TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

What Can You Say About a Book?

Ideas and Inspiration for Improving Book Talk and Book Reviews

by
Steve Peha

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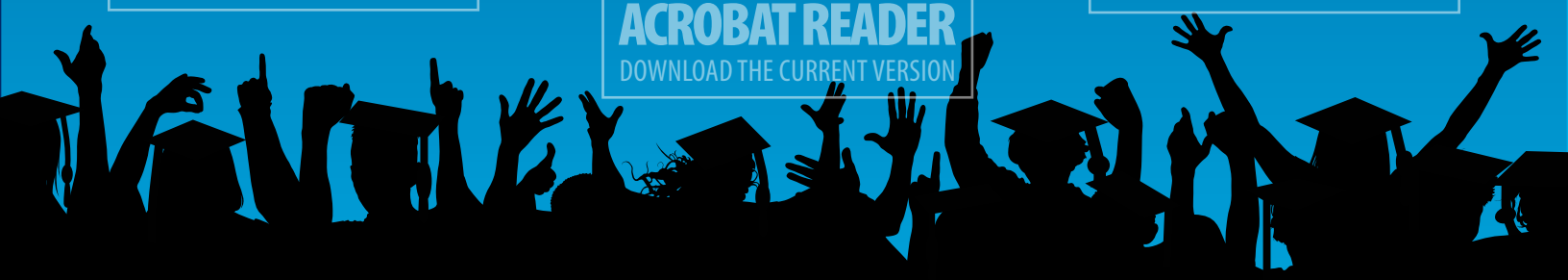

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

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"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

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by Steve Peha

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Everybody Wants to Be a Critic

In American society today, critics are right up there with pundits, experts, and talk radio hosts as the people whose opinions we most want to hear. Roger Ebert is a movie critic. He tells us what he thinks about movies and then we all go out and watch them — or make fun of other people who watch them. Sister Wendy Beckett is an art critic. She tells us what she thinks about art and we all go to museums on Sunday afternoon. Well, not all of us, I guess, especially during football season.

Speaking as someone who loves sharing his ideas with others in the hope that they will use them, I suspect that one of the great attractions of being a critic is influence. Critics are tastemakers: they tell us what we like, what we should like, and why.

When we say that someone is being "critical" we tend to think that he or she is being harsh, negative, or even mean. When we think of "critics" we think of crusty old curmudgeons passing judgment on the works of others. (So why do we all want to be critics again? Oh yeah, influence.) In fact, when I looked up the word online, the first definition listed was "inclined to judge severely and find fault." But there's a second meaning that I like better, one that is truer to what the word meant when it was coined 2500 years ago.

The word "critical" comes from the Greek word "kritikos" which means "able to discern." To be able to discern things means "to see with the eyes or the intellect, to recognize and comprehend." Now that sounds much

better, doesn't it? Maybe that's why we listen to critics, because they can see things we can't.

If you've ever read a book and had an opinion on it, you're a book critic. From some reason, most human beings can't help but make critical judgments about the books they read. But what kind of judgments can a book critic make? And how do critics go about making them?

Questions: The Critic's Best Friend

When I was in college, my favorite teacher was Dr. Anthony Canedo. He was also my favorite book critic because he always seemed to have an answer for the really hard questions in the hardest books he made us read.

One day I asked him, "Dr. Canedo, how do you always know the answers?" He looked at me and smiled, "I ask the right questions." And then he winked at me, patted me on the shoulder, and went back to his office.

What I learned from Dr. Canedo is that there are many ways of looking at a text and that for each of those ways, certain questions occur that if answered provide great insight.

To help you find those answers, I came up with *The Five Big Questions:*

- **Big Question #1: What makes this book good?** I think critics have a responsibility to add value to our experience of a book. And I think they can add more value when, as the old song says, they accentuate the positive.

- **Big Question #2: What would make this book better?** As a critic, it's important to be honest. And honestly, some parts of some books are pretty bad. Like the impartial umpire behind the plate, you gotta call'em as you see'em when you're a critic. If you don't, people won't trust your opinions and you'll lose your influence.

- **Big Question #3: What's the one most important thing the author wants you to know?** This is the main idea. It's almost as though you could squeeze a whole book down to a single sentence and say that's what it was all about.

- **Big Question #4: Why did the writer write this?** Why did the author bother to tell this story? What is it about this particular story that the author thought was so important?

- **Big Question #5: What does the audience need to know to understand and enjoy the book?** Sometimes, the critic's job is to unlock a mystery within a book by supplying an extra piece of information most readers don't see. This is, in my opinion, what critics do best, and why they are so essential to our appreciation of art and of the world.

