



BOOK IN REVIEW: A TEACHING GUIDE

Toby **Emert**



Of Porcupines and Trusty Sidekicks and Road Trips to Infinity

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When I was a kid, my mother would send me or my younger brother to the attic—typically in late July or early August—to drag down the Samsonite suitcases to prepare for the annual family road trip to visit my father’s aunts, uncles, and cousins. In the late 1940s, my grandparents had plucked my father and his siblings from a backroad farm in the Tennessee hills and plunked them down on a similar backroad farm in Virginia. At the time, when telephones and car trips, even postage stamps, were luxuries, the comfort of family must have seemed a lifetime away. To maintain the bond, my grandfather’s nine sisters—none of whom ever moved more than 40 miles from the house they grew up in—hosted a summer family potluck. My grandfather always attended, even when he could not afford to take his family along. When my parents married, they made the trip to the reunion our annual “vacation.”

The eight-hour road trip was a highlight of the year; it was essentially the only traveling my family did, and it required preparations. My mother spent the week prior to the trip choosing the clothes we would take, filling the toiletry case with small bottles of shampoo and new toothbrushes, and shopping for groceries for our in-route picnic lunch. My father

disliked restaurants and air conditioning, so a shady picnic at a roadside table was a welcome relief from the sweaty backseat of our Chevrolet Impala. The hills of East Tennessee were dotted with “attractions”: air-brushed t-shirt shops, miniature golf greens, pancake houses, and steak-and-potato restaurants. After a few days, we would return home, mimicking the accents of our distant cousins and showing off our inexpensive souvenirs. Now, with the ubiquity of air travel, a journey of 350 miles seems inconsequential, but when I was young, the idea of a road trip possessed a sense of possibility. As the miles ticked by, moving me away from what I knew and understood best, the world across the state border shimmered with expectation.

The “Road-Trip” Young Adult Novel

“There’s just something about being behind the wheel of a car with the windows rolled down and the music cranked up that makes it seem like anything is possible,” former children’s librarian Janssen Bradshaw writes in an article about young adult “road-trip” novels for *Brightly*, a website sponsored by Penguin Random House (<http://www.readbrightly.com/best-ya-road-trip-books/>) (n.d., para. 1). A good road-trip story “is a careful balance of an outward voyage with an inner journey” (Philpot, 2010, para. 3), which makes it a compelling narrative meme, remarkably resonant and infinitely adaptable. Young adult literature is rich with stories about the rites of initiation that rely, structurally and metaphorically, on the trope of travel. Riffing on the traditional features of the con-

temporary bildungsroman (<https://www.britannica.com/art/bildungsroman>), a variety of young adult authors have imagined stories in which their protagonists leave the familiar terrain of “home” and set off on a driving adventure that forces them to confront their conceptions of self and their understanding of the world.

John Green’s quirky *An Abundance of Katherines* (2006), a Printz Honor Book and finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, is a good example. Green puts 17-year-old Colin Singleton in the car with his buddy Hassan on a post-graduation trip from Chicago to Tennessee after Colin is dumped by the 19th girl named Katherine. Colin explores his self-doubt and his obsession with predicting his own future, especially his romantic future, as he and Hassan travel to Gunshot, Tennessee, on the fool’s errand of locating the gravesite of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

Similarly, Sharon Creech’s thoughtful *Walk Two Moons* (1994), winner of the 1995 Newbery Medal (<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/newberymedal/newberyhonors/1995newberymedal>), places her main character, Salamanca Tree Hiddle (Sal), in the car with her grandparents on a trip from Ohio to Idaho after Sal’s mother leaves her father. Creech’s story-within-a-story plays with metaphor and mystery as Sal and her grandparents visit spots highlighted in the postcards her mother sent as she traveled West.

Alex Sanchez’s third book in the Rainbow Boys series, *Rainbow Road* (2005), a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award, also features a cross-country road trip. Sanchez continues the alternating-perspective accounts as his characters—Jason, Kyle, and Nelson—pack into a car bound for Los Angeles in the summer before college; Jason has been invited to speak at an LGBTQ high school after gaining national attention for coming out as a bisexual athlete. The characters continue to develop their friction-prone triangulated relationship, seen in the previous novels in the series, as they encounter a variety of aspects of queer culture.

