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Motivating Young Writers: An Interview with Author/Illustrator Ryan Hipp

by Danielle L. DeFauw

Upon analyzing district and state writing assessment data, one elementary school chose a creative strategy to achieve their school improvement goal. To focus on writing instruction to support student writers, the teachers and K-4 students partnered with Ryan Hipp, author/illustrator of *Little Steps* (Hipp, 2014), co-illustrator of *A Curious Glimpse of Michigan* (Kammeraad & Kammeraad, 2004), and co-author/illustrator of *A Curious Glimpse of Michigan: The Music* (Hipp, Kammeraad, & Friends, 2007). The school hired Hipp to interact online and in-person with K-4 students and teachers to support students' writing development. Through weekly online blog interactions, 4 in-person sessions, and a webinar, he provides writing strategies, tips, challenges, and feedback to motivate students to write. See Table 1 for the collaboration schedule.

At the start of the 2013–2014 school year, I had the privilege of interviewing Ryan Hipp to understand his personal and instructional perspectives concerning this collaboration. This interview highlights his preliminary thoughts on a yearlong collaboration (spring 2013 through summer 2014) with an elementary school and details of his life as an author and illustrator.

Danielle: Describe your experience and thoughts concerning working with the elementary students and their teachers.

Ryan: I go to a lot of schools, and I get a lot of mixed reasons for why a school might be hosting a visiting author. A lot of times a school will enjoy it as a nice departure from the school day or an award for their students. It started off that this school wanted to hire me just for the day like any other school does.

Danielle: How was this school different?

Ryan: When I met with them to plan it was very evident to me that they are especially dedicated to encouraging their students' writing. I met with a team that included the principal and multiple teachers. We discussed what they needed in order to meet their school improvement writing goals. We realized we needed more time, so we started looking at expanding the one-day event. And once we started discussing the expansion, we started seeing the possibilities.

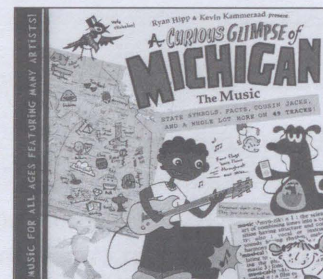
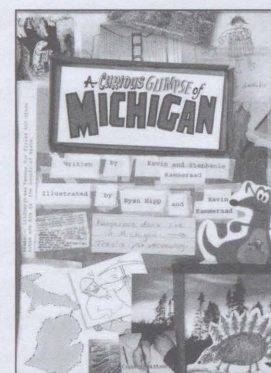
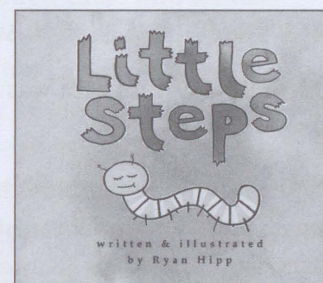
Danielle: Describe the possibilities.



Danielle DeFauw



Ryan Hipp



Ryan: We realized we could really make this a yearlong thing. We started discussing the summer writing blog to keep the kids connected between my visits from the end of the school year to the beginning of the next 2013 school year. For someone like me, to have that reconnection after being out of school, I'm not going to be a flash in the pan for these kids. I'm not going to be this guy that they might have enjoyed the day of, but out of sight out of mind, they've already forgotten about me. I've been working with these kids over the summer. They're excited to have me here. They're going to remember me. To have that kind of connection I think is going to really benefit the students and me. They're going to see that their teachers care about their writing more than just "Writing Month" or "Young Authors' Week." The school is making writing a priority for their students all year long.

Danielle: Whose idea was it to do the online blog?

Ryan: I don't remember who actually made the suggestion. We were brainstorming during that meeting. Someone suggested a blog since it was the end of the school year, and we were trying to figure out how we could keep connected with the students. So, I threw out an idea of doing a Q & A kind of thing with the kids where they can continue to ask me questions. It was more of my way to extend a couple extra perks and bonuses for them booking me. I would give up my time over the summer to respond to the students. The beauty of technology is I can be anywhere and if a student posts something to the blog, my goal was and is to respond to every student no matter what. No matter what they write they get a real response.

Danielle: That's quite a commitment.

