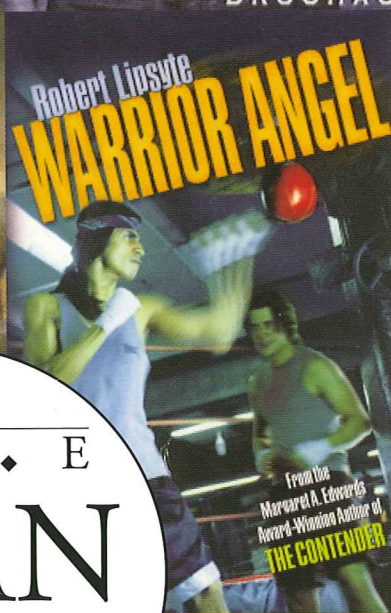
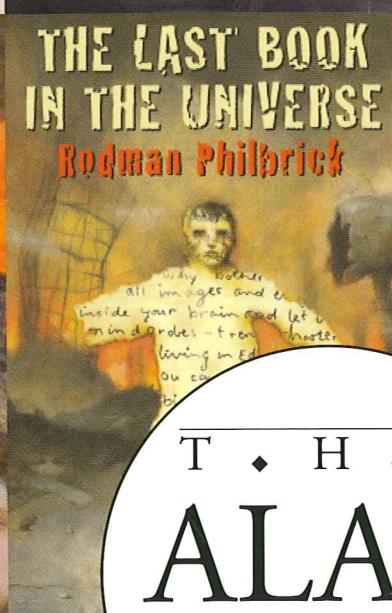
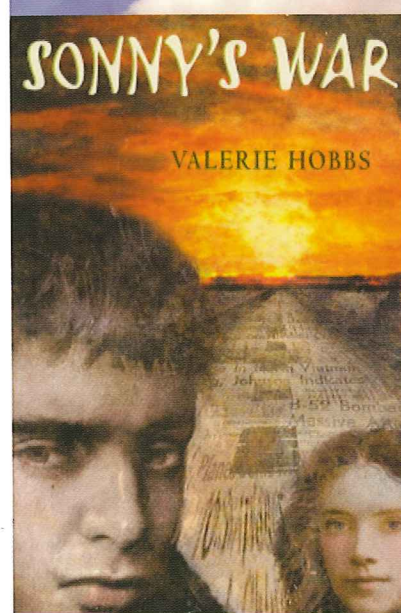
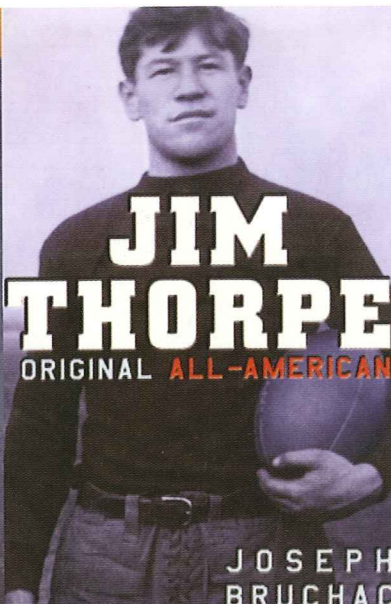
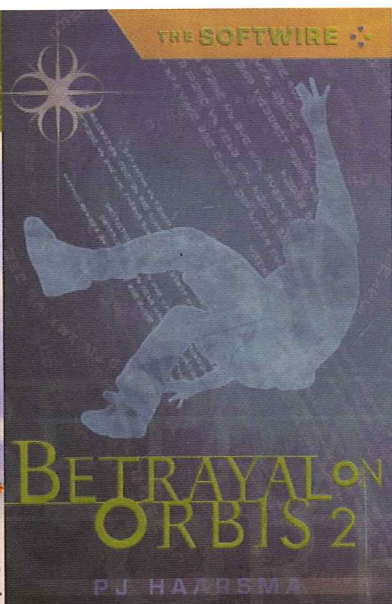
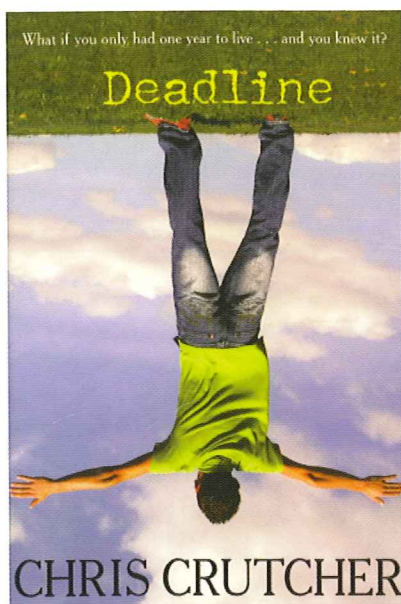
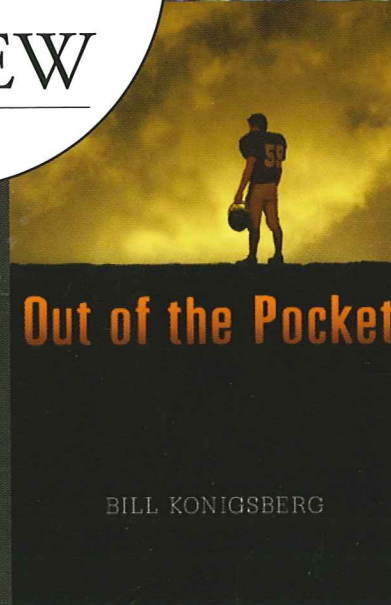
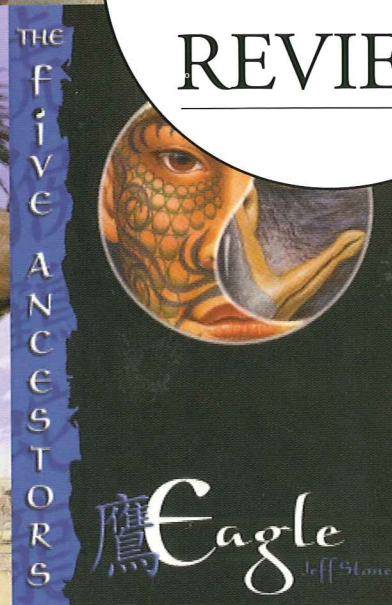
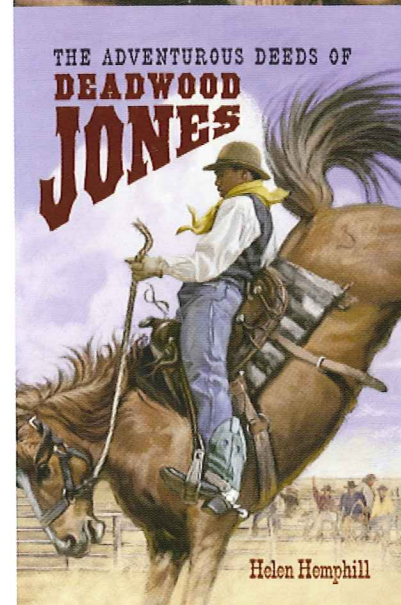




T • H • E

**ALAN**

REVIEW



# Writing and Teaching Historical Fiction:

The Lantern of Learning with L. M. Elliott

**T**he world of young adult literature is fortunate to have so many amazing authors of historical fiction. Sook Nyul Choi, L. M. Elliott, Karen Hesse, Trudy Krisher, Julius Lester, Lois Lowry, Harry Mazer, Walter Dean Myers, Linda Sue Park, Katherine Paterson, Richard Peck, Ann Rinaldi, and Jane Yolen are just a sampling of the great authors of historical fiction providing a lantern for learning about history and the connectedness of humankind in times of peace and prosperity, as well as in poverty, war, and transition. Historical fiction plunges readers into the past in a way that allows them to think, feel, and reason with greater complexity; awareness heightens and understanding deepens.

