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Navigating the Reality of School Shootings with Adolescents Through Middle Grade Novels

Short Title: School Shootings Through Fictional Middle Grade Novels

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Navigating the Reality of School Shootings with Adolescents

Through Middle Grade Novels

Abstract

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Personally and professionally, the author shares experiences with school safety and how the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom may utilize middle grade novels to address gun violence with adolescents. Highlighting five middle grade novels that address school shootings—Katherine Erskine's (2011) *Mockingbird*, Emily Barth Isler's (2021) *Aftermath*, J. S. Puller's (2022) *The Lost Things Club*, Jasmine Warga's (2022) *The Shape of Thunder*, and Erin Bow's (2023) *Simon Sort of Says*, this discussion provides ELA teachers and stakeholders with before, during, and after reading prompts to facilitate students' engagement with the topic through ELA tasks that support critical thinking and open dialogue.

Introduction

When writing about school shootings, I know the professional titles I typically wear within the field of English Language Arts—Literacy Researcher and Teacher Educator—fall away to my most important titles: Mom and Teacher. I live in Oxford, Michigan where we suffered a mass shooting in our high school on November 30, 2021. Although my children were in grades kindergarten, 4, and 7 at the time, my niece was in an eleventh-grade physics class, in a hallway where the shooting occurred. Flying to the Literacy Research Association's conference while four adolescents were murdered and seven victims were shot—six adolescents and one teacher—I learned of the chaos through a storm of text messages that overtook my phone once the airplane landed. My world, especially as a mother and teacher, shattered.

At the moment of this writing per Riedman's (2024) kindergarten to grade 12 School Shooting Database, there have been 2,916 incidents since 1966 with 2,347 victims wounded, 843 victims murdered, and 1,095 deaths. Personally and professionally, it sickened me to update the increase of these numbers throughout this manuscript's development. They are not numbers. Those numbers include children and adolescents and teachers. Each number is a person.

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Although gun control is an important topic, the focus of this discussion is on gun violence, and I took to heart Peterson and Densely's (2021) and Schumann's (2021) urge to engage with dialogue and act against gun violence. To teach through the pain, I turned to middle grade (MG) novels to connect with characters who could help me understand and process the pain. MG fiction is a category for children's literature written and marketed for eight to twelve year olds whereas the young adult (YA) category for adolescent literature is written and marketed for readers who are twelve to eighteen years old (Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, 2024). Although I found YA adolescent literature too raw for my fragile heart, I discovered MG novels could support my three children, the preservice teachers I teach, and myself through the process of healing, living, and teaching in a world where gun violence is a reality.

Theoretical Framework

This work was guided by two theories about how readers respond to text: critical reader response and text world theory. As Blake (1998) noted, "A critical model of reader response to literature is based primarily on the notion that through a certain ideology or stance one can look 'critically' at a text's or an author's assumptions and perspectives" (p. 239). Text world theory, a cognitive discourse grammar created by Werth (1999), provides a lens for literary analysis to explore how readers and writers engage in and create "mental configurations of fictional worlds" (Giovanelli, 2018, p. 185) as "human beings with mental resources (such as knowledge, experiences, motivations, beliefs, hopes and so on), which have a crucial influence upon the text-worlds they create" (Whitely, 2011, pp. 24–25).

When readers read through a critical reader response, they aim to read with an unwillingness to be swayed by text without contemplating their own reading of the world and

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being moved to action (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Readers need to question content actively and not accept information they read passively (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). This critical stance enhances Rosenblatt's (1938, 1995) reader response theory. Rosenblatt (1982, 2004) argued a reader's purpose and interest motivate the reader's transaction with the text along a continuum of efferent to aesthetic stances. Although no reading experience is entirely factual (efferent) or emotional (aesthetic), readers do "make choices about their thinking, focusing on both stances and sometimes more on one than the other" (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 52). When engaging in critical reader response, readers may first choose to read the facts to share information, but, ideally, those facts evolve into an emotional response that motivates conversation. "The aesthetic experiential component" of engaging with texts is "the very thing that should jolt learners into conversation with one another, via literary texts, about life issues and how to build a better way of life for oneself and for others" (Vytniorgu, 2018, p. 40).

