

IATE NEWSLETTER

Monthly Newsletter of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English

NEWS & FEATURES

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Welcome to a New Year!

BY MICHELLE RYAN

How many of you started the school year thinking that it was going to be the longest year ever? Are you as surprised as I am that we are already in our spring semester? (I hesitate to even use the word "spring" given how cold it's been.) I think we can all agree that once again, we are teaching in unprecedented times that have left us exhausted and longing for a classroom and life that is back to normal.

As you stepped back into your classroom after break, how many of you set goals for yourself to help propel you through the months ahead? Goal-setting has always been one way for me to stay focused and motivated. IATE has also been setting goals as we move forward in our new institutional home, and our newsletter is the perfect place to share those.

(continued on page 2)

Welcome to a new year!, Cont.

Communication

We are excited to bring our newsletter back to the membership. Once quarterly, the newsletter will now be monthly. You can learn about the columns that will be featured in our newsletter in our Call for Submissions section.

Membership Engagement

Engaging English professionals across Illinois is a primary focus for IATE. Our mission is to improve the quality of instruction in English at all educational levels; to encourage research, experimentation, and investigation in the teaching of English; to facilitate professional cooperation of the members; to hold public discussions and programs; to sponsor the publication of desirable articles and reports; and to integrate the efforts of all those who are concerned with the improvement of instruction in English.

We are arranged in districts across the state, so part of implementing our membership goal is to fill our open district leadership positions (found on page 11). If you, or someone you know, would be a good fit for our open districts, we look forward to hearing from you!

Scholarship

The English Bulletin is getting a face lift. After a pandemic hiatus, we are currently planning for our Spring issue. You can find the Call for Submissions on page 11 of the newsletter.

If you are interested in serving on our editorial team, please send an email of interest with your CV or resume to iatenctonline@gmail.com.

Professional Development

IATE plans to continue providing professional development opportunities to English professionals around the state. This fall we offered a session focused on processing the pandemic, another on book challenges, and we are currently offering a book study. Look for more opportunities to be offered--in most cases, free of charge for IATE members!

New Teacher Spotlight

BY JEN GOUIN



We are pleased to welcome Gianna Cassata to the English department at Lincoln Community High School. The oldest of five children including her identical twin, Gianna is a native of the northwest suburbs of Chicago and attended Wheaton North High School.

New Teacher Spotlight, Cont.

After student teaching with Samantha Murphy and Jennifer Gouin in the fall, and upon her graduation from Illinois State University, Ms. Cassata was hired to teach Applied English I & II.

Gianna just completed her first two weeks of teaching, and we asked her what she enjoys most about teaching. She says, "My favorite part about teaching is the students. Do not get me wrong; I love my content area as well, but the students are what make it all worth it. I have always said to myself since a young age, that I find the best joy in changing people's lives and being there for them to help them grow. So I picked teaching because I feel that students, in general, go through really hard times and have a lot of pressure from various aspects of their lives, so I love to be a person that is understanding, compromising, passionate, and kind to them. If I can change that one student's life for the better and help them to realize their greatness, my job has succeeded. The students are it all for me!"

As she just finished student teaching in December, we asked for her advice for future student teachers. Gianna responded, "My advice to student teachers is to simply... relax! I know that sounds easier said than done, but from my experience, it has been the most real thing. Just take a breath and realize why you are here and how far you've come to get to where you are in the teaching field. Another piece of advice I have is to always make connections and build relationships. Students, especially at the high school level, can see right through you, so always be yourself and work on building those connections with them first and foremost."

IATE would like to feature other new teachers in upcoming newsletters. If you have new teachers in your department, consider submitting a brief article introducing them.

My advice to student teachers is to simply...relax! I know that sounds easier said than done, but from my experience, it has been the most real thing. Just take a deep breath and realize why you are here and how far you've come to get to where you are in the teaching field.

Rationale Corner

BY AMY MAGNAFICHI STRONG, INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM COMMITTEE CHAIR

BOOK RATIONALE FOR: Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You: A Remix of the National Book Award-winning Stamped from the Beginning

Below is a rationale that may be used for your school or classroom. Please feel free to update or edit to fit your needs.

Bibliographic Citation

Reynolds, Jason, and Ibram Kendi. Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You: A Remix of the National Book Award-Winning Stamped from the Beginning. 1st ed., Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2020.

Intended Audience

Please include which grade you are using this book with and if it is a whole class, reading list, or small group text.

Brief Summary of the Work

Well-known, young adult author, Jason Reynolds, along with Dr. Ibram X. Kendi have created a retelling of Kendi's award winning book, Stamped from the Beginning, specifically for teen readers. This re-telling provides an opportunity for students to explore the legacy of racism in United States history. By taking this often-complex topic and breaking it into accessible pieces based on history, facts, and historical figures, the text creates a way in which students can begin to synthesize and analyze their world and be catalysts for antiracist ideas to shape the future of our nation.