Getting Started

The best way to learn how to use *The Five Big Questions* is to ask them of yourself and the pieces you write. Some of the questions, like questions 3 and 4, will be easier to answer for your own pieces than for the work of other writers. But questions 1, 2, and 5 will probably harder.

What Do Book Critics Do?

In the previous article, you discovered you were a book critic and that you've been one ever since that first night when your mom held you in her lap and read you a story. At that fateful first reading, you started forming opinions. And though you may have been able to express them with only a sigh or a smile or sniffle, you expressed them nonetheless, and nobody said you couldn't.

As all critics know, everyone has a right to my opinion. Oops. I mean everyone has a right to their own opinion. There, that's better. Take my advice: I'm not using it. Whoops! There I go again.

What's going on? Perhaps, now that I know that I'm a critic, I feel that I can say anything I want, that my status as a critic places me above such mundane requirements as truth or accuracy or fairness. But is that right? Can a critic really say anything he wants?

Yes. But that doesn't mean he should.

Being a critic is serious business and you owe it yourself and to your readers to take it seriously. People will be listening to you — you will have influence, remember? If what you say about a book is petulant and mean-spirited, you will be inciting others to respond in like fashion. Be aware that what you put out into the world often comes back around in strange and unpredictable ways.

This doesn't mean you can't say something bad about a book. But when you do, make sure you have good reasons and plenty of support from the text. It simply will not do to bandy about scurrilous innuendo as though your commentary was just so much static on the radio station of reading response wafting harmlessly out into the ether. Your position as a critic confers upon you a certain status, and with that status comes a certain responsibility.

What do book critics do? They serve their readers and the world by responding responsibly and constructively to great books.

The Cornerstones of Criticism

As I said a moment ago, there are no rules for critics; they can say anything they want. And yet, over the years, a kind of informal agreement has been struck among them that, for the most part, they will focus their exegetical energies on four things: value, quality, tradition, and meaning.

Value

In order for someone to read a book, they have to believe that it holds some value for them. Reading is hard. It takes time, effort, and energy. Even when we read just for fun, we're still hoping to get the value of an entertaining experience.

First and foremost, critics attempt to assess the value of a book to its readers. They ask questions like: Why did the author write this? Why should people read it? What will readers get out of it? How might it make a difference in people's lives?

Quality

To determine a book's value, critics must consider its quality. Is it well written? Is the writer's style inviting and engaging? Has the writer used specific techniques that are unusually effective?

When critics consider the quality of a book, they know that they do so subjectively. As the old saying goes, "One man's trash is another man's treasure." So, when you talk about quality, it's important to let your readers know what quality means to you. This will help them understand you by giving them a basis for evaluating your remarks.

Tradition

Every book is part of a tradition as neither reader nor writer can fully separate himself from all that has come before. Critics explore tradition in many ways. Some make comparisons between books of different eras, others attempt to identify the tradition itself.

Meaning

The purpose of reading, of course, is to gain meaning from text. So that's where our critical journey ends. Words and ideas can be tricky things; they don't always mean what they say. Critics try to sort this out.

To find meaning, critics process a text through their own life experience and their emotions. Understanding how a book might relate to or shed light upon a particular human issue is very important but understanding the emotional impact of a book is even moreso. Without emotions, life is meaningless, and so are books.

Getting Started

Behind every review there is a reviewer and every reviewer has opinions. What are your opinions about the book you are reading right now? Write down as many of them as you can identify. Don't fuss about things. Just write as fast you can.

What's a Book Review?

Let's get one thing clear right off the bat: a book review is not a book report. A book review is a real form of writing real writers use to write real things about real books that really matter to them. A book report is a made up form of writing, used only in school that some teachers ask kids to write in order to prove that they have read a particular book. A book report most often involves reciting information from a text and answering someone else's questions about it. A book review most often involves creating new and original information about a text and answering one's own questions about it.

Book reviews can contain just about any type of information related to the text, to the reader, or to the world of books and readers in general. Here are some typical things book reviews include:

- **An interesting lead.** Reviewers will often start out their reviews with some kind of catchy phrase that glosses something interesting from the book.

- **A brief plot summary.** Reviewers don't retell the story. They just give you a quick summary of the plot, rarely more than a paragraph or two.

- **The reviewer's favorite part.** Assuming the book was enjoyable to the reviewer, it's always fun to talk about one's favorite part and what makes it special.