To this sampling of the list, we could add Christopher Paul Curtis’s *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (1999), Ellen Wittlinger’s *Zigzag* (2003), Paul Fleischman’s *Whirligig* (1998), Elisa Janine Hoole’s *Kiss the Morning Star* (2012), Libba Bray’s *Going Bovine* (2009), Matt de la Peña’s *We Were Here* (2009), Linda Collison’s *Looking for Redfeather* (2013),

and many others. Each of these novels remixes elements of the hero’s quest tale to render characters who mature as they encounter new people, new locales, and new ideas. The key trait for a good road-trip novel is that “the journey is always as interesting as the destination” (Smith, 2015, para. 4).

In this column, I highlight three novels that send queer and questioning characters on road trips through regions of the American South, West, and Midwest: Julia Watts’s Lambda Award winner *Finding H. F.* (2001); Bill Konigsberg’s Stonewall Book Award winner (<http://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2016/01/george-and-porcupine-truth-win-2016-stonewall-children-s-and-young-adult>) and ALAN Pick (<http://www.alan-ya.org/alan-picks-apr15/>) *The Porcupine of Truth* (2015); and Kristin Elizabeth Clark’s just-released *Jess, Chunk, and the Road Trip to Infinity* (2016).

Watts’s novel was one of only a handful of young adult books published in the early 2000s that introduced readers to a lesbian protagonist, and it was the only YA book in 2001 to deal explicitly with the struggle to negotiate a queer identity in the rural South, specifically Appalachia. Heavenly Faith Simms (H. F.) is a 16-year-old in Morgan, Kentucky, whose teenaged mother, Sondra, abandoned her when she was born. H. F. lives with her churchy “memaw” and spends most afternoons driving around with her closeted friend Bo, who serves as the football team’s punching bag. When H. F. discovers that Memaw has been hiding letters from Sondra in a bedroom dresser drawer, she is furious, so she and Bo hatch a plan to drive from Morgan to Tippalula, Florida (the return address on the letter) to find Sondra. Neither of them has ever been farther than the state line, so the journey is a smorgasbord of “firsts”: their first car trip, their first visit to a large city, their first encounter with self-accepting lesbians and gay men, their first dip in the ocean. Watts is intentional in introducing her tenderfoot characters to the world in ways that are both eye-opening and heartbreaking. Elements of the novel read as historically specific (cell phones and the Internet were in their infancy in the late 1990s when the book was written, so H. F. and Bo use pay phones, for example), but the comedy and the pathos of a journey into the unfamiliar are on full display in this endearing story.

Konigsberg’s *The Porcupine of Truth* also has a

secret at the core of the plot. Carson Smith is spending the summer with his alcoholic father in Billings, Montana, when he meets Aisha Stinson in the gift shop at the local zoo. She is unlike any girl he knows, and he develops an immediate crush, which complicates the relationship because Aisha is lesbian. It is the reason she is estranged from her religious, wealthy family and working at the zoo to support herself. When Carson discovers that his father's neighbor, John Logan, a friend of Carson's estranged grandfather, is hiding something about his grandfather's past, Carson steals into Logan's attic to find a box of his grandparents' mementos. The pictures and letters further confuse Carson, and he coaxes Aisha to accompany him on a road trip to San Francisco to sleuth out his grandfather. The trip is rocky and revealing. Carson is forced to confront his romantic attraction to Aisha, the truth about his grandparents' relationship, and his father's addiction.

Clark's story, *Jess, Chunk, and the Road Trip to Infinity*, like Watts's and Konigsberg's, puts two teen-aged friends in a car together. Jess, a painter preparing to enter art school in New York, has convinced her friend Christophe, whom she affectionately calls Chunk, to ride with her from San Jose to Chicago to attend her father's wedding. The last time Jess spoke with her father, she was Jeremy, his 17-year-old son. Jess had called her father to ask his permission to begin hormone therapy. He refused, and Jess now imagines showing up at the wedding as a kind of revenge fantasy. Having only received hormones for seven months, Jess is concerned about "passing," and the road trip with Chunk brings her self-doubt into full relief. She feels both self-conscious and rightfully fearful, especially as they travel through the upper West. She obsesses about her discomfort and her disappointment with her father, which ultimately affects her relationship with Chunk and threatens to mar the trip. Clark interrupts the narrative with flashbacks to Jess's past, each illuminated by a description of one of her paintings; this pattern is designed to provide readers a perspective on Jess's transition, her family struggles, and her hopes for the future.

