

Books That Will Get Them Talking

The books included in this column will engage your middle school students and allow for rich, meaningful talk in the classroom. Rosenblatt (1978) taught us so many years ago that comprehension really occurs when students interact with a text. Dialogue enables readers to deepen their understanding of a text and really think about the text in a meaningful way. Young adult novels can help us guide productive and academic discussions because the topics of young adult novels are of interest to young adolescents, and the characters in these novels struggle with the same issues adolescents in our schools encounter daily.

***Wish You Were Dead* by Todd Strasser.** Egmont, 2009. This mystery will keep the reader hooked from the first page to the end of the novel. An anonymous blogger wishes one of the popular girls who won't give her the time of day would die. The next day, the popular student disappears. Soon after, several other kids from the popular clique begin to disappear. Everyone in this affluent neighborhood is worried, especially Madison, the down-to-earth girl who is friends with all of those missing popular kids. When one of the kids is found dead near the high school, shockwaves travel through the school and prompt Madison to try to solve the mystery. The end of the novel reveals that a serial killer is responsible

for the kidnappings. What is even more shocking, however, is the killer is well known by all of the students. Strasser, the author of *Give a Boy a Gun* does not disappoint readers with this thriller. Reluctant readers will enjoy this book, particularly because Strasser intersperses realistic-looking blog entries throughout the text to help the reader solve the mystery.

***Refresh, Refresh* by Danica Novgorodoff, Benjamin Percy, and James Ponsoldt.** Roaring Press, 2009. This graphic novel first appeared as a short story by the same title. The story centers around three boys who live in a small Oregon town made even smaller because of the recent deployments to Iraq for the war. Unfortunately, Josh, Cody, and Gordon all are forced to grow up too quickly because their fathers are fighting in a war and their mothers are working extra jobs to make ends meet. When the boys are not taking their frustration out on one another boxing in the back yard, they are constantly checking their email (by hitting the refresh button over and over again) in hopes of hearing from their fathers. The story is fast paced, and will be a hit with boys who are reluctant readers. There is little text in the novel, and the illustrations are helpful in moving the plot along.

***All the Broken Pieces* by Ann E. Burg.** Scholastic Press, 2009. This young adult book is written in poetic form, making it a quick read; however, the quick read is powerful. Set in the Vietnam War period, the book explores the memories and emotions of Matt Pin, a young teenager whose mother is Vietnamese and father is American.

Matt has been adopted by an American family and must come to terms with why his Vietnamese mother sent him away to live in America and why his American father deserted them in Vietnam. Through visits to a counseling group for Vietnam War veterans, a team-building activity at a baseball practice, and learning to play the piano, Matt comes to understand himself, his past life in Vietnam, and the reason his mother sent him away.

***Along for the Ride* by Sarah Dessen.** Viking Juvenile, 2009. During the summer between high school and college, Auden (named after W. H. Auden because her parents are both professors) goes to live with her dad, her stepmother, and her new half-sister. When she arrives, she discovers a household where the newborn baby is taking all her stepmother's attention and where her dad spends all his time in his office writing a book, seemingly oblivious to the problems building around him. During this summer, Auden learns what it is like to allow yourself to have friends and to be friends, both with other girls and with a boy. But this is so much more than a teen romance book. Dessen always has her characters learn something about themselves, and this book is no exception. There is no explicit sex, no foul language—just a girl, who happens to be a teenager, learning about who she really is instead of just who her parents want her to be.

***The Sweetheart of Prosper County* by Jill S. Alexander.** Feiwel & Friends, 2009. Austin Gray wants to be the FFA (Future Farmers of America) Sweetheart and believes the only way she can do that is to raise an animal; however, in Austin's case, she asks her mother for a chicken for Christmas and gets just that and more. This tale is set in a Texas town where small town life includes a "No Jesus" Christmas parade complete with all the trimmings. Austin helps her mother run the family business—the hardware store in town. Austin's best friend is Mexican American; the boy down the street is a rich, spoiled bully;

the mayor would like to have a relationship with Austin's mother; and the local "voo-doo" man provides the chicken for Austin to raise and show in the fair. This book is funny at times, heart-breaking at other times, and painstakingly true to life in a small town. During this year when Austin is turning 15, she and her mother must work on their strained relationship and come to terms with a subject that is just not talked about—the death of Austin's father on a Christmas Eve several years ago.

***The Treasure Map of Boys* by E. Lockhart.** Delacorte Press, 2009. This is the third book of Ruby Oliver trying to figure out life in general, and relationships with boys in particular. In this novel, Ruby is a junior at Tate, a school attended by mostly privileged students. Ruby is far from privileged, does not live in a huge house like her friends, and has parents who don't make a lot of money but are very happy! Ruby is trying to get over the mistakes she has made in life, particularly the ones related to dating boys and making her girlfriends upset to the point of not speaking to her.

To help her solve these issues, she has the help of a psychiatrist named Dr. Z. Her junior year of high school begins with her entering the land of Noboyfriend. In her 37th week of not having a boyfriend, she decides she really likes Noel, her chemistry lab partner. Like so many other aspects of Ruby's life, though, this is complicated because the only friend she has left also has a crush on Noel. To try and figure all of these things out, Ruby makes a map of all her relationships, and slowly she begins to understand how complicated life can be. Girls will enjoy reading this book as it delves into many aspects of adolescent relationships.

Rich conversations sparked by an enjoyable novel will help our students grow and develop critical thinking skills. Talking enables students to learn about topics, and talking about the books they enjoy may increase their interest in reading!