- **The reviewer's interpretation of the main idea.** This is the one most important thing the writer wants the reader to know. Most reviewers will address this directly because it is often the key to understanding what the book is really all about.

- **An evaluation.** In most book reviews, reviewers will come right out and say whether they think the books is good or not, or what parts were better than others.

- **A recommendation.** Since one of the purposes of writing book reviews is to get other readers to read certain books, book reviewers often end their reviews with a recommendation.

A Model Review

Here's a terrific book review of, from a talented 3rd grade writer, of "Ramona Quimby, Age 8" by Beverly Cleary:

"Ramona Quimby, Age 8" by Beverly Cleary

Touch of the flu? Egg in her hair? Poor Ramona!

"Ramona Quimby, Age 8" is a nine chapter, one hundred and ninety page book about an eight year old girl in third grade. She started school with a surprise gift from her dad, only to have it stolen by a boy she called "Yard Ape." One day at lunch she tried to be cool and show off for her friends by cracking an egg on her head and found herself in a big mess. When flu season hit she learned how awful it felt to throw up in class. She and her sister learn about using good manners at the dinner table. As

time goes on, Ramona and her family solve their problems, and learn to be more caring for each other. They also learn to be more considerate for each other when time alone is needed.

My favorite part was during a scene where Ramona's class is at lunch:

> "She took a firm hold on her egg, waited until everyone at her table was watching, and whack—she found herself with a hand full of crumbled shell and something cool and slimy running down her face." (*Ramona Quimby, Age 8*, Beverly Cleary, p. 60)

I thought that was funny because she wanted to be cool like the rest of her class, by breaking a hard boiled egg on her head. But guess what, her mother was in such a hurry she gave Ramona a raw egg! Whoops!

I think the one thing the author wants me to know is that when my family may be having problems I can be of help by obeying them and not fussing, disturbing, and/or annoying them.

"Ramona Quimby, Age 8" is one of the best Beverly Cleary books I've ever read because it pulled me in better than any other book in her series. (I have read 6 of her books.) It made pictures in my mind (Word Choice) and sounded like a real person wrote it (Voice). It also sounded good as I read it, flowed easily from sentence to sentence (Sentence Fluency), and sounded like a real 8 year old girl's life. These traits made me want to keep on reading until the end of the book.

I recommend this book to good readers who enjoy good long lasting chapters.

Getting Started

The site I go to most frequently for book reviews is Amazon. Make a list of several books that you have read recently, ones that you liked. Then, head over to www.amazon.com, pull those titles up, and check out all the book reviews. Some of the most popular books have been reviewed hundreds of times by readers just like you.

The Five Facts of Fiction

Book reviewers can review books of any genre, but most review fiction most of the time. There are many ways of looking at a work of fiction and good reviewers know them all. One tool that I use is called *The Five Facts of Fiction.* It's a set of five ideas that, when applied to any novel, help the reviewer develop a complex critical interpretation.

- **Fact #1: Fiction is all about a character.** Who is your main character? What does he or she look like? Can you describe your character's personality? How did this character get to be this way? The more you know about your character, the better your review will be.

- **Fact #2: Fiction is all about what your character wants.** What does your character want more than anything else? Why does your character want it? Some characters want a lot, some want a little. It doesn't really matter as long as long what your character wants is extremely important. The more important it is, the more your character will do to get it, and that's what makes the plot so interesting.

- **Fact #3: Fiction is all about how your character gets or does not get what he or she wants.** Is your character successful? Or does your character's quest end in failure? Either way, it can still be a great story. The trick is to understand how your character succeeds or

fails. What obstacles does your character encounter? What solutions does your character craft to meet the challenges of his or her world?

- **Fact #4: Fiction is all about how your character changes.** How does your character change as a result of what happens? What was your character like at the beginning? What is your character like at the end? What has your character learned? What did you learn from reading the story?

- **Fact #5: Fiction is all about a world an author creates.** How did the author create the world of the book? What kinds of people, places, things, and ideas did the author include? What successes, disasters, and conflicts does this world have? What are the good things in this world? What are the bad things? Complete the following sentence: "This is a world where…" Remember: the story is made up, but it is also true to its world.

The Five Facts of Harry Potter

Let's see how one of the world's most popular stories — *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J. K. Rowling — holds up to an analysis using the Five Facts of Fiction.

- **Fact #1: Fiction is all about character.** Harry Potter: 12 years old, black tousled hair, bright green eyes, glasses, lightning-shaped scar on his forehead. Naïve, kind, compassionate, curious. He is famous

in the wizard world because, as an infant, he somehow survived an attack by Voldemort, the world's most powerful evil wizard.

