



# THE ALAN REVIEW

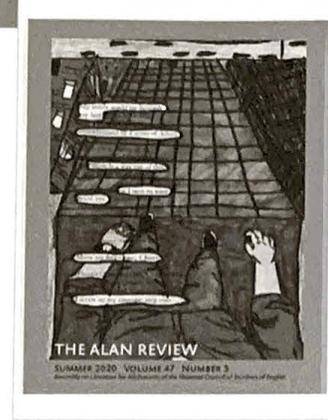
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## TEACHER TALK

Miriam **DesHarnais**  
Lisa M. **Barker**



# Life and Literature Beneath the Surface:

Using Neurodiverse Young Adult Literature as Mentor Texts for Narrative Writing

**A**dolescents' varied cognitive and mental health experiences are seldom reflected in the literature taught in middle and high schools. This disconnect between young people's lived experiences and the texts they are assigned creates a missed opportunity to expose students to compelling literary craft and to normalize conversations around neurodivergence and mental health. In this article, we define neurodiverse young adult literature (NYAL) and advocate for using NYAL as mentor texts in writing instruction. We align NYAL with narrative writing standards, outline an instructional sequence for utilizing texts, and offer resources for selecting NYAL.

## NYAL as Compelling Literary Craft

We define *neurodiverse young adult literature* (NYAL) as YAL featuring at least one adolescent character whose “neurocognitive functioning diverges from dominant societal norms” (Walker, 2014, para. 19). This divergence can be innate (e.g., autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), the result of a mental health condition (e.g., depression, anxiety disorder), and/or acquired through trauma (e.g., abuse, loss).

When capturing the inner life of neurodivergent characters, writers often make compelling, unconventional choices with structure, format, syntax, punctuation, and diction. Take, for example, these recent NYAL titles:

- *Long Way Down* (Reynolds, 2017) chronicles, in verse, how Will navigates the news of his brother's murder. Poems in the novel use metaphor, enjamb-

ment, spacing, and dialectical shifts to capture Will's cognitive experiences resulting from post-traumatic stress.

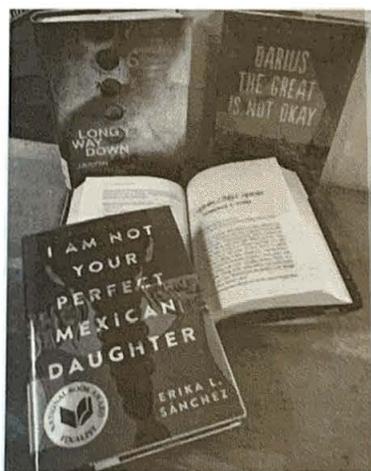
- *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (Sánchez, 2017), contains precise sensory language to convey the experiences of Julia, a Latina teenager with depression, who struggles with extreme sensitivity and feeling controlled by others, sometimes to the point of suicidality.
- In the short story, “Captain, My Captain” (Stork, 2018), Alberto is a multilingual immigrant with an unspecified mental health condition. His stressors (grief, displacement, poverty, fear of his sister's boyfriend) manifest in the voice of Captain America, whose dialogue—accessible only to Alberto (suggesting schizophrenia)—appears to the reader via indented paragraphs beginning with em dashes. Other dialogue is formatted conventionally (new paragraphs for each speaker, quotation marks). These varying approaches to formatting dialogue help readers see Alberto's disorientation and neurodivergence, and are nested in third-person point of view (POV), which separates readers from the characters, unlike much of YAL, which is often written in first-person POV.
- In *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* (Khorram, 2018), protagonist Darius experiences depression through self-consciousness that he is not a “True Persian” and fear that he is unimportant to those he loves. Despite tackling serious questions around mental illness, medication, and masculinity, Khorram makes Darius accessible and humorous through

his *Star Trek* lexicon and commentary on cultural customs, food, and tea.

This nuanced characterization of Will, Julia, Alberto, and Darius can validate teen readers, either reflecting their own experiences as members of under-represented groups or helping expand their empathy toward others.

## Incorporating NYAL in the Classroom

Given the range of techniques writers use to characterize neurodivergent adolescents' inner lives, NYAL makes good *mentor texts*, offering students compelling examples of stylistic choices to try out in their own storytelling (Gallagher, 2011).