L. M. Elliott, author of ten books, including five YA historical novels, has been particularly appealing to my students at Ohio University, but I did not have the pleasure of meeting her in person until the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English (ALAN) Workshop in New York City in 2007. I had used Laura's books primarily in my young adult literature classes, but in 2007, I assigned *Annie, Between the States* (2004) to my English Education methods class as the book around which they were to build an instructional unit. Having spent a quarter with the novel and developing a wide range of strategies for teaching it, this group of students traveled with me to NCTE's Annual Convention, where they met Laura during one of her autograph ses-

sions. The students were thrilled, and Laura recalled their enthusiasm when, a day later, I introduced myself and told her that my students were so compelled by *Annie*, it was as if they had added the protagonist to their group of friends.

Laura is a bright and beautiful person who cares deeply about history and about sharing the past with young people in meaningful and memorable ways. As one of my students, Ashley Aldrich, said after reading *Under a War-Torn Sky* (2001), "This book took me on an emotional roller coaster. I was constantly turning the page to see what was happening next, and I felt sadness and exhilaration right along with Henry during his journey. When [Henry] finally made it home and Clayton drops the eggs to embrace him, I felt the bottom drop out from under me, a whole rush of emotions. I found it so easy to be engrossed in the book and to lose myself in Henry's story."

Besides having a passion for history, the award-winning L. M. Elliott also genuinely cares about teaching and teachers. What began as a casual but energetic discussion at the ALAN reception in November 2007

continued over the course of a year as Laura answered questions that I and my students had about her, her writing process, and specific details from *Under a War-Torn Sky* (2001), *Annie, Between the States* (2004), and *Give Me Liberty* (2006). This article also gives a sneak peek into the author's latest book, *A Troubled Peace* (a sequel to *Under a War-Torn Sky*, available September

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**Besides having a passion for history, the award-winning L. M. Elliott also genuinely cares about teaching and teachers.**

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2009), and brief explanations of five projects, each supported with examples of student work.

## **Writing Historical Fiction: An Interview with L. M. Elliott**

**You must have a real love of history to write the kinds of books you do. How did this become a passion of yours?**

I grew up outside Washington, D.C., very aware of history in the making. Although it has since been swallowed up in suburbs, my hometown then was a small, close-knit community. Neighbors took time for garden parties and drop-by conversations over lemonade. Elderly and young mixed readily, and anecdotes about deceased friends wove their way into the conversation as easily as politics of the day. History was personal, told through ancestors' tales of hard times or unlikely romances—that of a local young woman with the Union officer who arrested her was a particularly intriguing story to this impressionable, budding author and became the seed for *Annie, Between the States*.

I lived in the house my grandfather built, near my great-grandfather's home. So I was used to the permanence of old things and deep roots. I just felt part of a natural continuum. It wasn't unusual to discover Civil War bullets in our rose beds or old documents crammed into desk drawers, like a decidedly unromantic letter from my great-grandfather telling his soon-to-be-bride that he loved her enough to marry her despite the fact it would ruin his political career—she was Irish Catholic, another inspiration for *Annie*.

**How was history taught when you were in school? Are there any particular projects or experiences that stand out as especially wonderful or horrible (i.e., boring) ways of learning?**

I see what intrigues my son. For WWI, his eighth-grade teacher assigned a series of short projects—a report on a poet and another on a military leader (my son chose the colorful Red Baron); a fictional journal of a day in the trenches; and a personal response to propaganda posters. The students conducted their research mostly on PBS's really fine website. Once my son clicked onto it, he spent hours browsing, absorbed by its collection of photos, letters, diaries, music, newspaper headlines that make the tragedy of that war very tangible, very human.

**What are some of your favorite historically based novels and/or films, particularly about the eras about which you have written, and why?**

For 1940s lingo and fly-boy swagger—*Twelve O'clock High*, *Memphis Belle*, *The Best Years of our Lives*, *Casablanca*. To understand occupied Europe: *Charlotte Gray*, *Au Revoir Les Enfants*, *The Pianist*, *Schindler's List*. Irene Nemirovsky's *Suite Francaise* had a tremendous impact on my upcoming sequel, *A Troubled Peace*. A Russian Jew émigré, her ability to portray a German officer with compassion was remarkable, humbling. She died in Auschwitz. A line in its afterword, about her daughters—truly, one line—told me where Henry should find Pierre. I worked backwards from there. For the Civil War, *Killer Angels* and *Across*

*Five Aprils* provide many differing perspectives. The movie *Cold Mountain* powerfully shows how imperiled the women left alone on isolated farms were.

**Which of the following are most influential in informing your writing of historically based novels: interviews, travel, library research, or other? Please expand a bit on how you approach writing novels so that they are rich, contextualized, and accurate reflections of past eras, conflicts, and ways of life.**

All these things are part of “reporting” fiction, just as I reported magazine articles. They tell me what to write—I don't start out with a premise that I then try to prove. For instance, in *Annie, Between the States*, I grew up with the story of two young women of the area, one accused of spying who married the Union officer who escorted her to prison, and another who was celebrated in poems by the flamboyant cavalry general, J.E.B. Stuart. But the bulk of that book came from reading dozens of journals, letters, battle reports, interviewing historians and re-enactors. For *Give Me Liberty*, I read the *Virginia Gazettes* of 1774-75 through Colonial Williamsburg's Digital Library. I stumbled onto ads run by a loyalist carriage-maker whose competitor responded by blasting him as “the Palace Street Puffer.” Further searches showed notices

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**A line in its afterword,  
about her daughters—  
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where Henry should find  
Pierre.**

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about his runaway indentured servants and pleas for his customers to pay him. The real-life Elkanah Deane became the irritable taskmaster for Nathaniel and a way of showing the plight of loyalists or those who simply wished to remain neutral.

Travel was particularly important to *Under a War-torn Sky* and its sequel, *A Troubled Peace*. Climbing France's Vercors mountains

showed me how truly terrifying it must have been to walk those cliffhanging passes in the dark, as escaping flyers had to. Standing in a small Resistance museum in the Morvan before a wall of photos of the youth who simply disappeared, I was reminded—starkly—that my story had to be as much about these idealistic, courageous civilians as about a lost American pilot. It's estimated that for each of the 5,000 American and British flyers saved, one French child, woman, or man died.

For the sequel, after learning returning deportees were processed through the elegant art deco Hotel Lutetia, I went to Paris and stayed in it. My descriptions of the irony of those emaciated concentration camp survivors being housed there are far richer as a result. I also discovered a statue in the park across the street that ended up being quite important symbolically. I never would have known it was there had I not wandered into the park one afternoon. Also, standing in the Gare de l'Est train station, I witnessed the scene I wrote to conclude the afterword. The book's most palpable details came from primary sources—journals that told of being rationed to one hour of electricity a day; people being jailed for fighting over matches because replacements wouldn't be found; the heart-breaking pleas of starved deportees to taste cherries that would kill them in their frail condition; deportees being sprayed with DDT to remove typhus-carrying lice.

**What themes did you aim to develop in *Give Me Liberty*, and what else helped you to develop the novel?**

We forget how truly radical a notion it was that common man, no matter how poor or ill-educated, had the inborn capability—intellectually and morally—to

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**I stumbled onto ads run by a loyalist carriage-maker whose competitor responded by blasting him as "the Palace Street Puffer."**

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govern himself. No longer were kings, noblemen, church officials *the* authority. The stirring words of Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry literally turned the world upside down. Of course, the "power of words" theme can't carry a whole novel, but seeing how abstract philosophies can push ordinary boys, yeomen, and farmers to take up their Brown Bess muskets and face off with the most powerful empire

in the world—now there's a story!

My first decision was to make my young protagonist, Nathaniel, an indentured servant so that his journey from a frightened, timid servant to a willing volunteer in the 2nd Virginia Regiment could symbolize how immense a leap it was to go from being a king's subject to someone who could potentially carve out new laws for a new country. After that, all I needed was a plot! In a rather dry historical journal, I read of a little known but pivotal battle in December 1775 at Great Bridge, just outside Norfolk, Virginia. Here the Chesapeake Bay opens onto the Atlantic Ocean. Had the British won, they would have bottled up the bay, cutting the colonies in half. Goods traveled mostly by water in those days. A blockaded bay might mean that no supplies or reinforcements from Virginia or Maryland could get to the Atlantic Ocean to sail up the coastline to George Washington and the Continental Army struggling in New York. The Revolution might have ended before it could really begin.

