

# Teen Librarian Toolbox: Guest Post by author Mary Amato

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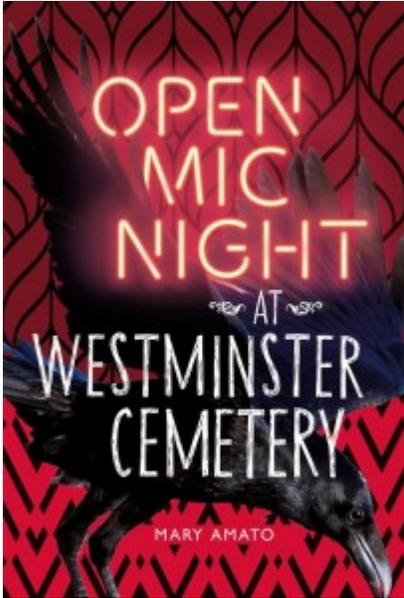
Introduction

*I have had the pleasure of working with author Mary Amato in the past, as we worked together to discuss ways in which librarians could provide more music based programming in libraries. GUITAR NOTES by Mary Amato is a moving story of grief, music and friendship that I will never stop recommending. Today, I am honored to have her join us here at TLT to discuss her newest release, OPEN MIC NIGHT AT WESTMINSTER CEMETERY.--* [KAREN JENSEN, TLT](#)

## Listening to Old Ghosts: The Haunting Influence of Our Town and Spoon River Anthology

My high school produced Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and I was in the "chorus"—one of the unimportant dead sitting quietly in the town cemetery. Although I was devastated that I did not get the part of Emily, the main female lead, the play had a lasting impact on me. I still remember the chill I felt at each performance, when the character of the stage manager simply walked out and said: "This play is called 'Our Town.' It was written by Thornton Wilder. . ."

The other plays I had seen tried to trick the audience into believing they were watching something real by having a scene pop to life. This was something different. This was a character telling us that what we were about to witness was a work of fiction—and yet that character was a part of the fiction. I was hooked.



During my high school years, I was introduced to *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters as well. Reading this 1916 work was like strolling through a cemetery and meeting the ghosts of the buried souls. The book is a collection of short poems each from the point of view of a person buried in a fictional small town in Illinois. I was an Illinois kid, and my favorite poem in the collection was *The Fiddler*: “The earth keeps some vibration going/There in your heart, and that is you/And if the people find you can fiddle/Why, fiddle you must, for all your life.”

Librarians and English/drama teachers have no idea what material they introduce will resonate with students. Those two works have been partners in my literary life and you can see their influence in my latest YA, *Open Mic Night at Westminster Cemetery* (Carolrhoda Lab™, 2018), a script-novel hybrid about a 16-year-old girl named Lacy who wakes up dead in an old cemetery.

I use the conceit of a narrator, a stage manager, who breaks the fourth wall by speaking directly to the audience to kick off the novel. “Dear Reader: This play, based on a true story, was originally written for the Deceased and was first performed in Westminster Cemetery in Baltimore, Maryland. All the characters you will meet, unless explicitly identified as Living, are Dead.” Like the stage manager in *Our Town*, my narrator seems to be in two worlds at once.

You can see *Spoon River Anthology* in the novel—especially in the book’s second act—as the various inhabitants of this cemetery rise and tell their stories.

The idea that every person has a story, no matter how ordinary, and that every story is worth hearing is a theme in Wilder and Masters that speaks to teens. During those turbulent years, teens want to know that their own stories matter. There is also comfort in realizing that a story can endure even after someone much loved has died.

As a teen, I loved walking through cemeteries and reading inscriptions on gravestones, imagining each person's story. I still do. That exercise is what led me to set my latest novel in a cemetery and watch the characters emerge.



Now, one of my favorite creative-writing exercises is to provide students with photos of old gravestones and ask them to use their imaginations to write a monologue from the point of view of the name engraved on the stone, a mission that would surely resonate with Wilder and Masters, wherever they now reside.

### Meet Author Mary Amato



Mary Amato is the author of many books for children and teens. Her latest novel, [\*Open Mic Night at Westminster Cemetery\*](#), is available from

Carolrhoda Lab™. Visit Mary online at [www.maryamato.com](http://www.maryamato.com).

Mary and I previously worked together to discuss ways to involve more music in public and school libraries and getting teens journaling. Please check out those posts:

[Bring the Power of Music Into Your Library](#)

[YA A to Z: Being Heard – Anne Frank, Diaries and Teens](#)