These three novels tinker with the conventions of the "road-trip" motif, sending their characters on emotional and spiritual journeys that are heightened by the geography of the routes they follow to their destinations.

In the Classroom

Students benefit from learning strategies that prime them for reading, assist them in processing texts as they read, and help them retain connections to important "take-away" ideas. Road-trip novels fit within frameworks that rely on recognizable conventions, inviting readers to experience the perils and exuberances of packing the car and leaving the familiar in the rearview mirror. Activities that heighten the readers' experience of the stories and the landscapes they encounter expand their access to the novel's intimacies and endear them to characters. In the following section, I provide an overview of strategies aimed to engage students before, during, and after reading the novels highlighted in this column.

Context becomes key to the novel's intellectual and emotional impact, especially for younger readers, whose grasp of history may be limited.

Pre-reading Activity: Mapping the Journey

Identifying and visualizing the physical characteristics of the settings of stories reinforce general comprehension of the plot; it is important, therefore, for readers to be able to translate the author's descriptions of time periods and locales into mental images that allow them to understand the "when and where" of any specific scene. A limited set of reference points—the lack of personal experience or familiarity with (or having only stereotypical notions of) eras, cultures, regions, and communities, for example—hinders and possibly distorts the readers' grasp of the story being told. When reading a novel that features a physical journey, students benefit from pre-reading activities that assist them with picturing the settings they will encounter as they read. These activities serve as mediation—reinforcing what the students already know, but also providing a more exact entry into the story.

Watts's novel, for example, begins with a first-person introduction to the protagonist and to Morgan, Kentucky, the fictional town where H. F. lives with her "memaw." H. F. addresses readers in a dialect—evidenced by her choice of vocabulary, the idiomatic expressions she uses, and the syntax of her sentenc-

es—that might be construed broadly as “Southern.” Watts is intentional in her efforts to render the cadences and color of a *particular* Southern accent, however. H. F. lives in Appalachia—a stretch of mountainous terrain that extends from southern New York through northern Alabama and Mississippi (<http://lookingatappalachia.org/defining-appalachia>). Her accent is

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definitive and serves as an indicator of the specific regional culture in which she is growing up. As they travel south, H. F. and Bo stop in Atlanta for the evening and encounter a trio of lesbian teenagers in a city park. One of the characters notices that they “talk cute,” an indication that their accents signify a particular regionalism. Georgia, Florida, and Louisiana are also Southern states, for example, but characters from each of those states would “sound” different on the page. The US is, in fact, a collection of local cultures with some similarities, but also with striking distinc-

tions. Preparing to read a “road-trip” novel allows for interesting discussions of these regional differences.

Reviewing a map of the eastern United States and identifying the region in which Watts has situated her fictional town of Morgan, as well as discussing the sociocultural and socioeconomic characteristics and history of Appalachia, acclimate young readers to the dialect(s) and the characters they will encounter in the novel. Furthermore, these tasks allow for discussions of stereotypes, media misrepresentation of regional traits, and our penchant for categorizing people in response to their speech patterns. Without this kind of examination of Watts’s choice to employ dialect in the novel and its effect on readers, students might mis-assume that the characters in the novel are rubes, which is not the case. H. F. and Bo are, however, naïve and inexperienced, and Watts purposefully depicts their innocence in her efforts to manipulate

the conventions of the picaresque novel. At the same time, these protagonists are observant, sharp, and self-aware characters.

A discussion of regional geography, language patterns, and stereotypes can be instructive and disarming. Questions that guide students to express their background knowledge and ask them to consider the stereotypes they may have been offered about specific US regions encourage more careful readings and prime the students for future discussions about how authors consciously employ archetypes and disrupt stereotypes in a road-trip novel. Possible questions for discussion before reading a “road-trip” novel are:

1. What are the characteristics of stereotypes? Of archetypes?
2. What purposes do stereotypes serve? How are they instructive, and how are they destructive?
3. When you think about regions of the US, what stereotypes come to mind? How did you learn those stereotypes?
4. Which regions of the US are most familiar to us, even if we have never visited them? Why is that the case?
5. Which US geographic or landscape features are elements of the identity of various regions?
6. What role do language usage and dialect play in the identity of various US regions?
7. How have authors you’ve read in the past used regional differences to create setting, imply tone, or develop characters?
8. Why are so many humans attached to the places they grew up in and know well? What does that kind of attachment say about human needs?
9. What are some of the reasons an author might choose to send characters on a road trip through regions of the US?
10. How might the elements of a region—its geography, its culture, its people—serve as metaphors in a story that features a road trip?

