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Young Adult Books: 'Celine' (and Her Teacher) Meet Brock Cole

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When Brock Cole told an auditorium full of teachers that he thought his novels were humorous, we scoffed. Humorous? He thinks *The Facts Speak for Themselves* (1997) is funny? He thinks a young drunk girl is entertaining? (Cole, 1989). Nevertheless, I thought about his interpretation and I tend to agree. Who else would create a 13-year-old girl who plays the stock market or designs lawn ornaments that sell for \$500 apiece? Better yet: Who has the imagination to develop a character like Celine, a character that fantasizes over an imagined flirtation with a friend's father? Brock Cole may be grim and he may be controversial, but he "paints the world as it is; instead of using soft pastels, he whips out the bright, bold, and sometimes ugly hues" (Glenn, 1999, p. 32).

Perhaps Cole is most famous for illustrating books such as *The Indian in the Cupboard* (Banks, 1981) or his own award-winning *The King in the Door* (1979) and *The Giant's Toe* (1986). However, he is also admired for his work in young adult literature, specifically *The Goats* (1987), *Celine* (1989), and *The Facts Speak for Themselves* (1997). In all three novels the reader sees the lack of positive role models and is forced to digest the raw emotions Cole so brilliantly evokes (Telgen, 1993, p. 35). Cole writes vividly of insensitive and "irresponsible adults, crass exploitive sex, and children's vulnerability" (Telgen, 1993, p. 35). Although somewhat controversial and often censored—*Goats* (1987) has remained one of the American Library Association's 100 most banned books for years—all three of Cole's novels allow the

young adult reader to experience (vicariously) and contemplate society, relationships, and issues that push the limits.

Nonetheless, Cole deals "honestly with concerns of young people" but "he uses humor to keep things real" (Glenn, 1999, p. 26). What Cole also does is instruct, uplift, comfort, amuse, and expand the horizons of young adult readers without preaching, disrespecting, or writing condescendingly (Glenn, 1999, p. 26). This is exactly what he did for Megan Lundquist,* an eighth-grade student who read all three of his novels and had the exceptional opportunity to meet him.

The Evolution of an Eighth-Grade Teacher

When Megan first brought *The Facts Speak for Themselves* (Cole, 1997) to me, I had never seen it. She had just read *Speak* (Anderson, 1999) and was so intrigued with the main character's voice and bleak situation that she went online and found a "similar" book. Ironically, in my children's literature class that evening, my professor discussed the book in detail, and I knew I had the responsibility as her teacher to steer her through the content. Megan and I embarked on an adventure. Megan read at home, struggling with the book's intense realism. More accustomed to edgy literature, I whizzed through it. Each morning until she finished the book, Megan popped her head into my classroom and expressed her astonishment. She was disturbed, angry, and

*All students' names are pseudonyms.

frightened. I differed: I found it innovative, shocking, and sexually explicit—much like Megan's previous choice *Speak* (Anderson, 1999).

I have learned that there is no right way to deal with controversial books. If it is on my shelf I must be able to discuss the material with the students and explain the content to their parents. After the first chapter, Megan and I agreed it was a novel to read together. Pedophilia was more than either of us bargained for. Megan and I talked. We didn't use any specific strategy or worksheet but we talked without reservation and kept our minds open. When we had an extra minute during free reading time, we discussed her reactions. Her response to the literature was compelling. She questioned society, relationships, and some heavy issues like statutory rape and broken families. She continually asked, "Is the world really like that?" Her questions raised issues about family and morality. She started to question her friends' destructive behaviors and she began to think about how she wanted to live her life. Ironically, after all the bristly passage and all the soul-searching she did, she wanted more.

I pointed her towards my ever-expanding classroom library, but there was nothing she wanted to read. She wanted to contemplate issues and she wanted action. She wanted authors who force her to think about herself and her life, as Cole had. Unfortunately, I didn't have enough on my shelf. Sure, I had some good literature, but I was missing the sink-your-teeth-into-it teenage angst books like *Make Lemonade* (Wolff, 1993) or *Cut* (McCormick, 2000). She wanted something deeper than *Ella Enchanted* (Levine, 1997) and I did not know where to turn.

I have to admit, a year ago, I didn't know much about young adult literature. I knew that *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 1987) existed, but that was the extent of my knowledge. For 3 years I taught journalism and speech at a high school in Illinois. My focus was on yearbooks and drama, not reading. Although I loved reading—I was the child with the flashlight under my bed covers—I did not emphasize it in my curriculum. However, when I moved to Michigan last fall and started teaching an eighth-grade language arts block, my entire professional world changed. I didn't know where to begin. What did eighth graders want? I had no answer so I headed back to school.

Two classes in particular influenced my teaching: *Foundations of Children's Literature* and *The Author's and Illustrator's Art and Craft*. My professors exposed me to quality contemporary literature and reunited me with my first love, illustrated books like *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* (Cleary, 1990) and picture storybooks like *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* (Steig, 1969). Specifically, *The Author's and Illustrator's Art and Craft* class was a chance to hear authors speak about their writing process and literature. Cole was one of those authors. For two days, he focused his presentation on his craft and allowed us to question his choice of topics and messages. When my professors learned of Megan's interest in Brock Cole's work, they suggested I invite her to meet him at lunch. When she learned of the invitation, Megan was on cloud nine, and immediately purchased *The Goats* (1987) and *Celine* (1989) to read.