Ryan: I can remember being a kid and writing letters to authors I liked. Nine months later I'd get a generic letter from their office with a stamp on it. They didn't even provide a real signature. They didn't really write to me. So I thought it

would make a bigger impact and mean a lot more if I'm doing one-on-one responses with the students and really encouraging them. There's a response from me for every single post.

Danielle: Is there anything you'd like to add concerning this experience?

Ryan: I've never done anything like this before to this extent, and I have to applaud the staff for that because I wish every school would do this. It means so much to me to be involved with a school that takes creativity so seriously. They really want these kids to read and write, and they're not being complacent about it. They're not giving up. They're not accepting the status quo. There's so much energy from all school staff. And the fact that they wanted me to be a part of this collaboration is very flattering to me, and I'm honored that they want me to be a part of their school family.

Danielle: You're a part of the team.

Ryan: You know in my career, this is such a big victory for me to be a part of inspiring these kids over a course of time. They really wanted to work with me and that's why I'm giving back to them so much because their energy is a little bit addictive to me. Seeing how much the staff wants to see success with their students makes me want to step up and improve my game. I want to be a part of that success.

Danielle: In terms of success, let's talk about your writing and illustrating journey. Describe yourself as a writer.

Ryan: I guess I've always had a little bit of a sarcastic sense of humor, and when I was in college, I was trying to figure out an outlet for that. Interestingly, one day a professor of mine said that whatever it was that you loved doing - not necessarily what you wanted to be when you grew up - but whatever it was that you loved doing when you were in first grade is what you should do for your career if you ever want to have a happy life. So when it was my turn to share, I said that I

liked to write stories and draw pictures. That kind of started getting around in my head quite a bit about how everything I was doing was diametrically opposed to that premise, and I couldn't really resolve that. Every time I would sign up for classes or focus on something completely different, I just couldn't get it out of my head. I started believing there was probably more truth to that statement than most people want to admit. So, I really started putting a lot of focus in actualizing that. I kind of took baby steps away from doing what I shouldn't have been doing. And I started shifting gears. I just tried to learn more about what it takes to become a writer, to become an artist, and to do it the right way. They say that there's no luck in the final work, but I did get really lucky.

Danielle: How so?

Ryan: They say it's not what you know, it's who you know, and once I started trying to figure out the right way to do things I started meeting the right people. I started going to educator conferences and talking to other local authors and artists. And for my first book I got lucky because I knew my co-author, Kevin Kammeraad, and he had just finished his first book *The Tomato Collection*. After his book came out I helped him with a lot of his projects. I just wanted to be a part of helping him become successful. The more I helped him, the more I learned, and my career started blooming.

Danielle: Tell me about your first book.

Ryan: Our publisher for my first book, Kevin's second book, *A Curious Glimpse of Michigan* was a Michigan publisher, and they were seeking somebody to write a concept book about Michigan poetry that tied to the Michigan history curriculum for fourth grade. We just raised our hands and said we'd do it. That's a rare thing. Usually how it works is authors come up with an idea, and they try to pitch it to a publisher. This was the other way around where the publisher came up with the idea, and they were seeking an

author. We were lucky. That was a very proud moment in my career to really say that I became a published author. I actually dedicated *A Curious Glimpse of Michigan* to that professor's memory. He passed away before the book was done.

Danielle: It sounds like that professor certainly was a positive influence in your life. Describe a positive writing experience.

Ryan: That's going back to when my professor asked what was it you loved to do when you were in first grade. First grade was my positive experience. It was "Young Authors' Week" at my school, and I don't remember a lot about it other than we really did take the entire week off to just work on writing stories. I wrote my first story. It was called *The Penguin that Froze*. I wrote it and revised it and got the rough draft into a final draft. It was only four sentences long. Then I got to illustrate it, and the media specialist at our school turned all of our books into these nice hardbound shelf-paper-wrapped hard edition books that I still have to this day.

Danielle: It's wonderful you still have such a keepsake to share with students.

Ryan: And after writing that story, I took it home and showed my family, and they laughed at it. At first I thought they were laughing at me, but they were laughing at the cleverness of the story. They thought that it was charming. It was a proud moment for me at an early age. I realized I was good at something. And I loved it. I loved getting that attention from my family and friends. And it just made me want to write more stories and draw more pictures. So, after "Young Authors' Week" was done, I still spent a lot of time in the library at our school. Whenever I would write another story, I would bring it to the media specialist who would use our publishing center.

