

Reaching Reluctant Readers (aka Books for Boys)

As a teacher of high school English, I feel it is my job to be well read in young adult literature. I have read a plethora of novels that deal with teenagers and the many problems they face. I remember in high school reading *Ronnie Finkelhof, Superstar*, by Alan W. Livingston, and then actually buying my own copy so I could read it again and again. I lost it in my university years and finally found a copy a few years ago. The novel is about a shy young boy who accidentally becomes an overnight sensation as a rock star but keeps his success a secret by hiding behind a façade. The novel becomes a satire about high school as everyone loves Spartacus (his alter-ego), yet no one knows Ronnie exists. The themes of fitting in and being true to yourself become abundantly clear as the novel progresses; the ending is surprising and honest as it concludes realistically with a far from rosy finale. When I was in high school, I related to this book on many fronts: I was a bit of an outcast, I wanted to date the hot cheerleaders and I wanted to be a rock star. The book allowed me to fantasize the what-ifs of life and love. Of course, that is what good books do; they make a connection to the reader.

The must-read “Connecting with Reluctant Readers” by Patrick Jones, Maureen L. Hartman and Patricia Taylor states that 43% of boys don’t read or only read what they have to, while 57% enjoy reading. Such numbers disprove the stereotype that boys won’t read. The fact is boys

will read if we put the right book in their hands. They need books with male protagonists, honesty and, most of all, books with characters and stories they can relate to. Teen author Laurie Halse Anderson says, “Teens are not ‘reluctant’ readers; they are ‘discriminating’ readers.” Thus the real problem is most boys (and yes I know I am stereotyping here) will not go searching for a book they will enjoy; they often don’t believe they will find a book they like because they have bought into the propaganda that boys don’t read, or they have been force-fed outdated classics for years and have long ago given up. This is where teachers and librarians come in. We need to know our students and have a vast variety of literature available for them to read. As you get to know your students’ personalities and needs, you can match a book to their individual interests. The following novels are especially well-suited to this matching.

If you can only stock your classroom with one book, it should be author and social therapy consultant Chris Crutcher’s masterpiece *Whale Talk*. Although all Crutcher’s earlier works are great, gritty,

honest stories, *Whale Talk* is the novel of novels. The complex story tackles racism, the high school sports hierarchy, child abuse, battered wife syndrome, forgiveness, bonding of father and son, standing up for one’s beliefs, the thrill of victory, and the understanding of people who are different than the so-called popular crowd. No summary

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can do justice to this multifaceted, multi-themed book, but I will try. The story revolves around Tao, a multi-racial, athletic, confident, stubborn young man who refuses to play school sports because he hates the politics of the sports hierarchy, even though he is an amazing athlete who could letter in a variety of school sports. But when a handicapped boy is picked on by a school jock, Tao decides to create a swim team of outcasts so they can get the “precious jacket” all school athletes receive when they letter in a sport. What follows is an intricate plot that involves colorful characters, numerous intriguing plots and, in the end, a thought-provoking commentary not only about the high school pecking order, but on society and its many flaws. The end leaves the reader with as many questions as answers, but also with a whole new understanding of life, love and loss. I should warn that the novel uses foul language and authentic scenes to bring to life the harsh realities of life. Crutcher does not apologize for the powerful, raw story he tells, instead stating:

When a high school or middle high school teacher looks out over the classroom he or she sees one in three girls who has been sexually mistreated, and one in six or seven boys, depending on which statistics you want to take. One in ten is struggling with sexual identity and will be homosexual. If you're a student in the classroom and you're not one of those kids, you are seated among them. You eat among them. A little understanding usually turns to compassion. (Personal Interview)

For more on the thoughts of Chris Crutcher in regards to censorship and student's rights go to his website at www.chriscrutcher.com.

