

## ■ ARTICLES

# Learning From Children Reading Books: Transactional Theory and the Teaching of Literature

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*Reflecting on 45 years of teaching and research, Lee Galda argues that practice based on transactional theory is essential for the effective teaching of literature.*

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When I began formal work on my PhD at New York University in the fall of 1977, I quickly came to realize that I had already learned a great deal about literature for young readers and response to literature, starting with the moment that I stepped into my own classroom in a middle school outside of Chicago in 1963. That first year of teaching was memorable for many reasons, the best of which is what those seventh- and eighth-grade students taught me about the importance of motivation to read and engagement in books. After I established Sustained Silent Reading blocks on Wednesdays, those days became the best day of the week. I began to wonder just what it was about books that turned these often distracted students, many of whom did not like to read, into engaged readers. I had always been a voracious reader, but I knew many others were not. Witnessing the gradual transformation of these young adolescents was astonishing; they were learning to enjoy reading by actually reading books that they enjoyed. A few years later, working on my master of science degree in reading at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, I learned a lot about the processes involved in reading and learning to read, and I also took my first course in children's literature, from Dr. Bette Peltola, in which I rediscovered the bliss of being lost in a book, even though I actually was doing this reading as an assignment for her course.

This bliss went with me back to the classroom in 1973 when I became a reading specialist in the Milwaukee Public Schools, working with elementary-grade classes full of struggling readers. My skills as a reading special-

ist were, I'm sure, important to my ability to help these struggling students become more fluent readers, but I'm convinced that it was that rediscovered bliss in books that really made the difference. Thinking of my own joy in reading and of those seventh- and eighth-grade students reading on Wednesdays, I used great books as bait to tempt my students into doing the hard work of learning to become fluent readers. It worked. These and other experiences with young readers within and outside of classrooms eventually led me to New York University, as I wanted to know why books seemed like magic, what it was about being engaged in a book that, more often than not, changed the minds of students who said that they didn't like to read, and how to recognize books that might do that. As it turned out, being able to study literature and response with Gordon Pradl and John Mayher and children's literature with Bee Cullinan, and to sit at the feet of James Britton and Louise Rosenblatt in two very special summer courses, shaped my life as a researcher and practitioner of transactional theory in action, studying how readers respond to the books that engage them and how these experiences can be enacted in classrooms, including my own.

Although they differed on specifics, including crucial terminology, Britton's (1970) *Language and Learning* and Rosenblatt's (1978, 1995) *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work and Literature as Exploration* describe the nature of a reader's (and speaker's/writer's in the case of Britton) activity when engaged with language in various forms for various purposes. Britton distinguishes among the participant role, in which we use explicit language to get things done in the world, and the spectator role, following Harding's (1937) notion of the role of the onlooker, in which we use poetic language to create or experience a work of art (e.g., literature) and expressive language, with which we utter ourselves. Reading a literary work of art, Britton argues, is to "enter into the experiences of other people" (p. 154), and this, in turn, offers us the opportunity to contemplate both ourselves and others.

Britton's theory is broad based, arising from a systematic look at how children and adolescents (and all of us) use language. Also basing her theory in the linguistic, sociological, psychological, and literary knowledge of her day, Rosenblatt (1978, 1995) focused closely on how readers respond to literature, positing them as being located

somewhere on a movable point of a continuum of efferent and aesthetic stances. Like Britton, although with important differences that are not germane here, Rosenblatt posited the importance of the different ways we approach texts. Stances range flexibly along a continuum from efferent, in which we carry away something to use in the world (e.g., directions for making a meal), to aesthetic, when we seek to participate in the experience that a literary work of art offers. She argues that we move around on this continuum as we read, with a reader's selective attention primarily on the images, ideas, and emotions raised between the text and the reader in an aesthetic reading. She also writes of a literary work of art as an experience:

As a work of art, it offers a special kind of experience. It is a mode of living. The poem, the play, the story, is thus an extension, an amplification, of life itself. The reader's primary purpose is to add *this* kind of experience to the other kinds of desirable experiences that life may offer. (1995, p. 264)

She describes reading a literary text from an aesthetic stance as the evocation of a poem: "The reader, assuming the aesthetic stance, selects out and synthesizes—interanimates—his responses to the author's pattern of words. This requires the reader to carry on a continuing, constructive, 'shaping' activity" (1978, p. 53). It is this "lived-through process of building up the work under the guidance of the text" that allows a reader to "organize his responses into an experienced meaning which is for him 'the work'" (1978, p. 69). Additionally, it is to this evocation that readers respond—not to the text but to their evocation of the text, to their own creation.