Suggested neurodiverse young adult literature

### NYAL in Whole-Class Discussion

Gallagher (2011) argued that effective writing instruction includes authentic mentor texts alongside “real-world writing purposes,” teacher modeling, emulation exercises, and ample time allotment (p. 21). We propose adding *teacher-facilitated whole-class discussion* to this formula, especially when using NYAL as mentor texts. In this discussion format, students build on each other’s ideas to deepen understanding of a text and to practice speaking and listening skills (Parker & Hess, 2001). The teacher plays an essential role, preceding discussion with small-group conversations and explicit norms for engagement (Barker, 2015). Such norms may introduce terminology related to neurodivergence and mental illness, dismantle

distancing or pejorative language, share statistics to fortify understanding of the prevalence and nature of these experiences, and establish an expectation that it is okay to ask questions, okay to make mistakes, and essential that we honor everyone’s humanity.

During discussion, teachers use talk moves to engage students as sense-makers (“Say more about what you mean.”), or to orient students to the text (“What in the text makes you think that?”), each other (“What do we hear X saying?”), or to the discipline (Reisman et al., 2018). This last move—orienting students to the practices of interpreting literature—is hard to enact in the moment as a discussion unfolds. Figure 1 gives sample discussion questions for orienting students to writing craft in NYAL mentor texts. We align these questions and texts with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which outline five sub-standards (A–E) under an overarching standard for writing “narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). The more teachers can “articulate the relationship between . . . pedagogy and state standards,” the closer they get to “having an ‘administrator-proof’ rationale” for adopting new readings (Dover, 2015, p. 87), so we offer Figure 1 to support teachers in making the case for including NYAL in writing instruction.

### An Instructional Sequence for Utilizing NYAL

To illustrate what it looks like to use these activities and practices alongside NYAL mentor texts for narrative writing, below is an instructional sequence inspired by Gallagher’s (2011) formula and by our beliefs in the power of norm-setting, discussion, and accessing students’ assets as resources in learning.

1. **Student independent writing that accesses personal assets.** Invite students to write about a personal or imagined experience that connects to the content or craft in the mentor text. For example, students could describe a setting that evokes complicated feelings, or write a dialogue between two family members. Starting the sequence with independent writing lets students settle into class, focus their energy, and draft some writing ideas that they can later “play” with when applying writing techniques. The writing prompt can also access