Danielle: You learned at an early the age the importance of publishing.

Ryan: I like to think that I was the happy result of that "Young Authors' Week." I'm sure for a lot

of kids it was like pulling teeth trying to get them to write their stories, but to have a student like me that just took off and was inspired and wanted to do it on his or her own time, I would like to think that they looked at that as a success. I can attest that those teachers at the elementary school where we're doing this collaboration would love it if experiences like this resulted.

Danielle: It sounds like part of your luck was simply choosing to connect to others and build relationships. Which organizations have you joined?

Ryan: I'm in a couple private writing critique groups that I met through the larger group, which is the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, which I really attribute a lot of my success. You really learn the ropes of the publishing industry and what it truly takes to become an author/illustrator of picture books for young people. Another organization that I'm a part of is the Michigan Reading Association that has really helped my career. It has really helped me network with schools and libraries and other authors. Just having that network with other people who live in Michigan and who are trying to make a career at writing for children is a great support system.

Danielle: People support you like you're supporting these kids.

Ryan: I mean just when you think that you're not good enough, or you've been at this a long time and you know you're not necessarily where you thought you wanted to be, or it gets hard, there's someone there to encourage you. It's just like any other job. It is a job, and it is hard work. Sometimes I get discouraged, and I always feel better after talking with someone else who has gone through a similar situation. I try not to focus on that when I talk to kids because I want them to see this in more of a lime light and not the hard truth of it. I don't want them to necessarily glamourize what I'm doing. I want them just to focus on the intrinsic pleasure of writing

at this stage of their lives. I want them just to have that passion and excitement for being creative at their young age.

Danielle: Your passion is certainly apparent. What is the easiest part of writing for you?

Ryan: This is fascinating because a lot of writers think that writing picture books must be easier than writing a novel because they're so short. There are fewer words. You don't have to write three hundred pages. It's 32 pages. How hard can that be? But the truth is it's very difficult to write picture books because every single word is scrutinized. Every syllable counts so that's the hard part. But the easy part for me is I feel that once I get a funny idea, I think the book tends to write itself. The hard part is coming up with a clever idea. But once I get the idea, it all becomes really clear to me, and I usually can write the skeleton of it in just a few hours. The funny thing is I write the book in a couple of hours, and then I spend the next couple of months fine-tuning it.

Danielle: You coupled that response with the hardest part of writing. Are you talking about word choice being the hardest part?

Ryan: Yes, word choice and pairing it down. I think we as grown ups forget what it was like to be in first or second grade. We don't speak with first or second graders' vocabulary. We don't read like them. Adults tend to be wordier than they need to be. They overthink it and the secret is if you can distill three sentences down to one sentence, that's amazing and that's perfect, but even still, cut it down even more. Cut out all those extra words that you don't need. You can't have too few words when it comes to a picture book. Finding that perfect balance is very tricky. So yeah, I spend a lot of time ruminating over my word choices.

Danielle: Where do your ideas come from?

Ryan: I tell kids this too when you're searching for an idea and you can't find it then it means you're forgetting your life because every day

something happens to you. Every day a sad thing happens to you. Every day a funny thing happens to you. Every day you make an observance. If you're struggling to find ideas that means you haven't been paying attention. I try to challenge kids to pay attention. So, when their friends say something that makes them laugh, I tell them to jot it down so they don't forget. When they had a bad day and something happened that made them cry, they need to write down how they're feeling and save this stuff for a rainy day so that when they're trying to find their ideas they can slip back in time.

Danielle: What do you recommend they write in?

Ryan: They can write in a journal, or a diary, or a sketchbook, or just a notepad, but we tend to forget things when we don't write them down. I usually ask kids how many of them have had a brilliant idea and then forgotten it. And their arms shoot up because we've all done that. You know we can remember that we had a good idea. But we don't remember all of the details of it. That's usually what happens so I don't think it's like turning a light switch on and off like when I sit down to write. I don't say, "Okay now that I'm sitting down at my desk. I'm going to come up with an idea." I don't sit down at my desk unloaded. I usually sit down at my desk, and I've got too many ideas that I've written down, and then it becomes just a matter of choosing the best one.

Danielle: Describe your writing process.