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Both Britton and Rosenblatt stress the active nature of reading a literary work of art from the aesthetic (I adopt Rosenblatt's terminology from here on) stance, in which readers bring the sum of who they are and what they have experienced to the construction of a meaningful experience through transaction with another's words. The transactionality, or mutuality of the process—reader infuses meaning, text guides and constrains—and the individuality of the process leads to the logical conclusion that there is no one right or fixed meaning, as the language of the text is understood through individual experiences and knowledge, even as it is socially situated, as all language is.

This image of an active reader engaging with a text for a particular purpose was compelling. I wanted to know what this might look like when an avid child reader was engaged with a story, especially if that engagement were aesthetic in nature. There had been a number of studies in the United States since 1968, when interest in response was rising, but none had looked at younger, elementary-age children. This interest led to my doctoral dissertation, “Three Children Reading Stories: Response to Literature in Preadolescents” (Galda, 1980), and a subsequent article (Galda, 1982), in which I documented the different ways that three 10-year-old girls approached two novels written for children: Constance Greene’s (1976) *Beat the Turtle Drum* and Katherine Paterson’s (1977) *Bridge to Terabithia*. In this initial research, I was concerned with how three readers, both individually and collectively, constructed meaning, with what engaged them, and with what interrupted or prevented engagement. My data allowed me to see how these readers’ experiences, beliefs, and preferences influenced the meaning they created, how their selective attention and stances affected their evocation of a poem from the words on the page, and how their understandings of how a story works influenced their reading of these two novels. I was utterly convinced that the nature of aesthetic literary response, as described by Rosenblatt, was real and that young children engaged in a complex dance of meaning construction as they read. This study also gave me one of my favorite descriptions of engaged reading when 10-year-old Ann, attempting to describe the kinds of books she enjoyed, told me, “I love books that inhale me.” What better description of engagement could there be?

This study also allowed me to explore how these children brought their varying ideas to a small-group discussion. Listening to the three participants argue about how they felt about the characters’ actions offered a window into how the students approached a text, with two of them clearly expecting that a good story would mirror what they knew to be true and one insisting that it could be otherwise because not all people think alike. This research also showed me how interesting small-group discussions could be and that there seemed to be a range of ways to read aesthetically that perhaps tied to Piaget’s concrete and formal operations stages. At the same time, Applebee’s (1978) *The Child’s Concept of Story: Ages Two to Seventeen*, based on Britton’s work, offered interesting ideas about how development, understood through Piaget’s stage theory, might influence response. How, I wondered, does response look as children mature? Specifically, how might it change as they move from childhood into adolescence?

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These questions led to my second major research project, a four-year longitudinal study, which included two years of cross-sectional data across six grade levels, funded by the National Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association, and the University of Georgia. Thirty-five students in fourth, sixth, and eighth grades participated for the first two years; eight of the original fourth-grade participants continued through their seventh-grade year. All students were interviewed about their reading habits, preferences, and attitudes. Each year, they read and responded to two books by contemporary authors for young readers, one fantasy and one contemporary realistic fiction. After reading on their own, they discussed each book in same-sex discussion groups of three outside of their classroom, with each discussion subsequently transcribed.

