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Teachers Reflect on Their Experience As Readers: The Literacy Club Luncheon

**Carolyn S. Andrews-Beck
James Rycik**

Just as teachers who write are best able to act as guides for less experienced writers (Graves, 1983; Murray, 1985; Calkins, 1991; Atwell, 1985), teachers who see themselves as readers – who are aware of the requirements and strategies of the reader's role – are best able to guide young readers (Smith, 1982; Bleich, 1985; Hansen, 1987). For this reason, it is important for teachers to keep their membership in the “literacy club” (Smith, 1985) current by attending regular meetings.

Fortunately, this is easy to do. All that is required is for two or more people who believe that they are members to get together and talk about a text. Conversations (but not interrogations) with friends, colleagues, and of course students all qualify as literacy club meetings.

A literacy club meets

From time to time it may be useful to provide occasions for teachers to celebrate their role as readers a little more self-consciously. At the recent Whole Language Umbrella Conference in Phoenix Arizona 51 teachers from all over North America invited themselves to attend a “share a book,

make a friend” luncheon where they found a welcome chance to reflect on their reading in the company of other long-time active literacy club members. Participants represented teachers of kindergarten through high school and college and a few administrators as well.

What makes a book memorable?

The theme for discussion was “What Makes a Book Memorable?” Conversations at big round tables began with simple reminiscences of some books that had lingered in the readers’ mind, the circumstances under which the books were read, and the reasons why they had “stuck.” The books cited represented a wide range, from Fred Gwynne’s *Chocolate Moose* to Lucy Calkins’ *Living Between the Lines* to Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

The accompanying appendix lists the individual books chosen, by category. Categories are arguable and fluid: many children’s books are poetry, books that started out as adult best-sellers (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example) are now read more by young adults, and some young adult books like *Johnny Tremain* can be considered traditional classics. Educators at all levels are represented in each category: high school teachers often chose picture books while kindergarten teachers chose adult trade best-sellers. The unifying principle is that participants found all of these books especially memorable in their lives.

After sharing individually memorable books at each table, groups generalized from their experience by working together to create and display a list of things that make books memorable. According to participants, books are remembered not so much because of plot and illustrations, but because of how they fit into readers’ lives at the time they were read. Most comments fell into three categories:

books that affirm readers' identities, books that connect people with each other, and books that extend and expand readers' lives by taking them – emotionally or intellectually – into other times and places.

Memorable books help sort out who we are. To the teachers who gathered in Phoenix, books *matter*. They are as much a part of daily life as food. Participants used terms such as *identification*, *remembering connections*, and *personal association*. Memorable books speak to readers, stir their emotions, and reflect and touch many stages of their lives. "I read McCaffrey's Pern (science fiction) series, especially *Dragonsinger* at a time when I needed to identify with a talented, self-sufficient woman," said a high school teacher from Virginia. Two kindergarten teachers each found their personal beliefs clarified by very different books: Tom Robbins' *Skinny Legs and All* and Pete Seeger's *Abiyoyo*. A college professor read Don Coldsmith's *Saga of the Silver Bit* series. "They are about where I live and they speak to my Indian heritage. I've read all eighteen books in the series." A reading supervisor from southern Ohio identified with the West Virginia setting of Cynthia Rylant's poem *Waiting to Waltz*: "I saw my own adolescence in them. Maybe I wasn't so weird after all. What a relief!" Poetry also "touched the core of who I am" for a New York second-grade teacher who remembered *Honey I Love* by Eloise Greenfield. Professional books can touch educators just as profoundly, according to teachers who recalled Tracy Kidder's *Among Schoolchildren* ("The author's thoughts and feelings confirmed my own") and the personal impact of Lucy Calkins' *Living Between the Lines*. These teachers confirm that we read to validate and affirm ourselves.

Memorable books connect us with others. Responses confirmed that reading is intensely social. In

many ways, readers mentioned over and over how books have connected them with other people – family, colleagues, students, authors. Whether they were required reading or gifts, memorable books celebrated a sense of community. Sometimes they even created that sense: a New York teacher recalled “the stillness that permeates any group when this book (*Honey I Love*) is read” and an Oregon fourth-grade class used *The Reason for a Flower* as the organizing metaphor to unify them as a community for their whole year’s study.

