

Children's Literature in the Classroom

- ◆ Books that enlarge our capacity to live
- ◆ Literature extension activities: Connecting with careers in primary grade classrooms
- ◆ Multicultural nonfiction literature: Current and verifiable resources that enlighten
- ◆ LA 100 best books: 1999



The Dragon Lode

Vol. 19 • No. 2 • Spring, 2001

©2001 IRA Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group

Bradford L. Walker

University of North Carolina at Wilmington, NC

Books that enlarge our capacity to live

In his book, **Build a Literate Classroom**, Donald Graves (1991) suggests that one of our most important tasks as educators, is to understand what literacy does for us and to then help our students understand what literacy does for them. Students will be more inclined to read, for example, if they have a good understanding of what reading does for them. They will be more excited about writing if they know what writing can do for them. Graves (1990) further explains that:

Literacy enriches our lives. Literate persons listen to their own questions about their family, their community, and the world in which they live. They wonder about their perceptions of daily events. They write regularly to understand what they see and to absorb the meaning of the information that emerges on their pages. They read the words of others, composing their own text as they read. Their thoughts interweave with those of others as they listen to the voices of other writers.

We read, then, not only because we enjoy reading a book that stirs our emotions, but we also know that it enables us to better understand the feelings of others. Reading helps us to add depth to our awareness. It helps to enlarge our capacity to live, to learn, to empathize, and to feel. It increases our ability to enjoy and understand life. We read because we know what it can do for us.

In the movie, *Dead Poet's Society*, Mr. Keating

says it another way. He says, “We don’t read and write poetry because it is cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race and the human race is filled with passion!” It seems appropriate to paraphrase his words and suggest that we don’t read and write because reading and writing are subjects we need to study in school. We don’t read and write because we need to score a three on the end of grade test. We read and write because “we are members of the human race and the human race is filled with passion!” We read and write because we know reading and writing are great tools for learning, for communicating and for feeling.

If we want our children to come to know what reading can do for them, we must get them into significant books in significant ways. One way to help students experience this powerful learning is to have them identify short passages from the book that catch their interest and that can generate discussion as significant issues are pondered. I like to call these special excerpts “Passages to Ponder.” They are skillfully crafted examples of what language can do to help us think, communicate, and learn. “Passages to Ponder” are short phrases or sentences that are written in such a way that they grab our attention and just invite us to reflect.

Asking students to offer a passage for the class to ponder can stimulate thoughtful discussion, enhance comprehension, and facilitate the learning of others. It can also help them explore their lives and the world around them. Teachers can help students learn how this process works by demonstrating with personal passages they have selected. These passages should be ones that are personally meaningful to the teacher since we want students to be able to select passages that are personally meaningful to them. As a passage is shared, students are invited to reflect on the statement and to begin to share their thoughts, questions, and connections. The teacher should participate in this discussion, sharing his/her thoughts and why the passage was selected. It is essential that students have the ownership to select the passages meaningful to them and not look for the ones they think the teacher would want them to identify. In this manner, teachers can support students in finding their voice and being an active part of the learning process. Students could be asked to jot down passages as they read or mark the passages with sticky notes. Discussion might be enhanced by asking questions such as, “How are you feeling right now?” “What questions did that passage raise for you?”

or “What connections are you making to other aspects of life?”

The power that good literature can have in enlarging our capacity to live is demonstrated by introducing a few excellent books along with some of the “passages to ponder” they offer. Examples of how children might respond are then explored.

Hang Tough, Paul Mather by Alfred Slote is a story about a young boy named Paul Mather who is a very talented, little league baseball player, struggling with leukemia. Paul tells the story from his bed in the hospital, using flashback to help us understand the events leading up to his stay in the hospital as well as the continuing story of his life. His doctor, Tom Kinsella, encourages Paul to record his story to help keep his mind off of his suffering. We learn that Paul and his family have just moved to Michigan in order to receive better care from the university hospital. The very day that the Mather family moved into their house in Arborville, Paul meets three boys his same age, dressed in baseball uniforms, going to a game. He is not supposed to play until he can get permission from Dr. Kinsella but the boys challenge him to show his stuff after Paul’s brother brags that he was the best pitcher in California. Paul convinces them of his talent, sneaks on the team and helps them gain a lead over their rival team. The story explains how Paul gets on the Wilson Dairy baseball team, how he ends up in the hospital, and how he works hard to get back to the ball diamond to try and finish the season. This is an excellent book about courage and facing adversity with a positive, optimistic outlook on life.