I learned a lot from this study, both about research and about response—first of all, that a study of this kind produces more data than one hard-working assistant professor could easily handle! Beyond that, the results aligned with developmental arguments, as the older readers were more analytical in their responses and more likely to offer generalizations than were the younger readers who tended to speak in terms of carefully defined categories. Furthermore, this pattern was evident in the longitudinal data as well, as those younger readers became increasingly sophisticated in both their preferences and their responses to both fantasy and realistic fiction across the four years of the study. For example, like the 10-year-olds in my previous study, the younger students were much more likely to express a desire for a real-world analog for fictional characters and events, a desire that diminished as they matured, as did the centrality of plot in their preferences, with students becoming increasingly interested in characters and with their growth evident in both the cross-sectional and the longitudinal data. However, individual preference and development weren’t the only factors in their responses. It was also clear that what students were doing in their classrooms profoundly influenced how they were responding to the books I asked them to read outside of the classroom, and even how they read them. The rigidity of Piagetian stages was problem-

atic for me, and Vygotsky's (1934/1962, 1978) work on the social nature of language and development was persuasive, so I turned to closely examining young readers' responses within a classroom setting and exploring how teachers shape opportunities for aesthetic engagement with stories and poems in classrooms. Fortunately for me, I knew some wonderful teachers who welcomed me into their classrooms.

With funding from a National Reading Research Center grant at the University of Georgia (Galda, Stahl, & Pellegrini, 1992–1995), I was able to spend a year with Betty Shockley and her first-grade students, documenting how she used children's literature to motivate and sustain her students from low- to middle-income families as they learned to read, write, speak, and listen in a classroom setting. At the time, Betty was an accomplished and dedicated teacher who loved children's literature, and her classroom overflowed with books. She had hundreds of picture books, to which her students always had access. They would share the picture books they were reading with partners, small groups, or the entire class. Betty also used picture books when she read aloud several times a day, sometimes just because she wanted her students to experience a particular book and other times because a book related to what the children were studying, such as particular writing and phonics patterns or specific authors and illustrators. At the beginning of the year, the picture books that Betty shared were most often patterned, predictable books that also helped children unlock the secrets of reading. Books became the impetus for oral and written language activities, such as drama and storytelling, as the children borrowed patterns and language from the books to create their own narratives. Betty also had many easy readers and transitional chapter books in her classroom, which offered those who became independent readers the opportunity to read extended text. It became a badge of honor to have read Arnold Lobel's *Frog and Toad* series, and everyone had done so by the end of the year (Galda, Bisplinghoff, Pellegrini, & Stahl, 1995).

Across this year, I was able to see clearly what I had glimpsed in my own classrooms in Milwaukee: how children's literature offered a purposeful reason for engaging with books, for reading, writing, talking, and listening, and how these same books allowed beginning readers to progress at their own rate as they learned to read and read fluently. None were left behind, and none were held back by their classmates' abilities because there were so many books available to them that reading levels really didn't matter. It was also clear that the opportunity to read from both aesthetic and efferent stances was important to these young readers. They delighted in the language

of poetry and song, were wrapped up in the narratives of stories, and eagerly turned to nonfiction books for information. They also learned to step back from any given book and consider how it was purposefully constructed by the author and illustrator. From the beginning, their responses to the books were enthusiastic, joyous, and profound. Books were the center of their lives as students, and they read because they loved it. And most of them learned to love it in Betty's classroom, not elsewhere.

Shortly after this research was completed, I was fortunate to be asked to be an observer in an equally successful second-grade classroom. In 1997, teacher Lisa Stanzi was interested in reshaping her teaching to reflect what she knew about transactional theory, and she invited me into her classroom to help her do so. She, Shane Rayburn (her fellow doctoral student), and I embarked on a yearlong study of Lisa's reading group, examining how she and her students read and responded to literature through group discussions. Unlike Betty's students, Lisa's reading groups were all at or above a second-grade reading level, some of them quite independent and others less so, but all having mastered reading. This offered the opportunity for us to better understand the complex dance of helping children learn to engage with varied texts, respond to them, and share their ideas with others. Further, it allowed us to document how understanding of text grows through discussions with others. This study allowed us to document how eleven 7- and 8-year-old students developed into "some kids," to use their own descriptor, across the course of the school year. This did not happen quickly. Early conversations were halting but gave us the opportunity to discover effective ways for Lisa to develop the students' skills for participation in book discussions, including a critique of their own videotaped discussion behavior. The primary tool, however, was the daily support, questions, and clear instruction that Lisa offered during the discussions. We listened to a grade-level reader mourn the transition from picture books to chapter books, explaining that it's easier when you can see what happens. We heard students taking up Lisa's example and making connections to other books and to their own lives; we saw how engaging in a discussion of character development and motivation could morph into a consideration of how people—themselves and those they loved—need to be loved. We documented how students explicitly connected ideas developed in earlier conversations to later discussions, weaving books and talk from across the year into an ongoing literary discussion. Moreover, we saw how 8-year-olds think deeply and extendedly about books. The following vignette from that study illustrates this especially well.

