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## Happy New Year from MATELA!

Here at the Montana Association of Teachers of English Language Arts, we are grateful to look back on a year of learning, growth, and community. From the camaraderie of the MFPE Educators' Conference to the incredible accomplishments of our members, we are proud to be ELA educators here under the Big Sky.

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### MATELA Member, Former NCTE Promising Young Writers and Writing Awards Coordinator Featured at Great Falls Gallery



During the months of November and December, MATELA member Dawn Sievers served as the featured artist in the gift shop at Paris Gibson Museum of Art. Sievers, who has been a member of MATELA since 1994, is a second-time recipient of this honor.

Humble about her award, Sievers said she was selected not because of prestige but because she was on the original list created by Jean Price. Price, who died of pancreatic cancer in 2019, was an art teacher, artist, local representative, Urban Art director, and all around art advocate in the city of

the store and—with a committee’s input— created a list of artists she would like to showcase. When the store recently reached the end of the list that Price and the committee had generated, they invited Sievers back.

“Since I had participated as a featured artist before and my items in the store were well received, the new committee felt I would be a good fit,” Sievers said.

When asked which of the pieces on display is her favorite, Sievers said, “It is difficult to say that I have a favorite piece. I enjoy the frenzied creative process of each piece and feel a bit depressed and detached when the thrill is over. However, the jumping trout, reaching for a fly, reminds me of family time with my son, who loves fishing. The title of that piece is *Last Chance at Dusk*. Also, I made the crow as a book cover for a special friend Cyndi Hughes, who wrote *The Messenger of Eshra*, which is part of a series.”

Sievers, who has taught both art and English for the Power School District for 23 years, weaves her love of art into her English classes. “When I teach students about writing, I often compare the process of writing to creating art. Just as an artist uses paint and brushes to create a desired image, the writer uses words to paint images that exist only in the reader's mind. We also often incorporate drawing or sculpting in the English classroom to help comprehension. As a teacher, I am an avid believer in the integration of the arts in all subjects, but art is especially helpful in the English classroom,” Sievers said.

When she’s not making art or teaching, Sievers fulfills her role as a wife and mother. Her oldest son recently moved from Phoenix, Arizona, to Miles City, Montana, to accept a physician’s assistant position; her middle son is a nurse practitioner in Great Falls, where he and his wife live; and her youngest daughter is a junior at Power High School.

“We are crazy busy with all her activities,” Sievers said.

For several years, Sievers served as the NCTE Promising Young Writers and Writing Awards Coordinator. When the NCTE writing contests entered the electronic world and entries were submitted via the internet, that role faded away. However, she remains a judge for both of these contests whose purpose is to stimulate and recognize the writing talents of eighth-graders and high school juniors and to emphasize the importance of writing skills.

*Submitted by Donna L. Miller.*

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Elk River Writing Project at Montana State University Billings (MSUB) and the Civic Imagination Project at the University of Southern California sponsored three events in late October. The event series was part of an ongoing relationship between the two universities.

One of the presenters, Henry Jenkins, is a provost's professor at the University of Southern California. He is also the author or editor of 20 books including *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* and *Spreadable Media: Creating Meaning and Value in a Networked Society*. He blogs at [henryjenkins.org](http://henryjenkins.org) and co-hosts the *How Do You Like It So Far?* podcast.

In his presentation, entitled "Popular Culture as Politics: Politics as Popular Culture," Jenkins spoke on the world-wide "blurring of the lines" between politics and popular culture. As young activists are deploying popular culture works to challenge governmental authorities in their countries, their actions have tapped into a mythology which has circulated both through mass media and through grassroots fandom across national boundaries. For example, a political figure may build on skills acquired through a range of different entertainment media sites, reality television, shock jock radio, and professional wrestling to shape his political career. Jenkins discussed the ways popular media has offered resources for political expression using the related concepts of participatory politics, fan activism, and civic imagination.