CCSS for Narrative Writing	NYAL Mentor Text	Discussion Questions
<p><b>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.A</b> Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation; establishing one or multiple point(s) of view and introducing a narrator and/or character; and creating a smooth progression of experiences or events.</p>	<p><i>Turtles All the Way Down</i> (Green, 2017); #ownvoices for obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) <i>Aza, 16, has severe OCD that isolates her from others, even as she investigates a mystery, tries to be a better friend, and has her first relationship.</i> “At the time I first realized I might be fictional, my weekdays were spent at a publicly funded institution on the north side of Indianapolis called White River High School, where I was required to eat lunch at a particular time—between 12:37 P.M. and 1:14 P.M.—by forces so much larger than myself that I couldn’t even begin to identify them. If those forces had given me a different lunch period, or if the tablemates who helped author my fate had chosen a different topic of conversation that September day, I would’ve met a different end—or at least a different middle.” (Green, 2017, p. 1)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did you think of how the story begins?</li> <li>• What reading strategies did you use to make sense of the beginning of the story?</li> <li>• Why might the author have chosen this point of view (POV)? How would the story be different if the POV were changed?</li> <li>• How do you feel about the character(s), and why?</li> </ul>
<p><b>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B</b> Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.</p>	<p><i>Queens of Geek</i> (Wilde, 2017); #ownvoices for Asperger’s, anxiety <i>Taylor, recently diagnosed with Asperger’s, is at “SupaCon,” a fan convention, in this rom-com featuring three friends. Here, she helps another attendee through a panic attack:</i> “I count to five again. We repeat this a few more times until her tears have stopped and her breathing has relaxed. Brianna like this, so vulnerable and fragile, seems so different from the girl I met the day before. Yesterday, Brianna had a few nerves, but overall she was confident, cheery, outgoing. Hell, she strutted along the stage, twirled, and took a bow. And now she’s sitting on a toilet, having a panic attack, and crying to a virtual stranger . . . Maybe it’s not just me. Maybe everyone is just on edge as I am.” (Wilde, 2017, pp. 203–204)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What descriptions stuck with you, and why might the author have wanted you to attend to this object/person?</li> <li>• How does the story use or break writing “rules”? Why might the author have made these choices?</li> </ul>
<p><b>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.C</b> Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole.</p>	<p><i>The First Part Last</i> (Johnson, 2003) <i>With chapters alternating titles between “Then” and “Now,” this non-linear story introduces Bobby, a teen father, and his girlfriend, Nia. This sequencing technique helps readers feel how Bobby experiences loss and the birth of his daughter.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What mood or feeling did this story give you, and in which parts?</li> <li>• How is the story sequenced, and why do you think the author made those choices?</li> </ul>
<p><b>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D</b> Use precise words and phrases, using details and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.</p>	<p><i>The Truth Is</i> (Ramos, 2019) <i>After her best friend is shot by a white supremacist, 15-year-old Verdad experiences disassociation and hears voices.</i> “The trees are like lightning planted in the ground. The stones welcome me, sinking under my feet, as I walk up to the headstones. . . . I make my way past a grave laden with potted yellow mums, buttery candle wax bubbled down the sides of the tombstone. Blanca’s grave is clean, well-kept, but empty. The smoke of burning brush wafts past me as I sit and hug my knees.” (Ramos, 2019, p. 105)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What passages stayed with you, and why?</li> <li>• What mood or feeling did the setting give you, and why?</li> <li>• How would you describe the character(s), and why?</li> </ul>
<p><b>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.E</b> Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.</p>	<p>“A Curse, a Kindness” (Duyvis, 2018); #ownvoices for autism <i>This fanciful short story features two teen girls—one of whom is autistic and cursed with supernatural wish-granting powers—falling for each other after they are bound by an act of kindness. These final sentences set the reader up to feel satisfied and confident in an off-page happy ending, despite the characters themselves no longer remembering their past together:</i> “Mia stands there for a few moments, not knowing whether to follow her earlier instinct to leave, or to pounce on the opening like she’s itching to do. Her mom and grandmother do always say Mia should make more friends. And the girl looks lonely. Like maybe she could use some kindness.” (Duyvis, 2018, p. 303)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did the ending make you feel and why?</li> </ul>

Figure 1. NYAL and Discussion Questions Aligned to CCSS for Narrative Writing

“students’ cultural, religious, family, intellectual, and personal experiences and resources for use in instruction”—a high-leverage instructional practice (TeachingWorks, 2010). When designing this writing prompt, consider: What is the author of the mentor text doing in their writing that you would like students to practice later?

2. **Partner story sharing.** Invite students to share their stories in partners by reading aloud or by telling the story from memory. After independent writing, writers want an immediate audience for talking through their ideas and getting feedback. Talking through writing ideas is an authentic practice in writing communities, and an engaging way to honor students’ writing, bridge their stories with other academic tasks, and encourage student participation in other talk formats, such as whole-class discussion. Moreover, the use of writing talk can be “particularly supportive during the teaching of writing with African American students” in urban middle schools (Alston, 2010, p. iv).
3. **Whole-class sharing of a few stories.** Invite student volunteers to share aloud their stories. Hearing stories celebrates students’ narrative skills, gives students practice speaking and listening, fills the classroom with emotional connections, and may help students feel more courageous about reading aloud in the future.
4. **Teacher talk to orient students to mentor text with enthusiasm, context, and norms.** Provide a verbal segue between students’ storytelling activities and the mentor text. Acknowledge students’ contributions so far, distribute the mentor text, and give context you want to provide about this new story. To preserve emotional safety and encourage creative risk-taking, establish norms for talking about the text, characters, and neurodivergence depicted.
5. **Read aloud all or part of excerpt.** Experiencing a text communally can help set the tone for a literary work and garner student engagement. Invite student volunteers to read aloud, read aloud yourself, or use an audio version.
6. **Teacher talk to transition students to independent reading with an annotation task.** Provide a verbal segue between communal and independent reading. Give an authentic, open-ended annotation task, such as underlining lines that stand out (because they are confusing, interesting, etc.), and writing questions and thoughts in the margins. Focus this annotation task on the big picture—meaning and feeling—rather than on reading to “hunt” for particular devices, so that students read authentically and enthusiastically and feel that their perspectives are valued, even if they do not yet know complex terminology.
7. **Student independent reading and annotation.** Ask students to read and annotate during class or for homework.
8. **Small-group unstructured talk.** Let students discuss their questions and striking lines in partners or small groups.
9. **Teacher-facilitated, whole-class discussion.** Transition students back to a full group, ideally in a circle so students can see and hear each other. Give labelled praise about the small-group talk that aligns with the norms you set earlier (e.g., “Great job using person-first language.”). Launch the discussion by asking students what struck them, and why. Let discussion unfold organically for several minutes as students guide the conversation into pastures they care about. Note which parts of the text and which aspects of craft students attend to, and which of your non-negotiables you need to orient students toward through questions, such as those proposed in Figure 1.
10. **Teacher talk and class brainstorming.** Connect the targeted techniques in the mentor text to students’ own writing. For example, in a lesson on metaphors, you might say: “Reynolds used a tooth—something everyone has an experience with—as a metaphor for a close family member. What other objects or things do you think would make good metaphors because most people have experiences with them?” List students’ ideas in an anchor chart.
11. **Student independent writing.** Let students try out one or more aspects of craft utilized in the mentor text in a piece of their own writing. This independent practice can be preceded by additional scaffolding, such as modeling how you do this work in your own writing and guided practice in partners using a sample scenario.

