Why Aren’t We Laughing?

When the Oscars are given out, very few comedies win the Best Picture award. Doesn’t it take significant talent to make an audience laugh?

When books are “lighter” in tone, readers have mixed reactions. Isn’t it normal to recognize that each person has a different “funny bone”? One that gets tickled in its own way to produce a smile or laughter? Some people laughed out loud at the Three Stooges, and others were not amused at all. Some enjoy Two and a Half Men on TV, and others are turned off. So a person who writes humor has a most “interesting” task. Consider the various techniques and styles in books by Mark Twain, Woody Allen, Erma Bombeck, Dorothy Parker, James Thurber, to name just a few.

In discussing this genre with teachers, they tell me if some students comment, “This isn’t funny,” they consider the lesson is not going very well or this might be a waste of time. One teacher stated, “There is not much to teach when students read funny stuff.” She went on to describe how much easier it is to teach when one reads about a character who is seriously ill or is dying or is suffering physical or emotional abuse. High drama? Another teacher stated that there is not much you can talk about after reading an Ogden Nash poem. Can’t one just have fun? In a Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert age, can’t laughter be its own reward?

I don’t always agree with critics who review plays, movies, TV shows, or books. I enjoy forming my own opinions and respect the rights of others to do the same. (Read Daniel Pennac’s The Rights of the Reader, Candlewick, 2008. Fun and somewhat provocative.) Humor can make one laugh at absurdity one moment and stimulate critical thinking about an issue the next. As I grow older, I realize how much enjoyment I’ve gained through humorous writings.

Here are just a few books by children’s and young adult authors that have enriched my life:

Kinney, Jeff. Diary of a Wimpy Kid:


The More the Merrier

When I visit schools or meet with teachers and/or librarians, they tell me about the many students who can’t read, won’t read, don’t read. When I talked with some of their students, I got some interesting information. A number of students could read better than they let on. In fact, some admitted they enjoyed being in special reading classes because not much was expected of them or they got out of reading boring books.

At one point in my career, I was assigned to visit all of the high schools in New York City and to look at the records of students who were likely to drop out. I met with..
a number of such students and listened to their stories. They were not critical of their teachers. They were extremely critical of the curriculum and the books they had to read. These did not seem relevant to them.

Many of these students could read very well. Some read magazines and often read what their friends recommended. Wouldn’t it be a good idea to print out a quarterly journal with reviews by students, teachers, librarians? Why not give credit for such participation and recognize that whatever students read is a big step in promoting literacy?

With that in mind, here are a few suggestions in various categories. I welcome hearing the suggestions of others.

**Beyond Here and Now**

**Beyond the Twilight series**

**Family Relationships**

**Historical Fiction**

**A Matter of Life and Death**

**Mystery and Suspense**

**Nonfiction**

School Life: Friends and Foes

Sporting Events

Too Good to Miss
• Chaikin, Andrew, and Alan Bean. Mission Control, This Is Apollo. Viking, 2009.

Special for the Teacher
• Nilsen, Alleen Pace, and Kenneth L. Donelson. Literature for Today’s Young Adults (8th ed.). Allyn and Bacon, 2009.