The Author and the Reader

Cole's first reaction to Megan was to look up. She stood a good 2 inches taller than he did and he laughed—commenting that she was much taller than he expected an eighth grader to be. He later commented on her maturity and intellect as well. Our lunch date was intimate, only six of us, so Megan was able to absorb Cole. She was shy. She spoke little but took in every ounce of the discussion. Often, Cole would bring her into the conversation and ask her perspective on an issue. When Cole brought up the *Dear Mr. Henshaw* (Cleary, 1983) topic—should students write to authors?—Megan fell silent. However, he included her, inquiring what she thought about students taking interest in authors. She answered academically. She told of a time several months ago in my language arts class when she e-mailed Lois Lowry a literary question about *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993). She impressed him because she hadn't written the author to tell her how good the book was, but rather to ask a question pertinent to her understanding of the novel. Cole went on to explain that he wished all students were like Megan, writing to authors out of self-generated interest or questions about a book rather than as a teacher-generated class assignment (Cole, July 9, 2002)

The most profound aspect of my experience with Cole is the effect he and his books had on Megan. As she and I were waiting for our lunch date with

Cole that Tuesday, I mentioned the conversation I had earlier that week with her mother. She had told me that Megan's father left them a few years ago, something Megan never mentioned to me in all of the hours I had spent with her—a minimum of 10 per week. What struck me then was the similarity between her and all of Cole's protagonists. Like Linda and Celine, Megan is self-reliant, has no father figure, is her mother's savior, and is seemingly well adjusted. Yet, on the inside she is flawed, vulnerable, and hurting. Megan, in a different situation, could be a Linda or Celine. "Linda is real. Her life is real, but she is fictional. Only bits and pieces come from reality" (Cole, July 9, 2002).

I believe that Megan is intelligent enough to make the same connection. Is it possible that she seized Linda and Celine because she saw her own life struggles in Cole's stories? In class, Cole stated that "no one needs consolation like an adolescent and nothing consoles like a good book" (Cole, July 9, 2002). Perhaps that is what he gave her, consolation for a grim life.

The Author and the Teacher

What Cole gave me was a deeper understanding of young adult literature. YA literature does not have to be happy. It can be gritty and powerful—even controversial; it can be uplifting yet grim; it can be amusing in the sense that a "Milk Bar T-shirt" (Cole, 1987) is. Cole's idea behind this stems from his belief that "novels shouldn't prompt action or resolution." Instead, they should "prompt contemplation ... make a writer and reader think" (Cole, July 10, 2002). In looking at the recent Michael L. Printz Award winners and honor books, I see grit and realism in novels such as *Stuck in Neutral* (Trueman, 2000), *The Body of Christopher Creed*, (Plum-Ucci, 2000), and *Speak* (Anderson, 1999). I see explicit sexuality in *Angus, Thongs, and Full-Frontal Snoggings* (Rennison, 2000) and *Hard Love* (Wittlinger, 1999), three of which Megan purchased on our trip to the bookstore after lunch. I also see that all of those novels make students think about life, about relationships, and about themselves. Having read and purchased all but one, I think my library is well stocked with not only interesting books, but also realistic ones.

With my move to seventh-grade reading and English this year, I have had to make some changes in

my curriculum in order to accommodate students like Megan—ones who are grasping for realism. My strategy for dealing with harsh literature remains the same as it was with her. Much like Nancie Atwell does with her students, we communicate any way we can. My students and I write letters to each other in their reading logs; we've talked about drugs, violence, and language when dealing with *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967). Students continually ask me thought-provoking questions, and I answer them objectively and without hesitation. Every day I encourage students to challenge themselves to think.

Equally important, since my visit with Cole I have introduced a censorship policy to deal with controversial literature like his. At Back to School Night I informed parents that I do not censor, but that I do require parent permission when students want to read literature I consider questionable for seventh graders. I used *The Facts Speak for Themselves* as an example because of its sex, harsh language, and violence. Parents raised their eyebrows, but ultimately they agreed that the policy was fair. Since then, I have had 9 out of 11 parents approve *Cut* (McCormick, 2000) as a book club selection and two others approve *Cujo* (King, 1981) and *Tenderness* (Cormier, 1997). Although *Cut* and *Tenderness* deal with heavy topics such as sex, drugs, alcohol, and self-mutilation, the themes are important and the stories real.

Some may say that my choices push the limit but I strongly believe as Cole does, that students do not need to be protected. "Novels are an education, but their lessons are never simple" (Cole, July 9, 2002). I simply cannot shelter my students from the world, nor can I subject them to literature that doesn't encourage them to think. Cole and other young adult authors provide a window into a world I'd like my students to examine. Books can provide experiences—allow students to "walk in someone else's shoes." I will stock my library shelves with novels that make readers contemplate, discuss, argue, and laugh. Some of these books may be harsh, but they are well worth the opportunities I can provide to students like Megan.

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