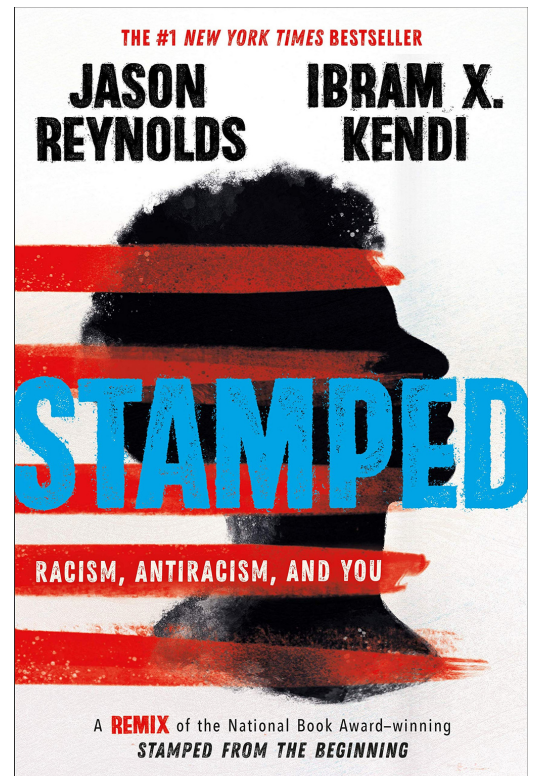
Relationship of the Text to the Curriculum

As our classrooms become more diverse, it is essential that we include the stories and histories of all people who make up the past and present state of our nation. Many textbooks in use across the country devote little to no time about the origins of racism or worse, contain false narratives. Students of color deserve to see their history, their stories studied with as much acumen as the mainstream history and stories often told. Our history is multifaceted and must be taught as such. All students need to see themselves reflected in what we teach. This text also fulfills the Illinois Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards.

Include a brief description of teaching method, activities, and assessments here. You can also add specific State Standards if you would like.

Impact of the Book

This text provides a framework, essential questions, and a vocabulary for students to explore race in an inclusive, historical context. Through guided discussion, students will be able to not only connect racism to the history of the United States, but they will also be able to talk about how they may see race playing out in their lives and the lives of their peers. (continued page 5)



Rationale Corner, Cont.

The text also provides students with the opportunity to explore how they can impact their communities through participating in social justice and creating a more equitable society. Stamped gives students many opportunities to further research events and people that have played a role in racism and antiracism in our history. At the end of the text, students will be able to make text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections.

Finally, this text will provide students with an opportunity to discover how to discuss, explore, evaluate, and synthesize difficult topics in a supportive environment.

Potential Problems with the Text

“It is important to note that some of the language used in Stamped may be triggering for some students. It is recommended that educators and students discuss this up front and make decisions as a community about how they will navigate this in ways that foster a learning environment that mitigates the emotional labor of students of color. For example, the N-word appears in Stamped. Educators can help students understand that this word provokes intense emotions and reactions based on the truth behind its origins, its historical use toward people of color, and the legacy that remains today. A community agreement might include the provision that just because students will read this word doesn’t mean they have to say this word during class discussions” (Cherry-Paul 2).

It should be noted that the text does take a particular political stance. The authors only explore our history concerning race, how we as a society can work against racism, and support diversity in our country.

Collection of Information About the Text

Lists, Awards, and Review:

Booklist starred, 01/01/20

Horn Book Magazine, 05/01/20

Kirkus Reviews starred, 12/01/19

New York Times, 03/08/20

Publishers Weekly starred, 01/27/20

School Library Connection starred, 03/01/20

School Library Journal starred, 01/01/20

Illinois Teen Readers’ Choice Book Award Nomination (2022 List)

Jane Addams Children’s Book Awards finalist

2021 Children’s Choices – Best of the Year (Cooperative Children’s Book Center)

Kirkus Prize Finalist

School Library Journal:

/* Starred Review */ Gr 7 Up—Reynolds's adaptation of Kendi's National Book Award-winning title teaches readers to think critically about racism and antiracism in the United States and the Western world. Within short chapters and a chronological format, the authors discuss specific people and/or historical events. (cont. page 6)

Rationale Corner, Cont.

Those selected examples are used to expand upon broader themes. There are no shallow representations of the men and women profiled in this book.

The authors argue that people fit into three categories, some transitioning from one category to another: segregationists, assimilationists, and antiracists. The actions of President Thomas Jefferson, Cotton Mather, W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., Angela Davis, and President Barack Obama, among other U.S. presidents, citizens, and organized movements, are evaluated in relation to these categories. The varying text and sentence sizes, and the occasional font changes, effectively guide readers through the content. The tone of the writing varies from provocative to funny to gentle. Due to the work not being a straight narrative account, some passages may require readers to seek further information to fully understand the context. A recommended reading list features older and contemporary adult and young adult fiction and nonfiction titles. VERDICT Reynolds and Kendi eloquently challenge the common narrative attached to U.S. history. This adaptation, like the 2016 adult title, will undoubtedly leave a lasting impact. Highly recommended for libraries serving middle and high school students. –Hilary Writt, Sullivan University, Lexington, KY -- Hilary Writt (Reviewed 01/01/2020) (School Library Journal, vol 66, issue 1, p100)



About the Authors

“DR. IBRAM X. KENDI is a New York Times–bestselling author and award-winning historian. He is a professor of history and international relations and the founding director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University. He is a columnist at The Atlantic and one of America’s leading antiracist voices” (Cherry-Paul, 22).