Over lunch one January day, Lee...was reading aloud Patricia MacLachlan's (2002) *Arthur, for the Very First Time*...[Lisa's] literature group had asked to hear the book again almost as soon as they had finished it the first time in November. Lisa...asked Lee if she'd like to read aloud to the group, so they arrange to eat lunch in Lisa's room for a few weeks in January, eating while Lee reads. They have just listened to the chapter in which Uncle Wisby remarks that Arthur might want to look through "the faraway end" [of his telescope] sometime, and Arthur wonders why. Lee asks the children why he might want to do that, but they have little to say, and there is no time left for discussion. Three months later in April, the windows are open to spring. As Lee enters the classroom, Amarachi runs up, smiles, and shyly hugs her, almost whispering, "I know why you might want to look through the faraway end." Lee, amazed, asks why, and Amarachi replies, "Well, I was looking through my binoculars at a bird in a tree. When I looked through the close-up end, I saw the bird, but when I looked through the faraway end, I saw the whole tree. (Galda, Rayburn, & Stanzi, 2000, p. 1)

Collecting data for that yearlong study marked my final year at the University of Georgia, and I joined the faculty at the University of Minnesota in 1998. Meanwhile, Lisa, Shane, and I worked with the data from Lisa's classroom, resulting in the book *Looking Through the Faraway End: Creating a Literature-Based Reading Curriculum With Second Graders* (Galda et al., 2000). Later, I would revisit the data from Lisa's classroom to more closely examine how she managed these conversations, documenting the way she taught her students how to approach texts from an aesthetic stance, how to respond in writing and in a discussion group, and how to learn from the ideas of others. The way she used contingent questions, how little she spoke once her students knew how to engage in the discussions, and the intensity with which she listened to what her students had to say (Boyd & Galda, 2011) had profound effects on how her students engaged with books. It seemed to me then, as it does now, that of all the things that a teacher does, how he or she handles book discussions is most crucial.

As I was engaged in this work while also continuing to read the many studies of classroom discussion that were available, I was also teaching children's literature courses for undergraduates, master's, and doctoral students, attempting to both explain and enact the wisdom of Britton and Rosenblatt. It was time to turn my focus to my own teaching. As I worked with preservice and practicing teachers, as well as my doctoral students, to help them

understand the importance of children's literature in children's lives and the joys, difficulties, and dangers of teaching with children's books (Galda, 1998), using the insights that I had gained through my own research and that of others, I began to realize that I, too, could be more careful to practice what I preached. Perhaps that practice would be more effective than the preaching.

Simultaneously, I was engaged in working on many editions of *Literature and the Child*, a textbook that I coauthored (e.g., Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2013). In this work, aimed at an undergraduate audience, I could explain transactional theory and cite research, but I found that it is much more difficult to write about children's literature from a point of view that honestly reflects transactional theory, a point of view that did not assume that a particular way of looking at a book—my way—was the only way to envision that text. I was the authority, quite literally so as the author, and it is so much more efficient to simply tell people what books are good and why, what books are bad and why, and leave it at that. Yet, that doesn't correspond with transactional theory and its principles; thus, my first challenge was to practice what I preached.

