



Standards! Testing! And All That Jazz!:

A Real Conversation

"Dr. Weiss, we would like you come talk with our high school English and social studies teachers about books that might appeal to our students. We have four schools, and in three of them our students are failing to meet annual yearly progress expectations. We have money for professional development, which would cover your consultation fee; however, we can't buy books with this money. No, we have no district money earmarked for the books you talk about. But this will be motivational and professional."

Question: Should I go? Who would be more frustrated, the teachers or I?

This is NCLB.

On NCLB

Many of us professionals have no objections to raising the standards for students. Testing doesn't scare us. But how much does testing show about the quality of learning and the impact of reading upon the reader?

Michael Winerip in an article, "Teaching and a Law That Dismisses Them," (New York Times, July 12, 2006), states:

A final concern with the federal law is that it is so driven by state testing that there's too much time devoted to test prep, too much time spent drilling facts for survey courses, and not enough emphasis on finding something children will fall in love with for a lifetime—the Civil War, repairing engines, science research, playing the trumpet.

Fortunately, the remedy can be found on Ms. Ray's (an English teacher) walls in Huntington, VA, a quotation from William Butler Yeats: "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." I recommend that as the official motto for a new, revitalized, No Child Left Behind Law. (p. B8).

Reality Check

So many states have reported that students are not doing well on these tests. But this is nothing new. In the early 50s, I worked on the drop-out studies in the New York City high schools. Other major cities were doing similar studies. We found out that students who

seemed to have reading problems were more likely to drop out. However, there were students who didn't necessarily need work on skills, although that was the chief emphasis being placed in school reading and remedial programs. Many students could read but didn't like the books being used in their classes. "The works were being dissected beyond belief." Others said they were so bored. "I read lots of good books I got out of the library."

My own son was a good reader, but he hated the texts. He was put in a Title I program for reading instruction. I never said a word. He told me that every third day he would get something right, and the teacher would give him a piece of candy or a cookie. She had many good books in her classroom from which the students could choose. He liked that.

So doesn't it make sense to have lots of good books for students to explore? Why not have reading groups, letting students choose books to match their different interests, abilities and needs?

A Thematic Approach

I've organized this presentation of good books according to themes, suggested topics worthy of consideration. I've chosen books that I found especially appealing to me. These might be starting points. But this is a sincere attempt to bring students and books together in a meaningful and lasting relationship.

Topic: Fantasy and Science Fiction

Almond, David, *Clay*. Delacorte.
Anderson, M. T., *The Amazing Life Of Octavian Nothing*. Candlewick.
Cornish, D. M., *Monster Blood Tattoo*. Dutton.
Knox, Elizabeth, *Dreamhunter*. Farrar Straus Giroux.
Layne, Steven L., *Mergers*. Pelican.
Pierce, Tamora, *The Will Of The Empress*. Scholastic.
Shan, Darren, *The Demonata: Demon Thief*. Little, Brown.
Skelton, Matthew, *Endymion Spring*. Delacorte.
Yolen, Jane, and Adam Stemple, *Trollbridge: A Rock 'N' Roll Fairy Tale*. Starscape.

Topic: MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE

Abrahams, Peter, *Behind The Curtain*. Harper Collins.
Broach, Elise, *Desert Crossing*. Holt.
Brooks, Kevin, *The Road Of The Dead*. Chicken House.
Feinstein, John, *Last Shot*. Knopf.
Horowitz, Anthony, *Ark Angel*. Philomel.
Portman, Frank, *King Dork*. Delacorte.
Springer, Nancy, *The Case Of The Missing Marquess*. Sleuth.
Updale, Eleanor, *Montmorency and The Assassins*. Orchard.