Connections with authors. Several teachers knew or had met the authors of their memorable books. A New Jersey fourth-grade teacher met Jerry Spinelli and had students correspond with him even before Newbery-winning *Maniac McGee* was published. The educators who found books by Cynthia Rylant and Don Coldsmith memorable both said that they were acquainted with the authors. A high school English teacher from Massachusetts heard Bruce Brooks speak, then read *The Moves Make the Man* – a novel whose sustained metaphor compares moves in life to moves on the basketball court: “It was *my* free choice when my students were reading theirs.” Personal connection with the author was important for professional books too: a first-grade teacher was moved by Denny Taylor’s *Learning Denied* after hearing Taylor speak. Said a high school English teacher: “I loved *Uncommon Sense*, but it meant more to me because John Mayher had been my masters advisor’s professor.”

Recommended or required books. Books that were recommended or even assigned by someone else also became memorable. A second-grade New Mexico teacher said that Regie Routman’s *Transitions* read by a discussion group hostile to whole language not only sup-

ported her in moving toward whole language but also led her to a team partner who was another minority in the group. Four different people mentioned *Living Between the Lines* by Lucy Calkins, and three of them had met it as part of coursework. Constance Weaver's *Understanding Whole Language*, an assigned textbook, "connected and explained a lot of things that had been rattling around in my mind." A college professor from Kansas recalled a summer school class for which she read Don Graves' *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*. She said simply, "This book changed my life."

Memorable books celebrate friends and family.

Books were cherished gifts. "A student gave *Ira Says Goodbye* to me when I was moving from Texas to Tennessee," said a teacher of second-graders. From Georgia and Ohio: "My mother gave me *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good Very Bad Day* during my master's work," and "I gave *Love You Forever* to my son when he became a father." From Virginia: "My mother gave me *Tale of Two Cities* for my high school graduation and I didn't even want to read it. When my last child left home after college, we were packing after selling the house, and I found it again and read it within two weeks of moving." An Iowa teacher was given Bill Martin's *Knots on a Counting Rope* by a colleague: "Each year I share the book with my class and we add a knot to our rope. I read this book with my son, who was seven years old, the same age as the students I teach. We both cried. My father-in-law had passed away the previous year. We remembered the stories he shared with us."

Memorable books have changed our worlds.

Finally, a book might be memorable for its power to open alternative worlds that forever altered the reader's perspective of this world. For some memorable books, participants

used terms such as *living in another time and place*, *vision*, *vicarious experience*, *new perspective*, *escape*, even *enchantment*. Some books, they said, “just grab you; you can’t get out of them.” A college professor recalled her first love: the title character in *Johnny Tremain* in eighth grade. Another teacher was a teenager all over again with Mark Childress’ *Tender: A Novel* about Elvis; yet another re-lived memories of Viet Nam with *December Stillness*.

Memorable books extended readers’ intellectual worlds. A kindergarten teacher recalled being “thrilled with increasing political awareness” upon reading *Animal Farm*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Lord of the Flies*. Other readers recalled books that puzzled them, made them question their own ideas, or “flat out contradicted what I had believed.” Said one: “I *still* don’t like it, but it made me grow in ways I’ll never forget.” Still others took a more pragmatic view: memorable books “extend your ability to deal with your environment, whether it’s desert or inner city.”

Implications

As they pursued the question of what general qualities make a book memorable, participants found three important ways in which their own experiences agreed with the views of readers and reading they’d been attempting to pass on to their students.

Clearly, reading has been powerful in the minds and lives of these educators. Memorable books can forge and celebrate human relationships; they can challenge or strengthen intrinsic personal values; they can literally change the reader’s life by providing experiences that are not so much vicarious as (according to one participant), “the closest thing I know to teleporting.” Against this standard,

most traditional measures of reading comprehension seem limited indeed.

Second, a book is often memorable because of the company in which it was read. When the book is discussed and debated, recommended by someone respected, or shared with others, it becomes intertwined with the reader's own life story. Such a view validates the belief that sharing one's reading is one of the most crucial activities of any literacy environment. Novice readers, no less than advanced literacy club members, need to have lots of time allocated for talking about reading.

Finally, the memorability of a book often was not a product of the book itself so much as it was a happy match between the text on the one hand and the needs, preoccupations, and background of the reader. When reader and text come together in the right circumstances, there can occur that spontaneous combustion that Rosenblatt (1978) calls "the poem" – the transactional meaning-making that is not in the text or in the reader, but in the event that happens when they meet.

Therefore, recommending an interesting or appropriate book to another individual might be more problematic than it would first appear. Professional reading was the only category in which assigned books became memorable, and even then the educators had had a voice in selection because they chose the courses to take. If the impact of a book is so strongly dependent on the reader's life situation, then teaching self-selection is clearly an instructional mandate (Hansen, 1987; Turbill and Butler, 1988) far more valuable than simply assigning books "on the student's reading level."

