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# UPDATE

MONTANA ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

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MFPE Educator Fall Conference News

## Selects Richard Fifield as MFPE Conference Keynote Speaker

Richard Fifield, Montana author of *The Flood Girls* and *The Small Crimes of Tiffany Templeton* has agreed to be MATELA's keynote speaker for the MFPE Conference Oct. 15-16 in Great Falls, provided the conference is a go (see side article).

The Board discussed asking him at the January meeting; then Dana Haring followed up, did research research (reading his books and listening to his interview on *The Write Question*) and confirmed he would speak.

"He is excited! I think he will be marvelous," Haring said.

In other conference news, MATELA reserved a block of 10 rooms at the Heritage Inn because the preferred hotel, the closer-to-venue Days Inn, was already booked. The Heritage Inn is also the tentative site of the banquet.

**By Dana Haring, MATELA Treasurer**

## Changes in the Timing

While MATELA has such a great keynote speaker lined up, MFPE may have to consider options, depending on how the COVID-19 virus is spreading in Montana.

Please read the press release below:

Due to COVID 19 stay at home order, MFPE will be POSTPONING the May 15, 2020 Educator Conference scheduling meeting.

Since fall circumstances are unknown, the MFPE team is taking time to research alternative options for the 2020 Educator Conference.

**"We will be in touch once we have a plan in place for the 2020 Educator Conference."**

If you have questions, please let us know. Thanks for your understanding and patience in this challenging environment.

**by Marco Ferro, MFPE Public Policy Director**



## OPI Offers Teacher Learning Hub, Other PD in Summer

OPI's list of [2019-2020 calendar of facilitated courses](#) on the Teacher Learning Hub is available, along with the [2020-2021 calendar](#). We started offering registration reminders for the 2020-2021 school year that may be beneficial.

**"Additionally, the course 'Preparing Young Writers for College, Career, and Community' may be of particular interest to MATELA members."**

The [self-paced courses](#) are offered year-round and offer many topics to choose from. Also, OPI added Introduction to Online Course Design as soon as officials were informed that schools were closing due to COVID-19.

In addition, the [OPI Learning Opportunities Portal](#) as a one-stop location for professional learning opportunities across the state. OPI updates the site daily and shares events from any approved professional development providers. While a number of the opportunities have been canceled, some providers have chosen to do webinars or other online professional development during this time.

OPI is continuing to monitor the COVID-19 situation and is looking at the needs of teachers as they close out this school year and envision what the next school year will look like. [The Remote Learning Sharing Sessions](#) have been particularly helpful to gauge needs. OPI staff members have meetings this week to determine what next steps will be, and we will have a communication plan that goes along with the continued professional development work we are doing regarding remote learning.

Finally, you may find the [Professional Learning website](#) beneficial. If interested, please sign up for the Professional Learning Provider newsletter that is linked in the Administrators and Providers section of the Professional Learning website.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

[Carli.Cockrell@mt.gov](mailto:Carli.Cockrell@mt.gov)

**By Carli Cockrell**, Professional Learning Coordinator

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## The Pandemic Muse: Dr. Clinard Reflects on Retiring; What to Do with Paper Stash

After the Montana Writing Summit of 2012 and literacy workshops in 2013, I strayed from a lifetime focus on Language Arts and meandered into Career Pathways at Helena College. In June, I will retire.

In my spacious college office, I still have MUS Writing Assessment training booklets, a library of books about teaching and assessing writing, stacks of MATELA *Update* newsletters and Journals, 25 years of *Signatures from Big Sky*, and files, and files. As I began debating what to take and what to toss, the pandemic sent me home.

My trip to LA on March 25 to visit my daughter and see the musical *Hamilton* was cancelled. But then I had the time to finish the 800-page *Alexander Hamilton* biography, download the musical soundtrack and listen with headphones while taking brisk walks. The writing in those songs is amazing.

father-in-law and the Boulder River School for the Disabled. That inspired me to find the cassette tapes my father had recorded back in 1979 about his homestead memories and start transcribing his stories. When a tape would actually play and was audible, I heard my dad's stories and typed furiously. However, those old tapes wound themselves into messes.

