



Young Adult Literature: Using YA Books to Teach Students to Love What We Love

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Young Adult Literature

CHRIS CROWE, EDITOR

USING YA BOOKS TO TEACH STUDENTS TO LOVE WHAT WE LOVE

... *what we have loved / others will love, and we will teach them how*

—William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book XIV

Wordsworth's quotation rings true with most English teachers: We got into this profession because of our desire to help young people learn to love what we love.

But what is it that we love? Some of us would confess that our real passion lies in our language. Others might profess a love for writing. But most of us were drawn to the study and teaching of English because of our love for reading, that indefinable pleasure of being lost in stories, being carried away on magic carpets of words woven by storytellers, talented or not.

At first it wasn't Shakespeare or Milton, Hawthorne or Faulkner, Woolf or Morrison that stoked our fires. It was reading. The smell of books. The spell of stories. The magic of making sense of printed words. That was enough. We learned to walk with stories, and later—after much reading and study—we learned to run with literature. And, being readers, we came to love literature.

Unfortunately, because of our adult involvement with literature, too many of us have forgotten the simple magic of reading. In our efforts to help students learn to love what we now love—literature—we overlook the more primary and important task of helping them learn to love reading. Without an appreciation of the magic of reading, our students will never, never gain a love of literature.

I want English teachers everywhere to remember how essential, how simple, how magical reading is. And I want them to understand that, un-

less we nourish our students with the milk of reading, they will choke on the meat of literature.

Here's how magical reading seems to someone who doesn't know what reading is:

In 1806, Will Mariner, a fifteen-year-old landsman aboard the British ship *Port au Prince*, was marooned on the South Pacific island of Tonga, a nation that, at the time, had no tradition of reading or writing. Not long after being separated from his crew mates, Mariner came under the care of Finau, king of Tonga. One day, the king discovered a letter Mariner had written and, baffled by the thin black markings on paper, asked another Englishman to explain the mysterious object. The Englishman read the letter to King Finau, and the king was amazed that the Englishman could repeat Mariner's message simply by looking at the black marks. The king later asked Mariner to explain the mystery to him. Mariner did so, writing down words the king spoke, then handing the paper to another Englishman, who had been out of earshot, to read what Mariner had written. Now even more amazed, King Finau kept Mariner busy for hours, writing the names of people, places, and things and having another Englishman read them. The king examined Mariner's writing several times but was unable to understand how Mariner could represent real things with thin scratchings on paper.

King Finau finally concluded it was magic.

And he was right. Reading is magic, a pleasurable magic, to be sure, but a process so simple and yet so wonderful that it's both impossible to understand and easy to take for granted.

John Steinbeck, one of the great American writers of the last century, understood and appreciated the magic of reading, as Steven Gilbar notes in *The Open Door: When Writers First Learned to Read* (Godine, 1989):

Some people there are who, being grown, forget the horrible task of learning to read. It is perhaps the greatest single effort that the human undertakes, and he must do it as a child. An adult is rarely successful in the undertaking—the reduction of experience to a set of symbols. For a thousand thousand years these humans have existed and they have only learned this trick—this magic—in the final ten thousand of the thousand thousand.

I do not know how usual my experience is, but I have seen in my children the appalled agony of trying to learn to read. They, at least, have my experience.

I remember that words—written or printed—were devils, and books, because they gave me pain, were my enemies. (69)

Fortunately for us, Steinbeck learned to overcome the demons of the printed word, but he'd probably be chagrined to know that some of his books now being used in American high schools have become enemies to many young people who are required to read them before they have mastered the magic of reading.

Of course, most American students know how to read; they can decode printed symbols. They can make sense of words on a page. But too many of them, mostly the ones we call "reluctant readers," don't know how to *read*. They don't understand how to engage a text in a way that opens their imagination, that melds their mind with an author's. It's as if they can read the notes but can't hear the music. It's these students who find no pleasure in books, who have forgotten—or never learned—the pleasure and magic of reading. Hitting these kids over the heads with *Great Expectations*, *Les Misérables*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Silas Marner*, or *The Grapes of Wrath* won't make them love reading or even like it. It will, however, help them relate to one of their tormentors by convincing them, if they haven't already been convinced, that "books, because they gave me pain, [are] my enemies."