Similarly, text world theory emphasizes how readers and authors create discourse or conversational worlds through which the author speaks through writing and the reader listens through reading (Gavins, 2007). Such conversation and discussion are key as readers make comparisons between their own lived worlds and the text worlds they visualize as they read (Beach, 2000; Galda & Beach, 2001; Lewis, 2000). Engagement with texts allows readers to live vicariously through characters' experiences while comparing fictional scenarios to their real-world contexts. Bickmore et al. (2019) stated:

> We believe that vicarious experience is the smoothest, least painful way to learn important lessons [about gun violence]. Nevertheless, too many students and teachers in America are having real experiences. They lose friends, relatives, and mentors. They

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> suffer post traumatic stress syndrome and when they speak up about the issues that are important to them, they are often ridiculed. (p. xi)

Through MG novels, students can speak up and advocate for safety before, during, and after their reading.

I argue that using MG novels, although seemingly simplistic for many adolescents and adults, is one way to handle the topic gently for readers in a way that leads into the discussion about gun violence with those who have and those who have not experienced such trauma. Similar to Shaffer et al. (2019), I provide prompts for before, during, and after reading each book to facilitate discussion through the use of pedagogical strategies designed to support students' engagement with these MG novels. As they read, students contemplate the fictional worlds they imagine and think critically about how those fictional worlds impact their real-world contexts. Through the suggested freewrites, discussions, and creations, students can reflect upon, respond to, or push back on what is presented within the books.

Gun Violence in Middle Grade Novels

Through this review of five MG novels that address school shootings, I aim to offer recommendations for stakeholders, especially those who have been trained in threat assessment protocol (Cornell, 2018), to engage with adolescents about school safety before, during, and after reading through discussion and instruction. As Shaffer et al. (2019) argued, the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom is a strong context from which educators may contend with gun violence, especially through high-quality literature that requires students to think critically. Emphatically, I argue ELA teachers cannot do this work alone. Teachers, school counselors,

families, and other stakeholders must collaborate in delivering such content as reading these MG novels may be difficult for students to process within and outside of school.

Instructional Design: Big Ideas and Essential Questions

Like Shaffer et al. (2019), I used Wiggins and McTighe's (2008) curricular design focused on Big Ideas and Essential Questions to detail one way to use these MG novels individually or within a unit plan. To align my work with my theoretical framework, I centered the Unit Big Ideas and Essential Questions within critical reader response and text world theory. See Table 1.

As detailed in Table 1, the first Unit Big Idea connects with text world theory to help students engage with the text world the authors create. Unit Big Idea 2 emphasizes both theories as students need to engage with text worlds through a critical lens to connect their real-world experiences with fictional scenarios. Similarly, Essential Questions 1 and 3 emphasize text world theory as students connect text worlds with real-world contexts, living vicariously through fictional characters and learning from characters' experiences, choices, and actions. Essential Question 2 focuses on critical reader response as students reflect on the power inherent in discussing the challenging topic of gun violence. I encourage teachers to add their own big ideas, essential questions, and before/during/after reading prompts (see examples of such prompts in the following five tables) that align to their learning communities' needs. To encompass the big ideas and essential questions, each of the following novels is summarized and expanded to include prompts designed to facilitate student discussion.

***Mockingbird* by Kathryn Erskine (2011)**

Marketed for grades 5–6, *Mockingbird* details Caitlin's story in first-person narration. As a ten-year-old child with Asperger's Syndrome, Caitlin experiences her last year in elementary

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school. Next year, she will begin at the middle school where gun violence occurred. Caitlin's small-town community is healing after two students opened fire, killing a teacher and two students, one of which was Caitlin's brother. One shooter was killed by police and the other was arrested.

Living at home with her grief-stricken father who lost his wife when Caitlin was young and now his son, Caitlin is struggling with how to connect with her father and help both of them move forward. From her viewpoint, the world is black and white, and it is hard for her to navigate others' emotions. Caitlin's year is filled with learning to understand feelings, demonstrate empathy, and engage in friendship. Through daily counseling appointments at school, she is encouraged to show more emotion and empathy, but it is not until she reads the definition for closure that she begins to understand how she can demonstrate the empathy she does feel. Working on a project with her father, she begins to understand how hope helps both of them to move on with such pain.

Authors craft such books often in response to their own experiences as was the case for Erskine:

> When I wrote *Mockingbird*, I naively thought that the Virginia Tech shootings (which spurred the book's theme) would end mass shootings at schools and universities because how could we not stop them after such a heinous event? Sadly, it continues. (K. Erskine, personal communication, February 25, 2023)

Erskine hoped readers would gain layers of meaning from reading her book. To help unpack such layers of meaning, Table 2 details tasks I believe are useful for working with students before, during, and after their reading of *Mockingbird*. Through such prompts, teachers may lead

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students through discussions about Erskine's book to explore the journey of empathy through such trauma.