But the British didn't seize the bay because of a rag-tag group of resolute, ordinary men, who crouched behind makeshift barricades and refused to run even as line-after-line of British regulars crossed the bridge. The well-armed professionals were routed in a mere twenty minutes by patriots who brought their own muskets and tomahawks to do battle. Their uniforms were merely hunting shirts they'd sewn themselves and embroidered with "Liberty or Death," Patrick Henry's galvanizing call to fight. See? The power of words!

It was the perfect climactic ending for the book. But the facts of the battle contained even more. Runaway slaves fought at the Battle of Great Bridge, not for the Americans, but for the Redcoats, as part of Lord Dunmore's Royal Ethiopian Regiment. They

mocked Patrick Henry's rousing "Liberty or Death" by wearing a sash that read: "Liberty to Slaves." That terrible irony insisted that my protagonist, Nathaniel, have a dear friend with an opposing story line, a slave with the Ethiopians, whom he must face in battle.

**So research forms your ideas and helps your stories to unfold. Can you expand on that a bit, particularly considering the negative responses teachers get from students when we suggest they "research."**

But that's where the gold lies! Research is the treasure hunt, the fun. I'd much rather research than write! Unearthing that one little battle provided me with an ending, two main characters, an important moral dilemma, and the thematic spine of my novel—independence, its promise, its responsibilities. It even suggested a double-edged title.

For Nathaniel, the plea "Give Me Liberty" offers the gift of being able to make his own choices; it ultimately redeems and redefines him. Conversely, the slave, Moses, personifies the tragic irony that defined American history for a hundred years. Moses cries out in despair when he and Nathaniel stumble onto one another as enemies in the Battle of Great Bridge: "You fighting for people who whine for their own liberty and keep me in chains?"

**What do you see as important aspects of writing historical fiction?**

Good historical fiction fills a reader's mind with the *human drama* that is history. As a child, hearing my dad's stories of surviving behind Nazi lines, I used to play "French Resistance" in the woods behind my house, darting from tree to tree, creeping up on my poor, hapless dog told to sit and be an Aryan sen-try. What was I doing? I was mulling over what I'd learned, wondering—what would I do given a Nazi occupation and neighbors who might be collaborators? Would I step out of the shadows and take the hand of a lost American boy, knowing I could be executed for doing so?

This is what historical fiction can do for our young people. Not just stuff their minds with sterile timelines, battles, speeches, and the bios of national leaders that they

regurgitate like multiplication tables. Good historical fiction will plop readers into the shoes of a person of that era so they can walk the emotional journey from doubt to belief, from fear to courage, from danger to peace. Doing so, they will far better understand who we are today.

To fully accomplish this, historical fiction must be rich in "telling" details—like a Vermeer painting, with their painstakingly lush backdrops. If it's done well, teenagers will absorb all sorts of knowledge without really realizing it!

**What are some examples of these "brushstrokes" as they apply to *Give Me Liberty* or *Annie*, *Between the States* that you can share to help our readers understand what you mean?**

To catch their attention, the grittier the detail the better—like the fact that common colds were treated in the 18th-century with a concoction of curdled milk, wine, and pickled deer antler slices. Rich women would dress their hair with bears' grease and cinnamon before powdering it, or pop small balls of cork in their mouths to prevent their cheeks looking sunken due to lost teeth. To earn 40 shillings, the poor with good teeth might sell one to a "surgeon" advertising in the *Virginia Gazette*, who also happened to teach sword play and tune harpsichords. I don't suppose he offered any painkillers.

But in terms of building a character, it's essential to "show rather than tell" personality, motivation, what constrains or challenges her; the opening pages of *Annie* provide a good example of the power of little details. Journalism taught me not to pussyfoot around in the lead—to drop the reader straight into the thick of things. So I start in the middle of the First Battle of Manassas, cannons blasting, cavalry jumping fences,

wounded men staggering through cornfields, groaning. How to insert a 15-year-old girl? From reading, I knew that the ill-prepared armies left hundreds of wounded on that battlefield. I knew medicine was primitive—lint scraped from sheets was used to staunch bleeding (think of that fluff you pull out of your dryer); wounds were stitched together with long strands of horse's tails. Victorian society

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**For Nathaniel, the plea "Give Me Liberty" offers the gift of being able to make his own choices; it ultimately redeems and redefines him.**

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frowned on women dealing with blood, and yet, here were all these boys—blue and gray—lying on the ground before the women of Manassas. Soldiers were often saved from death by bundles of letters or books they carried in their breast pocket deflecting bullets. And from a list of 1860s sayings I had compiled came a great phrase for being stupid: *pea-wit*. Isn't that poetical?—a brain the size of a pea!

So here's my opening: Annie, whose brother is fighting out there somewhere with the Virginia cavalry

is confronted with a Union soldier lying on her aunt's front porch, bleeding from his chest. She tries to steel herself to cram a ball of lint into his wound with the thought: "Stop being such a pea-wit." But she hesitates to unbutton his jacket—decorum forbade such a thing. Ultimately,

her mother treats the man and discovers that a book of Keats poetry in his jacket had stopped a bullet from piercing the officer's heart. Annie, a voracious reader, is stunned to find her "enemy" would enjoy such gentle verse.

It is the beginning of a cloistered girl having to face the brutal realities of war, the beginning of her questioning its dogma. It is the beginning of Annie, caught "between the states"—all within a few hundred words that also display the medicine, propriety, language, and popular literature of the time.

**Besides using these brushstrokes to paint a clearer picture of the past, what are some ways that you try to ensure the stories will resonate with today's readers?**

It's not as if the past can't address conundrums of today. For instance, to place my thirteen-year-old Nathaniel into the 2nd Virginia regiment, he would have to be a fifer. A soldier's minimum age was sixteen. To learn about fifers, I read a first-person account by Samuel Dewess. It is full of their hardships and hopes, but the most disturbing nugget in it is the fact that these boys—some as young as ten—were the ones who had to dole out the corporal punishment ordered by officers—lashings with cat-o-nine-tails.

One of the sad realities I learned covering family

issues is that abused children often grow up to abuse others. Such patterns exist on lesser degrees—ostracized teenagers, once accepted, often shun others like them; young athletes pushed to the ground often get up and foul their opponents as badly or worse. People have to make a conscious decision to act differently and better. So, I present Nathaniel the chance to revenge himself on a bully. He is ordered to whip that boy for stealing food (a typical offense, by the way, that could bring forty lashes). It takes real moral fortitude and compassion for Nathaniel to choose *not* to whip Jeremiah, to *not* replicate the abuse he suffered. He remembers what a character told him, that one of life's greatest challenges is "deciding to not let past sadness or mistreatment rule the way we act, to live as if each day presents a new, hopeful possibility." Our teens can use that message.

**You seem to have some of the concerns of young adults in mind when you write. What are some other age-appropriate themes for teens to be found in history?**

There are hundreds. In *Annie, Between the States*, for instance, the largest quandary Annie faces is choosing her own course, what she believes is right amid the pressures of family, regional culture, and friends. One specific—she must assess the flirtatious rhetoric of a very charismatic, incredibly charming man who inspired hundreds to join his romanticized "cause." Is what he preaches truly valid? Our teenagers are presented with such challenges all the time by pop culture and the "popular" kids in school hallways. I hope my characters help build empathetic, *independent* thinkers of our future.

**How did you get your start as a writer? What formal training do you have, and do you think that formal training matters more or less than other factors?**

I wrote for school newspapers and literary magazines, and edited the yearbook at Wake Forest University. I do have a masters in journalism from the University of North Carolina, but I suspect the day-to-day practice of being an editor on the *Daily Tarheel* was ultimately more beneficial than the class work for the degree.