“JASON REYNOLDS is a #1 New York Times–bestselling author; two-time National Book Award finalist; the recipient of a Newbery Honor, a Printz Honor, and multiple Coretta Scott King Honors; and the winner of a Kirkus Prize, two Walter Dean Myers Awards, and an NAACP Image Award, among other honors. He invites you to visit him online at JasonWritesBooks.com” (Cherry-Paul, 22). (continued page 7)

Rationale Corner, Cont.

Alternative Works for an Individual Student

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* - 10th Anniversary Edition. 1st ed., NEW PRESS, 2020.

Discussion how the War on Drugs and policies that deny convicted felons equal access to employment, housing, education, and public benefits create a permanent under caste based largely on race.

Beals, Melba Pattillo. *By Melba Pattillo Beals - Warriors Don't Cry* (1st Edition) (6/24/07). Simon Pulse, 2007.

The author describes the threats and emotional abuse she endured from white students and adults along with her fears of endangering her family as she committed to being one of the first African American students to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957.

Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. Random House, 2020. The Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Warmth of Other Suns* identifies the qualifying characteristics of historical caste systems to reveal how a rigid hierarchy of human rankings, enforced by religious views, heritage and stigma, impact everyday American lives.

Created with the aid of the following

Deborah Will, IATE President

National Coalition Against Censorship

Dr. Sonja Cherry-Paul's Curriculum Guide through NCTE at the following link:

<https://ncte.org/stamped-resources/>

Membership

IATE membership works toward maintaining and advancing the professionalism of the English/Language Arts field. Your membership benefits you through:

- Providing a means to make your concerns heard by state officials
- Expanding your network of educational contacts across the state
- Keeping you up-to-date through the annual IATE Fall Conference and IATE publications like the Illinois English Bulletin and the IATE Newsletter
- Promotion the recognition of outstanding members of our profession

Did you know that we offer a free, one-year membership to all teachers who have not previously been a member of IATE and to students?

PUBLISH YOUR WORK IN THE IATE NEWSLETTER

The IATE Newsletter welcomes articles, reviews, reports, announcements, brief teaching narratives, calls for papers, and other material important to the professional lives of English teachers in the state of Illinois. IATE district leaders are especially encouraged to send reports of district events. For any timely information, the deadline for submitting for the next month's newsletter is the second week of the previous month. All other submissions will be taken on a rolling basis.

Recurring columns:

Technology in the Classroom (250-500 words) - Submissions for this column could include reviews of devices, programs, and/or apps for the classroom, as well as lesson ideas utilizing technology in the classroom. Submissions should include the name of the technology, as well as any cost associated with it.

IATE Reads (400-600 words) - This column is devoted to building our libraries, both professionally and for our students. You might consider sharing books that are great for read-alouds or First Chapter Fridays, books that speak to our students and their experiences, or books for our professional libraries. Submissions might also include ideas for teaching specific books, places to find affordable books, discipline specific books to create cross-discipline connections, and other ideas for creating lifelong readers. When sharing recommendations and ideas, please include the text title, author, and publisher, as well as a "recommended for."

Job Corner (100-200 words) - Do you know of any English openings that you can share? Please include any details about the job and district, as well as contact information.

Brag Corner (100-200 words) - Tell us something good! Pat yourself on the back or pat someone else on the back. Let's celebrate the good things happening around us.

Honoring Our Retirees (100-200 words) - Our veteran teachers deserve recognition for their contributions to our profession. If you know someone retiring from the English classroom, tell us! Let us give them a "cheers for all their years!"

A Tribute to Meaningful Educators (100-200 words) - We all have someone who inspired us or inspires us as an English educator. This column is devoted to your favorite English teacher. Be sure to share who they are, where they are, and why they hold a special place in your heart. Pictures of your honoree are welcomed for this column.

But What About? (100 words) - This column is devoted to all of those questions we have as educators, whether we are new or veterans. Send in your questions and we'll provide the platform for sharing ideas and answers to your most pressing issues, even if it's as simple as maintaining your classroom library or how to make time for that bathroom break.

Teacher Creators - We teach in the English classroom, but we also have passions and talents outside of those four walls. Share your work with us. We invite submissions of original poetry and prose, photography, cartoons, art. You name it. Your submission should include your name, affiliation, and a brief statement accompanying your piece.

Please send inquiries or submissions via e-mail to Michelle Ryan at iatenctonline@gmail.com.

CALL FOR STUDENT WRITING FROM ALL LEVELS FOR IATE'S BEST ILLINOIS POETRY AND PROSE CONTEST

BY DELORES ROBINSON

DEADLINE: Submit all contest entries electronically through the IATE submission manager found on the website no later than January 31, 2022. Visit <https://iateonline.org/best-illinois-poetry-and-prose-contest/> to submit poetry and prose student work.

FORMAT: Accepted file types include .doc, .docx, and .rtf.

COVER LETTER: The "Cover Letter" field must include:

- Full name of student
- Title of student's work
- Student's grade level at time piece was written
- Full name of school
- School's complete mailing address
- Full name of teacher and teacher's IATE district
- E-mail address of teacher

IMPORTANT: The student's name, the school's name, and the teacher's name must not appear anywhere other than in the "Cover Letter" field.

