One More Time?

In this graduate-level YA lit class, students were discussing a novel in which two teens confront each other because one didn’t want to go to a community event; he just wanted to be left alone that evening. This led the bully to call the other boy “a faggot.” The bully later told his friends, word spread, and the devastated small-town boy was shunned.

A teacher taking the course who had read this book was so distressed that he arose and stated: “I’d never let any of my students read such a book. It could give them ideas!”

Isn’t it interesting that there are some who worry that reading a book might give students ideas?

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At a conference in March of this year, an author spoke eloquently about his growing up in poverty in Texas and the effects on his whole family. He read briefly from his novel based on this experience, and then he opened his presentation for questions and remarks.

One teacher started: “Does your book have any cursing, drinking, sexual situations?”

The author responded: “Some. But the sexual situations are not detailed.”

The teacher immediately scratched out all of her notes about the author and the book and couldn’t wait for the session to end. All around her noticed her fidgeting and restlessness.

This author and his book have been nominated for several special literary awards.

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A supervisor of language arts and social studies at a large urban high school asked if there were any books that could be recommended that had a more modern approach to critical issues confronting our country, books that would hook the students on reading about critical issues. When I suggested a few titles about conflicts and consequences of wars, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, she looked at me and stated, “Those won’t do. Some of our students might have relatives involved in those battles and might be deeply disturbed about reading such books. How about WWI?”

Aren’t all wars hell?

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A professor invited me to speak in a class about censorship. I started with a few cases and explained the importance of book selection policies that would be approved by the administration and the board of education. I listed the resources at NCTE, Office of Intellectual Freedom at ALA, and The National Coalition Against Censorship. We discussed ways of handling issues when someone objected to a student reading a certain book, either assigned or taken out of the library for a report.

I asked the students to list some of the topics they thought might be controversial. The list included sexual situations (straight, gay, lesbian), curse words, drugs, gangs and violence, abuse, death and dying, unruly school situations, bullying, drinking, unhappy home situations, supernatural, fantasy, science fiction.

The professor then turned to me and said, “In this city, we don’t need to worry about such matters. No one seems to care. We don’t have to worry about selection processes.”

Why did he invite me to speak about censorship and to involve his students? For the sensationalism?

Spread the Wealth

I have done limited research on

Family Matters
King, A. S. Everybody Sees the Ants. Little, Brown, 2011.

Fantasy
Norcliffe, James. The Boy Who

Students discover many books on their own. They spread the word about what they like, and then these books become popular. Sales go up. Circulation increases. Many of these books are personally enjoyable, but they are not part of any school activity or curriculum. Yet, many teachers have heard the authors of these books speak at such conventions as NCTE, IRA, ALAN Workshops, local and state conferences, public libraries, book store signings. When I meet teachers professionally or socially and ask them about some of these books, they tell me they already have a curriculum that has been approved, and it’s too much trouble to add anything else. Besides, some of these books are controversial, and they don’t want to have any more problems than they already have with students who don’t want to read or write anything.

How do teachers get students to read and write more?
Hardly anyone enjoys writing book reports. But having students share their reading experiences with others can often be not only enjoyable, but also motivating. Yes, give students credit for all books they are reading. Find books that meet the abilities and interests of students. Fiction, nonfiction, plays, poems, short stories, essays. Students might start a book because of the subject matter, but find they don’t enjoy an author’s literary style. Finding another book on that subject is not all that difficult. Reading is so personal. How long can one impose one’s taste on others? Isn’t this extremely limiting?

There are so many good books out there. ALAN and The ALAN Review do an excellent job in helping teachers discover the wealth of resources available. We need to engage more teachers in our organization and help them become familiar with the many ideas for bringing students and books together. Reading achievement is not a test score. It’s a lifetime experience.

Some Themes to Consider
A thematic approach allows students to look at several possible titles and to select a book that meets their personal interests. These are just a few suggestions. Most of the titles listed here are recent publications.

A Dash of Humor
Greenwald, Tommy (illustrated by J. P. Couvert). Charlie Joe

an outstanding author’s works in the New Jersey schools. This author has won many awards and is regarded as a major figure in young adult literature. However, the author’s overall works include a number of the issues listed above. I wrote to English department chairs throughout the state, asking if any books by this author were being used as required reading in any of their middle school or high school classes. I had a decent response, and the overwhelming answer was “No.” I didn’t have to ask why. Then I wrote to a number of school librarians; a few had some of the titles on their shelves.

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How do teachers get students to read and write more?
Hardly anyone enjoys writing book reports. But having students share their reading experiences with others can often be not only enjoyable, but also motivating. Yes, give students credit for all books they are reading. Find books that meet the abilities and interests of students. Fiction, nonfiction, plays, poems, short stories, essays. Students might start a book because of the subject matter, but find they don’t enjoy an author’s literary style. Finding another book on that subject is not all that difficult. Reading is so personal. How long can one impose one’s taste on others? Isn’t this extremely limiting?

There are so many good books out there. ALAN and The ALAN Review do an excellent job in helping teachers discover the wealth of resources available. We need to engage more teachers in our organization and help them become familiar with the many ideas for bringing students and books together. Reading achievement is not a test score. It’s a lifetime experience.

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A Dash of Humor

**Friendships**


**Historical Fiction**

Burg, Ann E. All the Broken Pieces. Scholastic, 2009.


**In The Schools**

Coriell, Shelley. Welcome, Caller, This Is Chloe. Amulet, 2012.

**Multicultural**


**Mystery And Suspense**


**Nonfiction**

Swanson, James L. Bloody Times: The Funeral of Abraham Lincoln and the Manhunt for Jefferson

Science Fiction
Grant, Michael. BZRK. Egmont, 2011.

Special People, Special Problems


Sports World


Supernatural
Reeves, Dia. Slice of Cherry. Simon Pulse, 2011.