**You worked as a journalist for over 15 years before launching your career as a novelist of young adult literature. Would you expand upon the influence of**

**your journalistic background and share any strategies you would suggest for aspiring writers?**

My “beat”—family issues, medical and mental health narratives—taught me to make issues human, to write about ordinary people pushing themselves with stubborn fortitude to do extraordinary things in tough circumstances, like the civilians in my novels. To clearly illustrate the stresses of cancer treatments, for instance, I followed a very young mother through her harrowing bone marrow transplant. Such stories are best told through scenes, and if I was not able to witness them, I reconstructed them by interviewing everyone involved, asking: what did the doctor say, what about the nurse, what frightened you, what gave you strength, what did you hear, smell, who held your hand, what did you tell your children? I learned that good writing is like building a drip sand castle at the beach, detail upon detail to build a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter.

In terms of basic techniques, columnist/novelist Anna Quindlin says the best training for her novels was her work as a journalist. I agree. Journalism teaches a writer to make deadlines, to be observant, to use the pithiest words possible. Interviewing and recording verbatim what sources say is the perfect preparation for creating believable dialogue. Writing to space forces self-discipline—throwing out what is extraneous or not well turned. Journalism also introduces the writer to editing, that extra pair of eyes, that mentoring.

In short, journalism teaches professionalism. Writing is about sweating it out—10% inspiration and 90% perspiration, as Thomas Edison said of science. It’s not about hypothesizing or whining about writer’s block. What about that 10 percent, then? That ephemeral inspiration? A writer must catch that. She must watch, listen, and try to imagine what the person across the room feels about his situation. She is a little bit of an eavesdropper with a painter’s eye and lots of empathy, a wind chime sounding as the world brushes past.

Carry a notebook for that eureka moment when life presents an idea. Or use that cell phone to leave a message. Because life dangles ideas right in front of us—the best ideas, in fact. The thinnest stories, the ones that don’t resonate, are the ones that are spawned by essentially saying, “Hmmm, what should I write about today?” The best stories are the ones life

makes you write—that so capture or baffle you that you need to comment or try to understand better. I also write picture books. My first was simply a bedtime story for my son when he got busted at preschool for following the antics of a classmate—it was to help him think through strategies to avoid such trouble in the future, not simply lecture him with “if your best friend jumped off a cliff...?” Had I been assigned a story on peer pressure, I don’t think I would have come up with something as authentic as what real life handed me. *Be that wind chime.*

**Your novels *Give Me Liberty* and *Annie, Between the States* deal with conflicts that took place on American soil but well over 100 years ago. When you consider the events of September 11, 2001, alongside the American Revolution and the American Civil War, what thoughts go through your mind?**

9-11 is a tragic reminder of how violence can come so unexpectedly. The world is still a dangerous place, peppered with cruel, fanatical individuals who clearly do not understand the American spirit or our tenacity. The common thread between those wars and 9-11 is the phenomenal quick-response courage of our citizens, their stubborn devotion to others even within a firestorm.

**Whether a formal award or a more personal moment, what has been the highlight of your career as a writer?**

This will sound corny—the envelope arriving with the very first copy of *Under a War-torn Sky* was pretty thrilling. I am proud of the articles people said helped them get out of damaging situations. Same thing when I receive letters from boys that start out, “I don’t like books, *but* after reading *Under a War-torn Sky*, I want to read more . . . .” As a mother, that moment is watching my children smile or nod as they read one of my first drafts. And it’s always gratifying to see students’ creative responses to something I started and to know my characters have touched readers enough for them to worry about what happens next. They are like children, you know, so you want people to care about them!

**The dust jacket of your books says that you live in Virginia with your husband, daughter, and son. Can you tell us about your children? How old are they?**

**Which of your books have they read (especially interested in *Annie*, *Between the States* and *Under a War-Torn Sky*), and what kind of feedback do they give you about your writing?**

My children are my muses, truly. They are voracious, inquisitive readers, my first and often my best editors. Because they were so widely read, if something I've written is unclear to them, I definitely need to rework it. And, happily, they aren't shy about telling me so. Their questions, their wanting more about certain elements, direct my plot choices and character development.

My son, Peter, now 15, has a wry sense of humor. His laughter at *Give Me Liberty's* eccentric old schoolmaster, Basil, inspired me to push that loveable character a bit to flesh out the gentle humor he offered. Peter helped name the characters, walked the streets of Williamsburg with me, and patiently fielded my questions about what personas in town and which events interested him most. Recently, his reading of Elie Wiesel's *Night* and his horror at Nazi atrocities told me how much to include in *A Troubled Peace*. He has a strong moral compass, a great respect for life and others. He easily befriends peers, both teammates and opponents, on his travel and school sports teams. I hope all boys can read this book with the kind of concern for humanity my son does. I see now, in hindsight, why I might have named Pierre as I did. And certainly, now that Peter is 15 and only three years away from the age of many of those aircrew, I feel even more urgency to create books that advocate peace over the brutality of war.

My daughter, Megan, now 20, traveled to Paris with me when I researched the sequel. With her educated love of French culture and literature, she was my astute and unflappable translator and editor. Her insights into Claudette—a passionate and sometimes reckless teenager—were particularly helpful. Megan is partly responsible for my tailoring *Under a War-torn Sky* for young adults. We were at the beach when she was in third grade and reading *Number the Stars*. When she closed the book, she wanted to know exactly who were Axis powers and who were Allies. *Exactly*. I

ended up drawing a map of Europe as best I could in the sand. We attracted quite a crowd—grandparent veterans, preteens actually asking questions. I could see the youth knew about the Holocaust, but not about the brave civilians who fought Hitler's genocide.

Without my realizing it, my children's personalities often seep into my characters. When a friend read *Annie* for the first time, he laughed and said, "Well, Annie is Megan"—a courageous, independent, book-loving tomboy with a lot of grit and compassion. Megan also happens to be the model on the novel's cover. HarperCollins needed a 15-year-old, and Katherine asked if Megan would pose. We had great fun together at that shoot.

**Do your children realize their mom is a famous author, and if so, what is that like for them and for you?**

I certainly hope that they don't take me that seriously! In fact, there was a time when my husband was working for National Wildlife Federation. I was writing for a magazine, and a very young Megan asked, "Daddy is helping save the world [animals are very important in our household], what do you do, Mom?" I see writing as more of a craft than an art, myself more artisan than "artiste." Real life is my inspiration and, therefore, the art in it, if that makes sense. They see that I don't lock myself in a closet to write—I have edited chapters in carpool lines or while waiting for their soccer games and horse events. I watch movies for details of clothes, lingo, etc., while I fold laundry. Their cats lie all over my desk, so it's no ivory tower around here! They hear my silly phone messages—"Not *Stuart Little*, too soon"—things I couldn't jot down while

driving that make sense to me. The only schools I'm nervous talking to, though, are theirs—I don't want to embarrass them somehow! The real joy has been my sharing all of this with them—I am lucky to have a profession they can witness and be actively involved in. And right now, anyway, my son hopes to be a newspaper reporter.

**What about your husband's role in your career as a writer?**

[My husband John] has been a

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**His laughter at *Give Me Liberty's* eccentric old schoolmaster, Basil, inspired me to push that loveable character a bit to flesh out the gentle humor he offered.**

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constant, steady support of me since college. He is a high school English teacher, and he is exceedingly good at reminding me of things that capture teenage readers—boys in particular. After all, he needs to catch their attention daily to teach them well. Henry eats a bug in *Under a War-Torn Sky* because John encouraged me to do that—“they’ll love that stuff,” he said. I foolishly didn’t listen when he gently advised me to change the way I initially opened *Under a War-Torn Sky*. I “book ended” the story, starting with Lilly [Henry’s mother] worrying about Henry’s whereabouts as she prepares Thanksgiving dinner, then dropped back in time to bring Henry and the reader forward to the day at which the book started. He told me, “They won’t care about the mother.” Well, I was a mother—how could they not care about the mother? It was the first thing my editor said to me—change the opening.