Ryan: It's funny because sometimes I get in trouble for this. I tell kids that the best way to write is to not write. I know a lot of teachers like their kids to do the writing process and get their draft done, and then revise it and revise it and revise it. But especially early elementary, just coming up with that idea for that base structure is hard for students. I try to tell them that when I'm writing a story, I don't write a single word on a piece of paper until I have the story completely mapped

out. So my writing process usually starts with that brilliant light bulb idea that writes itself. I immediately start sketching. I draw really rough sketches, and I write notes. I'll write the joke right on the sketch, and then it's a hodgepodge. I know the mess will clear later when I'm trying to put the stuff in the right order. It will all come into place, but I usually have a big mess on my desk of sketches that I've drawn on napkins, or scratch pieces of paper, or maybe even some of the more final work once I am pretty confident I like the direction things are going. Then I assemble it, and once I get this messy draft, then I type it out. And usually after it's typed out I see the holes, or I see the stuff that doesn't work. But it only takes me 10 minutes to write the story at that point because I've already collected all of the bits and pieces that make up the story. So, then once it's typed up and there's more of what an adult would consider a real story, I go back and cut out the stuff that doesn't work. Once I see it in black and white I realize the parts that don't work and those that do. I realize this part still holds up, or maybe I was too wordy here, and maybe I can cut that out. That's the beauty of the computer because you can delete and you can do many revisions and drafts. You know I might have 25 or 30 revisions before I think it looks good, but that part is so much easier once you do all that ground work first.

Danielle: What is your writing routine like? Do you write every day?

Ryan: I don't write every day, but I'm jotting down my observations every day. Recently I was flipping through an old sketchbook that I had tucked away in a drawer, and I found some of these notes that I wrote, and I'm like 'oh man I'm so glad I wrote this down,' because you instantly remember it. You remember the day you wrote it when you see it in front of you. I instantly remember what I was thinking when I wrote it, but I wouldn't have remembered it had I not flipped through and jogged my memory. So, I do that every day. I jot down things every day that I want to save for a rainy day, but I don't necessarily sit

down and do hard productive writing every day. That's the beauty of it. I know that any given time when I am afforded three hours to sit at my desk or go to a coffee shop that I've got all my ducks in a row, and I'm never going to be at a lost for ideas. I sketch every day, and the same thing happens with my sketches. Sometimes I'll sketch something out and I'm like 'ooh I really like the way this looks.' And I'm afraid if I try to draw it again it will never look that good again. And so I better save this rough sketch so I can use it as a starting point. A lot of the pictures that end up in my books are almost exact copies of that beautiful first rough sketch. There's just something about a sketch when you're sketching it and you don't care, and it's always perfect because it's loose and free. It has life in it. But whenever I'm trying to draw something carefully for the first time and intentionally, it never looks good. It looks a little lifeless to me. It would definitely be reworked a little bit because it is so rough but I find that as soon as I let go of my inhibition, that's usually when my best work comes out.

Danielle: What makes a piece of writing excellent?

Ryan: A piece of writing is excellent when it touches us. When you can read something and it feels like it was written just for you. I think being honest and whimsical and endearing makes quality writing. That's the kind of writing I like to do. I want to write something truthful, that maybe tugs at your heartstring a little, and that's so much easier said than done. But when I see a book that does that, that's usually when I appreciate it so much more. And to be honest, as a picture book author, I read a lot of picture books, and it's very rare that I pick one up that I'm still smiling at the end. A lot of times, I feel like this is kind of trite, or they're trying too hard, or this writer forgot what it's like to be a kid. But every so often there's a diamond in the rough. And those kinds of books that tug your heartstrings, that makes beautiful writing to me, and strangely enough, it's often really simple text too. It doesn't take a lot to say a lot.

Danielle: I know you are in those writing groups and you are connected to many authors. Have you shared this collaboration idea with other authors and illustrators? Are they interested in such collaborations?