- **Fact #2: Fiction is all about what your character wants.** Harry wants a family. Orphaned as an infant when his parents are killed by Voldemort, he is sent to live with his abusive uncle and aunt, Petunia and Vernon Dursley, and their obnoxious son, Dudley.

- **Fact #3: Fiction is all about how your character gets or does not get what he or she wants.** During his first year at Hogwarts, Harry forms sibling-like bonds with Hermione Granger and the Weasley brothers. Hagrid, the school groundskeeper, is like an uncle or a big brother to Harry. Dumbledore takes on a fatherly role. Together, these people become the family Harry lost.

- **Fact #4: Fiction is all about how your character changes.** In the beginning, Harry is shy, sullen, and scared, a miserable and hopeless victim of his unfortunate circumstances. At the end, Harry is no longer helpless, hopeless, and hapless. In his year at Hogwarts he has gained tremendous self-confidence and a better understanding of who he is and what his life is all about. The lesson of the story is this: If we're lucky enough to find out who we really are, and if we have the courage to claim our true power and embrace our destiny, we can take control of our world instead of letting it take control of us.

- **Fact #5: Fiction is all about a world an author creates.** This is a world where there's always some supernatural something or magical someone around to save the right people when they are in trouble.

It's a world where courage is rewarded, friendship is valued, and good triumphs over evil. Harry lives his life stretched between the ordinary world of ordinary humans — or "muggles" as they are derisively called — and the extraordinary world of wizards and magic. Each world has its challenges and rewards for Harry as he struggles to find safety, happiness, and a sense of belonging in both.

Getting Started

Pick any novel you've read all the way through and still remember well. You can even use a movie if you want. Run it through the Five Facts of Fiction and see how your story holds up. You'll be surprised by what you learn and how easy it is to develop a complex critical interpretation when you use this tool.

How to Read a Book and Why

If you go to college, and if you become an English major, and if, as I did, you become fascinated with the world of literary criticism, you will probably run across a famous book called “How to Read and Why” by a famous critic named Harold Bloom. In this book, Mr. Bloom shares his insights into some of the greatest books ever written and tries to convince us that our own insights into books like these are well worth the effort we must expend to discover them.

(Another book on the same subject, and with a similar title, is "How to Read a Book" by famous critic and quiz show scandal participant Charles Van Doren and Mortimer Adler. Technically, it doesn't cover the "why" of reading as Bloom attempts to do, but for my money, it's a lot easier to understand and more relevant for school work.)

I’m not nearly as famous as Mr. Bloom, and I haven’t written any famous books on literary criticism, but I have my own version of “How to Read and Why” and you’re about to hear it.

First, the “How” Part

Your mind is very active while you process text. You may think you’re just saying words to yourself and hearing them somewhere inside your head, but chances are there’s more going on. Becoming aware of what your mind is doing when you read helps you become a better reader.

Nobody knows what goes on in the minds of readers as they read. And there's no way to tell. So, we have to make up a theory about it. In my theory, there are two different ways to read:

1. **Reading like a reader.** We might think of this as the "normal" way of reading where we try to figure out what a piece of writing means by understanding the words a writer uses.

2. **Reading like a writer.** When we read from the perspective of a writer, we focus less on what the writer is saying and more on how the writer is saying it.

When we read actively, we don't just wait for the meaning to come to us, we go after it — consciously, aggressively. We look deeply into the text, hunting in certain ways, searching for certain clues about what the writer is saying to us. It's as if we start a conversation between the writer, the writing, and ourselves.

Why Read?

To be completely honest, reading can seem rather dull to the average kid compared with playing Nintendo or sports, riding bikes, hanging out with friends, or – and this is the one we adults worry about most – watching television. So why bother?

Oh yeah, sure, you're gonna grow up and have a job some day where you'll need to read but isn't that the kind of tired excuse you never believe

anyway, the kind adults give when they just want you to do something to make their lives easier?

As I see it, there are only two real reasons why anyone would want to read: power and pleasure.

Reading is Power

Reading is the quickest, most flexible way of acquiring knowledge on our own. And, as everyone knows, knowledge is power.

If you don't think reading is connected to power, think again: How many world leaders, CEOs, stock brokers, venture capitalists, scientists, policemen, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Supreme Court Justices, international diplomats, and other powerful people do you think can't read?

I suppose it's possible, through professional sports perhaps (but probably not even here anymore), that a person could grow up to be successful and powerful without reading, but unless you can tee it up like Tiger, take it to the hole like Shaq, or hit homeruns like Mark McGwire, you'd better hit the books.