Because of John’s work, I am very aware of high school curriculum. I was thrilled that Camus was a large voice in the Resistance and in Paris after the war and naturally warranted a spot in *A Troubled Peace*. John teaches *The Stranger*, and teenagers struggle so with existentialism. With Henry and Pierre, on the ravaged streets of post-war France, they can hopefully come to better understand the context of Camus’ philosophy on the absurd.

### **Under a War-Torn Sky**

**The Afterword indicates that your inspiration for *Under a War-Torn Sky* came from your father, who seemed to resemble Henry. Can you share how the story came about? What was it like for your father to share his story and for you to hear his story? Were there details you left out because they were too personal or traumatic?**

*Under a War-torn Sky* grew out of a factual account I wrote of my father’s WWII homecoming—the result of my being assigned the task of writing a heartwarming article, one that would remind readers of the meaning of the December holidays. Such assignments strike horror in the hearts of writers because it is so easy to be hackneyed. Thankfully, it hit me that one of the

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**One of the most moving stories I’d ever heard was that of my father, who’d been missing in action and presumed dead, walking up the driveway of his farm the week before Christmas 1944.**

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most moving stories I’d ever heard was that of my father, who’d been missing in action and presumed dead, walking up the driveway of his farm the week before Christmas 1944. He was so gaunt, so unexpected, that at first only the family dog recognized him. WWII is full of such poignant, breath-taking anecdotes. Frankly, if someone can’t write a good WWII story, given all the pathos and triumph of the time, he/she is just a bad writer!

My father had shared his homecoming only a few times—quietly and with great emotion. He

tended to recount the more swashbuckling escape stories with the matter-of-fact bravado typical of flyers. But I had never heard the entirety of his trek across France, of thinking he was about to die, over and over again. It was quite an experience. Hard. Touching. Revealing.

Because of the types of stories I tended to write, I instinctively saw the magazine piece and eventually the novel as primarily a homecoming story, a resolution of a father and son’s troubled relationship, an odyssey of a boy becoming a man, finding his way through a tortured land to home. But *Under a War-torn Sky* is not my father’s story. Yes, Henry Forester’s personality, his relationship with his father, and the homecoming are modeled on my father’s experiences. Everything else, though, came out of my imagination—from reading memoirs of Resistance fighters, flyers, newspapers, even culinary guides, so that when Henry ate, the food was correct, indigenous to that French region.

I didn’t purposefully omit some of my father’s experiences. It’s more that I used him as my springboard; he launched me. I added the wings through the reading and research. For instance, my dad told me about a Resistance worker the maquis called the “hatpin lady.” She would approach Germans seductively, lure them into an alley and, while they embraced, pull a long hatpin from her hat and stab into their ear, killing them. She struck me as a little too bitter, a little too bloodthirsty for young adults. However, you can see how Claudette might have evolved so tragically had Henry not helped her keep her instinctive humanity.

My dad never saw *Under a War-Torn Sky* in print. He was dying of skin cancer as I finished the manu-

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**I didn't purposefully omit some of my father's experiences. It's more that I used him as my springboard; he launched me.**

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script. I gave him galleys to read, and I regret it. The air battle chapters shoved him into a false memory of a very bad mission in which I was a gunner. But this will tell you everything about what a family man my father was. In the midst of that flashback, he suddenly cleared and asked me if it wasn't time

for me to leave the hospice and pick up my children at school. I hadn't noticed the clock. He was exactly right.

**You incorporate both French and German in the book. Why did you do this? What role did you want language to play?**

Flyers had to cope with it. Readers should experience—briefly—the discomfort, the confusion, the terror they felt. In his very first encounter, Henry bungles his French, saying he is a woman and likes America—instead of he is American and hungry. Anyone who's studied French knows how a slight misstep in pronunciation yields that embarrassing gaff. From that moment, Henry realizes that he can't use his school-French. In fact, it will imperil him in a land occupied by German-speaking Nazis where his only hope for survival are French-speaking strangers he can't really understand and who might be maquis or collaborators.

**Although Henry, the protagonist of *Under a War-Torn Sky*, is obviously male, several strong female characters (Madame Gaulloise, Patsy, and Claudette) are influential in helping him on his journey; they are even crucial to his staying alive. Were any of these women influenced by people in your own life or from your dad's stories?**

I've been blessed to know some really amazing, strong-willed, and eloquent women. My surrogate grandmother was a State Department lawyer during the 1920s and '30s. Believe me, that woman was bodacious. The influence for Madame Gaulloise, though, came mainly through my research—reading about

women like Lucie Aubrac, who saved her husband from the Gestapo by marching herself into their office and pretending her "boyfriend" had impregnated her without marrying her. The Gestapo could certainly execute him if they wanted, she said, but not before a marriage ceremony was conducted. Aubrac had an ambush waiting at the church, and her husband survived.

**Did you ever consider ending the story with Henry's death? Why or why not?**

No. The story was spawned by its ending, that moving homecoming. I did pause over the ending of *Annie, Between the States*, however. That misfired shot from Jamie's gun could easily have struck Thomas, Laurence, or Annie. I realized at that moment how glad I was to be writing for young adults. For adults, that bullet would have had to strike in such a way as to leave everyone ruined. But I didn't have to do that. And that's not to say that the ending is sugarcoated. I don't know if Charlotte will find the courage to marry Laurence, or if he will shed his pride to propose. I don't know that Annie will be so happy up in Massachusetts. Certainly Jamie is broken emotionally. But the *possibility* for those characters to find their way, to redeem their humanity, exists.

That's a possibility handed the writer by the YA lit genre. Teenagers want truth, they want reality, but they want it wrapped in hope—that they can make a difference with their dedication, their energy, their new ideas. So, I could keep Henry alive and write—about the Nazis' racism and brutality, the tragedy of the French people who died standing against them, and the fear of those American boys who fell out of the sky—not as a testament to the "evil" in man, but more as a celebration of the flicker of humanity that remained amid such carnage.

**What was your reasoning for keeping the fate of Pierre, Claudette, and Madame Gaulloise untold?**

Because that's the way it was in 1945. My father never knew what happened to the people who helped him. Ever. Their identities were purposefully kept secret so that it would be less likely that he might accidentally betray them if caught. Honestly, I hadn't planned a sequel. But I've written *A Troubled Peace* because readers seem so worried about Pierre, Claudette, and whether Patsy and Henry marry.

**Can you give us a glimpse into the sequel? A little sneak peek? When can we anticipate this book being in print?**

The sequel explores the aftermath of WWII. Henry is home physically, but not emotionally, suffering symptoms of what we now know as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In trying to resettle, to begin life anew, he realizes there are questions that must be answered first, such as what happened to Pierre? He returns to a France in upheaval, much of it left in rubble by Allied bombing and battles for liberation, reeling at the return of concentration camp survivors. I hope it's another compelling journey of redemption. I think it has a timeliness, given the return of our soldiers from Iraq and the withdrawal of our troops.

**Annie, Between the States**

**Virginia was the last state to leave the Union and the state with the most inhabitants voting against secession. No doubt this made it a pivotal state in the American Civil War. Can you expand a bit on this context as it affected your writing of *Annie, Between the States*?**

Virginia withstood the overwhelming portion of the war's battles—123 of the 384 pivotal ones. Tennessee came next with 38. Virginia was the feedbag, hospital, camp, and burial ground for two armies that staggered back and forth across its lands, neither quite establishing lasting dominance over the other. Warrenton, near Annie's home, changed hands 67 times. Each time soldiers went through, the men needed water, chickens, fresh horses and grain for them, whether friend or foe, kind or belligerent. Annie's farm—anyone's farm in their path—was necessary fodder.

