

2014

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Recommended Citation

Apol, Laura (2014) "For the Love of Literature: Book Selection," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 47 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol47/iss1/13>

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For the Love of Literature: Book Selection

by Laura Apol, Michigan State University

So many books; so little time. Who among us hasn't registered this lament at one time or another—on the beach, in front of a fireplace, late at night in bed? We might be too old for flashlights under the covers (or not!), but those with a passion for reading nearly always rue the mismatch between good books and enough available time.

As teachers, it's the same: there's so much we want to read to and with and for and about our students. We want *them* to read, as well. But with so many books, and with so little time, how do we decide which books are the "best"?

Many of us rely on reviews to help us make book selections. Many of us also rely on word of mouth. Internet sites, blogs, professional journals (online and in print), newsletters, author sites, listservs, friends and colleagues, librarians, bookstore personnel... there are numerous sources for information about books. For many, *The Michigan Reading Journal* is one such resource. Traditionally, *MRJ* has included dozens of book reviews spanning ages, genres and interests. It's a helpful source for information about books.

This issue of the *Michigan Reading Journal* marks a shift in editors and institutional "home" for the journal. I will be taking over the children's and young adult literature column, and I'll be assisted by a team of doctoral students at Michigan State University. We've retitled the column "For the Love of Literature." As in the past, in this space we will share books with you—new books you might not have discovered, old favorites we want to recommend—and of course we'll provide summaries of those books. But we know there are many places you can go to find reviews. So we want to do more than offer reviews; we want to build a context for those reviews.

In each "For the Love of Literature" column, we'll choose a topic, and provide both an overview of the topic and a few books we'd recommend, including summaries of the books and a rationale for use built in to the review. Sometimes writing about the books will be worked into the writing about a topic; sometimes we will introduce the topic, then list a few books. You'll see that in this, our first column (the topic of which is "Book Selection") we've done it both ways to model the different approaches. Some upcoming topics we'll be discussing include: children's and YA literature in film, literature awards and award winners, books that resist categories of genre, and the role of visual arts in children's and YA literature.

As well, in future issues we'll include a "Check it Out" section in which we call attention to new books. To facilitate the "Check it Out" section, we're seeking reviewers from across the state. We'd like to include the voices of teachers, librarians, reading specialists, education faculty, bookstore personnel, authors and readers from all over Michigan. Each month we'll send out a few new books, and collect reviews, some of which will appear in the journal (and on a "Check it Out" website linked to the Michigan Reading Association). Because we want to limit the number of reviews, we'll be selective, aiming for variety (of books and reviewers), relevance, and quality.

If you'd like to be considered as a reviewer, please send an email to me at apol@msu.edu. Please include in the subject line "MRJ book reviewer" so that I'm sure to locate the message. Include the following in your note: 1. A brief (100-word) bio; 2. A list of the sorts of books you would be most qualified to review—i.e. age/level, genre, special topic(s); 3. Your resumé, attached as a Word doc or pdf. We'll be accepting reviewer applications until January 15, 2015.

In the meantime: For the love of literature... READ!

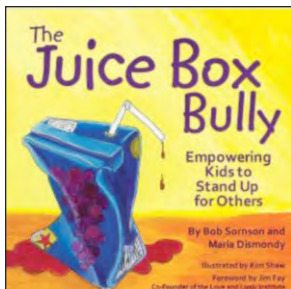
Children's Literature: What Students "Need"

—Lisa Domke and Tracy Weippert

With a new school year comes a new class: new students, new curriculum, and new materials to engage a brand-new group of children. We all have our perennial favorites, books that have proven their value in the classroom. However, we're always looking for ways to better connect with and validate our students. As we evaluate books for our classroom, there is one central question that we use to guide the selection process: *Does this book meet students' needs?*

Every classroom has diverse needs. No single book will respond to them all. So we take time to get to know our students as individuals, as learners, and as a whole class. Then we read, read, read. The more books we read, the more perspectives we address, the more personal experiences we validate, and ultimately, the more needs we meet. Over time, we build a classroom community through books by starting where students are and encouraging them to grow.