## Considerations for Selecting NYAL

There are many resources for locating and evaluating NYAL. Hart's (2019) bibliography curates YAL on mental health, body image, and learning challenges. Jensen (2018) edited a standout nonfiction mental health anthology. Vanderbilt University's Iris Center offers a free "Portrayals of People with Disabilities"

database of children's literature and YAL (Iris Center, 2019). Stratman's (2016) anthology includes teaching suggestions for several neurodiverse titles. Richmond's (2019) book on mental illness in YAL is comprehensive.

Once teachers have a NYAL title in mind, they can further evaluate the merit of adopting a text by asking the following questions:

*Who is writing?*

Researching authorship is an important step in text selection. Look for texts that are #ownvoices, a term coined by author and

*Disability in Kidlit* blog co-founder Corinne Duyvis to describe texts featuring "diverse characters written by authors from that same diverse group" (Duyvis, n.d.).

*Are depictions of neurodivergence nuanced and culturally varied?* No form of neurodivergence is a monolith; beware of texts that essentialize mental health conditions or experiences. Seek culturally varied texts. Some of the most powerful recent NYAL is by authors from historically underrepresented groups. With *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017), author Erika L. Sánchez sought to destigmatize depression and start conversations about high suicide rates among young Latinas (Ladish, 2018). *The Truth Is* (Ramos, 2019) and *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* (Khorram, 2018) feature protagonists navigating intersectional cultural and LGBTQAI+ identities.

*Are there offensive stereotypes/tropes/inaccuracies?* Read professional reviews and seek out critiques on blogs and social media that assess representation

in children's literature. *Disability in Kidlit's* (n.d.) archives are invaluable, as are #ownvoices reviews of disability-related YAL; they both zero in on harmful tropes, such as lovers as rescuers. For older titles (including those lauded when published), check for responses from current readers. Even if you feel confident about a book's depiction of neurodivergent characters, wider responses from all kinds of readers can highlight issues with *other* types of representation.

What approaches to literary craft (e.g., theme, figurative language) and convention (e.g., syntax) does the author use? How do these choices align with CCSS or other goals for student learning? Which of these stylistic devices are used to capture neurodivergence or mental health?

## Conclusion

Tomlinson (2017), writing about the "iceberg theory" of teaching, shared a student teacher's reflection on the importance of learning about and leveraging students' whole selves:

[I]f I think I'm preparing lessons for the faces in front of me, I'm making a costly mistake. My students live beneath the surface, and I have to do whatever I can to see beneath that surface so I am prepared to reach them where they live. (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 89)

In this spirit of honoring students' complex inner lives "beneath the surface," we encourage teachers to provide spaces for connecting students with high-quality, engaging texts featuring neurodivergent YA characters.

Selecting a powerful mentor text is only one step in inspiring adolescents' writing. Effective writing instruction also includes authentic writing tasks, norms, modeling, discussion, and playful writing exercises. Despite the complexity of choreographing and facilitating writing instruction, teachers may find that by using NYAL that combines visceral emotion and formal strength, a surprising amount of instructional heavy lifting has already been done.

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