**Why did you choose to put Annie on the Confederate side?**

One reviewer wrote that my novels tend to deal with choices—individuals growing enough internally to make their own, potentially controversial, decisions. And certainly that guided me as I cast Annie's personality. I wanted her to be a thinker, someone motivated by love and loyalty to family, yet also smart enough, inquisitive enough, moral enough to question the rhetoric of her community. Presenting her with that kind of challenge basically required she be a Confederate, uncomfortable with the practice of slavery and its horrific prejudices. As a Virginian, she would be right in

the middle—in the middle of battles, disturbing ethical questions, and political disagreements within her own family. I think the thematic challenge of Annie having to weigh many influences and reject a few—like slavery—to come up with her own unique beliefs is an important example for teen readers. I applaud YA literature's and cinema's current willingness to delve into the “bad side” to discover the good human beings there, like *Soldier X* and the movie *Valkyrie*.

**How about an example of how research informed your creation of other characters?**

I read about 20 history texts just to track battles and decide where to locate Annie's house. Little things I found expanded and enriched characters, even created some. I read a woman's account of trying to save the life of a boy by sticking her finger into a severed artery in his neck. She prayed with him before letting go, since there was nothing the doctors of that day could do to save him. That heart-wrenching anecdote deepened my portrait of Annie's kind mother. The report of a “high-spirited girl” in Warrenton making a good-natured bet with a Union officer occupying her town regarding the Federals' ultimate defeat embodied the strange convivial repartee between Confederate and Union leaders, and spawned Eliza, Annie's rival for friendship with Charlotte. Reading *Lee's Lieutenants*, I came across the photo of a beautiful young man, with huge sad eyes, named William Farley, killed at Brandywine Station. I had to include that Shakespeare-loving youth—he was the perfect romance for Annie, thus making a point of the travesty of all those boys killed so young.

**In America's history, the Civil War is second only to World War II in its number of casualties and injuries. Clearly war is dirty and dangerous. Of the various injuries incurred by war veterans, was there a particular reason you chose for Laurence to lose an arm?**

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**One reviewer wrote that my novels tend to deal with choices—individuals growing enough internally to make their own, potentially controversial, decisions.**

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**Seeing farms burned and crops destroyed in a kind of scorched earth policy, as ordered by Grant, would have embittered forever a boy like Jamie.**

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doing old things. He carries the wounds of war, but must also get past them.

**After Laurence is injured and can no longer fight in the war or take proper care of the home, it seems Jamie might wise up and become the responsible, bread-winning male of the family. But instead he fights in the army. Was this his way of protecting his family, even though Annie and Laurence thought otherwise? Can you expand a bit on Jamie's choices and connection with family?**

Jamie is ruined by the war. He was a hothead to begin with, a boy who felt competitive with his older brother, Laurence, and was driven to prove himself. At that young age, he could only see the glory, the glamour of the cavalry. Mosby's rangers were especially romanticized, legendary in their daring. His band of riders would be particularly alluring to a boy like Jamie. Loudoun and Fauquier counties experienced some of the worst retributions doled out by Union troops, who were sick of dealing with Mosby's surprise, hit-and-run attacks. Seeing farms burned and crops destroyed in a kind of scorched earth policy, as ordered by Grant, would have embittered forever a boy like Jamie. He was stunted in his emotional growth, caught forever in that absolute black-or-white thinking of the young teen.

Historians are mixed in their assessment of Mosby, by the way. As much as he is credited with protecting the Northern Virginia area from deserters and rogue groups, many feel residents suffered far more reprisals and raids than they would have had the Union not been trying to ferret out Mosby. He was autocratic, extreme, and self-righteous in his opinions, a Lord Byron aficionado—not one to seek others' counsel. Not a great role model for a boy like Jamie.

Amputations were common during the Civil War, but it also serves a symbolic purpose. Losing an arm hampers Laurence physically and spiritually without rendering him helpless. He can still ride, for instance. But he will need to figure out how to chop wood, to write with his left hand—new ways of seeing and

Jamie provides an important foil to Annie's growth. The cruelties of war have taught her to see beyond what she has been told to think. Laurence, too, can rise above hatred and prejudice because he has such a strong code of ethics and the ability to respect the same in his opponents. Tragically, Jamie is left only with his anger.

### **Teaching Historical Fiction: Student Responses to L. M. Elliott's Novels**

Whether teaching the American Revolution, the Civil War, or World War II, L. M. Elliott's young adult fiction helps history come to life for students. As one of my students, Erin Katherine Sykes, stated:

Novels make history more powerful, more real, more tangible. I've never had a history teacher who used novels to teach history. We always used textbooks alone. But I imagine how powerful my education would have been if my history courses were augmented with young adult novels. Reading books like *Give Me Liberty*, *Annie*, *Between the States*, or *Under a War-Torn Sky* in a history class would have made history more than just events and names and places to memorize. . . . Connecting with the characters would have increased my compassion for those who lived through wars, and also for those who currently live through war.

In this next section, I will offer brief explanations of projects used to prompt students' deeper exploration of the novels. Having shared several of these examples of student work with L. M. Elliott (Laura), I am also including excerpts from her responses, another sign of the immense caring Laura has not only for history and writing, but for their impact on student learning.

#### **Strategy 1: Explore the Theme of Separation.**

Each of Laura's young adult novels deals with separation in some way. After carefully considering one of these moments of separation, imagine what one of the affected characters was thinking and feeling. Compose a response.

**Example by Jen Ator in response to *Give Me Liberty*:** Jen titled her response "Goodbye, My Son" (see Fig. 1). When asked about her approach, she said:

I wanted to imagine what Nathaniel's father was thinking as he walked away from his son. The novel is based so tightly on Nathaniel's memories and feelings about his father, but I was curious to explore what his father might

truly be like. Had he felt regret for leaving his son so long ago? Had he wished to find him again? Or had he truly just given up on life with the death of his wife? After their final scene together, I wrote this based on my perception of who Mr. Dunn was as a man.

Asked to respond to “Goodbye, My Son,” Laura especially noted Jen’s voice and unique perspective, stating, “[Jen] really captured Dunn’s emotional isolation, the sad perversion of his hope in the future that brought him to the New World... I am so glad that [Jen] wanted to know what Dunn’s reaction would be to seeing his son alive and thriving without him.”

#### **Strategy 2: Map the Journey of a Character.**

This can be mapping the geographical or emotional journey. Create a visual map of some sort, and accompany it with a written explanation of how this project contributed to your understanding of the character’s physical and/or emotional journey.

**Example by Ashley Aldrich in response to *Under a War-Torn Sky*:** Ashley used maps of Spain, France, and Germany to depict the journey of downed fighter pilot Henry Forester, the book’s protagonist. Most compelling was Ashley’s written response; an excerpt follows:

While reading the novel, I found it hard to actually picture the distance Henry had to walk to get to Spain. While all the action happening in the story, it’s easy to forget about the many miles of travel and how hard it would be on someone’s body physically. I wanted a greater understanding of the physical distance Henry traveled. . . . Seeing the actual map of his journey created in me an even deeper respect for Henry, particularly when paired with his emotional journey.

A section of the story that stuck out in my mind while completing this project was when Henry was so close to crossing over into Spain and then was captured by the Germans, who slowly took him back into France and away from his goal. He is dragged even further back into France after being caught a second time with Claudette. This illustrated the almost hopelessness of Henry ever reaching home when he was so close; for me, this brought the struggle to life even more than just words alone. . . . The map also helped me to imagine the difficulty the French Resistance had in coordinating the evacuation of the people it helped. While France is not a large country as compared to the United States, the Resistance still has to cover a lot of ground, especially in Henry’s case; had everyone not been working together, Henry may not have made it home.

**Strategy 3: Examine Contrasts through Creative Writing.** Elliott’s novels are filled with contrasts. Find two contrasting scenes and merge them in a creative writing of your choice. Follow your creative work with a short essay explaining what you set out to accomplish.

