

Splish, Splash: The Story of a Book and a Bath

A Review of *Naked Reading: Uncovering What Tweens Need to Become Lifelong Readers*

[Lesesne, Teri S. *Naked Reading: Uncovering What Tweens Need to Become Lifelong Readers*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2006. 118 pp. US \$19.00.]

Who would have thought that the pink hotel would have a bathtub two feet deep? It was a wonderful surprise to discover this capacious basin when I arrived late on a Wednesday night after an interminable summer plane ride and a trip in a rented car through an award-winning rain storm. I could not resist the potential pleasures the petite pool presented and, as the young teachers in the room next to mine were relaxing to some rather loud heavy metal music, floating in a warm bath seemed like the right way to prepare for sleep. I had brought with me a book I was to read and review and, as it is my habit to read and do really deep thinking in the bathtub, everything seemed right for the occasion. The book in question, *Naked Reading: Uncovering What Tweens Need to Become Lifelong Readers* by Teri Lesesne, begins with the author's confession that she spends extra



Teri Lesesne

time in the bathroom reading books in uninterrupted quietude and that her granddaughter does the same after her bath. In this delicious tub, I would be in the proper place to peruse *Naked Reading*.

The inn provided a jar of fragrant bath salts, and I added a few dollops of these to the warm water along with some of the contents of the small bottle of shower gel displayed on the counter top across from the tub. Soft bubbles received my body as I slid into this pint-sized yet pungent

pond. I held the book aloft as I leaned back in the gently lapping water. Then I positioned the book on a hand towel that I had prepared for the purpose on the generous lip of the tub. After a moment of peaceful meditation on the pleasures of my present position, I opened the book and began to read.

I read this book in two ways. I read as a middle school teacher might who served in public school classrooms for thirty-eight years and collected a classroom library that swelled to the classroom next door. In that role, I witnessed the power of the proximity of books to captivate even the most reluctant reader. I also read this book as the teacher I-am-now, a teacher of Adolescent Literature at National Louis University. I am always searching for a textbook for my course. One that could fill in the blanks I must leave out because I don't have time to cover everything. As I read, I wondered, would Teri's book satisfy this essential requisite?

As still steaming threads of vapor rose off the water, I reflected on my Adolescent Literature course.

Students in my class are expected to read two to three books of adolescent literature every week. A professional text with long, windy chapters gets in the way of this requirement. Teri's book has concise, comprehensible chapters that can be simply scanned in a short stretch after the necessary reading is completed. Because this book is inexpensive, I don't think students will resent buying it and, I believe, they will retain it as a resource for their own use. It will also prop up my lessons by providing students with an extensive examination of the materials that I can only momentarily mention.

For example, I usually cover the psychology of adolescents by showing a few minutes of the film, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. This hardly addresses the topic. Teri's chapter entitled "Naked Reading: The Bare Essentials" describes the physical and psychological make-up of what she calls "tweens." Teri defines tweens as students between fourth and eighth grade who are, "between children's books and young adult novels." These students are among and amid in their interests and desires. Having taught this age group for over twenty-seven years, I can wholly champion this observation. Teri perceptibly portrays what she calls "the Five Cs," Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring. A useful figure inserted in the chapter lists the Five Cs and provides suggestions for texts to support thematic units in these areas.

Chapter 2 addresses a topic I usually gloss over. I observed that monthly publications jump-start

reading, my own daughter honed her reading skills immersed in the world of the *Sweet Valley Twins*, and students who claim reading is boring, find graphic novels irresistibly enticing. Teri candidly informs us that what teens like to read sometimes flies in the face of conventional thought. Yet these materials are the stuff that initially capture reluctant readers. Teri gives suggestions for "subliterature" such as comics, series books, and magazines. The list of current periodicals Teri provides in Chapter 2 is most useful. This chapter also includes a list of "Books to Tickle Your Funny Bone" and a fine list of mystery titles that have been "Winners and Nominees for the 2005 Edgar Award."

