

BOOKS TO GROW WITH NEWSLETTER: JUNE 2005

EDITOR'S NOTE

In this month's *Books to Grow With Newsletter*, I interview Amanda Shear, an urban high school teacher who believes in the power of books – and has designed her own degree in bibliotherapy to follow her belief. Amanda has used books with her high school students and with the teens she works with in the juvenile detention and probation systems.

DISTANCE LEARNING COURSE

From July 25- August 22, I am offering a non-credit workshop, to give some of us an expanded opportunity to explore choosing and using children's books to help kids, as well as topics of particular interest to participants. If you'd like to know more, please contact me for details at cherylcoon@lutrapress.com.

INTERVIEW WITH AMANDA SCHEAR

Cheryl: Hi Amanda, and welcome to the *Books to Grow With Newsletter*. Let's begin by telling folks about you, where you work and your background.

Amanda: I'm a high school teacher with the Cincinnati Public Schools, but I have also taught in the adult prison system and in the juvenile detention and probation systems. I hold a Masters in Secondary Education from Xavier University.

Cheryl: Have your studies included coursework on bibliotherapy or are you presently studying it?

Amanda: I am currently pursuing a degree in bibliotherapy through the Individualized Liberal and Professional Studies program at Antioch. Within that program, I will augment my knowledge of reading in the secondary classroom with additional training in adolescent psychology, counseling, adolescent literature and social work. I also intend to conduct my own research, as well as to observe bibliotherapy as it is used in the United Kingdom, where it is a well-recognized and widely used tool with a variety of populations, including students with disabilities, prisoners, mental health patients and the chronically and terminally ill.

Cheryl: Can you tell us about your students?

Amanda: Many of my students are academically behind their suburban peers both in the development of their abilities and in their exposure to college curricula. But they also face challenges in their lives outside my classroom. During this school year alone, my students have experienced: pregnancy, miscarriage, deaths of family and friends by violence (homicide, suicide), by accidents, and as a result of disease, incarceration, substance abuse, divorce, eating disorders, poverty, homelessness and chronic illness.

Cheryl: What led to your interest in using books to help teenagers?

As an English teacher, my primary concern is to help my students read well and to enjoy reading. To meet this objective, I've become a perpetual student in children's and young adult literature. As a result, over and over again I've seen students who believed that books had nothing to offer them become engaged with, then addicted to, and finally transformed by books that truly spoke to them.

Cheryl: Can you think of a specific example of a book or an issue where books helped?

Amanda: Sharon Draper's Tears of a Tiger once prompted a kind of memorial roundtable in one of my classes at Hillcrest Training School (a court-run residential treatment center for juveniles adjudicated "delinquent"). Discussion of a character's death and the responses of his friends in the story led several students in my class to share their own experiences with grief and loss. One student had held his best friend in his arms as he lay dying from a gunshot wound. He shared his memories of that experience, how he'd felt about it at the time, and how he felt about it sitting in class that day. Afterwards, he confided that it was the first time he'd really been able to talk about his friend's death and how good it had felt to share it with me and with the class.

Cheryl: Some people are uncomfortable with the level of candor that characterizes some current YA fiction. Do you have any feelings about that?

Amanda: I have found, in almost every case, the level of candor in YA fiction to be both appropriate and necessary. It is my strong belief that the level of discomfort it creates in adults stems from a general societal unwillingness to believe that adolescents experience important events and that they have important things to say about those events. There seems to be this generally accepted idea that because adolescence is such an ego-centric period of development that adolescents' self-expression is ego-centrally dramatic and therefore easily dismissed. I believe that, in general, adolescents aren't given enough credit for knowing themselves, or enough opportunities to be taken seriously as young adults. In the candor of YA fiction, they often find the respect and attention they may be unable to find elsewhere.

Cheryl: Are there topics you think deserve a good book but you've been unable to find?

Amanda: I still think that prison and the correction system are underrepresented, though authors like Jacqueline Woodson and Walter Dean Myers are certainly working to address that. I also find that literature for teens dealing with issues of gender and sexuality, both as questioning them and as 'dealing' with their friends or classmates who are questioning them, is scarce. In my city alone, there is a huge problem for students who identify themselves as gay/lesbian/transgender/bisexual – children have literally been stoned in their neighborhoods for this and while books won't solve that problem, I have found that exposure to a charged issue in literature is often the first step to breaking the code of silence around a 'hot' topic.

Cheryl: How do you find books for your students?

Amanda: I haunt bookstores and invest a ridiculous portion of my paycheck in my classroom library. I surf Amazon.com regularly to see who's publishing what. I attend at least one teachers' conference a year and spend time with the book vendors. Mostly, I read.

Cheryl: Are the other teachers in your school aware of bibliotherapy? Do they use it? Do you plan to share what you learn with them?

Amanda: I am very fortunate to work in a school with a very close staff. Although in general my colleagues were unaware of bibliotherapy before I began this degree program, my involvement has now catalyzed their awareness. They are incredibly supportive of my work, and I'm sure we'll share what I'm learning throughout the program.

Cheryl: Other thoughts or comments you'd like to share?

Amanda: I am excited about this research. I think bibliotherapy is an important tool for classroom teachers, and one probably many of us have been using informally for years. It is a joy, however, to be joining this larger community of researchers and practitioners to share experiences and understandings. Thank you.

THIS MONTH'S RECOMMENDED BOOKS

In addition to the books discussed below, I've just posted new book recommendations on the Lutra Press website at <http://www.lutrapress.com/idea/>.

Topic: Sleepovers
For: Preschool to 2nd Grade
Title: *Ben Over Night*, by Sarah Ellis, illustrated by Kim LaFave (Fitzhenry & Whiteside; 2005; 32 pages).
Synopsis: Strong colors and brightly outlined characters create an appealing background for this tale of a little boy, Ben, whose imagination allows him to do just about anything – except sleep over at his best friend's home. His parents' ideas don't work but then his sister comes up with a winning idea, by encouraging Ben to use his imagination once again to triumph over his worries. A nice addition to other recommended books about sleepovers.

Other books on this topic: *Arthur's First Sleepover, The Tapping Tale*

Topic: Fears
For: Preschool to 2nd Grade
Title: *Zoom!* by Diane Adams, illustrated by Kevin Luthardt. (Peachtree; 2005; unpaginated).
Synopsis: In a simple story with a kid-satisfying twist, a little boy is finally big enough to ride the rollercoaster with his dad, but he's not sure that he's ready. Dad convinces him to try it and it turns out to be his father who finds the ride more than he can handle! Zany and colorful illustrations with great facial expressions, this is a fun story told in rhyme.

Other books on this topic: *Harriet and the Rollercoaster*

Topic: Prejudice, being different
For: Grades 4-7
Title: *Project Mulberry* by Linda Sue Park (Clarion; 2005; 225 pages)
Synopsis: Julia Song, a 7th grader who is Korean-American, comes to live in a town in which her family is the only Korean family. She becomes friends with a neighbor, joins a school club and together with her new friend, devises a project for the state fair that involves silkworms. The only problem is that silkworms seem Korean to her and Julia wants to be 100% American. In the course of the project, Julia comes to recognize not only her mother's prejudices against African Americans but even her own reluctance to be identified as Korean. Entertaining and fast-moving, this story will also interest budding authors who may be intrigued by Park's technique of interspersing story with conversations between the main character and the author.

Other books on this topic: *The Jacket, The Rainbow Tulip*

If you have received this newsletter in error or do not wish to continue to receive it, please let me know at cherylcoon@lutrapress.com.