Passages to Ponder:

I hardly heard them laughing at us, the baseball felt so good in my hand. It was scuffed up, too, the kind you like to throw, the kind you can do things with. I throw my curve fingers against the seam. I throw my fast ball with the seam. I moved my fingers around the ball. They belonged there. The ball belonged in my hand. I’d forgotten what it felt like. Baseball was my game, pitching was my life. I was born to pitch. (Paul’s explanation of how he felt when other boys challenged him to prove he was as good as his brother had said. He knew he shouldn’t even hold a baseball without permission, but ...)

And that’s where I am now. Or, I should say, we are now. Tom and me.

We're hanging tough. It's not easy. There's pain and Tom says lots more to come. But Tom also says time is on my side. Time and medicine and research and my own battling instincts. If anyone can make it, he says, I can. Even Brophy, who doesn't go along with many things, goes along with that. She's keeping my uniform handy. I'm counting on being back next season. The guys finished second in the playoffs, but next year, when I'm back, I know we're gonna finish first. (The ending of the book)

As students ponder the issues of illness, disease, and pain, they develop a deeper appreciation for those who face these challenges in their lives. Watching Paul go through the agony of wanting to play ball when he couldn't and then trying to decide if he should prove his abilities to his peers without a doctor's permission can help students reflect on their own lives and the decisions they must make which might not be clear-cut or which might include doing something they shouldn't. Paul's optimistic, hope-filled battle with leukemia could also serve to help students gain insights into the challenges they face in their own lives. Paul's attitude of "hanging tough" can help all of us face life with new hope and courage.

Many have read Theodore Taylor's, **The Cay**. It is a moving story about a young boy living in the Dutch West Indies with his family at the outbreak of World War II. Phillip has been cautioned all his life about keeping his distance from the blacks who also live on the island. "They have their place, and we have ours," explains his mother. As the security of the island is shattered with the appearance of German U-boats, Phillip's mother decides to take him back to Virginia with her. During the voyage, the ship is torpedoed. After the chaos created by explosions, fires, and people scrambling to abandon ship, Phillip wakes up only to find that he is all alone on small raft with Timothy, a big, black man who was one of the deck hands on the ship. Phillip is depressed and scared. He expresses his disgust for his situation and for being with this man that he despises. A day later, he goes blind from a blow to the head he suffered as he was trying to abandon ship. The story describes how Phillip and Timothy struggle to survive. At the same time, Phillip learns to love Timothy and to recognize his goodness and talents. He learns that the most important attributes of people are those inside of them.

He learns that appearances are insignificant when compared to who we really are.

Passages to Ponder:

Because it had been on my mind I told him that my mother didn't like black people and asked him why.

He answered slowly, "I don' like some white people my own self, but t'would be outrageous if I didn' like any o' dem."

Wanting to hear it from Timothy, I asked him why there were different colors of skin, white and black, brown and red, and he laughed back, "Why b'feesh different color, or flower b'different color? I true don' know, Philleep, but I true tink beneath d'skin is all d'same."

Long after he'd begun to snore in the dripping hut, I thought about it. I moved close to Timothy's big body before I went to sleep. I remember smiling in the darkness. He felt neither white nor black. (A conversation between Phillip and Timothy as they huddled together under a shelter they had built to keep them out of the rain.)

It rained that night, a very soft rain. Not even enough to drip through the palm frond roof. Timothy breathed softly beside me. I had now been with him every moment of the day and night for two months, but I had not seen him. I remembered that ugly welted face. But now, in my memory, it did not seem ugly at all. It seemed only kind and strong.

I asked, "Timothy, are you still black?"

His laughter filled the hut.

Even though Phillip was blind, he began to see Timothy for who he was—a thoughtful, caring human being who basically did everything he did to help Phillip survive. Phillip could now see others more clearly than he could when he had his sight. He began to look at others from a different perspective. Students will undoubtedly discuss issues of prejudice, hate, and racism. They might then discuss other ways to view the world, deepening their ability to identify the good in everyone and to appreciate diversity. Seeing these issues through the eyes of a young man who was able to change his perspective will support students in reflecting

about their own feelings.