During-reading Activity: Facts and Inferences

Reading literature, of course, demands that we decode, decipher, and deduce. Writers employ a range of literary devices to convey plots and themes. The “road-trip” novel in particular, however, relies heavily on signification—the author typically chooses destinations along the journey that are patently symbolic or richly evocative—to highlight key themes and ad-

vance character development. Consequently, readers must use inference skills to translate explicit details into deeper meanings. Inferring is a natural process; we are hardwired to interpret and extrapolate. It is easy for students to draw quick conclusions and form impressions and opinions. It is more complicated to provide evidence for those impressions and to scrutinize passages of text to develop fine-grained analyses that lead to informed and lively discussions. Asking students to create Facts and Inferences charts can assist them with this skill. For this activity, students compile a list of quotations that they perceive to be significant as they read the novel. I often give students a set of “sticky flags” and ask them to mark passages and pages for later consideration. They tend to find this task easier and less disruptive to their reading than stopping to write notes. Underlining passages also works well, of course, but my students take pride in the physical representation of their engagement when they bring their “flagged” chapters to class. After “marking” the text, the students review their selections and transfer the most significant passages to their notes.

For the note-making, they create a T-chart with two headings: “Facts” (typically in the left-hand column) and “Inferences” (typically in the right-hand column). Under “Facts,” students copy the passages they have chosen as symbolic or representative of an important theme. Under “Inferences,” they develop a list of interpretations/inferences about the passages. For example, students reading *Finding H. F.* might select the scene in the Atlanta city park where H. F. and Bo first meet three lesbian street kids—Dee, Chantal, and Laney—and identify that scene as a “fact” of the plot. In the “inferences” column, the students would assign meaning to the setting, the characteristics of the girls, the tone of the dialogue, or Watts’s use of language to describe the park and the people H. F. and Bo notice there.

In *The Porcupine of Truth*, students might select one of the novel’s early scenes in which Carson visits the zoo in Billings and first meets Aisha. For this scene, the students might generate inferences about our conception of zoos, animals in general, or Konigsberg’s choice to place his character in Montana or in a gift shop. Later in the novel, Carson and Aisha wander around San Francisco in search of Carson’s estranged grandfather. The iconography of the city plays a role

in these scenes, so students might choose to interpret the descriptions of the physical characteristics of the city or of Carson’s and Aisha’s reactions to the setting and the people they meet.

The objective of this kind of close reading activity is to explore the effect of setting on the development of the characters and the plot. The road-trip novel intentionally places characters in a variety of settings, so an exercise like Facts and Inferences spotlights the author’s choices and emphasizes micro-themes that help the reader draw connections between the physical and psycho-social journeys depicted in the narrative.

After-reading Activity: Metacognition Statements

Writing Metacognition Statements reinforces students’ connections to the texts they read and helps them further process noteworthy

themes. The statements can also serve as concise, yet sophisticated, summaries that allow students to demonstrate comprehension and articulate ideas that resonate for them personally. Furthermore, especially for students who struggle with writing, the composing template offered by a Metacognition Statement provides a scaffold for developing thoughtful, strong sentences as it models syntax, vocabulary use, and grammar conventions. The writing frames

for the statements can address any aspect of a reading, but in the case of the road-trip novel, focusing on definitive traits of the meme can punctuate prior class discussions and review concepts that will be useful for future reading.

Metacognition Statements are conceptually simple: the teacher provides a “fill-in-the-blank” paragraph composed specifically to help students summarize and reflect on the class reading. The students complete the blanks with phrases and sentences that personalize their “take-aways” and then share the statements with their peers, often reading them aloud. The challenge for the teacher is to draft sentence

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stems that provoke students to think deeply; the challenge for the students is to craft responses to the blanks that reveal their capacity to analyze and reflect.