LIMITS:

- 1.) Five prose and ten poetry entries per teacher
- 2.) One thousand words of prose per entry; forty lines of poetry per entry.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FROM THE JUDGES:

- 1.) Please see that students abide by the line and word limits. Have them revise and shorten pieces that exceed these limits since submissions that surpass the limits are eliminated from consideration.
- 2.) Please emphasize to students that prose and fiction are not synonymous. While fiction submissions continue to be accepted, encourage students to explore the possibilities of expository essays, personal narratives, arguments, and creative non-fiction pieces, along with other genres.

CONTEST COORDINATORS:

Elizabeth E. Tacke and Melissa Ames
Eastern Illinois University
IATE Poetry Contest

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Visit <https://iateonline.org>

Celebrating a New Chapter - RFP

BY BETSY GEISELMAN

This year, the Illinois Association of Teachers of English (IATE) is planning to host our annual conference in Decatur, Illinois! Our annual conference, whose theme is “Celebrating a New Chapter,” will be held at Millikin University, on October 21-22, 2022. We chose this location to recognize our partnership with Millikin, IATE’s new institutional home. The conference theme—“Celebrating a New Chapter”—highlights some exciting changes IATE is implementing, and it marks the transition between the challenges of pandemic teaching and the possibilities ahead.

As English teachers, we are experts at turning the page and looking forward to new chapters, while still acknowledging how the previous ones shaped us. One key way this past chapter has been transformational is that it has reminded us of the value of our presence in the classroom, and the dearness of the relationships we share with our students, our colleagues, and our communities. The Program Committee is looking for sessions which demonstrate how, in creating new chapters in our teaching, ones that innovate and empower, we keep relationships and connections at the forefront of our thinking and design.

Fill out the 2022 IATE Conference RFP at: <https://tinyurl.com/IATEPresent2022> by Friday, March 18, 2022. RFPs can be found at the link above and are also posted here for your convenience. If you have any questions, please contact the Program Committee at betsy.geiselman@cchs165.com.

Thank you for your involvement with IATE, and we look forward to hearing from you!

IATE OFFERS SCHOLARSHIP FOR MINORITY TEACHER EDUCATION

BY SHANNON RADCLIFFE

IATE understands the importance of diversity in education and that both our schools and our organization would be enhanced by the addition of more diverse voices.

We will be offering two \$500 scholarships for graduating seniors (December or May) who identify with a minority group and will be entering the English Education profession. These scholarships can be used for professional clothing, moving expenses, graduation expenses, or anything the new educator will need as they start their career.

We will be accepting nominations for this scholarship from English Education professors. To nominate a student, please draft a letter of recommendation and send it to sradcliffe@lchsrailers.org. In your letter, please include how you believe this student will impact their educational communities as they begin their career.

Please send in your letters by February 15, 2021. Thank you for your help in this.

Publish Your Work in the Illinois English Bulletin

Spring 2022: Open Issue
Deadline: March 01, 2022

The spring 2022 issue of the Illinois English Bulletin will feature scholarly articles across a range of contexts and genres with relevance to our audience of literacy teachers, middle and high school English language arts instructors, and collegiate English educators. The past two years have resulted in personal and professional upheaval for educators across the state - from a global pandemic to the ongoing national response to social and economic injustices. With this upheaval, we recognize the particular challenges of preparing scholarly work for publication. To that end, we leave this call open for educators and scholars to engage with the work that is most pressing to them at this time - especially as we imagine a new age for literacy and ELA education. Authors may consider, but are not limited to, questions such as:

- What inquiry and scholarship have you done that expands our understanding of literacy, language arts, and English?
- How have your practices and pedagogies changed and shifted in response to the ongoing tensions of the past two years?
- What do readers of IEB need to explore and consider?
- How do you engage with the intersections of literature, literacy, language, culture, social justice, and/or collective wellness?
- What are the practices and pedagogies that you hope to take with you into the future to facilitate student and community language, literacy, and learning?

Please submit manuscripts to Michelle Ryan (iateonline@gmail.com).

Additional information can be found at: <https://iateonline.org/iate-publications/illinois-english-bulletin/>

District Leaders Wanted

The IATE Executive Board and District Leader Coordinator Kim Kotty are excited to find leaders for our open districts. If you would be interested in serving as a district leader or co-leader, please email kkotty@fenwickfriars.com. Next to each open district, you will see the counties it encompasses.

Open districts are as follows:

- East Central: Champaign, Ford, Iroquois, Kankakee, Piatt, Vermillion
- Illinois Valley: Bureau, Grundy, LaSalle, Marshall, Putnam
- Kaskaskia Valley: Clinton, Monroe, St. Claire, Washington
- Northeastern: Boone, Carroll, JoDaviess, Stephenson, Winnebago
- Rock River: DeKalb, Lee, Ogle, Whiteside
- Wabash Valley: Clay, Crawford, Edwards, Lawrence, Richland, Wabash, Wayne, White
- Western: Fulton, Henderson, Knox, McDonough, Stark, Warren

From the Archives

This article was originally printed in the Spring 2010 (v. 97, no.2) issue of the English Bulletin.

Note: Formatting has been changed for the purposes of the newsletter publication. No works cited or appendices are included.