**Example by Michael Rinaldi-Eichenberg in response to *Under a War-Torn Sky*:** In response to this project option, Michael wrote a poem entitled “Give Me Wings to Fly Away” (see Fig. 2). Michael describes his poem as being told in Henry’s voice, starting with “the scene in which Henry is locked in a cell with a dying dog and begins to hallucinate.” With great detail and full engagement of the senses, Michael’s poems depict a dream-like encounter in which Madame Gauloise helps to build up Henry’s strength and willpower to carry on, then the dream is interrupted as the Gestapo wakes Henry. In Michael’s own words, “the twist of events from despair, to hope, and ultimately

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#### Goodbye, My Son by Jen Ator

The walk home to this isolated cabin has never been so lonely. Just seeing Nathaniel, all grown up and matured, fighting as a free man for his cause, has made me realize how little of me is in him. I am not strong or brave--the only reason I came into battle was for the blood of the British who had ruined my life. Nathaniel, he came for a cause. He fought for liberty. He remained loyal to his men and stayed true to his beliefs. Loyalty is something I’ve never known much about. I think the only loyalty I have ever known is my commitment to my misery after my beloved wife passed. To think, I willingly gave up on my own flesh and blood; I abandoned a son who needed his father, and I don’t know how or if you can reconcile that. But in the deepest part of my heart and conscious, can I even truly say that I want to? It was true, I had not once tried to find him or even so much as thought about his safety and wellbeing. I was too cooped up in my own selfish fears that I completely forgot about the son I abandoned, left to survive on his own in this new country. Even now, I am certain that my intentions to find him once war has passed us will not become reality. I might think about it, but never will I put in the work it takes to find my son. I will live out my days only to die alone, but I guess it’s what I deserve. My only hope is that Nathaniel will continue to be strong, continue to live a life full of inspiration, passion, and dedication to others. I only hope that, in my absence, Nathaniel will grow into the man that I never became.

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**Figure 1.** Student response to an “Explore the Theme” assignment

back to despair is indicative of Henry's journey." Having read Michael's poem, Laura responded that she was "impressed by the juxtaposition of the inspiring and the frightening within the novel. Henry's journey exposes him to the best and worst of human nature—bravery and cruelty, triumph and loss. And he has to find his courage in the midst of his own despair. The poem captures all that well."

**Strategy 4: The Sestina.** Admittedly, the sestina is a very challenging poetic form; however, it also provides a structure for creative writing that is often helpful to students who find it difficult to start with "free verse." A sestina is a 39-line poem comprised of six 6-line stanzas and a final tercet. The end words used in each of the six lines in stanza one are repeated in a specified order as end words in the remaining five 6-line stanzas; in the final tercet, all six end words are used in a specified order as well—three as end words, three in the middle of each line. Many websites offer detailed instructions for the sestina. A particularly good, scholarly example is that by Alberto Rios, which can be found at <http://www.public.asu.edu/~aarios/formsofverse/reports2000/page9.html>. In terms of choosing a topic for the sestina, the form works particularly well to convey characters and situations that create a sense of entrapment or circular thinking, so beginning by exploring such tensions in the novels may prove helpful.

**Example by Auburn Fauver in response to *Annie, Between the States*:** Auburn's sestina entitled "Annie's Light" (see Fig. 3) draws on the events that occurred throughout the protagonist's stay in Carroll Prison. The sestina effectively captures Annie's transformation from her loneliness in prison to her optimism for the future in the end. The details of the poem show how carefully Auburn read the novel; for example, she mentions that Annie saved bits of candle in her bonnet. In her reflective paper that accompanied her poem, Auburn wrote: "When I first began to work on the sestina, I found its strict structure very frustrating and limiting. However, the more I worked with it and moved things around, the more I began to enjoy its restrictive form. It forced me to re-arrange things and think of various ways to get my point across." This reflection might be worth sharing with students to help them anticipate how the processes of perseverance and critical thinking will help them through the initial challenges they encounter as they

write. In response to Auburn's sestina, Laura commented on its effectiveness as "very potent in displaying Annie's emotions. [There was] a good sense of the prison's starkness *and* Annie's resilient ability to

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**Give Me Wings to Fly Away**

by Michael Rinaldi-Eichenberg

*Bang!*

I had half-hoped I was truly dead  
I even dared the Gestapo officer to "Go ahead."  
because death, as I saw it, was my only hope for escape.

I envied the dog beside me  
Because the puddle he was in was one of death,  
One with an end.  
While mine stinks of fear and torture yet to come.  
I can't go on any longer. "I can't dad."

*Love's got responsibilities.*  
*Things you gotta do even if you don't want to.*

Dad? Dad? Do you love me?  
*Shoot the dog, boy.*

Dad?

The sound of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata"  
played slowly and deliberately, with an intangible force  
that drew me off the couch.

Madame's face glowed with a purity  
that elevated her beauty.  
Music gave her wings like a butterfly,  
wings to carry her far, far away.

Her glowing aura radiated the very strength  
that attracted me to her.  
Inches from her face  
I could feel a renewed strength within me,  
a determination to persevere and travel  
my road no matter the difficulties.

When her hands began to falter  
I realized my face stood only inches from hers,  
the minor-key chord still reverberating in the air around us.

I glimpsed her face long enough to see a smile  
but her whispers to me were soon suffocated by  
a sinister laugh that cut my dream short.

The Doberman's cold, still body lay silently in my lap.

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**Figure 2.** Student response to an "Examine Contrasts through Creative Writing" assignment

remain hopeful—one of her greatest strengths.”

**Strategy 5: Scene with Stage Directions.** Readers Theater has become fairly routine in the English Language Arts classroom as a way to help students creatively explore and delve deeper into important character traits, perspectives, conflicts, and themes found in literature. Drawing on the same skills needed for a Readers Theater, creating a Scene with Stage Directions pushes students even further as they must consider the broader atmosphere in a deliberate fashion. Considerations should include props and lighting; facial expressions and posture; stage positioning and movement. Even pauses, tone, and gestures should be taken into account. The more specific, the better; the goal is to create as rich a sense of context as possible while still being concise in the manner of a stage play.

**Example by Shannon Hunt in response to *Annie, Between the States*:** Shannon’s Scene with Stage Directions appears in Figure 4. When I shared it with Laura to see what she thought, she specifically noted Shannon’s attention to detail and her way of showing a deep understanding of the protagonist. “I love all the stage directions. What a smart choice of scenes. We writers are always trying to ‘show rather than tell.’ This drama conveys very quickly the growing up, the hard recognitions Annie must undergo, as well as the tragic romanticizing of the war that lured so many into a bloodbath. Within two pages, we see clearly that Annie is a thinker, that she has compassion for others even if they have hurt or disappointed her.”

## Closing Thoughts

As I conclude this article, one that I have worked on over a period of two years in order to add to my experience teaching L. M. Elliott’s novels and engage in a year’s worth of back-and-forth correspondence with the author, I reflect on how grateful I am to be in a community such as ALAN where people place such a high value on literature, history, experience, teaching, and learning. Where else would award-winning writers take so much time to share? And where else would readers be so excited to try out new ideas in their classrooms, to ignite a deep and personalized understanding of the past as a way to illuminate the future? For all who carry the lantern of learning through writing, reading, and teaching, be encouraged, for you make a difference.