The most basic statements might include just a few sentences. Here's an example, using Clark's novel as the topic:

In Kristin Clark's novel *Jess, Chunk, and the Road Trip to Infinity*, the author tells the story of two characters who _____. Jess is intent on _____, while Chunk hopes _____. Both characters learn something important about themselves as they travel; for example, Jess learns _____, and Chunk learns _____. One idea from the novel that resonated for me as a reader was _____. I think that is because _____.

Filling in the blanks may, at first, seem elementary to students, but in my experience, most students (and teachers) are less adept at this kind of thinking and responding activity than they predict when it is presented. It may help the class to understand the expectations for the writing if the teacher demonstrates the activity with the whole class, illustrating how the frame extends an invitation to develop interesting and thoughtful reflective summaries. I often project the framework onto the classroom screen and ask students to help me generate language to fill in the blanks in the paragraph, setting the expectations for the length and the tone of strong responses. It takes more than one attempt for most students to finesse this strategy, but once they are practiced at completing the sentence stems, they can reply to more complex invitations that challenge their thinking and bolster their writing skills. For example, the sentence stems can elicit more open-ended responses, reiterate important terminology, and present sophisticated sentence structures. Here's an example using Konigsberg's novel as the topic:

Author Bill Konigsberg sends his characters on a prototypical quest in *The Porcupine of Truth*. As they travel across the country, Carson and Aisha discover _____. Not surprisingly, _____. Interestingly, the characters reveal _____.

I was intrigued by this revelation because _____. In fundamental ways, I'm like (Carson or Aisha) in that I also _____. I expect I will remember _____ when I think back to my experience of reading *The Porcupine of Truth*.

Metacognition Statements are traditionally only a few sentences in length, and they always include an element of reflection. The aim is to help students voice a succinct culminating response to a text they have read, as well as to provide practice with using the language of summary. Ultimately, students may transcend the confines of the sentence frame and craft reflexive synopses that illustrate critical interpretive skills.

Conclusions

Road-trip novels are appealing to readers for a variety of reasons, and even if middle and high school students have limited experience *reading* about cross-country driving adventures, they tend to understand the road-trip story's implicit tropes. Film and television have taught them the structures of such narratives, so integrating them into curricula speaks to the strengths students bring to the classroom. Furthermore, road-trip novels that focus on the developing identities of queer and questioning protagonists present an amplified version of the travelers' symbolic negotiation with unfamiliar environments. In all well-crafted road-trip narratives, the interactions with people the characters meet reverberate with meaning for the characters' notions of self, their relationship to others, and their understanding about the world-at-large. But when authors develop adolescent characters whose struggles with self-acceptance are clouded by institutional social disapproval of their identity, the stakes for the metaphorical journey are elevated. The three novels highlighted in this column offer stories set in quite different regions of the US, but in each story, the angst about romance and attraction—omni-important concerns for adolescents—is further complicated by the characters' fears of abandonment because of their sexual identity.

In the call for articles for this issue of the journal, the editors ask this question: "What common experiences, realities, and ways of knowing, doing,

and being exist across cultures?” Unfortunately, the common reality for most queer and questioning youth is the ubiquitous apprehension that even those they love most—parents, siblings, and best friends—will, at the least, misunderstand them, and, at the worst, harm them. It sometimes takes a road trip far away from the “safety” of family and “home” to develop the sense of self-confidence that allows for a real homecoming—a celebration of self-reliance, if you will. Watts, Konigsberg, and Clark understand this reality and have written compelling stories that offer students an opportunity to learn along with the characters, to take a sort of journey of their own, one that will likely inspire as many questions as answers. But such is the nature of traveling; it almost always takes us somewhere unexpected.

Toby Emert is a professor in the Department of Education at Agnes Scott College, a small liberal arts school for women, located just outside Atlanta, Georgia. He teaches courses in literature, literacy, research, and the arts, and writes about his work on arts-based instructional interventions, students with less access to quality educational experiences, and the need to advocate for more inclusive classrooms, especially classrooms that incorporate texts that feature queer and questioning characters. He is currently partnering with the Matthew Shepard Foundation to develop a teaching guide for the verbatim play *The Laramie Project*, writing about his work doing digital storytelling with refugee learners, and serving as panel chair for the Children’s and Young Adult Category of the Lambda Literary Awards. He can be contacted at temert@agnesscott.edu.

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