***Aftermath* by Emily Barth Isler (2021)**

Marketed for grades 5–8, *Aftermath* is a first-person, point-of-view story about twelve-year-old Lucy who moves to a small-town community in which students in her grade level experienced a school shooting. Because of her own grief of losing her younger brother, Theo, due to a heart defect, some of her emotions mirror the pain her peers feel from the trauma they faced four years prior.

Math is Lucy's subject of choice, but the challenges that circulate all around her do not have easy solutions. Although Lucy's family hoped for a fresh start, the process of fitting into a new school leaves her feeling lost. As she struggles to face her brother's death and her family's grief, Lucy tries to make new friends, especially after joining an after-school mime class. Her connections with Avery, whose step-brother was the shooter, unfolds. Overall, Lucy learns that people face trauma and grief in different ways, all of which require kindness from others.

In an interview with Pla (2022), Isler shared that her novel connected to two life experiences: (a) the death of a friend's five-year-old child due to a heart condition, and (b) the media coverage of mass shootings in the United States of America. To deal with the pain, she turned to writing:

> All of this loss and pain felt so incredibly large, and yet none of it was happening directly to me. I felt lucky and guilty and sad and helpless. The only thing I could think to do about it was to write, and what began as a self-soothing exercise quickly became something I felt might be helpful to other people, too. (Pla, 2022, n.p.)

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Table 3 details ELA experiences stakeholders may find useful for engaging students before, during, and after their reading of *Aftermath*.

***The Shape of Thunder* by Jasmine Warga (2022)**

The *Shape of Thunder* is marketed for grades 3–7. In this dual point-of-view MG novel, neighbors and best friends, Cora and Quinn, experience opposite ends of the trauma inherent in a school shooting. Cora's sister, Mabel, was murdered by Quinn's brother, Parker. On Cora's twelfth birthday, Quinn reaches out to her, longing for the same wish Cora holds in her heart: turn back time and help the shooter before his choice shatters lives.

Focused on time travel, the girls attempt to open a wormhole, an act they firmly believe is possible. They want nothing more than to help Quinn's brother before he feels there is no other option than to resort to gun violence. They discover healing as they begin to accept there is no changing the past. They must take steps forward to help themselves and others.

Warga's idea for writing *The Shape of Thunder* stemmed from having to explain to her oldest daughter why there would be lockdown drills in her elementary school (Umesi, 2021). Warga's experience reminds me of a moment with my oldest daughter when she was eight years old. On Valentine's Day in 2018, I tucked her into bed after we heard of the shooting that occurred at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida where 17 people were murdered and 17 other people were injured. With huge tears in her eyes, DeLainey asked me, "Mommy, are you afraid to go to school?"

Some questions do not have answers.

As a parent and teacher, I relate to Warga's comment, which bores deep into my heart: "I didn't have the emotional vocabulary to express how sad I was that this is the world our children are living in" (Umesi, 2021, n.p.). From this pain, the idea of her novel took hold. Table 4

provides suggestions for how teachers and families may wish to support students through their reading of *The Shape of Thunder*.

***The Lost Things Club* by J. S. Puller (2022)**

Marketed for grades 3–7, *The Lost Things Club* is told through twelve-year-old Leah's perspective using first person point of view. Leah spends the summer with her eight-year-old cousin, TJ, who has not spoken since surviving a school shooting in his elementary classroom. Through a group of friends, TJ rediscovers his voice as they create a world called The Land of Lost Things using lost socks turned into puppets at a laundromat.

Following TJ to the laundromat, Lucy and her friend, Violet, learn of TJ's friend, Michelle, who helps him find lost things in the driers. Michelle pretends there is a secret dimension called The Land of Lost Things, but the twelve-year-old girls learn that TJ really believes this land exists. This motivates TJ to break his silence while at the laundromat. To keep him talking, the girls begin filming plays using sock puppets that they upload to YouTube. The group helps TJ understand the past cannot be changed; this awareness helps TJ to take steps toward healing.

Asked during an interview about how she came up with the idea for her novel, J. S. Puller stated the following:

> As a communications specialist at the…UChicago Consortium…one of my primary duties is monitoring media…any time there's a school shooting…I'm inevitably the first person in the office to know…I needed to try to make sense out of what happened. Obviously, I couldn't. No one could…Maybe we're not supposed to make sense out of it. Maybe it's the human inclination, instead, to find *hope* out of it. (CBETHM, 2022, n.p.)

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Hope is inherent in this novel and students may explore this topic and others through the ELA tasks detailed in Table 5.