I took a moment to slide a lightly scented square of rose soap over my arms and neck, dab a soaking wash cloth on the soapy areas, and, after a gentle rinse-off, I returned to my reading. The classroom teacher in me was gratified by Chapter 4, "How Can We Energize Tweens? T-A-R-G-E-T: Six Ways for Teachers to Reconnect Kids to Books." T-A-R-G-E-T is a short form for these beliefs: Trust, Access, Response, Guidance, Enthusiasm, and Tween-appeal. The section entitled "Guidance" includes a description of reading ladders, a short list of books based on students' interests which literally scaffolds readers in short increments of difficulty from easy books to more challenging ones. Teri provides two sample ladders. "The Humor Ladder" takes the reader from *Captain Underpants* by Dave Pilkey to *No More Dead Dogs* by Gordon Korman. "The Graphic Novel Ladder" also starts with

Captain Underpants and ends at the graphic novel version of *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka. I am always looking for good graphic novels so this list was welcome in that respect as well. Another suggestion invites the teacher to introduce books by setting up a survey in the classroom. Teri suggests covering the titles of five or six books and asking students to rank them for "read-appeal" by their covers alone. Students can be challenged to read the books and determine if their assessment was accurate. A similar survey and ranking can be done with books' titles minus the cover art. Teri warmed my heart by challenging the assumption that only long books are worthy of student consideration. She includes a fine list of "Skinny Books" for which size does not equate with easy reading.

My bubbles were disappearing so I added more bath gel and as I floated on the foam, I was delighted to discover that "A Baker's Dozen of Un-Book Report Ideas" veered from the usual offerings of diorama projects or conventional book reports. I am always searching for ideas that require little effort on the part of teachers and a great deal of effort on the part of students and I looked for that sort of suggestion in this book. Teri proposes that students write "Annotations" as a response to the books they've read. The "Annotations" are created in three parts: a brief summary addressing four questions, a short response answering one of the suggestions from a list of questions, a bibliographic citation. The results are a written reading response that is only about

six sentences long. This could be easily read and graded by the teacher in a very short time, yet it holds the students answerable for their independent reading. Another check for accountability is SWBST. This is an acronym for “Somebody Wanted But So Then.” Students are asked to draw five columns on a sheet of paper. Each column is headed with one of the words from SWBST. Using the book they are currently reading, students write the name of the main character in the first column, the goal of the character in the second column, the obstacles facing the character in the third column, what the character does about it in the fourth column, and in the fifth column the student places a prediction of what might happen next in the story. The teacher can collect and assess these pages at a glance. Students can be asked to fill out the sheet once or twice a week and the resulting notes can be used by the students to create a summary or an annotation.

It may have been because my fingers were pruney, but before I got to the “Appendix: More Than One Hundred Great Books for Tweens,” the book slipped into the water. I swiftly pulled it out and dabbed the soaking pages with a fluffy towel. I hoped little damage had been done, and, although the pages were wet, I was able to read the book list and the excellent

annotations that accompanied it.

The water was turning tepid when I realized my refreshing respite was almost over. I would leave the tub with only one objection to this book and it is not a serious one. In two places Teri cites research describing what motivates students to read. I felt so many connections to this book, that when the results of these surveys did not match my experience, I was interested in determining what questions had been asked. Perhaps the questions were phrased in such a way that they would provide answers that might not actually mirror students’ real interests? When I went to the bibliography, I discovered that the studies reflected the results of unpublished doctoral dissertations. Short of requesting these studies, there was no way I could check on the details of the surveys. It would have been helpful if Teri had included the questions the researchers asked, or cited published accounts of such surveys. I am humbly suggesting two articles that describe investigations regarding student interests and what motivates their book selection, Katz, Claudia Anne, and Sue Anne Johnson-Kuby. “Visit from the Vampire.” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 39.2 (October, 1995): 156-59. This article, in the form of a story, presents research results regarding parents’, teachers’, and

students’ observations about the students as readers, and their goals for the students as readers. The role of the teacher as researcher is also discussed in Johnson-Kuby, Sue Ann, and Claudia Anne Katz. “Return of the Vampire.” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 40.2 (October 1996): 144-48. In the form of a conversation with a vampire, this article details the results of a teacher’s research on middle school students’ reading preferences. It includes a list of favorite books mentioned, favorite authors mentioned, and how students found these favorite books.

Unfortunately I must report that the book did not survive the drenching it suffered in the tub. Even though I carefully dried each page, I learned that soapy water is not easily removed. When I returned home, I discovered that the pages were cemented together. I had to purchase a new copy of *Naked Reading*. However, I am hoping that this review will forever link a book and a bath.

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