Following Jenkins, the Director of Research of the Civic Imagination Project Sangita Shresthova hosted "Civic Imagination Training: Become a Workshop Facilitator." She explained that the Civic Imagination Project focuses on civic imagination, a collective vision for what a better tomorrow might look like, and seeks to bridge perceived cultural gaps between diverse communities. Rooted in aspirational approaches to civic action, Civic Imagination workshops assist teams in building activist communities through creative storytelling and play. These teams can build bridges between communities that want to work together and need a creative way of surfacing shared values and constructing strong foundations for collaboration and unity.

Through an easy-to-grasp and accessible hands-on approach, Shresthova's session intended to train participants in becoming workshop facilitators. Guests received all the instructions they would need to conduct the organization's "signature" civic imagination workshops. These newly trained Civic Imagination workshop facilitators will join a growing network.

In addition to directing research surrounding the Civic Imagination Project, Shresthova leads the Civic Paths Project based at the University of Southern

*With Bollywood Dance*. She continues to find time to teach and to learn dance whenever she can.

The third event featured a collaboration between Jenkins, Shresthova, and Tami Haaland, a professor of English at MSUB. Their workshop and conversation explored how we can think about our past and future in ways that generate visions of who we really want to be as a community, as a nation, and as a people.

“We know how important it is for voices in our community to find common ground and to cast an alternative vision for good,” Haaland said. “This workshop provided an opportunity to focus ourselves and contribute to a larger research project on the civic imagination.”

Haaland is the author of three poetry collections, *What Does Not Return*, *When We Wake in the Night*, and *Breath in Every Room*, which won the Nicholas Roerich First Book Award. Haaland has also received an Artist Innovation Award from Montana Arts Council and is a 2019 recipient of a Governor’s Humanities Award. From 2013-2015, she served as Montana’s Poet Laureate and is currently a Director of the Elk River Writing Project at MSUB.

*Submitted by Donna L. Miller.*

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## Book Review

### Human Survival Depends on Questioning the Status Quo: A Review of *Crier’s War*

Authors bravely explore controversial topics, and ask important *what if* and *why* questions, and then explore their potential results, which explains one of the reasons I love reading. Authors who tackle bioethics are especially intriguing—perhaps because they ask significant questions before the moment when the decision seems like it has already been made. With progress in life science, technology, and medicine, bioethical issues are increasingly confronting us on the evening news, in social media, and even in our own lives. Books like Nina Varela’s *Crier’s War* not only open the topic of bioethics for young adult (YA) audiences but make it accessible.

In this debut YA fantasy, the first in what will be a duology, Varela writes about a world ruled by an oppressive android monarchy, a world that evolved after the War of Kinds, where humans are slaves because the Made are a dominant race. Not only immune to disease, fatigue, and the effects of aging, these Automae are also superior in physical beauty and symmetry.

he can experience a similar anguish. The death of her entire family leaves Ayla traumatized at age 10. Besides the hope for revenge, the only comfort Ayla has is her locket. This unimpressive necklace, a Made object, is considered forbidden, but she can't bear to dispose of this gift from her mother, and now the only proof that her family ever existed at all. Initially, the object's sentimental value and the mystery regarding its purpose—since it ticks with a soft rhythm—are its only interesting aspects since Ayla has never been able to open the locket. A clever plot convention on Varela's part, the locket comes to play a significant role in the story.

Tainted forever and a ghost of her past self, Ayla is a ruined shell of anger, muscle, and will—with the will to achieve revenge the strongest. When she gets a post as handmaiden to Crier, sixteen-year-old Ayla is convinced that she is in a position to help the Revolution, but those feelings occur before Ayla knows Crier, before she discovers Crier's careful use of words, her ability to tell captivating stories, her tender and trusting ways, and her watchful, thoughtful eyes. True, Crier is naïve, arrogant, and often clueless and foolish, but she has a stubborn side that desires to help the world to see from a different perspective, one that enables humankind to coexist, living harmoniously and with equality among the Made, not separate from them, not with one Kind judged as stronger and the other weaker, one dominant and the other submissive. Although Crier represents burning villages, ruined families, lost brothers, and wailing mothers, she also represents hope for genuine coexistence and equality, justice without bloodshed, and freedom from misery. This whole truth complicates Ayla's dilemma and dilutes her resolve.