Response to Book Challenges: One School's Experience

authored by Michelle Ryan, Lincoln Community High School and Jennifer Gouin, Lincoln Community High School

Overview/Background

Most schools, at some point in time, encounter at least one parental challenge to a book in the curriculum. At our school, Lincoln Community High School in Lincoln, a school of approximately 900 students, our English department has experienced two such challenges in the last three years. In the first instance, our (now former) superintendent removed the book *10th Grade* by Joel Weisberg as the sophomore summer reading assignment immediately following a parent complaint. In the process, he disparaged the English department in the local newspaper for what he considered an inappropriate choice, despite the fact that he had not read the book or spoken to a member of the English department concerning the rationale for selecting the text. An excerpt from that letter written to parents stated:

Do we accept something at the lowest common denominator and provide it as our recommendation to the entire sophomore class? I say no. We're better than that. I think, in retrospect, all English staff agree with our position on this. There are clearly parts of his story that are offensive and inappropriate for sophomores in high school. In my view, the selection of this book for the summer reading program represents a tremendous lack of judgment. The book will not be discussed or assessed in our curriculum at Lincoln Community High School. Our staff will make other arrangements for appropriate reading material once the year begins. (qtd. in Frost)

He later apologized to the department for these ill-chosen words (and inaccuracies in speaking for the English department), but that apology was never made public. At the time of our second challenge, he was no longer superintendent, but his words still had repercussions.

The Challenge—Round One

The second book challenge began in the summer of 2008. A small group of parents objected to advanced sophomores being assigned Abe Lincoln Award nominee *The Tenth Circle* by Jodi Picoult for summer reading. The novel tells the story of 14 year old Trixie Stone, a girl who is raped by her ex-boyfriend at a party. The event is a catalyst for Picoult's exploration of how one act of violence impacts an individual and the bond between parent and child. The text includes a graphic novel that depicts Trixie's father's allegorical journey to Hell as he deals with the tragic events. The main parental objections involved language and sexual content, specifically a four page portion of the text that describes the events preceding the rape. One parent stated the following in the local newspaper the Lincoln Courier: "This book contains such explicit sexual material and profanity that I cannot be more specific (here)... The book is hardcore pornography and I cannot emphasize strongly enough the inappropriateness of this book" (qtd. in Frost). A concerned parent objected first to the teacher, and when she was not happy with the book still being a part of the curriculum, her complaint was forwarded to the department liaison. After the department liaison contacted the parent and, again, did not comply with removal of the book, the complaint was then sent to the principal, who contacted the teacher for clarification about the reading assignment as well as an alternative text, an option that is typically provided for students when the original summer reading assignment is given. (continued page 13)

From the Archives, Cont.

In response to the parents' concerns, the teacher elucidated her reasoning for choosing the text. In a letter sent to parents she stated:

Summer reading assignments are given to serve two purposes: to augment and prepare for the classroom experience and to get students reading and exercising their brains in the summer months. ...The selection of *The Tenth Circle* was not intended to encourage any of the behavior in the book, but rather to encourage discussion and thought about the choices made and the consequences of those actions. (Keith)

The teacher also alluded to the text's thematic connections (being true to oneself) to other texts studied in the accelerated sophomore curriculum: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, Chris Crutcher's *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* and *The Sledding Hill*, and *Speak* by Laurie R. King. *The Tenth Circle* was intended to be discussed in conjunction with excerpts of Dante's *Inferno*, obviously a more difficult piece, one which lends itself better to a classroom setting rather than an independent reading for the summer. The teacher also offered the students the choice of reading Dante's *Inferno* as their summer reading selection. Most parents were satisfied with that outcome; however, a very outspoken few were not.

Unhappy with simply having an alternative text provided for summer reading, a small but vocal group of parents approached the superintendent in order to make a formal request to have the book removed from the LCHS curriculum. He scheduled an informal meeting in the library with parents and teachers. While the intention of the meeting was to dialogue peacefully about *The Tenth Circle* as a summer reading choice, the meeting's atmosphere was quite contentious at several points. First, the parents were given an opportunity to explain why they felt the book was an inappropriate choice. One parent cited the use of the "f-word...40 or 50 times... It's just so inappropriate for something (like this) to be taught in the classroom... It was pretty blatant. If this were a magazine that a kid brought in, it would be considered pornography" (qtd. in Frost). One parent went so far as to say teachers have no business teaching morality. Unfortunately, he was ignoring the fact that Illinois School Code states that

Every public school teacher shall teach character education, which includes the teaching of respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, trustworthiness, and citizenship, in order to raise pupils' honesty, kindness, justice, discipline, respect for others, and moral courage for the purpose of lessening crime and raising the standard of good character." (ilga.gov)

What better way of modeling both positive and negative examples of good character than through literature! Eventually, as sometimes happens when groups with dissenting positions meet, the meeting degenerated into complaints about a variety of literary choices including Chris Crutcher's *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*.

Our Response

During the first challenge (of 10th Grade), our English department did not formally change our procedures for adopting books in the classroom. We always have and still do use award-winning, professionally recommended literature as the basis for our selections. (A department member would initially propose a text for a course, and the department would informally evaluate the validity of the text. Upon its acceptance, the title would be included in the curriculum. At that point, the administration would be informed of the choice, and it was the understanding of the faculty that the principal would read the material and object if she deemed it appropriate. (continued page 14)

From the Archives, Cont.

In truth, our recommendations were rarely, if ever, questioned. However, when the second challenge occurred, it was clear that we needed to cultivate the perception that parents were involved in the reading choice process; however, we needed to be sure to create an arena in which parents felt as if they had input without directly petitioning for curricular advice or direction from the public.

