Local teens pick literary favorites for the Best American Nonrequired Reading anthology

By JOEY STEINBERGER, Daily Arts Writer Published December 7, 2012

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It's hard to tell where an anthology comes from when you find one in a bookstore. The many texts that make up the collection are separated from their original context, which begs the question: "Who arranged these works together, and on what grounds?"

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For readers of the Best American Nonrequired Reading series, the answer is a lot closer to home then you would think.

The texts for the Best American Nonrequired Reading anthology are chosen annually by two groups of high school students, one from Valencia, Calif. and the other from Ann Arbor. Both groups are involved with 826, a writing and tutoring non-profit started by author Dave Eggers.

"(Eggers) and a group of high school students in the Bay Area began developing the book ten years ago," said Amanda Uhle, executive director of 826michigan. "Shortly after they invited other 826 chapters to take part ... (our chapter) took him up on the invitation, and we were the only one."

The group consists of approximately a dozen students and two facilitators who meet for two hours every week to discuss material that could possibly be included in the anthology. The students represent about six different high schools from the Ann Arbor area. When searching for material, the panel acquires texts

in a few different ways.

The series is considered "nonrequired" because it is a compilation of more unusual texts.

"The students themselves can seek out materials they read in literary journals or other publications," Uhle said. "The facilitators can also source materials from things that they read and distribute them to the students. We also do a whole lot of collaboration with the Valencia group. If they find something they are really excited about, we get a copy of it too."

The facilitators, Henry W. Leung and Jia Tolentino, are MFA students at the University.

Eggers looks at the students' favorite pieces each year as he compiles the anthology.

"Those are the backbone of how he builds the collection," Uhle said. "But I can't say there is a rock-solid process that everything goes through. Like all publishing projects, there is an organic nature to it."

While Eggers always serves as the editor of the anthology, the series has a different introducer and cover artist every year. Introducers come from a variety of creative backgrounds; musician Beck, "Simpsons" creator Matt Groening and author David Sedaris have all contributed, and Banksy and Art Spiegelman have both done cover art.

Hanal Baveja, a junior at Huron High School, has been a part of the Best American Nonrequired Reading group since the fall of her freshman year, when a senior at her high school told her she might be interested.

"From the first meeting, I knew that this was something I wanted to do for high school and maybe even college because it was so different from anything I've ever done," Baveja said. "It was a chance to read so much new work, and all these exciting pieces that were so different from what I was reading in school or in the library."

When Baveja first joined the panel, the students in Valencia chose most of the readings and sent them over to the students in Ann Arbor to review. This year, however, the Ann Arbor students are taking a more active role in the selection process.

"Henry has been bringing more and more journals to our meetings, which gives us a chance to pick out pieces we want to share with the group," Baveja said. "We're definitely trying to make it more cooperative."

Though Eggers is ultimately the editor of the book, the students serve as preliminary editors.

"We talk about whether it's a good piece or not and what we like about it, but we also talk about where it would fit in the book," Baveja said. "Although there are wonderful pieces we read, some of them we don't end up choosing because they are not right for the book."

"We're seeking work that is off the beaten path that you wouldn't come across otherwise," Uhle said. "It winds up being a gem of a collection because it has a kind of unusual feeling to it."