Five Things to Ponder

Think about This


Budgets (in book companies) have been trimmed in various ways:

Author advances, except for the biggest names, have slumped sharply since the 2008 financial crash, declining by more than half, according to one recent survey. It’s hard to imagine that the quality of manuscripts from writers who have been forced either to eat less or write faster isn’t deteriorating. Meanwhile, spending on editing and promotion has also been pared away.

Things don’t get better after the book leaves the publisher. Price cutting, led primarily by Amazon, has reduced many brick-and-mortar bookstores to rubble, depriving readers of direct interaction with booksellers. Despite some recent good news, the number of independents has been halved in the last two decades, and the chain stores that survive increasingly employ part-time, unskilled staff.

The decline in libraries weakens another vital prop for readers. Librarians, described by the novelist Richard Powers as “gas attendan[t[s] of the mind,” saw a national decrease in their numbers of nearly 100,000 over the two decades to 2009. Two-thirds of public libraries reported flat or decreasing budgets in 2012.

2. Elizabeth Suneby, with illustrator Suana Verelet, has written Razia’s Ray of Hope: One Girl’s Dream of an Education (Kids Can Press, 2013). While this is a book intended for elementary students, its message of hope is for all ages. A young Afghanistan girl would love to go to school, but it is not usually permitted in this culture. “Our girls are needed to help their mothers at home.” The author points out “only about 13 percent of girls living in Afghanistan are literate.” What does it mean not to be able to read or write?

3. Michael Sokolove, a feature writer for the New York Times, is the author of Drama High (Riverhead Press, 2013). This book is a tribute to English/Drama teacher Lou Volpe, an outstanding personality at Harry S. Truman High School in the blue collar section of Levittown, PA. There is hardly any censorship in the productions Volpe presents in this school. He is a perfectionist, and he wants his productions to be of Broadway quality, and he is able to inspire his students to be “professional.” His productions have won many awards and caused Cameron Mackintosh, a major Broadway producer, among others, to visit the school to see what Volpe is able to do.

Over time, one of the things that I come to see is how deeply Volpe knows his students. How couldn’t he? They take chances onstage that reveal their inner selves. But it is also true that the very things they learn from being in theater—empathy, the ability to imagine lives other than their own; the actor’s gift for giving a character a backstory, a biography beyond what the playwright put on the paper—allow them to know him.

You have to “find your character,” he tells them, meaning they have to imagine lives they cannot fully know. Not the prosaic biographical details, but beyond that. What is it like to be that person? What resides deep within, and what is missing? Volpe gives his students only hints of his personal
life—tells them about the show he just saw in New York, the purchase he made at the mall—so they have to imagine the rest, intuit it, figure out what’s it like to be Louis T. Volpe, high school theater teacher. (p. 39)

4. From The Rights of the Reader by Daniel Pennac, illustrated by Quentin Blake (Candlewick, 2008).
1. The right not to read.
2. The right to skip.
3. The right not to finish a book.
4. The right to read it again.
5. The right to read anything.
6. The right to mistake a book for real life.
7. The right to read anywhere.
8. The right to dip in.
9. The right to read out loud.
10. The right to be quiet. (p. 135)

5. How does one thank all of the authors, teachers, publishers who made the 40th anniversary of ALAN a celebration in Boston? So many good presentations. The Program Committee did an amazing job. In the boxes each participant received were a multitude of fine new books. Now is the time to order books for classrooms, school libraries, public libraries to support the efforts of authors and publishers. Now is the time to recognize that giving students a variety of choices will develop a love of reading for the rest of their lives.

And Think More with These Books
To encourage such an activity, here are some themes worthy of consideration.

Another Time

When One Dies

Autobiography and Biography

Family Matters
Tracy, Kristen. Too Cool for This School. Delacorte, 2013.

Multiculturism
Ada, Alma Flor, and F. Isabel Campoy, with pictures by David Diaz. Yes, We Are Latinos.
Charlesbridge, 2013.

**Mystery and Suspense**

**Nonfiction**

**Romance**
Smith, Jennifer E. *This Is What Happy Looks Like.* Little, Brown, 2013.

**Science Fiction**

**Sports**


**Supernatural**


**War**


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