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### Annie’s Light

by Auburn Fauver

Carrol Prison is far from an ideal place.  
It is filthy, grimy, and frigid; infested with rats and roaches too.  
Oh, have I mentioned lonely? Prison is so lonely.  
The darkness at night has become unbearable  
I have been saving bits of candle in my bonnet so I may have some light.  
This little bonnet of light has become my only source of happiness.  
I squeeze my eyes as tight as I can and try to remember happiness.  
Was Hickory Heights always a happy place?  
The memory of my family pours in and creates a wave of hope and light  
In me. Carrol Prison and Hickory Heights; I can’t even begin to compare  
the two.  
This war between the North and South has made so many dimensions of  
life unbearable.  
My home at Hickory Heights was not always happy, but it was never  
lonely.  
Maybe when morning comes, it will chase away my lonely  
Thoughts and with it bring some happiness.  
The anticipation of daylight has become unbearable  
Closing my eyes is no longer an escape from this place  
I can’t even remember how many months I’ve been here. One? Two?  
Through my cracked window I begin to see the approaching daylight.  
I have not slept a wink on this moldy straw mattress, but now the light  
Is here to save me. I have a feeling that today will not be so lonely.  
But I will not get my hopes up; it may be too good to  
Be true. However, any change to this string of nothingness would be  
some happiness.  
The guard comes to tell me that a visitor has come to see me in this awful  
place.  
Cousin Eleanor is waiting in the parlor; perhaps she will make my day  
less unbearable.  
The cake, dried apples, and clean clothes she has brought keep Carrol  
Prison bearable  
Tucked underneath was the best part; a true gem, a shining light.  
A book of Longfellow’s poetry sent by Thomas with a certain place  
Marked. I memorize this poem, “The Day Is Done,” and recite it when I  
feel lonely.  
Oh, the thought of sweet Thomas has given me a new happiness;  
A happiness that I never felt before. I wonder if he feels it too?  
It seems that my Union soldier Thomas Walker does feel it too!  
Today he has come to take me away from this most unbearable  
Confinement. I am overwhelmed with happiness.  
Thomas has convinced them that I am not guilty of treason and now they  
see the light.  
We marry at Cousin Eleanor’s and now I know that I cannot be lonely  
Again. Now I must say goodbye to Hickory Heights and go with Thomas  
to his place.  
Thomas and I are a lucky two and I see a great light and hope  
For our country. This unbearable war will end soon. Many will be left  
lonely.  
I can only hope that Northerners and Southerners alike can find  
happiness, as I have in this place.

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**Figure 3.** Student response to a “Sestina” assignment

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**Scene with Stage Directions for *Annie, Between the States***  
by Shannon Hunt

Act 18, Scene 1

*The stage is dimly lit with soft yellow, brown, and gray lights. Stage right there is a large tent made of dirty canvas and thick rope. The tent is of an A-frame construction. One of the tent flaps is tied up and to the right side with a canvas strap. From inside there is a light shining; most likely from a lit lantern. The light casts shadows on the tent walls; there are shadows of a man, cot, lantern, and cross-legged side table. Stage left is slightly more lit- but not a full brightness- the hue of just after sunset. The backdrop is of a trampled field filled with similar canvas tents but smaller in size. Interspersed amongst the tents are small cooking fires and tethered horses.*

*ANNIE SINCLAIR is upper stage left when the curtain rises. She is wearing an everyday dress; it is pale blue, corseted at the top with open bell sleeves. The hoop skirt is starting to lose its fluff since it is the end of the day. The sleeves and hem lines are lined with white lace. Over the dress she is wearing a lap apron of white opaque fabric and rose patterned lace. Her hair is pinned neatly and tightly in a bun at the back of her head. Her cheeks are flush from the cold and excitement.*

*Enter- ARMY LIEUTENANT, from lower stage left—moving toward upper center stage. He looks frantic and worn. He is wearing a Confederate gray uniform—it is dirt- and gun powder-stained, and doesn't look as if it has been washed since the start of the war. The right cuff is marooned with dried blood—most likely of Yankee soldiers, as he doesn't appear to be hurt.*

*ANNIE intercepts the LIEUTENANT before he turns to enter the large tent.*

Annie: I wanted to know if the General needed anything else for the night.

*Facing the audience- all cast on stage at a freeze position. Aside: The simple inquisitive comment kept me from sounding like a lovesick school girl.*

Lieutenant: I'll ask, miss. Please, may I announce you?

Annie: Yes. Tell him it's Annie Sinclair.

*The LIEUTENANT steps inside the large tent. Decipherable voices are heard. ANNIE waits outside, fidgeting and anxious. Quickly the LIEUTENANT comes back out of the tents, ducking between the flaps as he exits.*

Lieutenant: He asks that you wait just a moment, miss, and that you forgive his delay. *(He looks back at the tent and then moves closer to ANNIE. He leans in to whisper)* He has just received bad news, miss. His daughter is gravely ill. *(Pause, casually exits stage right)*

Annie: *(Anger and frustration visible on her face. She abides by the request and waits outside the tent. She speaks in a quickened and irritated pace, facing the audience)* *Aside: Daughter!? What Daughter?! (Pause for realization)* If he has a daughter, that means he has...a...a...wife! *(Take a step upstage)* What a fool I've been to read anything into that poem, his flirtatious banter. *(Thrust hands into apron pockets, pull out letter. The letter is on heavily yellowed parchment paper)* Here is the treasured letter I've carried for more than a year now, hanging on each and every word he wrote. *(Crush the letter with both hands, then stuff it back in to apron pocket)*

*Enter- GENERAL STUART. He is dressed in a Confederate officer's uniform. There are no gold sashes on this occasion, no plume, no braided epaulets. His hair is brushed back and his beard is ungroomed. He stands just out of the tent, pulling on his gray coat and tucking the hair behind his ears. The wiping of his eyes lets ANNIE and the audience know he has been crying.*

Stuart: *(in a somber voice)* Is that Lady Liberty? I am sorry to hear of your mother's illness, Miss Annie. Please tell her how much I enjoyed the mutton she graciously shared with us.

*continued on next page*

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**Figure 4.** Student response to a "Scene with Stage Directions" assignment

#### Figure 4. Continued

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Annie: (*facing the audience—all cast on stage at a freeze position*) *Aside*: I wanted to slap him, to shout my disappointment at him, to accuse him of leading me on. But suddenly, I just felt sorry for him, sorry for myself, sorry for them all in this cold, stark night. (*Turning to STUART*) Perhaps we could bundle Mother down in the morning, so she could meet you, General. I know that would mean a great deal to hear. But (*pause*) you must forgive her if she is quiet, General. She is not herself just yet. The diphtheria has left her very weak.

STUART turns toward ANNIE with a blank and empty expression—as if he is looking through her rather than at her.

Stuart: We must all bear the sadness that sickness brings with Christian fortitude and resignation. (*Shaking head in disbelief*) (*Mumbles*) My own little Flora, just barely five year of age...such a sweet nature, so devoted to her papa.

Annie: (*facing the audience—all cast on stage at a freeze position*) *Aside*: I didn't know what to say. This wasn't the raucous, charismatic Stuart I had known, the larger-than-life man who could embolden a thousand men by his speeches or reduce women to swoons by a glance. He looked small, hairy, dirty, unmoved by my presence. (*pause*) I had been so sure of his interest in me. But, then again I have never been courted before. How would I know the difference? In the cold moonlight, I realized that his poetic tribute to me was just part of the fun, the game, the lore of the crusade, the precious Southern cause. Flattering? Yes. Heartfelt? Probably at the moment of penning it. Serious affection? It couldn't be. At least I had enough sense not to burden this critically important general with my infatuation while he was in the middle of a confrontation with the enemy. I also had absolutely no idea what to say, my sense of embarrassment ran so deep. So I waited.

Stuart: Well. (*sigh*) Theirs is sure to be a fight tomorrow. I cannot leave my men to see my daughter, as my wife asks. God's will be done. Flora will live or die whether I am with her or not. My place is here. (*attempting a smile, but failing*) After all—(*voice swelling with a bit of his accustomed bravura*) I am the knight with the golden spurs. (*lift a foot to show ANNIE an elegant, long, gleaming spur*) They're gold, sent to me by a lady in Baltimore. Aren't they marvelous?

Annie: (*facing the audience—all cast on stage at a freeze position*) *Aside*: There was something very childlike in the question. (*Turning to speak to STUART*) Indeed, General, they are very handsome. (*forcing a smile to her face*) They befit the man who will lead the Confederacy to victory.

Instantly STUART's face is beaming, and his posture straightens.

Stuart: You see, Miss Annie, you do soothe the soldier.

Annie: (*facing the audience—all cast on stage at a freeze position*) *Aside*: I recognized the line from the poem he wrote to me. So he remembered. Or was it a line he used on all women he hoped to inspire- or impress? I felt a new wariness, a new understanding of how words could have many meanings. And yet, on this night, this moment of changing history, did it matter whether I was one of many he so flattered? His honeyed words inspired, even romanced Southerners into patriotism. That's probably what should matter most.

End scene. Curtain fall.

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