This became even more difficult the more I wrote about cultural diversity in children's literature, intrigued by questions such as, How can a book be racist? How is it not a particular reading that is racist? and How do I help my students recognize the hidden ideologies in books without constraining them as readers? Understanding and accepting the elegance of transactional theory made me ask the questions, so perhaps teaching a course in culturally diverse literature for children and adolescents using the principles that Rosenblatt espoused would help me answer those questions. I began to systematically note the effects of particular books, particular assignments, and especially the way I conducted discussions as I was teaching children's literature to adults. As I did that over the past 10 years, it became clear that the most difficult part of teaching this way was the same for me as it had been for Lisa: negotiating the tensions between telling students how they should read and respond, telling them what the interpretation of a book should be, and allowing them to first create their own experience, evoke their own poem, and then develop their ideas through conversations with others.

Through several semesters of teaching that class, I discovered for myself the different outcomes for telling students what they should think because it was so important that they recognize bad cultural depictions when they saw them and for allowing them to read, respond, and then discover

other ways of viewing a book through conversations with others or from my written comments on their own written responses. I learned that it was important for them to understand that there are many ways to respond and many opinions about the cultural authenticity of any given book. *Stories Matter: The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children's Literature* (Fox & Short, 2003) helped open the conversation about cultural authenticity, what it is, and how one recognizes it. I found that reading some books that had generated controversy in the children's literature community and asking them to not look online or read any reviews before responding in writing and then discussing in class allowed each student to evoke their own poem (or not) or to engage with a book or reject it. I continued to try to find the balance among, as Lewis (2000) proposed, the personal, the pleasurable, and the critical without diminishing the opportunity for the personal by moving too quickly to the critical, between asking them to read in a particular way from a particular point of view and just handing them a book and stepping back until we came together to discuss it.

In the fall of 2012, I taught my final class, Culturally Diverse Literature for Children and Adolescents. I had 17 graduate students in that class, all of whom were either teaching at that time or had taught before they began their full-time graduate study. We began by reading *Stories Matter* (Fox & Short, 2003) and having discussions about various picturebooks. Then, after the students had each begun a draft of a paper in which they described how they thought of cultural authenticity, we began reading pairs of novels, starting with Paula Fox's (2008) *The Slave Dancer* and Sharon Draper's (2008) *Copper Sun*. Everyone came to class with both books read, written responses to each, and a lot of nervous energy. Many of them laughingly told me how they worried about being wrong, but underneath the laughter, I could hear their sincerity. We began with discussions in small groups, with new ideas generated by those discussions handwritten on their typed initial responses. Finally, the 18 of us began our first whole-class discussion, starting with *Copper Sun*.

At first, it seemed that everyone had been "inhaled" by that book, and positive comments abounded about both the book and their experiences reading it. But soon, someone mentioned being a bit put off by the coincidences that occurred during the protagonists' escape, another commented on the almost unbelievable happy ending, and everyone relaxed. My nonjudgmental responses to what they said—and most responses were directed at me in this first whole-group experience—and their burgeoning knowledge of transactional theory, along with their prior small-group discussions, helped them stop worrying about

what they were going to say and join the conversation. Soon, while talking about point of view, the discussion turned to *The Slave Dancer*, which many did not enjoy or find authentic. We discussed the male protagonist, whom many of those mostly female students did not find particularly appealing, and then the influence of individual preferences (in this case, for female narrators) on response, moving back and forth between the two books. We discussed the historical settings because many assumed that what was new information to them was, in fact, not true, moving to consider how to know when they were operating on unfounded assumptions and how not recognizing that could lead to misjudgments about accuracy of cultural and historical depictions. We also discussed the cultural value in the story of a young white boy's close encounter with the horrors of a slave ship, even though it was not as engaging for many of them as *Copper Sun*. We debated whether it was valuable to "experience" slavery from multiple points of view. We laughed at ourselves when we changed our minds, and we stayed late to write a final response on the back of our written responses. It wasn't a surprise when, in the next class, a student exclaimed, "But what is wrong with me that I loved Nannie Little Rose?" in the middle of the discussion of our third and fourth books, *My Heart Is on the Ground: The Diary of Nannie Little Rose, a Sioux Girl, Carlisle Indian School, Pennsylvania, 1880* by Ann Rinaldi (1999) and *The Birchbark House* by Louise Erdrich (1999). Then, we were able to talk about the difference between identifying with a character and critical judgment, about what Rinaldi did to make us like Nannie and believe her as a narrator, and again about the power of point of view. We considered how the diary format and the research cited in the end matter made the book seem authentic. Finally, we were able to consider the consequences of portraying assimilation as a virtue, to critique the text without making those who loved the character feel that they were poor readers. This book, more than any other, helped these students understand how important it was to unpack the assumptions that an author brings to a text; I know that because of their papers on cultural authenticity and written and oral responses to subsequent books.