Canadian Dennis Foon is best known as a playwright, yet his novel *Skud* is an amazing Canadian work that candidly brings to life the difficulties of being a young man in today's society. The book has four separate male narrators whose lives are woven together and will never be the same again. Tommy, perceived as Mr. Perfect, has a life goal to join the Air Force, yet simmering underneath the calm exterior is a rage held in check for 17 years. His best buddy Brad is a hockey jock and the team thug but has been demoted to the fourth line by a girl because the game is becoming a speed game; Brad's anger gets the best of him and begins a downward spiral for those around him. Shane is a bad boy, a tough, ruthless gang leader who is rumored to have pushed a teacher down the

stairs. The students and teachers fear him, but no one actually knows him. Lastly, there is Andy, an actor who dreams of making it big; he is also the accidental catalyst for all three of the other boys as life changes quickly and dramatically.

The novel brings out some of the real problems teen boys face including pressure from parents, unrealistic expectations, and fear of failure. All these pressures are linked together by one universal theme—“boys must be boys.” To prepare to write the novel Foon interviewed over a hundred teens in public and alternate schools, group homes, and drop-in centers. Foon was inspired by the book *The Rites of Man* by Rosalind Miles and the quote “Manhood training by its very nature creates the climate in which violence can flourish, and a society in which, despite its pious protestations, a level of violence is always tolerated, indeed expected” (235). Foon explains further:

the pressure ‘to be a man’ is universal. Boys put it on boys, fathers put it on sons, men place it on men: repress feelings, be overly competitive, aggressive, invulnerable. This imperative was a common denominator linking all the males I interviewed. It skewered their ability to see themselves and the people around (particularly women) clearly. It creates an environment where violence can flourish. I wrote this book because we have to start looking at this; questioning it, challenging, trying to understand its effect on all of us in hopes that we can end this vicious cycle. (Personal Interview)

The novel takes a frank look at these unrealistic expectations and the endings for each of the four boys stays with the reader long after the story ends.

Friday Night Lights by H.G Bissinger, *Bump & Run* by Mike Lupica, and *Crackback* by John Coy are just a few of the many great football books out there. The most recent in this genre is Robert Lipsyte's shock-

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ingly realistic portrayal of high school football in *Raiders Night*. This novel focuses on Matt, co-captain of his high school football team and all-around good guy. The novel depicts the all-consuming impact football has on a town and the unique life teen football players have. Matt “gets the girls,” is in the “in” crowd and is well on his way to an all-expenses-paid ticket to college. Yet, when a team hazing goes extremely wrong, Matt has to question his perfect life. Lipsyte is critical of what football has become in high school:

I’ve been amazed as high school sports has evolved into a bush-league version of the intense, commercialized, drugged big-time college culture. When naming rights for high school fields in Texas go for more than a million dollars, kids are scouted in sixth grade, dads are accomplices in steroid use and hazing becomes a rite of group solidarity, YA fiction has an obligation to reflect it. (Personal Interview)

The novel realistically portrays the pressure society, parents, coaches and teammates puts on teen

boys. The response in football circles has been mixed (as all controversial calling-out stories are), but the overwhelming reaction has been that these issues are prominent in many high schools across America. The most interesting reaction has been from the football players, themselves. After many discussions with players Lipsyte states: “I’ve talked to them individually, and in several cases with teams, one consistent thread is their distrust of coaches, who they think exploit them, play them hurt, mess with their minds and set them against each other. But these boys love the game, the contact

and the comraderie, so they stick it out and are angry” (personal interview). Lipsyte’s novel takes a cold, hard look not only at sports hazings, but steroid abuse, peer pressure, and parental expectations. The reality is

we live in a world where winning has become everything, and when that pressure is put on boys at a young age, the results are often catastrophic.

You may know Rob Thomas as the creator of the TV show *Veronica Mars*, a popular teen mystery television show that was cancelled last year. Before Thomas turned to television, he wrote a few young adult novels including the very good *Slave Day* and the amazing *Rats Saw God*. *Rats Saw God* will intrigue the reluctant reader as it tells the story of an academically strong sophomore student from Houston who has become a drugged-out-on-the-road-to-flunking-out senior in San Diego. The story bounces back and forth between his sophomore and senior years to show how this young man’s life has crumbled right before his eyes and he has not even realized it. The story is a coming-of-age story as the main character Steve comes to grip with his past relationships with his astronaut, image-obsessed father and his crushing romantic heartbreak with the quirky and beautiful Dub. To graduate, his counselor makes Steve write a 100-page paper that forces Steve to reflect on who he was, who he is and who he wants to become.