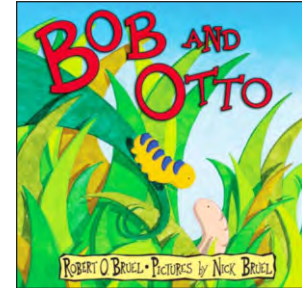
As fewer elementary schools have guidance counselors, we have felt increasingly responsible for meeting students' social and emotional needs, and shaping not only the classroom climate, but the school climate as well. Books are a great way to do this as they give us a foundation and common language that we can use for discussion. When confronted with issues of bullying, we sometimes have felt under-prepared. *The Juice*



Box Bully by Bob Sornson and Maria Dimondy is a wonderful resource in that it clearly portrays the complexities of bullying—e.g. the roles of bystanders, motivations for bullying, and

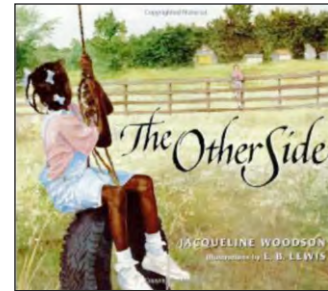
helping the person who is bullying rejoin the community. In addition, we have found the story's "class promise" to provide a great segue into class promises of our own.

Often our promises reflect themes of respect and friendship. While the book *Bob and Otto* by Robert Bruel seems like a typical butterfly life-cycle story (and can be used as such), it is

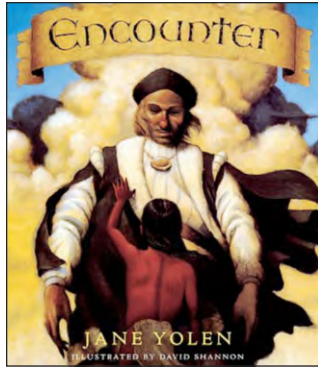


also a beautiful story of friendship that can spark important conversations about celebrating your own uniqueness and validating the uniqueness of others. *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson

also celebrates these topics as it tells the story of two girls whose friendship becomes a simple, yet powerful act of resistance. This book not only meets students' social and emotional needs, but it also offers new perspectives. While many books used in classrooms focus on historical "landmark" civil rights cases (such as Ruby Bridges' fight for educational equality or Rosa Parks' encounter on a Montgomery bus), *The Other Side* takes a more subtle view of the fights against segregation. It provides space for teachers and students to talk about the changes that ordinary people can bring about.



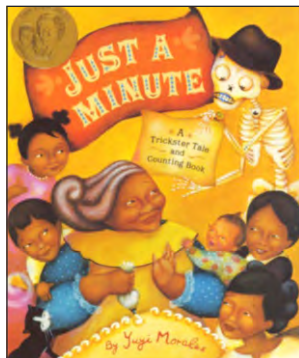
In using stories like *The Other Side*, we have found it important to expand students' world-views and provide them with new perspectives and points of view. Knowing only one (dominant) aspect of an event limits understanding and distorts truth. Identifying other points of view can empower students and teach critical thinking and empathy. This in turn helps students be-



come compassionate, knowledgeable leaders in their classrooms, schools, and communities. Books like *Encounter* by Jane Yolen introduce students to the complexities of society and history.

Typical stories of Columbus describe how he came to the Americas and “discovered” a new land. Sometimes they also explain the impact he, his crew, and subsequent voyages of exploration had on Native American populations. Instead, *Encounter* tells of Columbus’s arrival to North America from the perspective of a Taino boy, affording opportunities for discussion of how a widely-accepted account of a story—told from the perspective of those with power—may have other versions that also need to be heard.

As we introduce students to new perspectives, we also seek to value their unique heritages and stories. One of our favorite texts is *Just a Minute!: A Trickster Tale and Counting Book* by Yuyi Morales. This



is a bilingual Spanish-English counting book describing how Grandma Beetle gets ready for a party and tricks the friendly Señor Calavera. Through the character of Señor Calavera, the book challenges the idea that skeletons are frightening, explaining the Mexican traditions of the *calavera* being used in children’s toys and beautifully decorated sugar skulls for The Day of the Dead / *El Día de los Muertos*—a time to remember and celebrate loved ones who have passed away. Paired with the book, our students have loved the videos about Señor Calavera that also

show him as a lovable character (<http://www.sr-calavera.com/jarana.html>). As a resource for young writers, Yuyi Morales also includes a video about how she made the book (<http://www.sr-calavera.com/artista.html>).

We have found it especially helpful when books (like the ones described above) address a variety of diverse classroom priorities—when they speak to students’ social and emotional needs, provide new alternative perspectives, validate cultural heritages, and/or enhance curricular instruction. These are just a few of our favorites—our “go-to” books; over the years they have proven to be some of our students’ favorites, too.