As our conversations continued across seven more pairs of books, I discovered the fine line between supporting individual readers as they willingly expressed their responses to their own evocations of text and expanding their responses to those texts by sharing my own responses and through the questions I raised in class discussions. We all came to the mutual understanding that it was truly difficult to be wrong, that we all brought different experiences, preferences, knowledge, and values to the books that we were reading together, and that these differences

played out in our discussions. We learned to learn from one another, not just from me, the teacher, or from critics who had written about the texts, but from our own ideas. We all learned new ways of thinking and talking about books. I stopped worrying (mostly) about not teaching enough. As Rosenblatt (1978, 1995) once argued, I couldn't give my students an aesthetic experience by telling them about a book any more than I could fill them up by eating their dinner and telling them about it. It was through response and discussion that I taught, by doing what those studying discussion tell us to do: Listen well, ask contingent questions, seize opportunities to clarify or enlarge concepts and ideas, and be challenging but supportive in interactions with students.

The time I spent reading written responses and writing back increased. I often began the next class by summarizing the written responses and discussion of the previous class, but mostly, I listened and participated as a reader, although a very knowledgeable one. Students, too, began to find their voices as knowledgeable readers. By the end of the semester, they had experienced some wonderful books, had learned that no one reading is the "right" reading, had learned to understand how their personal preferences shaped their initial responses, had learned the difference between accuracy and authenticity, had developed a healthy doubt about their assumptions, and had learned the power of open discussions with other readers. I had learned that Rosenblatt was right, again.

What do I know now, after 45 years of teaching, research, and reading? I know that powerful books exert powerful influences on readers as they use the ideas, images, and words on the page to construct meaning, as they evoke a poem that they experience as they read. Powerful books shake us out of complacency, hold our assumptions and values up to those of others, and allow us to consider and reconsider our own. Reading these books allows us the opportunity for transformation, for a shaping and reshaping of how we view ourselves and the world around us. Finally, I learned that discussing those books with others in a collegial environment only increases the power. Britton and Rosenblatt argued that this was so. Lisa Stanzi's students and mine demonstrated this, and it has immense implications for how we, as teachers, treat the act of reading literature in our classrooms.

How we teach literature is central to developing avid readers, and we are losing ground to programs that do not consider the complexity of reading from an aesthetic stance.

Good teaching with literature seems to me to be an attempt to balance [multiple] goals across the days and weeks and months of classroom life, allowing readers the [opportunity] to experience the dangerous power that reading can provide, to develop literate voices, to want to read and read more, to spontaneously share and refine their personal responses through self-reflection and social dialogue, and to see the world through the eyes of others. (Galda, 1998, p. 9)

We must, certainly, teach our children to read and teach them about literature, encouraging them to use their comprehension strategies and to make various kinds of intertextual connections, but that is not enough. That is, to my mind, merely the beginning. We also must allow them opportunities to think and talk about books in such a way that they understand themselves better, but this, too, is not enough. Making connections between life and text and recognizing yourself in books is wonderful, but if the reading experience stops there, we have stopped short if we believe that reading can be transformational. I know now how crucial it is to allow students the opportunity to evoke their own poems with the books we ask them to read before we even begin to do anything with those books, whether discussion or action, literary study or social change.

Many of us feel that we must take advantage of the power of literature to enact social justice, social change, or at the very least, social awareness to create more open-mindedness in ourselves and our students. We try to use literature to help our students connect with others who have different life experiences. This, as I have learned, is not easy to do well, especially if you, as I, are committed to teaching in a way that honors transactional theory.