***Simon Sort of Says* by Erin Bow (2023)**

Awarded a Newbery Honor, *Simon Sort of Says* is marketed for grades 3–7. Told in first person, this novel connects readers to twelve-year-old Simon O'Keeffe who moves to Grin and Bear It, Nebraska with his parents because it is the only American town with no access to Internet. It has been two years since he survived his fifth-grade classroom's school shooting. The lone survivor, he faces countless challenges. Luckily, he meets Agate, an impressive secondary character with Autism who helps Simon through his pain.

With a dad who is a Catholic deacon and a mother who is an undertaker, Simon begins finding his place in their new community. Facing survivor's guilt and grief secretly, he builds relationships with Agate and Kevin. They commit to faking a mission from aliens to give the local scientists the shock they need through their Large Radio Telescope. Ultimately, Simon learns to share his past to help his healing process.

As a reader and a teacher, I cannot fully comprehend how Bow used humor so well in addressing such a heavy topic. Bow stated, "I know this kind of humor isn't for everyone, but I have always used lightness and humor to pull myself, my kids and my readers through dark places. That's what I hope this book can be: a light" (Dumpleton, 2023, n.p.).

As a mom, I am grateful for the humor inherent in Bow's book, which proved to be a source of healing for our family. My oldest daughter and I listened to the audiobook for about two months, laughing, crying, and, most importantly, engaging in rich conversation. Bow's book created space for us to talk, reflect, and learn. Table 6 provides a few suggestions for engaging

with the novel, some prompts my daughter and I organically explored through our car-ride conversations.

Slaying Metaphorical Dragons Through Engaged Discussion

"Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten." ~Neil Gaiman, 2002, Epigraph

While presenting on this discussion's topic to an audience of literacy educators and researchers at the Young Adult Literature Summit in 2023 (DeFauw & Bow, 2023), Bow shared Gaiman's (2002) quote to highlight how the metaphor of slaying dragons through fictional literature helps readers consider how to face the metaphorical dragons they experience in reality. Admittedly, I love this notion that teachers and students have the control to remove all metaphorical dragons' destructive power; however, the reality of a mass shooting feels entirely out of control. Yet, within a school context, teachers, students, administrators, families, and all stakeholders must do all that can be done to keep students safe, inside and outside of the ELA classroom. My hope is that students benefit from rich ELA experiences with high-quality literature and stakeholders who slay dragons through threat assessments (Cornell, n.d.; University of Virginia, 2023).

The details encompassing threat assessment go beyond the scope of this discussion. First and foremost, threat assessment is not an ELA teacher's responsibility. Because I experienced threat assessment training, I feel empowered as an ELA teacher to know how to *report* any concerns I may have about students, but I do not know how to carry out a threat assessment. Threat assessment is a team endeavor. I have learned there are so many points in which prevention can occur before violence is chosen, prevention that is orchestrated through a threat assessment team (Cornell, 2018). I fervently believe stakeholders are not always helpless before

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such a tragedy occurs. Table 7 provides additional details about threat assessment for interested readers, details I learned after my community experienced a mass shooting.

Another way I believe stakeholders slay metaphorical dragons is through open dialogue about the sensitivities, experiences, and concerns inherent in gun violence. As one of those stakeholders, ELA teachers may choose to facilitate discussions about gun violence evident in MG novels. Such novels provide stakeholders a means for discussing the topic gently but firmly to help those who could be hurt by and those that could cause hurt with gun violence. Although the number of students helped through teaching about gun violence within the ELA classroom context will never be quantified, I strongly believe ELA teachers are positioned well to create a learning community of open dialogue and reflection about such a sensitive topic. I argue ELA content opens opportunities for educators to know students' hearts in a way that no other subject provides.

Granted, censorship is its own dragon. The topic of gun violence is a challenge with which teachers and stakeholders battle, but students have the right to read about topics pertinent to their lives (National Council of Teachers of English, 2018). Like Skerrett and Smagorinsky (2023) stated, I believe stakeholders must "position the teacher as the orchestrator of student activity through which teachers inquire into topics that matter in a contentious world without imposing their personal political views on students, whose task is to construct a worldview of their own" (p. 4).

As students share their stories and experiences through various engagements in the ELA classrooms, my hope is that educators will continue to teach with eyes and hearts wide open, especially for those students who are hurting. Like Commeret (2023) argued, most educators "became teachers because they love kids, they love to cultivate learning, and they believe all

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children are worthy of love and success" (p. 200). I believe some dragons may be slayed through the choice to facilitate ELA experiences about school shootings. I am grateful for the authors and their publishing teams who provide such vicarious experiences to use as tools with students. I would be remiss to not emphasize that—forever—my heart will break for the readers whose personal experiences connect too closely to the school shooting details inherent in these novels.