The book also takes a look at some of the outcasts of the school; students who don’t fit in by choice or by status. These students bond together and form a club called GOD (Grace Order of Dadaists) whose goal is simply non-participation in anything that promotes school spirit. Ironically, by creating a club they “found a social network that worked for them.”

The book has a variety of themes and messages, but a few linger in the reader’s mind long after the book is done. One is that a person need self-reflection to really see what is going on in his or her life and what has gone on. Steve must come to grips with his own mistakes and take responsibility for his decisions before any real change can be made. Secondly, Rob Thomas explains “One thing I had, personally, in common with Steve is heartbreak of epic proportions, or at least it felt that way at the time. The message is, we get beyond it. We need to forgive people in order to lead mentally healthy lives” (Personal Interview). In reality high school is only four years of a life and, for better or for worse, the road after high school is the real journey.

Patrick Jones, former teen librarian, has become a successful author of young adult literature with four novels out. The first two have male protagonists with

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a variety of problems. While his first novel *Things Change* is a great story about teen anger and dating abuse, *Nailed* is a riveting tale about trying to find your place in the world and overcoming the many obstacles high school and life bring. Bret, Jones's protagonist in *Nailed*, is a social outcast who has long given up trying to fit in. Although he doesn't fit in or feel important in the classroom, he does feel comfortable in the theatre and in his band. Compounding his problems is the lack of communication and understanding with his father whose respect Bret desperately wants to gain. The stubbornness they have in common has left them with a rift that no longer seems possible to mend. As the story progresses, Bret's life goes through a hurricane of change as he falls in love for the first time, is betrayed by a friend, must deal with his father's disappointment and overcome the daily bullying from the 'jockarchy'. Bret's decisions and reactions to his many tribulations are honest, real and sometimes shocking. In the end, Bret does find out who he is and comes to grips with his strained relationship with his father, but at a heavy cost. The novel looks candidly at a side of society that is often ignored.

Jones' explains why he writes about troubled teens (Paul in *Things Change* and Bret in *Nailed*, Christy in *Chasing Headlights* and Mick in the dark *Cheated*) "I'm from Flint, Michigan, so I'm interested in what happens when the so-called American dream collapses. It is partly a reaction to *Gossip Girls* and those novels, just generally all the YA fiction about well off families. That isn't any reality I know" (Jones 2007). This reality Jones that knows and created in *Nailed* is one that most teens can relate to because the majority of high school students are average teens just attempting to find out who they are and what their place in society is.

The cover for the novel *Skate* by Michael Harmon will have boys taking a second look; the intense story will have them reading. The book is about Ian, an angry, frustrated teenager whose rage finally reaches its boiling point and who must then deal with the consequences. With the police looking for him and a mother deep in the depths of drug abuse, Ian takes his younger brother and goes on the lam in hopes of finding his long lost father. The journey across Washington state leads to a shocking revelation that does not solve Ian's problems, but rather complicates

the matter. Ian must come to terms with his past in order to redeem himself and save his brother from a similar fate. Harmon tells an enthralling story that unflinchingly portrays the long-term impact adult drug abuse has on children. Readers will be inspired by the incredible and complex bond between brothers, pulled in by the boys' battle to survive the elements of their journey and awed by the captivating ending, one that clearly presents the many problems our society is currently fighting.

Although the novel makes a clear statement about the flaws our society has in regard to dealing with students with problems much bigger than school life, Harmon stresses the best solution is "the stability of functional and responsible parents." Also, Harmon states: "If a teen on edge is going to take anything away from my work, I would wish it to be an attitude of self-reliance. Through his mistakes, Ian learns that only he can make his life what he dreams it to be, and that even though help is available, the responsibility, and consequences of his actions, rest solely on his shoulders" (Harmon 2007). In the end, Harmon's first novel is a gritty, true and realistic story that often is overlooked in our society.