Byrd Baylor's intriguing book, **The Table Where Rich People Sit**, allows us to wonder about the most important aspects of life. When we count up our riches, what is most valuable to us? A young girl asks her family to have a meeting about money. She thinks they need more because she and her brother don't have nice clothes to wear to school and they have to sit at a homemade kitchen table when they eat. "It just doesn't seem like a table where rich people would sit," she muses. During the course of the very open discussion, her parents show her how they determine their riches. They list all the things that make them rich. They suggest that it is worth \$20,000 "... to be able to work outside where they can see the sky all day and feel the wind and smell rain" They explain that it is worth \$10,000 to be able to "... hear coyotes howling back in the hills." A most touching scene is presented when her parents ask her how much she thinks she is worth. She says that she is beginning to catch on to this kind of thinking and states that she is worth \$10,000. Her parents say, "Oh, don't underestimate yourself." They go on to tell her that she is worth a million dollars to them. At the end of the story, the little girl pats the kitchen table and she says that she is glad it is theirs. She realizes just how rich they are. This book provides the opportunity for young and old to be more aware of the world around us and the things in our lives that are most valuable—the things that truly make us rich.

Passages to Ponder:

We don't just take our pay in cash, you know. We have a special plan so we get paid in sunsets, too, and in having time to hike around the canyons looking for eagle nests.

To tell the truth, the cash part doesn't seem to matter anymore. I suggest it shouldn't even be on a list of our kind of riches.

I kind of pat the table and I'm glad it's ours.

Now my mother says, "Let's see what our Mountain Girl is worth to us." ... They end up deciding I'm worth about a million dollars.

By listing the many "riches" we have in our own lives that have little, if anything, to do with money, students can develop a greater apprecia-

tion for the world around them and cultivate a desire to take care of it and enjoy it. They begin to realize more fully what they have around them. An attitude of gratitude for what one has and an ability to see things for what they are will enhance anyone's capacity to live. Every child deserves the advantage of knowing they are loved and worth "about a million dollars." Reflection about the concepts in this book can enhance self-confidence, patience, and gratitude. Students can also develop the ability to think positively.

Another author with the ability to create emotion-packed experiences through her books is Eve Bunting. She has said that she cries when she reads the books she writes and hopes that children will cry, too. She is one who understands the power of literature and its role in our emotional lives. A most-touching book is **Train to Somewhere**. The story takes place during the early history of our country. In order to help deal with the growing population of orphans, and to help farmers in need of extra hands, huge numbers of orphans in the east were often placed on trains which were headed west. Announcements of the trains were sent forward and anyone desiring to take a child would meet the train at the station, look over the group, and select any who seemed to meet their needs. The orphan then went to live with the family and, often, was adopted by this new family. This provided help for the families as well as a home for the orphans. The story is told through the eyes of a young girl, Marianne, whose mother left to go out west and find suitable work. She promised Marianne that she would send for her. As Marianne boards the train, she is convinced that her mother will be waiting for her at one of the stations. Marianne carries a white, chicken feather in her pocket. It is a feather that she took from her mother's hair as her mother left. It has been the thing that has given her hope to keep going these past years. At each station, however, her mother is nowhere to be found. There are people at each station, and, little by little, each of the orphans is picked for a home. She is the only one left. After all have gone from the station, Marianne and her custodian board the train for one last stop. Confident that she will see her mother at the next stop, Marianne prepares herself. At the station, however, there is only one couple, both older. They seem disappointed because they were expecting and needing a boy. Marianne is disappointed because they aren't her mother. The story ends as the little orphan gives the feather to her new mother and they embrace.

Passages to Ponder:

"Are you...?" the man asks Miss Randolph.

"Yes." Miss Randolph nudges me forward. "This is Marianne."

"Is she all..." The woman stops. I know she was going to say: "Is she all that's left?" But she doesn't. She looks at me closely and I see a change in her face. A softness. I'd thought my mother would look at me like that.

Somehow this woman understands about me, how it felt that nobody wanted me, even though I was waiting inside myself for my mother to come. Somehow she understands the hurt.

"I'm not what you wanted, am I?" I say. "You wanted a boy."