Reading is Pleasure

Everyone is interested in something and everything anyone could be interested in has been written down somewhere. All you have to do is find

it. Most kids who are turned off to reading get turned off in school because teachers make them read things they're not interested in. Don't let this happen to you. Respect the wishes of responsible adults but don't let their choices determine your enjoyment.

Still Not Convinced?

Why read? Because when you do it well it helps you get the things you want. When you choose your own texts, and read the things you like, it can even be fun – not as much fun, I'll grant you, as playing Nintendo or sports, riding bikes, hanging out with friends, or watching television, but it runs a close sixth, and hey, that's not too shabby for something you do in school, right?

Getting Started

I listed two things – power and pleasure – that I think make reading worthwhile. What do you think? Why do people read? Why do you read? What makes reading worth all the time and effort? Why do people go crazy for Oprah's Book Club? Why do so many people in our country feel that reading is essential to the welfare of our democracy and the health of our nation?

Read Like a Reader

We might think of this as the normal way of reading where we try to figure out what a piece of writing means by understanding the words a writer writes. Sounds simple enough. But even this normal way is more complicated than it seems.

When you read like a reader you usually do one or more of the following six things:

1. **Question.** Readers ask good questions about the things they read: Why is something happening? Or not happening? Why is a character feeling or acting a certain ways? Why did the author use a particular word? And so on. Questions help readers clarify their understanding.

2. **Predict.** No reader, it seems, can resist thinking about what a writer is going to write next. Predicting helps readers sort out important information from unimportant information. It also helps them organize their thinking as they encounter new material.

3. **Infer.** Readers figure out things that aren't actually written in the text. There's almost always more to a text than just the words on the page. Often, writers leave "clues" that good readers can use to discover important information.

4. **Connect.** We can't help but be reminded of our own lives as we read. We're also reminded of similar things we've read in other texts and other parts of the same text.

5. **Feel.** Readers have feelings while they read. Sometimes, it seems like we have a direct connection to what we're reading: sad parts make us feel sad, happy parts make us feel happy, scary parts scare us, and so on. But often, the feelings we have are more subtle. Much of the meaning we get from a text comes from the emotions we feel when read it.

6. **Evaluate.** Readers make judgments while they read: Is this good? If so, what's good about it? Do I like it? Why? Should I keep reading or should I put this down and get something else? The evaluations they make help them decide whether or not what they are reading is valuable.

Reading Like a Reader

Here's what was on my mind as I read like a reader through the first paragraph of a short story called *Eddie Takes Off*:

> Eddie had always been able to fly, but it wasn't until his fifth birthday party that he realized that it would turn out to be a bit of a social problem. Until that embarrassing day on the Johnsons' lawn, Eddie's parents had treated his airborne peculiarity as something of a childish whim. "Boy's gotta stretch out, learn what he can do,"

said his father. "I just worry that he'll hurt himself, you know, bump into the ceiling or get his eye poked out by a bird, I don't know..." said his mother. For the young Eddie, flying was just another discovery about his developing body, like learning that he could reach out his arm and ring the bell on his cradle railing, or finding that he loved the taste of peas. The first time his parents came into the nursery and found Eddie hovering a foot or two off the floor it came as a bit of a shock. But, after all, parents are forever discovering special little things about their children. Eddie's mother thought that perhaps they should take their son to see a specialist, but his father vetoed the idea. "It's not like anything's wrong with him, and I don't want him getting a complex about it."

— From *Eddie Takes Off* by Ben Hippen

Question: Is this a fantasy story where people have special powers? Or is the author using the idea of flying to stand for something else?

Predict: I think Eddie's flying is going to get him in trouble.

Infer: Eddie's parents seem strange. I think the author is trying to tell us that they may not be very smart or very sensitive.

Connect: This reminds me of Harry Potter where a boy has special powers. But it also makes me think of other kids I have seen who may be different.

Feel: I feel sorry for Eddie. I think he's going to be lonely because people aren't going to understand him.

Evaluate: The beginning is good. I'm curious about Eddie and his flying and I like author's entertaining and funny style.

Getting Started

The beginning of a text is always a great place to take time for a close reading. Take the opening page of any novel you're interested in and read it like a reader. Respond to the text just like I responded to *Eddie Takes Off* by making a few comments for each of the six activities.