We can find better, friendlier books to offer to students who haven't yet learned to love reading. The way into the hearts and minds of many of today's teenagers is through story. Because of their extensive viewing of TV and movies, most kids have learned to enjoy narratives. If we lead students to books with strong stories, we might be able to kindle—or rekindle—a love of reading.

In *Better than Life* (Coach House Press, 1994), Daniel Pennac reminds us of the pleasant power of story:

You never get over that transformation. You don't return from a voyage like that unchanged. No matter how inhibited, the *pleasure of reading* presides over every act of reading. By its nature, its alchemical sensuality, the pleasure of reading has no fear of visual media, not even the daily avalanche of pictures on the TV screen.

Even if the pleasure of reading has been lost (which is what we mean when we say that my son, my daughter, young people today, don't like reading), it hasn't gone very far.

It's just under the surface.

Easily found.

We simply need to know where to look. To focus our search, we should state a few home truths that have nothing to do with the effect of the modern world on today's youth. A few truths that concern only us. We who say we love reading and who claim we want to share that love. (48–49)

There are many texts that can provide engaging narratives for teenagers, but—and I know I'm biased—young adult novels in general may be the best texts available to hook students on stories, on reading. Most YA writers are primarily storytellers, and their stories have the ability to engage and hold the interest of inexperienced and experienced readers in ways that many classic adult novels cannot. If students who see books as their enemies are encouraged, given permission, or even required to spend time reading good YA novels, they are more likely to learn to love reading. And if they learn to love reading, they'll be better prepared to learn to love literature.

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But it's not book selection alone that alienates teenagers from reading. Often, sometimes too often, English teachers' approaches to reading and literature contribute to reluctant readers' abhorrence of books. Once again, Pennac reminds us of our first love, of what matters most when it comes to books:

There was no miracle. The teacher doesn't deserve much in the way of praise. The pleasure of reading was close at hand, held hostage in those adolescent attics by a secret and very old fear: the fear of not understanding.

They had forgotten what a book was, and what it had to offer. They had forgotten that, above all

else, a novel *tells a story*. They didn't realize that a novel must be read as a novel, and that its first job is to quench our thirst for stories. (137)

So, if we really want to help students learn to love what we love, we must first approach novels as stories. Literary labeling and dissection can come later, but we have to allow our students to wallow in the pleasure of a novel's plot.

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Lest I be pegged as some sort of New Wave radical trying to corrupt America's youth and undermine the fabric of American society by trashing the "Classics," let me say that I love many classic works of literature. I want my children and my students to have that same appreciation for the great work of talented, brilliant authors. But I also know that my love and appreciation for the classics came after high school, and in some cases, after college. I know I'm slower than many people, but it wasn't until I was a twenty-four-year-old with a BA in English and had taught *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to ninth graders for three or four years that I finally began to appreciate Mark Twain's great novel. For some reason, probably because I was slower than many people, I expected my fourteen-year-old ninth graders without even a high school education to enjoy the novel as much as I did.

I failed. I failed because I wasn't a good enough teacher. I didn't know how to teach them to love what I loved. I didn't realize that, before most of them could enjoy floating down the Mississippi River with Huck, they first had to learn how to enjoy floating away on the magic carpet of reading.

I want my students to love what I love; I want your students to love what you love. We can teach them to love reading and literature by focusing not

on what we love *now* (literature) but what we loved *then* (reading). Of course, some students, those few who will one day become English majors and teachers themselves, probably don't need us to teach them to love reading. They're avid readers who come to our English classes ready to dive into the canon. It's the rest of the students, those who dislike books, who quickly fall behind and become discouraged, disgruntled, and disgusted with literature, who need our attention, who need to be taught to love reading. It's those students who can benefit most from thoughtful approaches and good YA books.

B. F. Skinner said, "We shouldn't teach great books; we should teach a love of reading." I tend to agree with Skinner, but I'd like to modify his statement to say, "We shouldn't teach great books *until* we have taught a love of reading." If we do that, we'll be much more likely to teach students to love what we really love.

