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Bailey White

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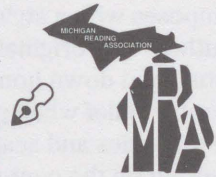
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# Maritime Disasters

COMMENTARY BY BAILEY WHITE



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I've been teaching children to read for fifteen years now. I've seen the teaching methods come and go. When I first started teaching first grade, we used the word-list method. Children would memorize lists of words, and when they knew enough words, say ten or twelve, they could read little stories composed of those words. Believe me, those were some dreary stories. It was hard to keep the children's interest.

So we went on to the cute-idea teaching method. A teacher would make construction paper teddy bears whose arms and legs could be attached by matching a contraction to its long form, or dogs who could reach their food bowls by displaying the correct beginning consonant through holes in their heads. Other teachers would say, "What a cute idea!" Then they would make construction paper teddy bears and dogs and dog bowls. Some children learned to read; some didn't. And at the end of the day, with my classroom strewn with dismembered teddy bears and starving construction paper dogs whose bowls were permanently lost, I would think, There must be a better way.

Then a few years ago I found it: maritime disasters. Give me a man overboard or a good sinking ship, and I can teach a half-witted gorilla to read. I start with old sea chanties. The children rub their fingers under the written words on

their song sheets as the singers on the tape recorder yowl out the tales at a dirgelike pace — exactly the speed beginning first-graders read.

So his messmates pulled him up,  
but on the deck he died.  
And they stitched him in the  
    hammock  
which was so fair and wide.  
And they lowered him overboard,  
but he drifted with the tide,  
and he sank into the Lowland,  
    Lowland, low,  
he sank into the Lowland Sea.

When children get the idea that written words can tell them something absolutely horrible, half the battle of teaching reading is won.

And that's when I turn to the *Titanic*. The children sit on the rug at my feet, and I tell them the story. It's almost scary to have the absolute, complete attention of that many young minds. I bought a little cardboard model of the ship and spent a week and a half folding down flaps and inserting tabs to assemble it.

I used up three years' worth of bonus points from the Lucky Book Club to buy a classroom set of Robert Ballard's book *Exploring the Titanic: How the Greatest Ship Ever Lost Was Found*. It's written on a fourth-grade reading level — lots of hard words — so I tipped in pages with the story rewritten on an easier level. But by the end of the second week the children are clawing up my pages to get at the original text underneath.

Little boys who couldn't pass the Draw a Man test in September are now turning out recognizable portraits of Captain Smith and Robert Ballard in eight colors with their blunt-tipped first-grade crayons, and Styrofoam cups and paper clips are transformed into models of Ballard's underwater remote-controlled robot. The children learn to read, and I haven't had a cute idea in years.

Sometimes I still worry though. Robert Ballard, who first found the *Titanic* more than seventy years after the disaster, deplores the pilfering and artifact gathering of subsequent explorations of the wreck. He thinks it's like desecrating a grave. And some after-

noons when the children are gone home, I sit all alone in my empty classroom surrounded by sketches of a wall-eyed Captain Smith and wonder if my use of the *Titanic* is not just as exploitative.

Then I remind myself that in my whole career the *Titanic* and I will teach over a thousand children how to read — close to the number of people who lost their lives on that black night. Surely, for the sake of literacy, the spirits of those poor souls will forgive me.

*Bailey White teaches in Georgia. She is a contributor to "All Things Considered" on National Public Radio.*

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