Although the cover of *Derailed* by Jon Ripslinger has a football on the cover, the novel is not really about football. Rather it is about Wendell Stoneking, "Stony," "a likeable, smart, talented football player who is not living up to his potential" (Lipsyte 2007). Because he is a football star Wendell has a relatively privileged life. That said, Wendell's family background, his poor choices in life and his lack of motivation lead to the fact that Wendell, like his family, will never leave this small town. Then he meets Robyn, an intriguing young woman who quickly has Wendell questioning his life. Wendell grows closer to Robyn, a single mother, and ends up entangled in an intense situation when Robyn's ex-

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boyfriend returns. The story builds to a climatic ending with Wendell transforming from boy to man. Ripslinger explains why he wrote this novel, “I taught English in public schools for thirty-five years and saw many students like Stony, a kid with tons of wasted potential. The sight always made me sad. I wanted to write a story about such a kid, but this kid finally sees the light” (Ripslinger 2008). To make the message of this novel (we make our own choices in life) more powerful, Ripslinger created Mindy, Wendell’s girlfriend at the beginning of the story, who wants to simply get married, have kids and spend their whole life in this small town. “I created Mindy as a contrast to Stony. Mindy comes from a poor family back-

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ground, just like Stony, but she can’t shake her family’s influence and keeps making poor choices.” This contrast enhances the two roads Stony could take and the conclusion of the novel gives hope to all teenagers that they too can break the chain of adequacy that their family may have.

I Am the Messenger by Australian writer Markus Zusak is a novel that is difficult to explain. It is a quirky mystery story with more twists and turns than any roller coaster ride. The plot revolves around Ed, a “going-nowhere” underage taxi driver who accidentally foils a bank robbery and then receives the ace of diamonds in the mail. This

card starts a long road to self-discovery for Ed who must for each ace he receives do three tasks. The tasks get harder with each ace and with each ace Ed becomes closer to the truth. Who is sending the aces to Ed, why is he the chosen one, and how were the people he must deal with picked? These mysteries are not resolved until the very last page. Yet, within the intricate mystery lies much more. Ed must deal with his unsympathetic mother, his idiosyncratic friends and his undying love for his best friend Audrey.

Zusak’s compelling story is enhanced by riveting dialogue and subtle humour that allows the story to progress fluidly. Although the novel has many messages for the reader to ponder, Zusak explains it much more simply, “I think Ed exists to rise above his on mediocrity-that is the message” (Zusak 2007). Ed is one of the most believable characters in young adult literature (or any literature for that matter), an underachiever whose life is not really going anywhere, but Ed has the ability to be successful; however, it takes a catalyst, in this case the arrival of a card, for Ed to rise above his mediocrity. Zusak explains his creation of Ed:

I created Ed as a piece of myself. I was a lot like Ed when I was nineteen. There are so many doubts and fears that live side by side with the jokes, the back and forth bickering of friends and everything else. I didn’t want Ed to be a symbol of a generation. I just wanted him to be the quirky, loveable, courageous, cowardly human that I felt I was and possibly that we all are. (Zusak 2007)

I am the Messenger is an addictive tale that will leave the reader with a clear message: Am I really doing all I can do to be the best person I can be? Is there a better question to leave a reader with than that?

Joaquin Dorfman’s solo novel debut (he wrote *Burning City* with his father Ariel Dorfman) *Playing it Cool* is one of the most unique novels written for young adults. The story revolves around Sebastian, an eighteen-year-old, who is famous in his town for being a problem solver. Sebastian is “the man,” but when he leaves home to help a buddy, doubts begin to surface. He has to match wits with “the man” of Wilmington (who may not be as he appears), try to win over the cold Christina, and try to solve an escalating problem from his past. Just when the reader and Sebastian think they know the truth, everything changes and Sebastian’s house of cards begins to crumble. What Sebastian learns by the end is a powerful lesson. Everything Sebastian thought he knew comes into question.