At the initial informal meeting after the challenge was made, several teachers from the department, as well as other members of the faculty, stood in solidarity. Michelle Ryan, a member of the LCHS English department, represented the Illinois Association of Teachers of English. Our goal at the meeting was to respond to questions and concerns parents had about the choice of *The Tenth Circle*. While our responses did not seem to appease the parents in attendance, our superintendent was quick to point out that “you have a group of professionals here who are very good at what they do” and agreed with the teacher-generated idea that an advisory committee be formed (qtd. in Frost). We were understandably impressed and touched by our superintendent’s praise of and confidence in us. We had been lashed in the media three years before and again now, and we had been battling a public firestorm of malcontent.

Despite the good feelings engendered by our superintendent’s support, we seemed to accomplish very little in the informal meeting. We did manage to maintain focus on *The Tenth Circle*. When parents veered off-topic to discuss other books in the school’s curriculum, the superintendent reminded them that the issue at hand was one specific book. We did establish that senior-level texts were “off the table.” We affirmed our intention that an alternative reading will always be given for summer reading selections, and we established the need to begin formalizing the procedure for selecting texts.

The parents accepted the idea of an advisory committee, so it became the priority for the department. Now, behind the scenes, the English department liaison along with other members of the departments created an application form for committee member candidates (Appendix 1). In addition to the application process, we also created a generic form to guide committee member response to texts and to facilitate meeting discussion. In anticipation of the eventual first meeting, we also spent some time developing an agenda that would help clarify and solidify our goals for the committee. We wanted to be sure to guide the direction of the committee without appearing to have a hidden agenda.

The Challenge—Round Two: The Board Meeting

Despite our good-faith efforts to form a committee, some parents were dismayed that the book was not being removed from the curriculum completely. Therefore, they decided to file a formal request for removal of *The Tenth Circle* from the curriculum, and they placed themselves on the Board meeting agenda. (Appendix 2) In the few weeks prior to the board meeting, the parents ran ads in the newspaper requesting that other concerned parents attend the meeting.

Notwithstanding the media blitz, fewer than 10 parents were in attendance at the October board meeting. The parents were given 15 minutes to address the board. In the presentation, the spokesperson for the parent group stated that she wanted a removal of the book from the curriculum but not from the library; she also wanted formalization of the process to choose books, including more parental control over the teachers’ choices. To describe the presentation as anything but one meaning to incite shock and anger from the board members would be to misrepresent the events. The parents’ intentions were to cite the offending four-page section from the novel, hopefully camouflaging the merits of the text. (continued page 15)

From the Archives, Cont.

And, through their dubious primary intention, they single handedly managed to vilify the English department who assigned the text. Thankfully we were not alone in our attempt to halt this attack on our professionalism and curricular choices.

Our Response

In preparation for the board meeting, the English department spent many hours debating the manner with which to respond to the assault. As any teacher can imagine, even if he or she has not been in the same position, the immediate reaction is to become defensive. We spent every breath we could muster maligning the parents who were, as we saw, the root of our problem. We spent time self-justifying and only after allowing ourselves sufficient time to be angry did we recognize that our anger was not going to solve this issue or prevent another one like it from occurring in the future. Even though we felt as if our ethics, morals, education, and professionalism were being attacked, we vowed to take the higher ground. We knew that ultimately, these parents were acting out of love for their children, and they could make choices for their children; we didn't agree that they had the right to make choices for the rest of the student population.

Therefore, the English department, as well as other members of the faculty, decided to present a unified and dignified front, one we hoped would silently speak to our confidence in the curricular choices we had made and would be made in the future. We did not formally address the board at the meeting, but did present the board with a letter from the IATE in which the curricular decision and rationale for selection of *The Tenth Circle* were supported. (Appendix 3) Claire Lamonica and Karen Coats, professors from Illinois State University attended the meeting and gave support for the committee formation and teacher cooperation while emphasizing our professionalism and ability to choose appropriate texts. We also had personal communication from Jodi Picoult to share with the board. Her response to our reading challenge was simply:

Oh, yeah, this happens all the time. If these parents would take their heads out of the sand they'd see the story as a cautionary tale AGAINST teen sexuality. Pornography is defined as graphic images meant to excite –that's not the point of *Tenth Circle* at all. Instead, it's a look at what's really happening in schools to educate and inform. Trust me, there's nothing in that book that kids in your school don't already know about or participate in! (Picoult)

The National Association of Teachers of English had indicated that they would send a response to the board as well, but we wanted to hold something in our hip pocket if the issue was not presently resolved. We were extremely grateful for the support of our administration, other members of our faculty whose attendance at the board meeting spoke volumes, and of the IATE and our colleagues at Illinois State University. As English professionals, we are so fortunate to have knowledgeable and willing people in organizations that are merely at our fingertips.

It would be fictionalizing our story to assert that the board meeting was without its bristling moments. Despite our intention to maintain the high road, there were moments when some of the more animated members of the English department did everything they could to maintain a positive air and not respond to the parents' insinuations. And, honestly, although we felt as if we had the support of our administration for the actions that we had already taken in responding to this challenge, we were tense with anticipation as to how our temperamental board might respond. (continued page 16)

From the Archives, Cont.