Ryan: I do speak at conferences specifically to authors and prospective writers on school visits. I think a lot of authors don't have a plan for school visits. They might get published, but what do you do next? What do you do to supplement your income? What do you do to get your word out there? You have to take your career into your own hands and going to schools really helps to get the word out there about yourself to help develop a fan base. You can't just go to a school and read your book. I think there's more to a successful school visit than just going there and asking kids, "Do you know what an author is?" I don't pat myself on the back about too many things, but if there's one thing in this world that I feel I'm super good at, it's making connections with kids - legitimate honest connections. I pride myself on my school visits and getting kids excited. I try to inspire other authors and illustrators that if you're going to do this, you've got to bring your A-game. You have to really practice and know what you're doing. You have to be really sincere with these kids because kids are very smart. They're just like us. They can see through adults that are condescending. I try to come to them at the same level that they're on and be honest with the kids and be sincere. And so the short answer is no I haven't quite presented to them about what I'm doing with this specific school collaboration, but I have tried to help other authors perfect their school visits.

Perfecting school visits is a journey, and I have observed Ryan Hipp' masterful school visits with this K-4 building. He demonstrates a natural ability to connect with students and teachers. His passion is contagious. It will be interesting to see how students are motivated to improve their writing. The elementary school has taken such an

important step in choosing to collaborate with Ryan Hipp who brings such a strong energy of commitment to supporting and motivating young writers.

Kammeraad, K., & Kammeraad, S. (2004). *A curious glimpse of Michigan*. (R. Hipp & K. Kammeraad, Illus.). Auburn Hills, MI: EDCO Publishing, Inc.

Children's Books Cited

Hipp, R. (2014). *Little steps*. Grand Rapids, MI: HIPPHOP STUDIO.

Hipp, R., Kammeraad, K., & Friends. (2007). *A curious glimpse of Michigan: The music*. Grand Rapids, MI: Cooperfly Records/Industrial Puppytronics.

Kammeraad, K. (1999). *The tomato collection*. Grand Rapids, MI: Cooperfly Books, Inc.

Danielle L. DeFauw is an assistant professor in the College of Education, Health, and Human Services at the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

Ryan Hipp is an award-winning Michigan author/illustrator and school/library speaker. Connect with Ryan and inquire about his live presentations and his "Skoolcasts" (audio or video Q & A podcasts) at www.ryanhipp.com or contact@ryanhipp.com.

Table 1

Collaboration Schedule

Author/Illustrator Contact	Date
Four In-Person Sessions	May & September 2013 January & May 2014
Year-Long Online Blog	June 2013 – August 2014
One Webinar	Planned for 2014

About the Cover Spring 2014

Top photo by K.W. Barrett (www.flickr.com/photos/bartletteleetary)

Bottom: photo of teenagers by Julie Falk (www.flickr.com/photos/piper); photo of girl using a tablet computer by Brad Flickinger (www.flickr.com/photos/56155476@N08); photo of two students by Harris Walker (www.flickr.com/photos/harriswalkerphotography).

An Island Adventure

Exploring the Heart of Literacy

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Helen Frost
Dr. Troy Hicks
Kevin Kammeraad
Dr. Steven Layne
E.B. Lewis
Jeffery Schatzer
Gijsbert & Robbyn van
Frankenhuyzen
Dr. Elaine M. Weber
and more!



Luncheon with the Authors & Illustrators * Autographing Party * Island Scavenger Hunt * Literacy Sessions for All

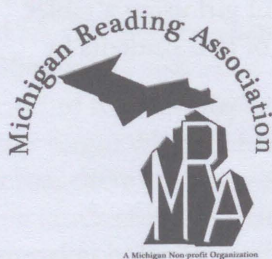
REGISTRATION

Registration for our Summer Literature Conference is now open! We hope you will join us on the island for two days of fun, laughter, networking, and learning. Register at michiganreading.org

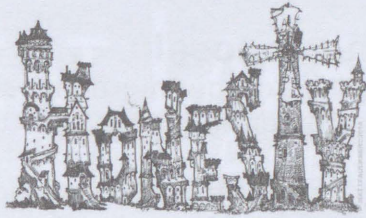
MISSION POINT

Mission Point Resort has a great selection of rooms available to conferees starting at \$119/night plus taxes and fees. Rooms are available Monday - Thursday at the discounted MRA rate. You must call the hotel at (800) 833-7711 to book rooms at MRA rate. See michiganreading.org for more information. Be sure to take the Arnold Line Ferry across the lake. MRA Conferees get a discounted round trip ferry ticket.

Online Registration closes June 26.