Remembering that my nephew Damon had attempted to digitize these tapes about 12 years ago, I emailed, and he responded, "It's funny you mention the tapes because I re-visited those myself just a week or so ago. I spent several full days listening and working them over with my current pitch correction software. I was able to get some of it listenable and then I listened to Grandpa, a voice I had not heard since I was 16, pretty stunning." Transcribing from Damon's digital version and filling in with research, I'm working on stories.

Hearing about my father's bout with scarlet fever and his sisters' Spanish flu, quarantines and disinfecting, I began some research and discovered that my doctoral classmate (and former English teacher), Christine Wortman-Engren, recently published *West to Montana*, which I bought at Far Country Press. Socially distanced in the parking lot of a grocery store, I chatted with our MATELA colleague Jean O'Connor—who is continuing her research and writing, and invited me to join her Writers' Group when that's feasible.

Is the pandemic temporarily refocusing all of us on reading, researching, writing, and connecting? Can I stay committed to writing my father's stories? Does the quality of writing that students send their teachers from home match the quality of writing in school? Are students more or less focused? How will this experience change teaching and learning?

And finally, can you help me decide what's worth keeping among the books and files in my office?

*By Jan Clinard. Liaison, Helena College*



**Wishing Things into Being through Writing:**

Say the word poetry, and many cringe, connecting their aversion to school room experiences that required dissecting a poem for its hidden meaning. But April, which is National Poetry Month, offers an opportunity to see poetry from another angle.

When I taught high-school English, I often began a poetry unit by asking the question: What is poetry? From that exercise, I received numerous creative and candid definitions. To get some students to think more positively about poetry, I would remind them how music is an accessible form of poetry that most of us appreciate.

As I traveled home from Nebraska a while ago, I listened to a country radio station to pass the time and found myself captivated by the lyrics of songs like "I Wish Grandpas Never Died" by Riley Green. I imagined teens making connections to the sentiments, especially with lines like these: "I wish high school home teams never lost / And back road drinkin' kids never got caught."

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**In brainstorming ideas, think about your regrets, your losses, your yearnings for a better life. What thoughts come to mind?**

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With that song's poetry, a writing prompt sneaked into my brain. I imagined inviting a group of writers to explore what they wish for: In brainstorming ideas, think about your regrets, your losses, your yearnings for a better life. What thoughts come to mind? What do you wish for that is gone, and you'd like to have back? Now think about things you value or favor, whether that be good manners or the flavor of a preferred beverage or food. What wishes are connected to those values? If certain things would no longer exist, what might those be? If new features would come into being, what might those be?

Once you have a collection of ideas, examine the structure of Riley Green's song. An inquiry will reveal that the first stanza carries a nostalgic tone, relating things rarely seen in contemporary times but missed and wished for. The next few stanzas catalog favorites and yearnings with that list culminating in the grand finale, the heart of the poem's purpose: *I wish Grandpas never died*. Following that thematic line, there is a brief return to the past, but then the lyrics skip all over in stream of consciousness fashion.

Consider a similar arrangement or create your own organizational plan: The

fourth might change somewhat negative things into positive ones. And your ending might be a variation on your most powerful wish.

You have had to listen to, learn, and follow rules for most of your life. Now you have the chance to consider your own desires and wants and what it would be like to wish into being a more ideal universe or to invite readers to think more deeply. Have fun redesigning, altering, adding, omitting, and creating!

Other songs have equal potential: "That's How Country Boys Roll," a song co-written and recorded by American country music artist Billy Currington. Similar to a definition poem, the song essentially describes how to be a country boy. Writers could craft imitations, defining how to be a wrestler, a sculptor, a mechanic, or a cowgirl.

Luke Bryan's "We Rode in Trucks" is another song ripe for imitation. It is reminiscent of where I come from/where I grew up stories; Scotty McCreery's "In Between" reminded me of writing self-definition or How-to-be pieces; and "Noise" (2016) by Kenny Chesney would pair beautifully with Tony Hoagland's poem "America" (2003).