In Sebastian, Dorfman has created an amazingly complex, interesting and insightful protagonist. Dorfman explains:

I came up with Sebastian back when I was sixteen. Upon resurrecting him practically ten years later, I discovered the world to be no more simple and myself no less confused or despairing. The result, I suppose, is a complex teenage character doing all he can to deny his own inner network of

complications and contradictions, as well those of the world. The nearly crippling process of stepping into bigger shoes is something I believe most teenagers do have in common with Sebastian. (Dorfman 2007)

This ultimate coming-of-age novel will appeal to all teens on the doorsteps of adulthood as it honestly portrays the differences between being a man and being a boy. What also makes this novel stand out is the articulate and entertaining dialogue between characters. The conversations reveal insight into the characters that make them real, sincere and complicated. This characterization makes the reader like characters they would usually dislike and thus enhances the end message Dorfman presents. That message, like all great novels, is up to the reader to decipher as Dorfman himself suggests. "I've never given message much thought when it comes to writing. Whatever light those lessons may shine on readers is beyond my control."

Of all the teen novels I have ever read, the most intriguing premise comes from the new novel *13 Reasons Why*. Jay Asher's debut novel is a dark journey through the life of Hannah Baker, who committed suicide two weeks before. Before she died, she made seven cassette tapes, each side with a story; a story that in some way affected her and led to her fatal decision. The tapes are being passed along to each individual that is somehow responsible for Hannah's fatal decision. The novel focuses on the day and night Clay Jensen receives the tapes. Clay is Mr. Nice Guy and does not know how he fits into the big picture. Clay narrates the complex story as he listens to the shocking tapes and slowly learns why Hannah decided to end her life; Hannah also narrates the novel as we hear her thoughts, pains and insecurities as Clay listens to the tapes. The devastation of Hannah's life is heard through each story and the tone is set early as Hannah gives the listener two rules: "Rule number one: You listen. Number Two: You pass it on. Hopefully, neither one will be easy to you" (Asher 8). The double narration is very effective as Asher explains, "I wanted characters who were two sides of the same coin. Hannah has been torn down by a list of people. But, in the end, she alone is responsible for her decisions . . . and she knows that" (Asher 2007). By the end of the last tape, Clay (and all the others who hear the tape) will never be the same. Clay will see Hannah, his peers, and his life in a whole new

light. The novel stays with the reader long after the story is done as the reader realizes that one's actions all have consequences whether we notice it or not. Asher explains, "In the book, Hannah states that no one knows exactly what's going on in another person's life. Yet we like to believe that our 'little' comments or actions won't have a ripple effect. So, if anything, I hope it makes people take notice of those little things we do that tear other people down. And maybe . . . hopefully . . . we'll start to notice before we do those things" (Asher 2007). In the end, Asher has written one of the most provocative debuts in teen literature, a novel that should be required reading for all teens.

Staying with the dark theme comes one of the most compelling reads ever. Debut novelist C.G. Watson has created a shocking and powerful story about the pressures of high school and, like Asher's *13 Reasons Why*, how the smallest of things can have devastating results. Watson's *Quad* chronicles the lives of six teenagers stuck in a quad as a school shooter lurks outside. The story masterfully shifts from past to present as the story slowly unravels how every character is a suspect and every character has motive. Creating characters from a variety of high school cliques, Watson intriguingly blends together jocks, preps, techies, drama queens, freaks, and choir boys in a realistic depiction of the ups and downs of high school life. Watson, a teacher, explains the reason she wrote this riveting novel:

What motivated me to write this book was a situation that occurred a few years ago in one of my classes, as I watched the way my own students psychologically dismantled one of their classmates. My attempts at intervention fell completely flat; they just didn't get it. After one particularly brutal day, I remember driving home and thinking, 'So, what

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happens to a kid who gets pushed to his limits? And what if the other kids don't see where the limits are—what happens if they push one step past that?' It was from that question that the story of *Quad* evolved. (Watson 2008)

The novel has many themes including bullying, peer pressure and many more, yet Watson explains her novel's underlying theme and the reality of high school life in 2008:

Quad is about bullying and high school relationships, yes, but it's also about the unseen power of our words and actions on others. At the risk of waxing Darwinian here, high school life in 2008 is about survival of the fittest. It's about living every day on the offensive because if you don't, you're the next victim. What's so sad is that, even though kids pretty much have to play along in order to survive, there isn't one kid out there who doesn't hate this game. The good news is, it truly doesn't have to be that way. (Watson 2008)

In *Quad*, C.G. Watson has written a future classic that is maybe best concluded by the words of a boy who thanked her by saying that *Quad* was "the tightest book ever."