In the past, they had been questionable at best. Nevertheless, despite the parent presentation, the Board President indicated that the school board would not take action on the book, stating that the board “doesn’t try to micromanage the teachers” (qtd. in Frost).

The Curriculum Enhancement Committee

Given the overabundance of time and effort given to responding to parental inquiry since the beginning of school, after the October board meeting, our department and school finally had an opportunity to formalize the Curriculum Enhancement Committee. The school made the member applications available in the school office and on the school website, and, because of the intense interest in the “porn” that we were distributing to our students, we spent the next several weeks awaiting the deluge of applicants. We assumed that the selection process would be highly competitive and stringent. Unfortunately, very few community members and parents applied to serve on the committee, and we received no student applications.

Our intent was for the committee to be made up of the following: superintendent, principal, one board member, one junior student, one senior student, two English teachers, one teacher from another curricular area, two parents, and two community members. To form the committee, however, due to lack of interested parties, we had to allow parents to fill the role of community members, and English teachers to fill the role of other curricular area teachers. Basically, we resorted to begging to get people to serve. The building principal selected the committee members, and the first meeting was scheduled for December.

In the time that passed between the initial complaint (two weeks before the start of school...right inline with when most students start their “summer” reading) and the first Curriculum Enhancement Committee meeting in December, the use of *The Tenth Circle* had become a mute point. The teacher who had intended to use the text in class had to make other arrangements because no formal decision had been made about its inclusion in the curriculum. She did use the graphic novel portion of the text and also supplemented with Dante’s *Inferno*. Therefore, we were unsure of the purpose, content, and direction of the first meeting besides what we had informally put in an agenda.

Lack of direction for the committee was obvious as the first meeting progressed. Parents on the committee felt it necessary to revisit *The Tenth Circle* and its inclusion in the curriculum despite the Board’s decision. We tried to reiterate that the agenda for the first meeting was simply to establish guidelines for and the purpose of the committee, and instead we spent the greatest portion of time debating issues with the text that had long since been resolved. To move forward and to practice the purpose for which the committee had been created, prior to the first meeting the accelerated sophomore English teacher proposed a change in the summer reading assignment for accelerated sophomores to *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* by David Wroblewski. The committee members were informed of this choice and asked to read the book before the next meeting. Due to lack of direction and the parents’ well-intentioned but erroneous ideas about their role on the committee, the teachers attending the first meeting left feeling aggravated at the manner and expectations with which the parents approached the meeting.

With the second meeting’s purpose clearly established, we approached the time with confident anticipation. The new summer reading choice, *The Lift of Edgar Sawtelle*, had little if anything to contend, and we hoped that the ensuing discussion would be productive and a positive launching board for the foundation of the committee’s purpose. We weren’t naive enough to believe that the parents would come to the table with an unequivocal acclamation, (continued page 17)

From the Archives, Cont.

but we felt that this meeting, as compared to the previous one, would leave us feeling a sense of accomplishment. As we expected, the parents brought a list of questionable sections in the book, and by list, we mean an itemized-by-page-number analysis of everything from the use of the Lord's name in vain, to the use of the word "bitch" (the book's central character is part of a family that breeds dogs and the term is used to refer to the female dog), to instances where students might learn to use ether for hurting animals rather than the medical way in which it is discussed in the text, to the four instances an expletive is used (other than the technical term mentioned before). By the end of the meeting, overwhelmingly the committee decided that the text would be an appropriate piece of material to be used with accelerated sophomore students, one which would facilitate the students' access to and understanding of Hamlet.

As the school year progressed and our Curriculum Enhancement Committee evolved, the meetings fell into a recognizable pattern. English teachers would suggest new texts for consideration for summer reading titles, the group would read and evaluate those texts in preparation for the next meeting, parents would voice concerns and questions, teachers would respond to those concerns and questions, and ultimately, the books would be added to the summer reading list. The teacher requesting the addition of the book was never asked to be present at the meeting, leaving the English teachers on the committee the responsibility of justifying the text, a job made easy because of the communication within our department.

Over the course of the five meetings since the genesis of our committee we have learned that a few of the parents seem to have their own agenda: to suggest the inclusion of a certain few titles that may or may not fit thematically and/ or appropriately at a specified grade level but which is done with such repetitiveness that the committee has learned the recitation by heart. We have also had to cope with the fact that one parent in particular is using the committee as a vehicle to question the English department's ability to create a comprehensive curriculum for Lincoln Community High School that would be approved by universities and colleges in the state. We did, however, accomplish a summer reading list that was created by the English department, approved by the Curriculum Enhancement Committee, and adopted by the school board. (Appendix 4)

The Future

Only time will tell what will become of this committee: will it become defunct, or will it continue to evolve in such a way that it becomes beneficial for both the parents and teachers rather than the burdensome meeting that everyone creates excuses to avoid? If the five meetings this year are our guide, we venture to guess that the committee will become an antiquated step in our process of choosing texts, only to be revived if we face this issue again. By May, the meetings had already metamorphosed into an informal reading group sustained by one parent who did not want to see the group dissolve. Without additional texts to evaluate and with no meetings scheduled over the summer, there is little chance that the committee will become the Phoenix within our school's process of making curricular choices. Unfortunately, if this committee meets its end, we are left with questions about issues that have yet to be raised, much less answered: what would happen if there were a stalemate over a particular text and the parents adamantly opposed its adoption, what happens if we negotiate a text that is not in the summer reading but rather is a required curricular text during the school year, and what happens if a different curricular area wishes to adopt a text? All of these questions are important to consider as we look toward the future. (continued page 18)

From the Archives, Cont.