Both Chesney and Hoagland raise social consciousness with their commentary on contemporary American society. Writers might compare and contrast how consumerism and noise distract from society's ills and from what really matters. Using material things and other distractions, we not only drown out the suffering of others, of those who might need our help, but we insulate ourselves from their cries.

Inundated with too much information, we neglect the impoverished, the needy, and the voiceless with both literal and figurative noise.

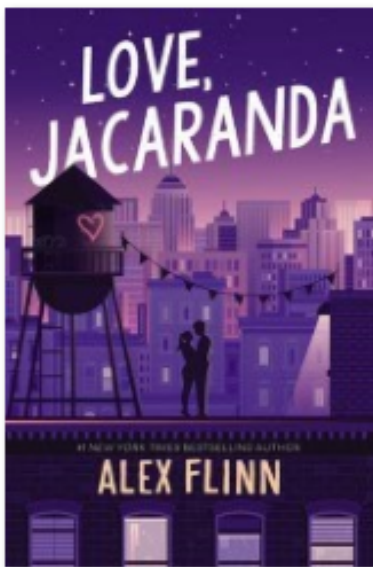
With so many different messages shouting, Chesney and Hoagland push back on the notions of being told what to think and what to buy and how to act. Once we are aware of the noise, we might be more mindful of what really matters: listening empathically, reflecting introspectively, communicating emotionally, and interacting more harmoniously.

Speaking in rhythms and connecting sound to sense, poetry pares away superfluous language and presents life in intimate or shocking ways. It layers meaning and offers fresh or radical perspectives. Inviting both an artistic and



During this National Poetry Month, my wish for you is that you look to poetry as a model for writing and as a teacher of style. With its rich imagery that values voice and story, poetry enables us to talk about life with fresh, new vision.

**by Donna L. Miller**, Professional Learning Coordinator and Adjunct Instructor  
MSU-Northern



## The Value of a Gift: A Review of *Love, Jacaranda*

Amid the COVID-19 crisis, I needed a feel-good book, and Alex Flinn's *Love, Jacaranda* (Harper Teen, 2020) did not disappoint. Written in one-way email correspondence, almost like a diary, Flinn's book performs some genre-bending: it is realistic fiction sprinkled with mystery and romance. The plot moves quickly as it both intrigues and coaches the reader through Jacaranda's life lessons.

Named for the gorgeous tree with feathery new foliage and immense purple flower clusters that herald springtime in Southeastern Florida, Jacaranda Abbott bags groceries at a Publix supermarket. Because she loves to sing and to bring joy to others, she performs for Mr. Louis, one of her favorite patrons who takes an interest in her passions. Chorus class has always been the best part of her school day, since it is "sort of like a little vacay right in the middle of



harmony” (9). Singing is the one thing in which Jacaranda takes comfort and pride.

When her supermarket performance video goes viral, Jacaranda and her talent are discovered by a wealthy gentleman who wishes to remain anonymous but serves on the board of a private educational foundation. Through his agent Vanessa Lastra, “Mr. John Smith” offers Jacaranda the opportunity of a lifetime.

In the foster care system because her mother is in prison for vehicular assault, Jacaranda is offered a place at Midwestern Arts Academy, a private boarding school in Michigan where she will study musical theater.

Elated at this opportunity and wanting to be special, Jacaranda leaps over the socioeconomic divide and finds herself on the side of advantages that money can buy. However, she also discovers that she may not belong among these wealthy, privileged, and entitled youth who have had more opportunities, more schooling, and more lessons in the arts. After all, experiences are expensive. With Eliza Doolittle in her soul and living among “haves” when she’s a “have-not,” Jacaranda wonders whether her talent will be enough to enable her to keep her scholarship.

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**“It’s when all the bullying and craziness about who has the better sneakers or the less-nasty backpack stops, and we all sing together in harmony”**

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In order to conceal her past and her roots, Jacaranda adopts the personality of Jackie, her newly created persona, telling everyone that her parents are overseas to explain why she can’t go home for holiday breaks. Leading a Witness Protection Program-like existence, Jackie throws herself into her education, trying to compensate for her ignorance and her deprivation of privilege. Nearly every day, she writes an email of gratitude to John Smith, her benefactor, thanking him for his sponsorship and giving him an update on her experiences while also wondering if this is an investment that she can ever repay.