I have come to understand that if readers do not have the opportunity to evoke a poem as they read, if they are reading with specific directions given to them by their teacher, with outcomes predetermined, even if for a good reason, the opportunity for transformation is lost. Sometimes, perhaps, the importance of the reason for shaping reading for students might outweigh the importance of allowing personal response first, but we must also recognize that doing so may interrupt our students' engagement in books, especially if we direct their reading too frequently. Rosenblatt (1995) rightly argues that "evocation *should* [emphasis added] precede response" and that there is no poem, no literary work, unless there has been an aesthetic reading, a lived-through experience that is

essential to the beginning of a process of organic growth, in which the capacity for thinking rationally

about emotional responses can be expanded. Such reading can nourish both aesthetic and social sensitivities and can foster the development of critical and self-critical judgment. (p. xviii)

The evocation of the poem, then, must come first, before examining a text for literary quality or ideology, before using a text to explore the social and cultural norms of life in the past or present for various groups of people. Our students need to experience a text in their own ways before we do anything else with the text, including looking at the cultural aspects of it, because if we don't let them do this, they won't care enough to go one step further. Why care about what Rinaldi did to make you like Nannie Little Rose unless you first came to care about her? Why care about the problematic ideologies that underlie that same text unless you found yourself either enamored or repulsed by the story? If Rosenblatt is right, and I think she is, it is not the texts themselves that are worth discussing but students' responses to their own evocations. It is only when a text comes alive for an actively engaged reader—when a text becomes a poem evoked by a reader—that we have something worth discussing.

Unless we hold off on our own purposes and allow students to bring their experiences of a text—even if they missed something, even if they didn't like something, even if they didn't connect with the characters, or most importantly, even if they didn't understand the text in the way we did—to the table, we won't be helping our students become engaged, thoughtful readers. Then, we can begin the work of exploring books that engage our students because of the texts' literary merit and ideological content, and it will truly matter to our students.

I end my career where I began, in a classroom with children, allowing them to teach me what they know. The particular classroom that I volunteer in today is a special place, a fifth grade in a Minneapolis public school with a very gifted teacher in charge of the education of a rich variety of children. Across the 15 years that I have been associated with this particular classroom, I have seen children who hated reading become avid readers, have watched young writers grow, and have had countless discussions with individual students. One year we read *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis (1995) together, with me reading the final chapter aloud while they followed in their own copies. The conversation that ensued taught me a lot about how a powerful text engages readers, lifts them into the life of the book, and provokes contemplation of their own lives. After a discussion of how both Kenny and Byron, the protago-

nist and his older brother, changed across the course of the story, the students then turned to talking about what Byron says to Kenny about fairness. One boy expressed what many of them might have been thinking when he asked, "But *why* would the police not arrest the people who killed the little girls if they knew that they did it?" With this question, the class exploded into one of the most raw, honest, and insightful conversations about race in America that I have ever heard. I didn't even have to ask a single question because over the school year, those students had learned how to engage with books and use them to think about their own worlds.

This year's class has been most recently engaged in a study of the history of civil rights in the United States. They've read many books together and individually, and each chose a person, place, or event to specialize in, writing about that choice in both prose and poetry. One girl was so taken by the books that she read about Sojourner Truth that she came up to me and asked, "Can I write a poem about Sojourner Truth's hands? I keep seeing her hands in my mind, and I've thought of words to describe them. Can I do that?" Of course, she could, and did, and I freely admit that the poem that she created brought tears to my eyes. She understood the courage and determination that Sojourner possessed. She discovered this through the books she read, and she wanted to express it to others. That is the outcome that we want.

Over and over, across the 45 years that I have been working with children as a teacher, researcher, parent, and classroom volunteer and working with teachers as a professor, coresearcher, and author of textbooks, I have learned a lot from other scholars, but most of all from the students and teachers with whom I have worked. My respect for the power that engaged reading offers to anyone willing to try has increased. I have watched teachers, including myself, shape and constrain the ways that students read and respond. I continue to marvel at the amazing things that children say about the poems they construct. Rosenblatt and Britton were right: If we support readers as they read aesthetically, evoking their own poems, and allow them time to think, write, and talk about their experiences, reading a powerful book can become an event that just might change the world, one reader at a time. ■

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