Read Like a Writer

Because we are writers ourselves, we pay close attention to the techniques we discover in the writing we read. I call this "reading like a writer." When we read like this, there are six things we pay attention to:

1. **Ideas.** Ideas are the heart of the piece — what the writer is writing about and what the writer chooses to reveal about it. How does the writer reveal the main idea? What types of details does the writer use? How does the writer achieve his or her purpose?

2. **Organization.** Organization refers to the order of ideas and the way the writer moves from one to the next. What kinds of leads does the writer use, and how do they pull us in and make us want to read more? What kinds of endings does the writer use and how do they work to make the writing feel finished and to give us something important to think about? How does the writer handle transitions? How does the writer control pacing?

3. **Voice.** Voice is the expression of the writer's individual personality through words. How does the writer demonstrate passion for the topic? How does the writer reveal emotions? How does the writer put personality into the piece?

4. **Word Choice.** Word Choice refers to writer's selection of particular words and phrases to express ideas. What techniques (simile,

metaphor, strong verbs, etc.) does the writer use to make the word choice more specific, more memorable, and more effective?

5. **Sentence Fluency.** Sentence Fluency is the rhythm and flow of the language as we read it aloud. What kinds of sentence constructions does the writer use? How does the writer vary the beginnings and lengths of sentences? How does the writer use "sound" effects like alliteration, rhyme, and rhythm?

6. **Conventions.** Conventions are the ways we agree to use punctuation, spelling, grammar, and other things that make writing consistent and easy to read. How does the writer use conventions to make the writing easy to read and more meaningful? Does the author use conventions in unusual ways that are successful?

Reading Like a Writer

Here's my writerly reading of the first paragraph of a short story called *Eddie Takes Off:*

> Eddie had always been able to fly, but it wasn't until his fifth birthday party that he realized that it would turn out to be a bit of a social problem. Until that embarrassing day on the Johnsons' lawn, Eddie's parents had treated his airborne peculiarity as something of a childish whim. "Boy's gotta stretch out, learn what he can do," said his father. "I just worry that he'll hurt himself, you know,

bump into the ceiling or get his eye poked out by a bird, I don't know..." said his mother. For the young Eddie, flying was just another discovery about his developing body, like learning that he could reach out his arm and ring the bell on his cradle railing, or finding that he loved the taste of peas. The first time his parents came into the nursery and found Eddie hovering a foot or two off the floor it came as a bit of a shock. But, after all, parents are forever discovering special little things about their children. Eddie's mother thought that perhaps they should take their son to see a specialist, but his father vetoed the idea. "It's not like anything's wrong with him, and I don't want him getting a complex about it."

— From *Eddie Takes Off* by Ben Hippen

1. **Ideas.** A flying baby boy in an otherwise realistic setting is a curious and compelling idea.

2. **Organization.** The opening line makes me want to find out more about Eddie's flying ability and the embarrassing incident on his fifth birthday.

3. **Voice.** The author's voice is light-hearted and playful, just as one might imagine a flying baby boy to be.

4. **Word Choice.** The phrase "airborne peculiarity" seems like the perfect way to describe Eddie's unique talent as viewed by his parents -- as though it were something just slightly odd or mildly eccentric.

5. **Sentence Fluency.** The balance of the two quotes works nicely. And the last sentence, laid out in four pieces, with just a little bit of alliteration near the end, sounds smooth and satisfying.

6. **Conventions.** The use of the ellipsis at the end of the mother's comment makes her seem even more vague than her clichéd words imply.

Getting Started

The beginning of a text is always a great place to take time for a close reading. Take the opening page of any novel you're interested in and read it like a writer. Respond to the text just like I responded to *Eddie Takes Off* by making a few comments for each of the six activities.

Comprehending Comprehension

When I was in school, I thought reading comprehension was being able to answer questions in a workbook or on a test. Even today, 30 years later, I still see kids filling out dittos, working through workbooks, and answering questions on tests after they finish a book or a chapter.

But isn't this silly?

Do your parents answer questions in a workbook after reading an article in the newspaper? Do you see people filling out dittos in the doctor's office after they read a magazine? When you go to the library and see people reading books of all kinds, do you also see them carrying around number two pencils so they can fill in the bubbles on a multiple choice test? Did your copy of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* come with a vocabulary test after each chapter?

I think not!

The purpose of reading is to extract meaning from text. This is reading comprehension. Answering questions in dittos and workbooks, or filling out multiple choice tests, has little or nothing to do with it.

According to Dictionary.com, to comprehend something is to "grasp the meaning, nature, or importance" of it.