Because Jackie has no one else in whom to confide and with whom to share secrets—like having her first boyfriend and receiving her first kiss—Mr. Smith becomes her confidante. Although Jackie misses her mother and yearns to

Mr. Smith's identity, Jackie pictures her benefactor as "one of those old guys on the Supreme Court" (122).

At school, one of Jackie's biggest competitors in musical theater is Phoebe Pendleton-Hodgkins, a suite-mate who bullies others. With a glorious voice, Phoebe is talented but disliked. In fact, her enigmatic character adds another thread of mystery to the novel as the reader wonders whether her stage fright and embarrassment are real or just an act to get attention. In Jackie's opinion, Phoebe has all the scary things: talent, beauty, and riches. But Jackie is motivated by haters and decides she's not fighting against her classmates but taking on the mission of spreading music and theater to the world.

Jackie's relationship with Phoebe grows more complicated when Jackie falls for Phoebe's cousin, John Jarvis Pendleton III, a philanthropist and computer genius. The two share an uncanny connection—comforting one another about their insecurities and sharing their vulnerabilities. Jarvis tells Jackie: "When we're given a gift, we have the responsibility to understand its value" (227) and to share it with the world. However, the two are also keeping secrets from each another, secrets that may shatter their relationship.

In addition to these plot threads that keep the story moving forward at a comfortable pace, Flinn shares some interesting lessons. While the socioeconomic divide provides plenty of discussion material, so will other thematic threads, such as how our reality, our perspective, or our picture may not be like everyone else's.

Readers may also find intriguing the premise that public schools don't value the arts. At one point Jackie declares, "I WILL DIE IF I HAVE TO GO BACK TO REGULAR SCHOOL. . . . It's like the schools don't care if their students have souls, as long as we can feed ourselves and not become a burden to society" (127). That premise begs to be tackled by critical, creative, and curious thinkers, as do these notions:

- We are all damaged with scars we are trying to hide;
- Money increases one's opportunities or magnifies a dream, giving an individual more options;
- When you're good, you're going to have people who hate you;
- We feel lonely, unloved, and ugly when we are rejected, and we feel pretty under someone else's adoring gaze;

- “Who your parents are makes no difference. It’s all who you are” (326).
- Andrew Carnegie not only “came from nothing and became the richest man in the world [but also] believed the wealthy were morally obligated to help others” (228).

Beyond the surroundings, the opportunities, and the people, Jackie counts the best thing about her life in the lap of luxury as the predictability of a meal schedule, a routine, and a regulated thermostat setting. Despite her having been through so much, Jackie remains true to her art.

Lest readers think the story is all happily ever after, they should be forewarned that the book holds plenty of surprises and twists that are true to life and its unpredictability.

*By Donna L. Miller*, Professional Learning Coordinator and Adjunct Instructor  
MSU-Northern

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## Golden Triangle Offers Summer Institute

Golden Triangle Curriculum Cooperative staff have been working hard to put together the summer schedule, so teachers have professional development this summer despite being in the trenches of adjusting to remote learning. **The opening date for Summer Institute is April 15.**

Each class costs \$40 for teachers from member schools and \$100 for nonmembers. Graduate-level college credit through MSU-Northern is available for an additional \$150 for one-credit.

Topics include **art, hands-on and art integration; standards-based grading; STREAM; Code.org; yoga; teacher rejuvenation; differentiation; multi-grade classrooms.**

Two featured technology courses are **Tips for Teaching Online** and **Office 365: What Your Students Need to Know**. This course will focus on what skills businesses across the state expect students to enter the workplace knowing.

locations. Staff will reevaluate, (at least) two weeks before each workshop is set to start, then decide if it is best to offer the class remotely or cancel the class.

If you enroll for a course that is intended to be in-person that ends up changing to a virtual platform and you choose to unenroll, your fees will be refunded. Online courses will still be able to be taken for college credit.

Register at <https://www.gtccmt.org/>

**Submitted by Alyssa Cliver, GTCC Director**



National Council of  
Teachers of English®

## 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](#).

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