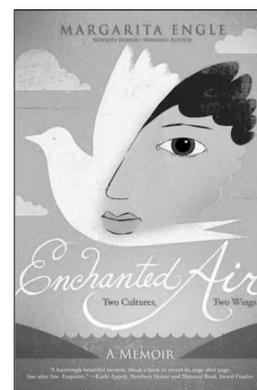
Told through a variety of poetic forms—free verse, conversation poems, and even “vocabulary poems”—Kwame Alexander’s *The Crossover* is the story of Josh Bell, basketball player extraordinaire.



This book is the winner of both the 2015 Newbery Medal and the 2015 Coretta Scott King Honor Award, and its beauty lies in its narrative. There is much to love about this story, including a plethora of topics to which students can connect: Josh and his brother experience sibling rivalry; their mother just happens to be their principal; they both like the same girl; and they both love their father.

The energetic cadence of the language will make readers want to read this aloud, maybe even chant the words. Students will recognize the art form of carefully chosen words and appreciate the clever basketball metaphors embedded in poems called “Basketball Rules.” For example, one of the last poems reads, “A loss is inevitable,/like snow in winter./ True champions/learn/to dance/ through/the storm” (Alexander 230). Words and phrases like this

are sure to inspire even the most reluctant reader.

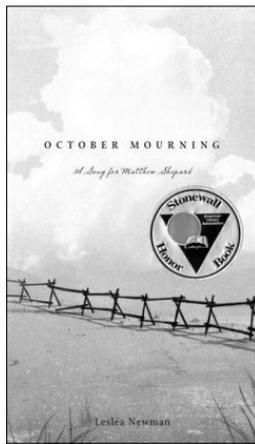


Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings: A Memoir by Margarita Engle

Exotic and elegant, *Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings: A Memoir* tells the story of young Margarita Engle who must leave Cuba to live in California just as the Bay of Pigs invasion is unfolding. This carefully crafted memoir vividly describes the beauty of Cuba, painting gorgeous images of tropical landscapes. Her words evoke the sights, smells, and tastes of this faraway land. Consequently, when she describes the smoggy air of Los Angeles, the sensory connections help readers understand the narrator’s homesickness.

As the conflict between Cuba and America grows, so does the anxiety of our young narrator.

She questions everything about her heritage, her future, and her self, “Two countries./Two families./Two sets of words” (Engle 13). Students will relate as they are surely grappling with similar questions themselves. Margarita finds solace in the written word and in various artistic expressions such as painting and drawing; readers can explore their own sources of peace while reading this beautiful narrative.

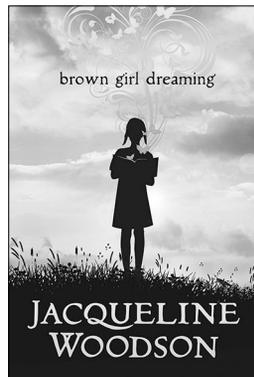


***October Mourning:
A Song for Matthew
Shepard* by Leslea Newman**

Leslea Newman was scheduled to speak at the University of Wyoming’s Gay Awareness week in October 1998, just days after Matthew Shepard’s brutal murder in Laramie, Wyoming. In the introduction of *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard*, she describes her connection to the incident and how it haunted her for years. Around the tenth anniversary of Matthew Shepard’s death, Newman started writing poems to attempt to make sense

of the tragedy. This book is a vividly imaginative rendering of that night; the collection of poems represent her interpretation of news stories, interviews, and courtroom testimony.

Each poem is crafted from a different perspective: the murderers, the fence, the armbands worn by students, the protestors, and even Matthew himself. These haunting poems evoke visceral responses when read individually; read as a collection, they are intimately and utterly heartbreaking. This text serves as a mentor text in two ways: first, it illustrates adopting perspectives outside of oneself; and second, it demonstrates how to take the harsh reality of our world and craft it into something inspiring and artistic.



***Brown Girl Dreaming*
by Jacqueline Woodson**

Another memoir told in verse, *Brown Girl Dreaming* is narrated from the perspective of young Jackie Woodson. Her poems depict life in the 1960s and 1970s in both the North and South, amid echoes of Jim Crow laws and the emerging

Civil Rights Movement. Woodson artfully weaves in elements of the era’s popular culture—hairstyles, apparel, bubblegum cigarettes, the Black Panthers, and even the music of Michael Jackson. Some of the poems are more serious than others as she explores family relationships, geography, being a Jehovah’s Witness, and the desperate search for her true identity.

She struggled with reading and reflects on the importance of listening, and she finally decided, “I’ll be a writer. I’ll be able to hold on to/each moment, each memory/everything” (Woodson 274). Fortunately, for us, she did grow up to be a writer. *Brown Girl Dreaming* is certainly worthy of all its accolades, which include the 2014 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature, a 2015 Newbery Honor, a 2015 Sibert Honor, the 2015 Coretta Scott King Award, and the 2015 Claudia Lewis Award for Older Readers. While technically categorized as a “middle grade” title, there is a richness of language that readers of all ages will appreciate. (5)

Works Cited

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Pauline Skowron Schmidt, a member of NCTE since 2003, is an assistant professor in English education at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. She teaches methods courses, general writing, and young adult literature, and she supervises student teachers. When she is not teaching, she is busy reading young adult literature books for this column. Email: pschmidt@wcupa.edu.