I don't want to throw out comprehension questioning, just traditional comprehension questions. How about trying questions like these instead the next time you read a passage that seems difficult to understand:

- **What is its meaning?** Can you explain it? Does it make sense? Is there more to understand here than simply the words on the page? Sometimes words mean exactly what they say, sometimes they mean something else.

- **What is its nature?** How does the text work to produce meaning? How did you figure it out? Why do you think it means what it means? Sometimes we know exactly how a text works. At other times, we only have a hunch.

- **What is its importance?** What value does it have? How can it be used? How does it relate to other parts of the text and to the text as a whole? Some parts are more important than others. These are the parts that are worth spending time on.

From Comprehension to Comprehending

Even with a definition to work with, comprehension is a tough thing to define in a practical way that we can apply in our own reading. There's also some disagreement among experts about what comprehension really looks like. So rather than focusing on comprehension as a product of reading, I like to look at comprehending as a process of reading.

To give kids a sense of the experience of comprehending in an explicit way, I use a strategy called Say-Think-Feel-Mean. I ask kids to find a short passage that they really like a lot and then I take them through this process:

- **Say.** What does it say? What are the words in the passage? Try to read every one of them as accurately as possible. One of the biggest problems young readers have is frequent misreading. Don't be afraid to read a difficult passage several times.

- **Think.** What does it make you think about? Some of your thoughts will be directly related to the text. Others will come from your life or from other books you've read. All are helpful as long we know which are which and where they all come from. A problem some readers have is confusing something from the text with something from their lives or from another book.

- **Feel.** How do you feel? The emotional content of a passage is one of the best clues to its meaning. This may not be obvious to every reader in every situation. Another thing to watch for is when the feelings in a text are implied rather than being literally stated**.**

- **Mean.** What does it mean? This is, of course, open to endless speculation. However, for the sake of practicality, you can imagine that a text can have meaning in three different ways: (1) It means exactly what it says — literal; (2) It's an example of something — implied or figurative; (3) It's the opposite of what it says — irony.

Say-Think-Feel-Mean is a close approximation of what successful readers do when faced with extremely challenging texts. Even when we don't understand every word, or the ideas seem too complex, we can still muddle through and extract useful information if we engage actively in comprehending.

Getting Started

How do you comprehend? What set of steps to do you go through to make sense of a text? Is it the same set of steps every time or does it change? Share your process of comprehending with another reader and compare it with what he or she does.

Expression Equals Comprehension

Three years ago, I was working in a classroom filled with kids who could read any word in any book with speed and confidence. Many of them could read out loud over 200 words per minute. But they didn't understand a thing. The only idea I had was to slow them down and get them to put some feeling into their reading. So we started working on expression.

The results were incredible. Their comprehension improved dramatically and they started to enjoy reading more as well. This experience put me on to a powerful personal discovery about reading: the strong connection between expression and comprehension.

To express a text well, to read it with feeling that matches what it means, is one of the best ways to understand it. In order to match the proper expression to each word or phrase, you have to understand both the meaning of the words and the grammar of each sentence. Expression is such a powerful comprehension strategy because it instantly increases your access to meaning as you read.

Daily practice in expressive reading is now a regular part of my reading instruction. I like the kids to give readings frequently based on their favorite passages in books of their choice. I also like to do reader's theater activities because acting out texts seems to heighten the use of expression even more.

I once asked a drama teacher who also taught reading what he thought the connection was between expression in drama and understanding a text. He put it this way: "Actors put so much effort into choosing just the right expression because they have only one chance to deliver a line and they need to be sure the audience will understand it perfectly." This rings true for me. It also reminds me that if I want to be 100% certain that I'm understanding what I read, I may need to slow down, and perhaps re-read a particular passage, in order to get the expression just right.

Explicit Training in Expressive Reading

I teach expressive reading just like I teach everything else: by giving students authentic strategies they can use to achieve the best results. Over the last few years, I have identified about 20 different expressive reading strategies, but here's a useful subset that gets most of the job done.

- **Go Slow.** To increase expression, most readers have to lower their speed. If you feel like you're going a bit too slow, you're probably doing just fine. It feels a bit strange at first, but you'll get used to it with practice.

- **Repeat Till It's Complete.** If you mess up, don't go on, go back and repeat the sentence from the very beginning. If you keep messing up, take a moment to practice the word or phrase you're having trouble with, then try again.

- **Sentence High and Low.** Start a bit higher in pitch at the beginning of a sentence then, as you approach the end, gradually lower the pitch of your voice.

- **Sentence Fast and Slow.** Start out at a good clip but taper off your speed just slightly as you near the end. This one should be very subtle, don't over do it.