Lessons Learned

This book challenge and subsequent events offer lessons that vary according to the people whom they affect. Every school district needs to be reminded to always be prepared for such challenges. You can never make everyone happy regardless of measures taken. The loudest cries will be the ones dealt with; however, those who cry the loudest don't necessarily win, but they do create situations that can either tear a district apart or build positive relationships among all parties involved. Fortunately for us, we are on the winning end of this particular conflict. We have come out of this situation virtually unscathed. We did not lose any texts from our curriculum, and the issue went no further than our local arena.

We have a difficult time speaking for parents as to what they may have learned from this situation. Acknowledging the biases created in the authorship of this article, we hope that the parents involved have learned that while they may have a voice in curricular discussion, they do not have a voice in curricular decisions. We hope that, because of the way in which our department and high school responded to this situation, they feel confident that their children are in good hands. We hope that they have learned that we are professionals who endlessly try to create meaningful learning experiences for our students.

It is hard to quantify how much we, as teachers, learned in this process. The most basic lessons are obvious: procedures are created and used to avoid conflicts such as ours. English departments should have a formalized procedure for making curricular decisions, even though they may believe reading challenges will never happen. Second, the teachers were reminded that it is good to be prepared with a plan for parental complaints. While we all go to conferences or talk to colleagues who have read good books, it is important that each teacher, if he or she is lucky enough to be in a position to have the freedom to choose books, should be sure that the rationale is clear for texts chosen for the classroom. Third, on a lighter note, more students than we ever could have imagined rushed to read *The Tenth Circle* and have continued to do so all year long, creating an opportunity for dialogue between parents and students, students and teachers, and teachers and parents. And finally, English teachers, especially those in Illinois, are fortunate to have resources such as the Illinois Association of Teachers of English, whose membership and leadership consist of the brightest professionals in the state, women and men who are willing to take time out of their busy schedules to help even the smallest constituents tackle such large issues as censorship. Despite the headaches and stress caused by this incident, it did have a twofold positive result: our department truly rallied for a cause, and our teachers reminded themselves, as they vocalized for others, the reasons why we choose our texts and what we find to be important for our students to learn.

And our students—because it is for them that the battle was truly fought—no matter the side of the line in the sand they seemed to find themselves, because of allegiance or defiance to their parents or their teacher, we hope they have learned that something you believe in is always worth fighting for. We hope they have learned responsibility in journalism through classroom discussions of inaccuracies about the situation as written in the local paper. We hope they have learned how to justify and rationalize choices in a mature and responsible way. We hope they have learned that they are loved...both by their parents, who strive to keep them safe and yet, rationally or irrationally, sheltered from the world; and their teachers, who want nothing more than to create a rich learning environment, filled with novels that they can love and use to grow into the people who are able to make appropriate choices, regardless of which side of the line in the sand on which they fall.

IATE Reads

BY CAITLIN LORE

This YA thriller has been on my list for quite a while now, and I finally devoured it this last week while at my writing residency.

It's Christie-esque in all the right ways. A locked room. A ticking clock. A close knit group of suspects.

When the Queen Bee, star athlete, valedictorian, stoner, longer and music geek all get invited to a scholarship dinner, they have no idea it will be a trap...giving them an hour to choose which one should die before the night it over.

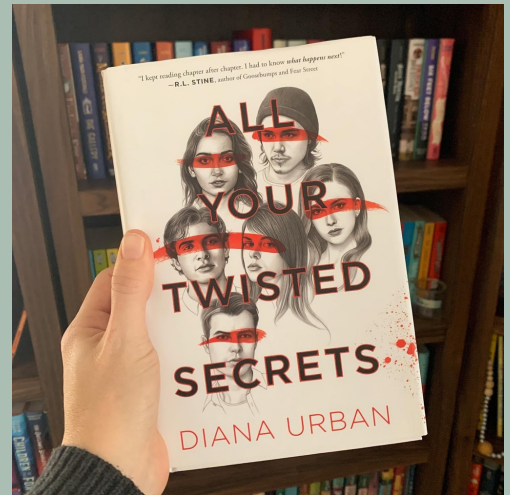
Or else they all will.

Think of it as a breakfast club gone wrong, especially as they all discover each one of them has something to hide.

I love the tension author Diana Urban creates in her story as the chapters alternate time, counting down with the ticking clock and counting up over the last year until the past catches up with the present.

If you're looking for a good thriller that's both psychological and high tension, All Your Twisted Secrets is it.

All Your Twisted Secrets is published by Harper Teen. You can learn more about Diana Urban's stories and check out her blog by visiting her online at <https://dianaurban.com>.



Caitlin Lore is a creative force, known for her deep love of reading and writing. A recent graduate of Hamline University's creative writing Master's program, she passes on her passion for all things English to her classrooms in creative writing, sci fi, and senior English. Outside of the classroom, she is a yoga and gardening enthusiast who loves spending time with her family, including her beloved dachshunds Gatsby and Daisy.