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Author

The chain of creativity: How response informs the writer

When I was invited to discuss how reader response has affected my writing, I realized that, first, I had to share the various responses I experience before my books reach my intended audiences:

- ✓ My initial draft is often my response to “reading” a stimulus—a natural or human event, an interesting person or animal, a work of art, and frequently an existing text.
- ✓ I bring my own reader response to my drafts, and believe it, I am a different reader after I have written each draft.
- ✓ My trusted circle responds—my weekly writers’ group, my agent, sometimes a family member, friend, or an expert on the content.
- ✓ Editors respond—not all favorably. I stopped counting my rejections when they hit 200 and that was three years ago! (I write a lot of stories, and I naturally think they all should be accepted.) But on a published book, I especially need to work with the editor’s responses, which are informed by sales—the “dirty” part of reader response.

Only after I synthesize all these responses do I fashion a text—bound for a shelf—inviting “transaction.” In the Fall 1999 issue of **The Dragon Lode**, Glenna Sloan writes, “There is no meaning in a given text by itself, reader response theorists insist; it is the reader who brings meaning to it.” (p. 6) But before readers have the book in

their hands, the text has already been infused with meaning by a variety of readers’ responses. To insist there is “no meaning in a given text by itself” is like insisting that a native culture does not exist until colonizing forces “discover” it and use it for their own purposes. I don’t devalue reader response at all; but the end-reader is only one of many respondents who help a text achieve meaning.

I READ AND RESPOND

My third book, **New Moon**, is a perfect example of how my transaction with a text generated a creative response—a new text. In my Romantic Literature class at Rutgers, we studied Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode.” (1802) Coleridge starts off with an epigraph from “The Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence,” a pre-15th century anonymously written song. In the ballad, the image of “the new Moon/with the old Moon in her arms” portends a fatal storm. (This image is seen immediately following the invisible “new” moon phase, when a waxing sliver on the right embraces the outline of the entire moon.) Coleridge responds to the Ballad by acknowledging that the new moon portends a storm. However, he hopes that the storm’s powers will lift him from his creative and emotional doldrums, “might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!” (l. 20.)

To my feminist eyes, Coleridge improved upon the ballad’s negative connotations of that lunar phase, but not enough. I felt “The new moon with the old moon in her arms” was such a beautiful phrase, as well as a beautiful phase of the moon, I just had to rewrite it with positive connotations. And every month after that, when I saw the waxing sliver, I vowed anew to find the right words.

In December, 1991, my 16-month-old daughter was bursting with words. One late afternoon, we hiked up a hill to watch this new moon rise as the sun set. When she hugged my leg and said, “Mooooon,” I—feeling very much the “old moon”—knew I could finally respond with my own poem, a joyful text. Today’s readers of **New Moon** may not know all this background; they surely don’t need all this background to infuse the text with their own personal meanings. But meanings are already there, meanings dating back 500 years, meanings linked in a chain of responses.

I RESPOND AND REWRITE

My response to a first draft is usually a swoon. And the longer the story or poem is, the deeper the swoon. Like Kathleen Turner finishing her novel in *Romancing the Stone*, I sigh, sometimes cry, then celebrate with a glass of wine or beer. (I do not chug airplane bottles!) My poem/picture book/novel manuscript is “the best thing I’ve ever written” for at least 24 hours. But the next time I look at it, the buzz is over. I won’t go as far as Anne Lamott in calling my first effort an “SFD” (you’ll have to read *Bird by Bird* to find out what that means), but I bring a practical eye and ear back to the text. Call it a literary hangover.

Producing a first draft is like dumping a lump of Play-Doh out of a can. Only when I have the raw material in front of me can I shape it, examine it, listen to it, and—by all means smell and taste it! Re-make it, as all writers do when they revise. I’m at least 24 hours older (wiser?) when I revisit a first draft. A lot can happen in 24 hours. The market can crash, I can read a poem, my son could lose a tooth, a faraway friend could get back in touch, a loved one can die, a new loved one can be born. Sometimes, I am years older when I return to a fifth or tenth draft.

My point is that every time I read a draft, I am a different person, bringing new meanings to the text, seeing different meanings in what I wrote, identifying spots where I can enhance the meanings I intended.

MY WRITERS’ GROUP RESPONDS

“I pick up the pa’ndau, but the wind blows it back against me. Its words are warm against my face. Far away laughter flaps in my ears....” When I finished reading this early draft (the third of ten) of **The Whispering Cloth** to my writers’ group, they were silent for the longest time. I thought, they hate it! But no, they loved it—except for this ending.

“Vague,” someone said. “Whose words? ...whose laughter?” someone else piped up. “Why is there laughter at all in this climax?”

In our writers’ group, the suggestions and the questions fly after a member reads his or her work. I write down and consider every one. I may not agree with or use half of them, but these questions—these responses—force me to re-examine my text. They force me to refine my wording if I want readers to perceive my meaning.

After I get students to admit how lousy they feel when teachers ask them to re-do something, I tell them how lucky they are. “Lucky to have teachers who believe in you so much that they ask you to re-do it.” This shocks them. I tell kids, “So, don’t feel so bad when you have to re-do something. Consider it another chance to do something wonderful.”

Did I feel that way when my group asked me to re-write the ending of **The Whispering Cloth**? No way! Boy, was I miffed, to put it mildly. I was also scared that I couldn’t write a better ending, one that the powerful story deserved. But I knew I had to try. So, I took down my Hmong pa’ndau storycloth from the living room wall and brought it to my computer. I put my face into the pa’ndau—an embroidered textile—and allowed myself to respond physically and spiritually. Then, I wrote: “Mai picked up the pa’ndau, but the wind blew it back against her. The short rough stitches of her father’s hand stood up from the cloth to stroke Mai’s chin. She tried to speak, but the smooth stitches of her mother’s cheeks hushed her lips.”