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Young Adult Literature: Mindful Match-making

—Jackie Kerr, Ashley Johnson
and Jeannie Loh

Douglas had been in my class for two months. Although he knew that each class began the same way—20 minutes of individual silent reading—he continued to resist. Book after book from our classroom library was rejected. His response was always the same: “Mrs. J, reading just isn’t for me.”

We have all had a Douglas or two in our classrooms - students who challenge the very idea that one day they might enjoy a book. Yet as English teachers, we cannot accept this. After all, for many of us it was a love of story that brought us to the classroom in the first place. So each time Douglas told me that reading wasn't for him, I had the same reply: “You just haven't found the story for you. There is a story for everyone and we're going to find yours.”

So how do we as teachers select books for our middle and high school students? What principles should we consider as we search for books that will turn on a light for students and foster a love of reading? In this column, we offer our ideas on how to choose books that matter to readers, along with suggestions for books that have engaged our students. We see the search for a story as a kind of match-making, a love connection between reader and book that is very much a relationship. Some young readers, through strategy or serendipity, find those special stories and spark their own reading magic; others will need help with the process.

As educators who have spent a lifetime reading, we all have our favorite stories, and often, we want to pass those down to our students. But we need to recognize that our stories are not necessarily our students' stories, and that, to choose books for them, we must be willing to read

widely and beyond our personal boundaries and preferences, constantly exploring new genres, new authors, and new topics. Here are a few ideas for ways to expand your reading experiences. As you venture into uncharted territory you will ultimately energize your classroom reading community:

- Check in with your students regularly and ask for recommendations. What are they reading? What's hot? Why?
- Swap books with students and then have conversations after reading so you can share perspectives.
- Consult librarians and bookstore personnel for ideas on new books and authors.
- Peruse reading blogs written by young people, YA authors, and fellow educators.
- Follow contemporary authors on Twitter and other social media.
- Enlist the help of students in the book-researching process and allow them to give input about books for the classroom shelves.
- Provide opportunities in your class for students to share with each other about books, e.g., spotlight on books, book trailers, and sneak previews. This will generate enthusiasm for reading and foster a community of readers.
- Volunteer to sponsor a book club and read with students after school.
- Challenge yourself to venture out of your comfort zone and deliberately read books (and genres) you would usually avoid.

Novelist Mitali Perkins writes, “With the right slant of light, the best novels serve as windows *and* mirrors,” and we agree. We must know our students in order to choose the “best” books—books that will ignite in them a passion for reading. However, knowing our students is not only about their reading levels, backgrounds, and interests. We must also make an effort to understand their personalities, the conflicts they face, and the connections they make between the world of books and their own lived experiences.

In other words, we need to be able to help them choose books that connect with who they are and can show them who they might be.

As we combine our wide reading with an understanding of our students, we should also consider how books challenge readers to take on new perspectives—allowing our students a wider and more nuanced view both of their communities and of the larger world. We often think that pleasure reading and critical reading exist in opposition, but young adult literature, particularly when carefully selected, can offer our students the opportunity for both.

If our goal is to create lifelong readers who love books and choose to read widely for pleasure and for edification, we have to think more globally about books and authors, and about our student readers. We have a moral imperative to continually read, immersing ourselves in the wide world of YA literature because our students need us to know which stories are out there. Books serve many purposes in today's world, and reading is a vital component of our contemporary existence. As Sherman Alexie points out:

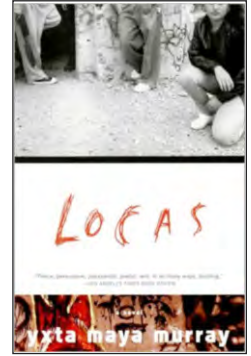
Teenagers read millions of books every year. They read for entertainment and for education. They read because of school assignments and pop culture fads. And there are millions of teens who read because they are sad and lonely and enraged. They read because they live in an often-terrible world. They read because they believe, despite the callow protestations of certain adults, that books—especially the dark and dangerous ones—will save them.

So we close with a challenge: to get to know students, to read widely and well, and to help match young readers with stories. This challenge is both grave and glorious. Books matter. Teachers do, too.