Topic: IN THIS SCHOOL

Alvarez, Julia, *Finding Miracles*. Knopf.
Clarke, Judith, *Kalpana's Dream*. Front Street.
Evangelista, Beth, *Gifted*. Walker.
Fogelin, Adrian, *The Real Question*. Peachtree.
Garden, Nancy, *Endgame*. Harcourt.
Gerber, Michael, *Freshman*. Hyperion.
Green, John, *Looking For Alaska*. Dutton.
Houston, Julian, *New Boy*. Houghton Muffin.
Sitomer, Alan Lawrence, *Hip-Hop High School*. Hyperion.

Theme: SPORTS WORLD

Carter, Alden R., *Love, Football, and Other Contact Sports*. Holiday House.
Eskilsen, Erik, *The Outside Groove*. Houghton Mifflin.
Gorman, Carol, and Ron J. Findley, *Stumptown Kid*. Peachtree.
Lupica, Mike, *Heat*. Philomel.
Martino, Alfred C., *Pinned*. Harcourt.
Ritter, John R., *Under the Baseball Moon*. Philomel.

Topic: HOLOCAUST

Friedman, D. Dina, *Escaping Into the Night*. Simon & Schuster.
Glayshteyn, Yankev, trans. by Jeffrey Shandler, *Emil and Karl*. Roaring Brook.
Kass, Pnina Moed, *Real Time*. Graphia.
Miiman, Isaac, *Hidden Child*. Farrar Straus Giroux.
Orlev, Un, **Run, Boy, Run**. Houghton Mifflin.
Pressler, Mirjam, *Malka*. Speak.
Roy, Jennifer, *Yellow Star*. Cavendish.

Watts, Irene N., *Remember Me*. Tundra.

Topic: SPECIAL PROBLEMS!

Abbott, Tony, *Firegirl*. Little, Brown.
Frank, E. R., *Wrecked*. Atheneum.
Gallo, Donald R., ed. *What Are You Afraid Of?* Candlewick.
Hobbs, Valerie, *Defiance*. Farrar Straus Giroux.
Hobbs, Will, *Crossing the Wire*. Harper Collins.
Horrocks, Anita, *Almost Eden*. Tundra.
Johnson, Harriet McBride, *Accidents of Nature*. Holt.
Korman, Gordon, *Born To Rock*. Hyperion.
Nolan, Han, *A Summer of Kings*. Harcourt.
Runyon, Brent, *The Burn Journals*. Knopf.
Smith, Sherri L, *Sparrow*. Delacorte.
Vrettos, Adrienne Maria, *Skin*. McElderry.
Woodson, Jacqueline, *Behind You*. Putnam.
Zusak, Markus, *I Am the Messenger*. Knopf.

Topic: IN DANGEROUS PLACES

Rolub, Josef, *An Innocent Soldier*. Scholastic.
Hughes, Dean, *Search and Destroy*. Atheneum.
Lewis, Richard, *The Flame Tree*. Simon & Schuster.
Morpurgo, Michael, *Private Peaceful*. Scholastic.
Salisbury, Graham, *House of the Red Fish*. Random House.
Sandell, Lisa Ann, *The Weight Of the Sky*. Viking.
Staples, Suzaima Fisher, *Under the Persimmon Tree*. Farrar Straus Giroux.
Stein, Tarnmar, *Light Years*. Knopf.

Topic: HISTORICAL FICTION

Bajoria, Paul, *The Printer's Devil*.

Little, Brown.

Blackwood, Gary, *Second Sight*.

Dutton.

Geras, Adele, *Ithaka*. Harcourt.

Kidd, Ronald, *Monkey Town: The Summer Of the Scopes Trial*.

Simon & Schuster.

Lawlor, Laurie, *The Two Loves Of Will Shakespeare*. Holiday

House.

Lester, Julius, *Time's Memory*.

Farrar Straus Giroux.

Spooner, Michael, *Last Child*. Holt

M. Jerry Weiss is Professor Emeritus at Jersey City State College in Jersey City, New Jersey, and recipient of the 2003 Ted Hipple Service Award.