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2015 Michigan Reading Association 59th Annual Conference - March 27-30, 2015

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Call for Program Proposals

The Michigan Reading Association, an affiliate of the International Reading Association, invites you to submit a program proposal for the

59th Annual Michigan Reading Association Conference "United We Read. United We Write."

Saturday, March 28 – Monday, March 30, 2015

Amway Grand Plaza Hotel and DeVos Place Convention Center, Grand Rapids

Proposals must be received no later than September 15, 2014.

The Program Committee will consider all proposals submitted by the due date. Notification of the committee's decision will be sent no later than November 22, 2014. **The individual submitting the proposal is responsible for notifying co-presenters of the Program Committee's decision.**

FACTORS THAT TEND TO ENHANCE A PROPOSAL:

- Relevance and interest of program to proposed audience and conference theme
- Clarity, conciseness, and coherence of proposal
- Timeliness of issues or topics
- Innovative ways of viewing more traditional issues
- Evidence of presenters' knowledge about current practices and/or research
- Specific and articulate program description that does not need editing

FACTORS THAT DISQUALIFY A PROPOSAL:

- Promotion of commercial materials or programs
- Content not clearly related to literacy
- Failure to complete the proposal according to guidelines and format

PLEASE READ IMPORTANT DETAILS BELOW:

- All presenters and co-presenters MUST register and pay for the conference by December 31, 2014.
- Failure of each presenter of the proposal to register for the conference by December 31, 2014 will result in the immediate cancellation of the scheduled session.
- Registered presenters and co-presenters who cancel following December 31, 2014 must submit their cancellation in writing and will be eligible for a 50% refund of the conference registration fees.
- Upon signing this proposal, it is also understood that presenters and co-presenters do not receive honoraria or reimbursement for travel, hotel, or related expenses.
- Upon request, each presentation room will be equipped with an overhead projector and screen. Handouts and any additional A/V equipment, however, will be the responsibility of the presenters.

The 2015 Proposal Form must be submitted via our online proposal system. Visit our website this summer for more information. Speakers are limited to three proposal submissions. Speakers cannot be guaranteed all submissions will be accepted.

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GREAT LAKES GREAT BOOKS AWARD NOMINEES 2014-2015

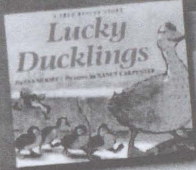


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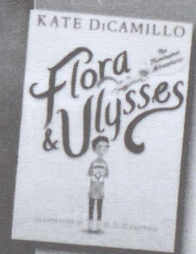
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- 000082241 *Carnivores* Reynolds, Aaron
RL 3.4 IL K-3 *\$18.92
- 000070844 *Day The Crayons Quit* Daywalt, Drew
RL 3.8 IL P-2 *\$19.70
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RL 2 IL K-3 *\$18.68
- 000074368 *I'm A Frog* Willems, Mo RL 1.1 IL P-2 *\$13.92
- 000082240 *Lifetime: The Amazing Numbers In Animal Lives*
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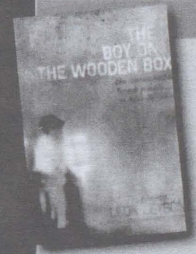
Great Lakes Great Books 2-3

- 000075060 *Battle Bunny* Scieszka, Jon & Barnett, Mac
RL 2 IL K-3 *\$17.36
- 000068842 *Exclamation Mark* Rosenthal, Amy Krouse
RL 2.0 IL K-3 *\$19.70
- 000075033 *Locomotive Flocia, Brian* RL 2 IL 1-4 *\$19.70
- 000081050 *Memoirs Of A Hamster* Scillian, Devin
RL 1 IL K-3 *\$17.89
- 000082242 *On A Beam Of Light: A Story Of*
Albert Einstein Berne, Jennifer RL 4.5 IL K-3 *\$19.70
- 000067623 *Pet Project: Cute And Cuddly Vicious Verses*
Wheeler, Lisa RL 3.4 IL K-3 *\$18.92
- 000068164 *Splash Of Red: The Life And Art Of*
Horace Pippin Bryant, Jennifer RL 4.1 IL K-3 *\$19.70
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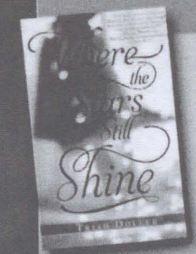
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