Discoveries: New or Overlooked YA Books Worth Reading

Choosing Up Sides, John H. Ritter (Philomel, 1998). Lefthanded Luke Bledsoe, the thirteen-year-old son of a strict preacher who believes lefthandedness is satanic, struggles to be an obedient son. Soon after his family moves to a new community in 1921, Luke discovers his prodigious potential as a baseball pitcher. His growing affection for baseball forces him to violate two of his father's strictest commandments: no games and no using the left hand. Ultimately, his father's rules bring tragedy to both of them.

A Dance for Three, Louise Plummer (Delacorte, 2000). Fifteen-year-old Hannah Ziebarth's father died when she was thirteen, leaving Hannah alone with her increasingly depressed and distant mother. Two years later, when Hannah discovers she's pregnant, she fantasizes that her handsome and rich boyfriend will be happy to hear the good news and that, with him and her baby, she'll have a whole family again. Unfortunately, he cruelly rejects Hannah, leaving her to face her crisis alone.

Edgar Allan, John Neufeld ([1968] Puffin, 1999). In the 1960s, a white family decides to adopt an African American boy, but the outcry—and outrage—from their white neighbors triggers unforeseen conflict and pain for them and for the little boy, Edgar Allan. This story, timely when it was

written during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, is still worth reading today.

Ender's Shadow, Orson Scott Card (Tor, 1999). This “parallel novel” to Card’s magnificent science fiction novel *Ender's Game* (Tor 1985), tells the story of Ender Wiggin’s diminutive but brilliant Battle School classmate, Bean, from the time he is rescued from poverty, starvation, and certain death in Amsterdam to his joining with Ender to battle the Buggers. It’s an ingenious and page-turning “non-sequel” to Card’s best-known novel.

Faraway Places, Tom Spanbauer (Harper-Perennial, 1993). When thirteen-year-old Jake Weber witnesses a murder while swimming in a river near his small Idaho town, he cannot know how much the event will change his life. Though three murders are committed in this short novel, it is not a murder mystery; it’s a coming-of-age story of a young boy who learns about the unsavory side of adults.

Freedom's Children, Ellen Levine (Avon, 1993). This volume of recollections by thirty African Americans who were children during the Civil Rights movement will help today’s young people understand the courage of Civil Rights activists and the very difficult social conditions they battled to change.

Heart of a Champion, Carl Deuker (Flare, 1994). Friends and teammates from Little League through high school, Seth and Jimmy are prepared for a season of success on their high school baseball team. Jimmy’s superior baseball talents are hindered by his growing dependence on alcohol, and Seth watches helplessly as Jimmy throws his talent—and his life—away.

The Kid's Address Book, Michael Levine (Perigree, 1999). This alphabetical guide to mailing addresses—and some e-mail addresses—of famous athletes, singers, and TV and movie stars will quickly grab the attention of many junior high school students. In addition to celebrities’ addresses, it also lists mailing information for world leaders, large corporations, and international organizations.

Oddballs, William Sleator (Puffin, 1993). Sleator’s memoir of his childhood has this dedication: “To my family: please forgive me!” Fans of William Sleator will love this inside look at his childhood, and they’ll enjoy reading about the antics of Bill, his siblings, and the rest of his “oddball” family.

Stormy Night, Michele Lemieux (Kids Can Press, 1999). This provocative picture book (originally published in German as *Gewitternacht*) is not a children’s book. The story, told with simple text illustrated in pen and ink, tells of a girl going to bed but unable to sleep because too many questions are “buzzing through [her] head.” The questions are the adolescent, philosophical type: Is there life on other planets? Who decided what humans would look like? Will the world come to an end someday?

The Superior Person's Book of Words, Peter Bowler (Dell, 1990). Unusual words appeal to teenagers, and this book is loaded with words (and their definitions) ranging from *acerebral* to *zzxjoanw* and from *zaftig* to *alliaceous*. Students will have fun using this book to discover and experiment with new words.