"I won't lie to you. We did want a boy," Mrs. Book says.

"But we like girls fine," Mr. Book adds.

"Mrs. Book squints at me. "I expect we're not what you wanted, either. ... sometimes what you get turns out to be better than what you wanted in the first place."

I reach in my pocket and bring out the feather. It was white when I took it from my mother's hair; now it's yellow. I smooth it with my fingers. "I brought you this."

Watching another child effectively deal with the loss of a parent and other disappointments in life will help students develop an increased feeling of hope and optimism in their own lives. It will also help students develop a deeper ability to empathize with the challenges others have to face. The advice from Mrs. Book, "Sometimes what you get turns out to be better than what you wanted in the first place," fosters a contentment with life and what it brings. Marianne's determination to face a new, unknown situation with hope, trust, and a positive attitude, can, likewise, help students to be able to do the same. We are touched when we learn how others have faced and dealt with difficult situations in their lives.

Marie Bradby's **More Than Anything Else** is the story of Booker T. Washington and his desire to learn to read. The title is indicative of his feelings about the need for literacy. He wanted to learn

to read, "more than anything else". The story begins with young Booker getting up early and going to the salt works to shovel salt with his father and big brother. He talks about how hard they work and all the aspects of life he notices as he goes to and from work. The thing he wants more than anything else, however, is to learn to read. He hears a man in town reading a newspaper aloud. He pictures himself as that man, reading to everyone else. His mother gives him a book she has saved for him. She can't read and can't help him with it but he starts to try to understand. He becomes frustrated when he can't make sense of the marks on the pages of the book. Booker finally goes to find the man he has heard reading in the town. He does, and this man helps him to make sense of the letters.

Passages to Ponder:

But it isn't really a meal I want, though I would not turn one down. More than anything else, I want to learn to read." (Booker says this as he describes how hungry he is since they usually don't eat breakfast.)

My arms ache from lifting the shovel, but I do not think about the pain there. I think about the hunger still in my head—reading. (Comments made after returning from a long day of work.)

I jump up and down singing it. I shout and laugh like when I was baptized in the creek. I have jumped into another world and I am saved. (Joy expressed as Booker begins to catch on to the reading process and make sense of the letters on the page.)

As students ponder these well-written passages, they can't help but begin to feel the hunger that Booker had for learning to read. Relating those feelings to their own pangs of hunger when they haven't eaten and describing the actual physical feelings of being hungry or tired will allow students to develop a deeper understanding of the longing Booker had to learn. Students might discuss their own desires and share what they could do to make them become a reality. Seeing Booker's strong desire to learn can inspire students in their own learning.

These books, and so many others available to children, can have a significant impact in their lives. Books will grab them around their emotions, shake them, and let them back down. They will allow children to experience and understand what read-

ing can do for them. Books will enlarge their capacity to live. Helping students learn what reading will do for them is a big part of our responsibility as teachers. With so many excellent books available, however, this task is not as difficult as it might seem.

REFERENCES

- Graves, Donald H. (1990). **Discover your own literacy**. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- _____. (1991) **Build a literate classroom**. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS CITED

- Baylor, Byrd. (1994). **The table where rich people sit**. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Bunting, Eve. (1996). **Train to somewhere**. New York: Clarion Books.
- Bradby, Marie. (1995). **More than anything else**. New York: Orchard Books.
- Slote, Alfred. (1973). **Hang tough, Paul Mather**. New York: J.B. Lippincott Company.
- Taylor, Theodore. (1969). **The Cay**. New York: Avon Books.

JOIN US

IRA SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND READING MEETS AT IRA 2001 IN NEW ORLEANS!

Wednesday ♦ May 2nd ♦ 2:00 p.m.-4:45 p.m.
Rosedown Room ♦ Doubletree Hotel

The IRA-CL/R SIG session for 2001 will be an unforgettable one. It is titled after Hazel Rochman's book **Somehow Tenderness Survives** and looks at social justice issues in children's literature. Hazel Rochman will be presenting a talk about her work, as will Carol Matas (**Daniel's Story**) and Michael Tunnell (**The Children of Topaz**). An open forum will follow. As a capstone piece there will be a special presentation of children choreographing a dance to the work of our three authors.

We hope to see you there!