Some Top Titles From Our “Hit” Lists

Locas by Yxta Maya Murray

Set in Echo Park, Los Angeles, this story tells of the turbulent lives of Chicano female gangbangers as told from two perspectives, Celia and Lucia. Lucia starts out as the girlfriend of Celia's brother, a gangbanger who rises in the gang hierarchy, and, in her own desire for power, begins her own gang. On the opposite end, Celia stays away from gang life but struggles to find success and stability doing menial work. *Locas* presents two complex perspectives on the lives of young women in urban Los Angeles. This novel sheds light on the impact of gangs on young women as they struggle to make life decisions to either conform to or defy the traditional roles set out for them.



The Prisoner's Wife by asha bandele

A heartbreaking but inspiring story told from the point-of-view of a woman who falls in love with an incarcerated man. The prison population is largely invisible, and talking about loved ones in prison is a social taboo, so bandele gives voice to the love between those on the inside and those on the outside. She documents the emotional and physical obstacles between not only Asha and Rashid but also between the lovers and the prison institution and its policies.



Street Pharm by Allison Van Diepen

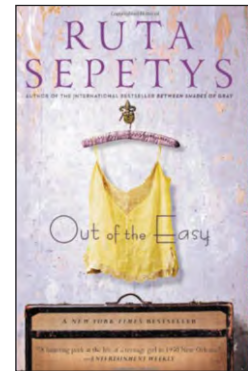
This book is a realistically told story of survival, which is most likely the reason it is a major hit with alternative high school students. The author actually consulted with her students and mobilized her experiences as a teacher in an inner city alternative high school in Brooklyn to write the story of Ty Johnson, a 17-year-old drug dealer who has read *The Art of War* and uses Sun Tzu's principles to run his enterprise. He faces obstacles and life-threatening dangers as he struggles to balance his life, attempting to stay in school and maintain the drug business he is running for his incarcerated father. Although the book depicts a gritty street reality in graphic detail, the main character meets another student who is balancing her own problems, and their burgeoning relationship provides Ty with the impetus he needs to think differently about his options and take positive action to change his life.



raising to tear-jerking, readers of all ages can connect with this book through the animal lover element. It will be a non-fiction hit because it is easily accessible to reluctant readers, it celebrates “man’s best friend,” and it stays true to Paulsen’s skillful storytelling style.

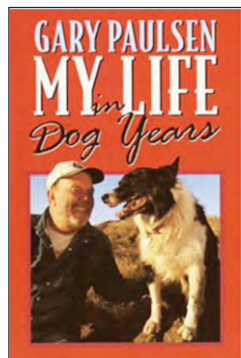
Out of the Easy by Ruta Sepetys

In her second novel, Sepetys transports readers to 1950s New Orleans, where protagonist Josie is a 17-year-old living on her own and hoping to find a way to college. Part murder mystery, part identity struggle, *Out of the Easy* interests both high school girls and boys. While Josie’s struggles are unique to her time and place, her willingness to fight against people who would take advantage of her appeals to contemporary readers. Not only does the book offer a window into 1950s New Orleans and raise questions about women’s rights and parental connections, but it also challenges students to consider what it means to be a good person, as Josie interacts with characters from all walks of life including prostitutes, bankers, and booksellers.



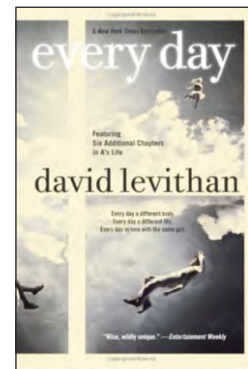
My Life in Dog Years by Gary Paulsen

Gary Paulsen is well known and beloved for his books about outdoor adventure, including dog sledding. But in this atypical non-fiction book for young readers, the author tells his life story through the ten dogs he has owned and encountered so far, working chronologically from the past up to his current dog at the time of writing. Each chapter portrays a different dog companion and tells the story of the experiences the author has with that dog as well as the lessons he learns from each dog about himself and life. Although it runs the gamut of emotion from laugh-inducing to hair-



Every Day by David Levithan

This book wins students over with its portrayal of a teen romance that challenges expected ideas about love. In the story, 16-year-old A wakes up in the body of a different teenager each day. A has accepted this until A meets Rhiannon and falls in love. Throughout the story, A searches for ways to be with Rhiannon and comes to question an identity-less existence. By depicting a charac-



ter who exists outside classifications like gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, *Every Day* asks students to question these traditional boundaries in understanding others. At the same time, the novel invites critical reading and conversation both about A's actions and Levithan's treatment of underrepresented groups.

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