Conclusion

When invited to examine their lives as readers in the company of others, literacy educators can validate by their own experience a transactional view of reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) and classroom practices that uphold the personal and social needs of readers. This suggests that such opportunities to read and reflect should be one component in the on-going growth of literacy educators as they help to induct others into active membership in the literacy club.

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APPENDIX

Books chosen as memorable by educators participating
in the Second Whole Language Umbrella Conference:
Share a Book, Make a Friend Luncheon,
Phoenix, August 2, 1991.

Author**Title****ADULT TRADE BOOKS**

Mark Childress	<i>Tender: A Novel</i>
Annie Dillard	<i>Pilgrim at Tinker Creek</i>
William Golding	<i>Lord of the Flies</i>
Helen H. Santmyer	<i>...and Ladies of the Club</i>
Harper Lee	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>
James V. Marshall	<i>Walkabout</i>
Tom Robbins	<i>Skinny Legs and All</i>
Scott Turow	<i>Presumed Innocent</i>
Leon Uris	<i>Mila 18</i>
P.G. Wodehouse	anything by Wodehouse

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Byrd Baylor	<i>Another Way to Listen</i>
Jean Brett	<i>The Mitten</i>
Margaret Wise Brown	<i>The Important Book</i>
Barbara Cooney	<i>Miss Rumphius</i>
Crescent Dragonwagon	<i>Half a Moon and One Whole Star</i>
	<i>Home Place</i>
Mem Fox	<i>Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge</i>
Fred Gwynne	<i>Chocolate Moose</i>
Ruth Heller	<i>The Reason for a Flower</i>
Bill Martin Jr.	<i>Chicka Chicka Boom Boom</i>
	<i>Knots on a Counting Rope</i>
Patricia McKissack	<i>Flossie and the Fox</i>
Eve Memling	<i>Hi All You Rabbits</i>
Robert Munsch	<i>Love You Forever</i>
Patricia Polacco	anything by Polacco
Pete Seeger	<i>Abiyoyo</i>
Chris Van Allsburg	<i>Just a Dream</i>
Judith Viorst	<i>Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day</i>
Bernard Waber	<i>Ira Says Goodbye</i>
Jane Yolen	<i>Owl Moon</i>

POETRY

Jo Carson	<i>Stories I Ain't Told Nobody Yet</i>
Chief Dan George	<i>poems</i>
Eloise Greenfield	<i>Honey I Love</i>
Adrienne Rich	<i>Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law</i>
Cynthia Rylant	<i>Waiting to Waltz</i>

PROFESSIONAL BOOKS

Lucy Calkins	<i>Living Between the Lines</i>
Bobbi Fisher	<i>Joyful Learning</i>
Donald Graves	<i>Build a Literate Classroom</i>
	<i>Writing: Teachers and Children at Work</i>
Georgia Heard	<i>For the Good of the Earth and Sun:</i> <i>Teaching Poetry</i>
Tracy Kidder	<i>Among Schoolchildren</i>
John Mayher	<i>Uncommon Sense: Theoretical Practice</i> <i>in Language Education</i>
Regie Routman	<i>Transitions: From Literature to Literacy</i>
Denny Taylor	<i>Learning Denied</i>
Constance Weaver	<i>Understanding Whole Language</i>
Gordon Wells	<i>The Meaning Makers: Children Learning</i> <i>Language</i>
	<i>Using Language to Learn</i>
Whitin, Mills & O'Keefe	<i>Living and Learning Mathematics</i>

TRADITIONAL CLASSICS

Charles Dickens	<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>
George Orwell	<i>Animal Farm</i>
John Steinbeck	<i>The Pearl</i>

YOUNG ADULT BOOKS

Natalie Babbitt	<i>Tuck Everlasting</i>
Bruce Brooks	<i>The Moves Make the Man</i>
Don Coldsmith	<i>Saga of the Silver Jit (series)</i>
Esther Forbes	<i>Johnny Tremain</i>
Mary Downing Hahn	<i>December Stillness</i>
Marcia Keegan	<i>Mother Earth, Father Sky</i>
Anne McCaffrey	the Pern series
Marie McSwigan	<i>Snow Treasure</i>
Gary Paulsen	<i>Canyons</i>
Jerry Spinelli	<i>Maniac McGee</i>
Jane Yolen	<i>Children of the Wolf</i>