To further complicate Ayla's desire for revenge, Crier is betrothed to Kinok, a keeper of the secrets about the Iron Heart—the source of heartstone, the sustenance required of all Automae. Although Kinok is serious, controlled, and quiet, people are drawn to him because he is charismatic and loves a challenge. Leader of the Anti-Reliance Movement (ARM), Kinok wants to see the race of humankind not just subjugated for their inferiority but obliterated. As an alchemist, he envisions a race of designed beings who are no longer reliant on heartstone but get their energy from [tourmaline](#). Whether Varela intended it or not, the initial rage over these gems, when those mined in Paraiba quickly became the most popular and most [valuable tourmaline](#), is quite an appropriate metaphor for how humans often judge things based on their beauty and the character of their color.

Shrouded in mystery and secrecy, alchemy used to be considered an ancient practice in which its practitioners mainly sought to turn lead into gold, a

involves the making of things thought impossible. If lead and gold both consisted of fire, air, water, and earth—so the theory went—then surely by changing the proportions of the constituent elements, lead could be transformed into gold. That theory debunked, today we know that the universe is made up of atoms and elements and that it's not possible to adjust the components in lead and turn them into gold. Although alchemy never achieved its goals of immortality or of turning lead into gold, it did leave an important legacy: our search for perfection still lingers.

It is in this branch of alchemy that Kinok deals; he desires to achieve the 'golden' being, one resplendent with immortal beauty and endless energy. And because he is a master manipulator, he tells Crier that she is flawed—that in addition to her Four Pillars of Reason, Calculation, Organics, and Intellect, her Maker added a fifth pillar: Passion. With this additional pillar, this difference, Crier believes she is broken, an abomination. This belief weakens her resolve and undermines her sense of self-worth.

Just as every genius draws from others, Kinok is also a people-mapper, another form of alchemy. With this form of magic, Kinok maps human connections so that he can leverage these relationships, exploiting them for information and power. According to Kinok, "You can learn a lot by tracing the connections from one mind to another" (223). When Ayla discovers this map and realizes its threat, she wishes to break her ties with Benjy, her trusted friend and confidante, thinking that her connections to him will turn him into collateral damage. After all, Ayla knows the price of love is grief. Experience has taught her that love breaks a person, that love makes a person crave death as an escape from the pain of loss.

Just like human beings, this book has many layers and presents many conflicts:

- Can Crier escape the noose cast by her arranged marriage?
- Will Ayala be able to follow-through on her promise for revenge by killing Hesod's daughter?
- Will Benjy's dream for justice come true?
- And what of Kinok and his machinations?
- How will Ayla find a resolution to her swirl of suffering caused by death, desire, longing, loneliness, curiosity, shame, and confusion?

Varela's novel also poses a plethora of bioethical conundrums. Bioethics is an important subject because the asking of questions encourages the essential exercise of our remembering "the why." Why are we doing this? Why

to happen and not others? Who should be allowed to decide what is right and what is wrong? Bioethics is the exercise of asking these questions before they become hindsight—before we find ourselves asking: What else could we have done; it seemed like the only choice?

Applying Marshal McLuhan's famous tetrad might force us to think critically about and to uncover the hidden consequences of the technologies we develop. This tetrad allowed McLuhan to apply four laws, framed as questions, to a wide spectrum of mankind's endeavors, essentially providing a useful tool for examining our culture:

- What does it (the medium or technology) extend?
- What does it make obsolete?
- What is retrieved?
- What does the technology reverse into if it is over-extended?