In Closing

The following quote is on the back of the memorial shirts our #OxfordStrong community members wear to honor Madison Baldwin, Tate Myre, Justin Shilling, and Hana St. Juliana: "You never know how strong you are, until being strong is your only choice." Personally and professionally, I long for each of us to live empowered, demonstrating strength through advocacy within our educational contexts, communities, and countries. My hope is that through fictional literature, educators may facilitate ELA experiences to address the reality of school shootings through listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing, all of which require students to think critically about gun violence. Personally and professionally, stakeholders must address gun violence to help students, those that have been or could be hurt. I believe stakeholders long to help those students who could hurt before their pain causes even more trauma.

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Table 1

Unit Big Ideas and Essential Questions for Middle Grade Novels about Gun Violence

Unit Big Idea 1: Readers imagine and react to the literary choices authors make regarding characters and plot.
Unit Big Idea 2: Readers respond to text critically as they connect fictional content to their real-world contexts.
Essential Question 1: In hindsight, warning signs of gun violence often become apparent. What are some patterns characters identified after gun violence occurred? How do these patterns connect to real-life contexts?
Essential Question 2: How does discussion and reflection about gun violence empower students, teachers, families, and other stakeholders to notice changed behavior in others?
Essential Question 3: Based on novels, what social change or protocols are needed to help prevent gun violence?

Table 2

Before, During, and After ELA Tasks for Erskine's (2011) Mockingbird

Before	During	After
Freewrite: After losing something or someone, how have you experienced	Freewrite or Draw: Show the process Caitlin takes to achieve closure.	Discuss: What does the idea of closure mean following a school shooting? Explain.

closure? What does closure mean?	What does closure mean to Caitlin?	How do the characters in this book experience closure: Caitlin whose brother was murdered, the cousin of one of the shooters, and the community overall?

Table 3

Before, During, and After ELA Tasks for Isler's (2021) Aftermath

Before	During	After
Freewrite or Discuss: Math is filled with problems that can be solved. Gun violence is a societal problem with many challenges. How can we solve the problem of gun violence, if at all? How can we help those who consider gun violence an answer to their problems?	Freewrite or Discuss: How is Lucy's journey through grief of losing her brother different and similar to the grief her classmates feel?	Freewrite or Discuss: What do you think the survivors of gun violence and their families in this story need? How can support groups find out what survivors of gun violence need in order to heal after such tragedies—moments later, days later, months later, years later?

Table 4

Before, During, and After ELA Tasks for Warga's (2022) The Shape of Thunder

Before	During	After

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Freewrite, Draw, or Create: Knowing that this book addresses the aftermath of a school shooting, what does the shape of thunder mean to you?	*The Shape of Thunder* is an intriguing title. If thunder has a shape, then create the shape of grief and the shape of healing.	Freewrite or Discuss: How have your relationships helped or not helped you face the trauma inherent in gun violence? What should adults do to solve the problem of gun violence?

Table 5

Before, During, and After ELA Tasks for Puller's (2022) The Lost Things Club

Before	During	After
Freewrite, Discuss, or Create a Poem: What is hope? What does hope feel like? How can hope be personified?	Freewrite, Discuss, or Create a Poem: How does TJ find hope within lost things? Give voice to lost and hope through a two-voiced poem.	Freewrite or Discuss: Puller (2022) stated, "[T]here was a life to live after surviving. And [TJ and his friends] were figuring out how to do just that" (p. 290). How does hope help us survive trauma?

Table 6

Before, During, and After ELA Tasks for Bow's (2023) Simon Sort of Says

Before	During	After

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Freewrite or Discuss: How does humor help, support, and/or save our lives?	Create and Discuss: Design an image of the plot's humorous hills and visceral valleys. How does this image reflect your own life?	Freewrite or Discuss: How are panic attacks different from traumatic responses? How does Simon face his past trauma? How do Simon's friends and family support him through his pain?

Table 7

Points to Consider Regarding Threat Assessment

- Peterson and Densley (2021) stated, "In addition to *preparing* for a mass shooting, teachers, staff, and students are well placed to start *preventing* them" (p. 90, italics in original).
- Schools need a "full threat assessment team—typically consisting of a school administrator, counselor, psychologist, and school resource officer" (Cornell, 2018, p. 1).
- Cornell (2018) stated, "School staff should be prepared to identify threats…[and] be advised that they are not expected to assess the seriousness of a threat; that is the job of the threat assessment team" (p. 81).
- All stakeholders from school personnel to families and friends need to speak up when they notice a "*marked change*—something noticeable that feels different—from a student's usual behavior" (Peterson & Densely, 2021, p. 87).

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