Most of the books discussed are for boys who are grade-level equivalent readers. For boys who are reading substantially below grade level, there are a number of Orca Books that are high interest and low reading level. The books generally have limited character development, but interesting and fast paced plots. Although there are quite a few available, I have found a few to be especially appealing to young readers. *Juice*, by Eric Walters, looks at the pressure to do "whatever it takes" to win; *I.D.*, by Vicki Grant, is a intriguing look at the downward spiral of a boy unwilling to adapt to his current life;

Yellow Line, by Sylvia Olsen, is a racial commentary on what happens when a white girl falls for an Indian boy; *Bang*, by Norah McClintock, is a cautionary tale about what happens when two boys go too far in their

attempt to be cool; *Blazer Drive*, by Sigmund Brewer, is a layered mystery story wrapped up in a hockey novel; and lastly, *Thunderbowl*, by Lesley Choyce, tells the story of a boy who plays a mean guitar and his priorities change as he gets his first success, but at what cost? At a reading level of grade 4 or lower and generally being just over a hundred pages in length, these books will have students feeling a lot less intimidated than if they were given *The Grapes of Wrath*. I cannot finish without mentioning Walter Dean Myers' courtroom novel *MONSTER*. Sixteen-year-old Steve is in jail and on trail for murder. The story is told in diary entries and in movie script form as Steve decides to make his life story into a movie. The unique style makes the novel a smooth and simple read that keeps the reader on the edge of his seat to the very last page.

There are a lot of other books that will fit well for reluctant readers, obviously. Laurie Halse Anderson's first male protagonist novel *Twisted*, Janet Tashjian's funny and satirical *The Gospel According to Larry*; Joyce Sweeney's wrestling drama, *Headspin*; Alex Flinn's vivid account of teen date abuse, *Breathing Underwater*; Will Leitch's coming of age story, *Catch*; Chris Crutcher's portrayal of the ultimate friendship, *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*; Rob Thomas' multi-narrated commentary on high school, *Slave Day*; Michael Scott's multi-layered science fiction-end of the world shocker, *The Alchemist*; Gordon Korman's popularity novel, *Jake, Reinvented*; John Green's boarding school drama, *Looking for Alaska*, and road journey comedy, *An Abundance of Katherines*, just to name a few.

Lastly, I started with Chris Crutcher and I will finish with him. His newest novel is *Deadline*. The novel is a powerful story about senior Ben Wolf who learns just before school starts that he has leukemia and has less than a year to live. Instead of fighting the disease, he decides to live his final year as normally as possible and does not tell anyone. He decides to try out for the football team even though he weighs 123 pounds, befriend the town drunk who has a secret of his own, get a street named after Malcolm X in his all white hometown and lose his virginity to the girl of his dreams. On his journey to leaving a legacy and a normal twelfth-grade year, he starts to have doubts and attempts to find answers to many difficult questions. He wonders why teachers often glorify history

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instead of just giving students the facts; questions why people can't ignore color and judge people based solely on who they are; and ponders if he is crazy as he continually has conversations with an imaginary guy named Hey-Soos. Like all Crutcher novels, there are shocking plot twists, thrilling sports scenes and honest dialogue. The end message is simple and one that all students can live by: "Live every day like you're going to live forever and every day like it's going to be your last" (Crutcher *Deadline* 312).

In conclusion, this list is hardly conclusive, but it is a start. As a lifelong learner, I too am always learning, so if you have novels that you have read that are great for reluctant boy readers (or is just a good novel) please drop me a line; I would love to hear from you.

Dwayne Jeffery is an English and History teacher in Lloydminster, Saskatchewan, Canada. He is the author of the one-act play The Puppet Master (currently under publication consideration) about the impact of gossip in high school. Dwayne loves to read young adult novels, write plays and short fiction and spend time with his wife, Poppy, and their two children: Trinity and Ryder.

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