(Kappelman, np)

Every technological extension—in this case Designer Humans—has the effect of amputating or modifying some other extension. When we become fascinated and obsessed with these extensions, too frequently we choose to ignore or minimize the amputations. Flooded by technology and enjoying the luxuries it provides, we neglect caution; we have forgotten stories like Ray Bradbury's (1951) "The Veldt," which warns that "HappyLife Home" with its superfluous technological gadgetry can kill us. When technology contributes to obsolescence, the potentially grave consequences require reflection.

Whether read with a bioethical lens or by applying McLuhan's tetrad, *Crier's War* also invites consideration of the following topics:

- Under what conditions might it be better to do what is right than to be kind?
- Is one individual being—whether human or made—guilty of the sins of a group?
- What does it mean to be human?
- What does it mean to be an intellectual rebel who questions the dominant views of the time?
- Who decides the worth of something and why are some things valued more than others?
- What Four Pillars comprise the foundation of humanity, and how do they differ from the basis of the Automa Individual: Reason, Calculation, Organics, and Intellect?

difference, the advantages rather than the disadvantages—that these differences might also make an individual a stronger, improved version of humanity, one that not only adds to the uniqueness and beauty of a group but one that contributes significantly?

- If it does in fact have such power, to what extent does sentiment weaken a person?
- To what degree is fervor (intense and passionate feeling) like a fever (a form of infection/disease)?
- Argue for or against the idea proposed on page 423, that humanity is how you act, not how you were made.

With all of these benefits, Varela's book contributes greatly to the development of critical thinking. It asserts that human survival depends on intellectual rebels who question—not accept—the status quo.

*Submitted by Donna L. Miller.*

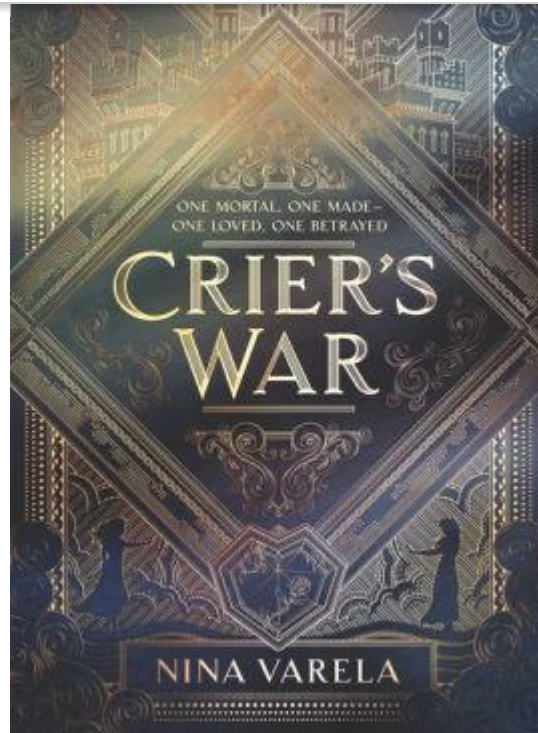
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## News from NCTE

### 2019 Affiliate Awards

Please join us in celebrating the 2019 Affiliates of Excellence!

- Georgia Council of Teachers of English
- New Jersey Council of Teachers of English
- Ohio Council of Teachers of English Language Arts
- Texas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts
- Virginia Association of Teachers of English
- West Virginia Council of Teachers of English

A complete list of all NCTE Affiliate Awards and 2019 winners is available [here](#).

Here comes #NCTE20! “¡Confluencia! Songs of Ourselves” is the theme for the 2020 NCTE Annual Convention, November 19–22, in Denver, Colorado. Talk with your colleagues, plan your session, and **submit your proposal by 11:59 p.m. ET on Wednesday, January 15.** [SUBMIT YOUR PROPOSAL](#)

**Additional events are available on the 2019-2020 NCTE calendar.** [Click here](#) to track professional development opportunities, submission deadlines and more.



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