These new words rewarded me for responding to the pa’ndau text, and for responding to my group’s constructive response. My final story, headed to press, already represented a chain of responses.

MY EDITORS RESPOND

One of my new books, **I See Me**, (Harper Growing Tree, Summer 2000) was rejected more than 25 times! It was rejected by the same editor and the same house, Harper Collins, who later bought it. My text about a toddler discovering her reflection in a variety of surfaces did not change much. Why, then, did the text work in 1998 and not in 1991-5? Because the market had changed. Readers had responded with their wallets.

In the early ’90s, not much demand existed for original board book literature. Publishers were serving that market by sizing down preschool picture books, and publishing concept books on colors, numbers, letters—books with only one or

two words per page. Readers—babies, parents, and early childhood educators—responded. Studies made it clear that children develop language skills so early that babies should be further stimulated. (Plus parents were getting sick of boring baby books.) Editors answered that response.

An editor has a more direct response to my specific text in the editing process. When I first started submitting my manuscript for **New Moon**, it was a mother-daughter story. It got rejected a few places before an editor told me, “Kids love their moms, but they really don’t want to read about them.” (Only kids over six say this is true.) So when I changed the mother to a big brother, the book could appeal to babies through 8-year-olds. (Plus moms still liked it because it’s a sweet sibling story.) My editor at Boyds Mills Press reminded me that the text’s language still sounded more like a mom’s. For example, I had written “the moonlight turned the bushes and trees into bouquets of lace.” A pretty image, sure, but the sensibility is too old. I revised it to show how the “glow of the full moon fell over” Vinnie, like a spell.

But there is one special image in **New Moon** that I refused to change despite months of the editor’s negative responses and “requests” to change it. At the end of the book, the big brother brings Vinnie to a hill to watch the new moon rise as the sun sets. I wrote, “When we got to where the trees stopped, the daylight was becoming the color of peach ice cream....” To argue for this image, I drew upon my own response to that magical sky-text, that winter sunset. Months of polite disagreement later, my editor called me after sundown and told me she and her kids had seen that “peach ice cream” sky that night, and yes, I could keep the image. Readers of every age tell me that the “peach ice cream” sky is the best image in the story. And whenever I read it aloud, the audience responds with sighs, smiles, soft giggles. And I’m glad all over that I trusted my responses and instincts, and actively prompted readers to respond in the same way.

HOW I INVITE RESPONSE

Obviously, I use the tools of the trade—rhythm, alliteration, assonance, metaphor, dialogue, suspense, etc.—to help readers respond the way I’d like them to. I’m also overjoyed that readers can get more out of a text than I put in, because they bring their own experience. In fact, I’m pro-active about eliciting readers’ responses. Whenever I have a new book published, I write up related cross-

curriculum activities that teachers can use with their students. These activities have resulted in a variety of responses: new poems about the moon, drawings of siblings having fun, quilts about difficulties or joys, etc. So by the time I visit a school to share my writing process, I’m surrounded by responses to my work. What a genuine thrill!

The most poignant responses come from readers of **The Whispering Cloth**. Usually, there is silence when I finish reciting it, and I can feel the weighty thoughts of my audience. I often hear a snuffle or two before soft applause comes. I don’t mind if no applause comes at all, because it means the audience is still deep in thought—a response I intended. Needy children respond so deeply to this story of an orphaned Hmong girl in a refugee camp. They show me their own storycloths of house fires, robberies, beatings at home, life on the street. Just as Mai creates a vision of hope with her stitching, these children express small signs of hope too: A flower still standing, a favorite toy still clutched, a hand to hold. These responses overwhelm me. They challenge me to make all my writing as evocative.

Some young readers respond to the realistic aspects of the story. “Why couldn’t Mai leave the camp?” “Why couldn’t they eat what they wanted?” “How were her parents killed?” These sympathetic questions remind me that most American children need to see how other, sometimes less-fortunate, children live without the easy fixes of a sitcom or Disney movie. They need substantial stories to explore time and again, to help them make sense of the world.

The most stirring responses have come from readers and educators in the Hmong community. Despite my research and help from Hmong friends, I still was nervous about my text because I’m not Hmong. Did I get it right? Their responses have reduced me to tears: “Thank you for writing our story.” “In a time when we needed something to be proud of, Pegi Deitz Shea has shown us what we already have....We should read this book to our children.” The most touching response came from a Hmong mother who could not read English yet. After I recited the story, she said, “When I learn to read, I will read this every day.”

Ironically, these very responses and my own exhaustive research have contributed to my problems in writing **The Whispering Cloth** sequel, a novel about Mai coming to America. Most of my Hmong readers have loved the manuscript, **The Shell of the Snail**, and have helped me fine-tune it and get it right. But over the past four years,

editors' responses have been consistent despite my numerous revisions: "The story's more about the Hmong immigration process, than about Mai living this experience.... I couldn't connect with Mai."

Negative responses help me too. They are re-constructive. So, back I go to reread and re-respond

to my drafts, my research, and my purpose. And hopefully, I go forward as well: to a new text which will interact with my writers' group and editors. Finally, the text will meet my intended audiences. And these very readers will inspire me to respond anew in the chain of creativity.

Teachers wishing to have curriculum activities for **New Moon** and **The Whispering Cloth** can send a self-addressed stamped envelope to Pegi Deitz Shea, 27 Fox Hill Drive, Rockville, CT 06066.

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