- **Up at the End for a Question Mark.** The pitch of your voice should go up at the end of a question.

- **Straight Up for an Exclamation Mark.** Shoot your voice straight up in both pitch and volume if you see an exclamation mark.

- **Big Pause at a Period, Small Pause at a Comma.** Pay attention to punctuation. Treat colons, semi-colons, and dashes just like commas.

- **Character High, Narrator Low.** In passages that contain dialog, raise the pitch of your voice for spoken parts (the dialog), lower the pitch for attributions (the "He saids and She saids) and other text by the narrator.

- **Emphasize the Important Word.** Pick one key word in a sentence and call attention to it by raising the volume of your voice, changing tone, or stretching it out to make it last just a bit longer than normal. This strategy should also be used very subtly.

Moving Ahead to Advanced Expressive Reading

This is the set of strategies I use to get kids started with expressive reading. If I work on these for a while, maybe a week or two, until thekids really get them down, I usually see great improvement in expression and comprehension from virtually everyone. Once you get the hang of it, you'll be ready for more advanced techniques which I'll be covering next.

Getting Started

I introduce the strategies through choral reading practice. I make sure everyone has the same text, usually a work of fiction that I know most students can read fairly easily. Then I model the strategies one at a time and we all practice them together chorally until we're ready to try them individually.

How Do Expressive Readers Read?

When I was in school, most of us read like little robots, droning on one word after another. I don't know which was worse: reading out loud myself or having to listen to everyone else. I knew that expressive reading was what my teachers did when they read to us. But I didn't know how to do it myself because I didn't know the four things good readers do to express a text:

- **They change pitch.** Expressive readers make their voices go up and down. They go up at the beginning of a sentence and down at the end (up slightly if it ends with a question mark). They also go up and down to differentiate the words of a speaker (often high in pitch) from those of the narrator (usually lower). Changes in pitch often help readers understand where different ideas begin and end.

- **They change rhythm.** Expressive readers speed up and slow down when they read. They also take appropriate pauses—big ones at the end of a sentence, smaller ones in between, after commas, and also at logical points like phrase and clause boundaries. Changes in rhythm often help readers understand how small parts of sentences combine to create a complete thought.

- **They change volume.** Expressive readers say some words louder than others. In general, little words are said softer than more important words. Changes in volume are often used to create emphasis.

- **They change tone.** Sometimes readers use a soft, warm voice; sometimes their voice is cold and hard. They do this to communicate different feelings—soft and warm usually means nice, calm, or even sad; hard and cold can mean scary, angry, or excited.

Of course, some of the most interesting things happen when reader's break these rules in ways that add meaning to the text. By doing something different than what others may expect, in the context of doing other things more conventionally, a reader can give unusual emphasis to important parts when reading aloud.

A Little Grammar Goes a Long Way

Telling you about the four elements of expressive reading will help build your analytical skills and helps you assess your efforts as an expressive reader, but in order to be most effective, you need to understand the crucial connection between expression, meaning, and sentence structure. And this requires a slightly more technical approach that brings in a little grammar.

Take a look at this sentence:

> On a bright summer morning, Jeremy Goodfellow, a young man of simple means and honest intentions, left the quiet country town in which he'd been raised, and set off on the bold errand he'd been preparing for all his life.

You can see that it is made up of several parts. There are four kinds of sentence parts to watch for:

1. **Main Parts.** These parts usually contain the main action of the sentence: "Jeremy Goodfellow… left the quiet country town in which he'd been raised…."

2. **Lead-In Parts.** These parts often introduce a main part: "On a bright summer morning…"

3. **In-Between Parts.** As the name implies, these parts go in between other parts. They feel like a slight interruption: "…a young man of simple means and honest intentions…"

4. **Add-On Parts.** These are extra parts that convey additional information about any of the other parts: "…and set off on the bold errand he'd been preparing for all his life."

Experienced expressive readers change pitch when they change part. Main Parts should be spoken at a middle pitch level. Intro Parts are often read at a higher pitch level. In-between Parts are usually read at a level lower than the parts they are in between. And Add-On Parts should be spoken at a slightly lower level than the part they follow.

If this doesn't sound like the kind of grammar study you're used to, it's because I'm intentionally avoiding the terminology of traditional Latin grammar, the kind we study in school. Latin grammar is often meaningless to kids (at least it was to me) because it is often applied incorrectly to

English (Latin grammar works well for Latin but not so well for us). Over the years, I've had much better results using descriptive terms like "in-between parts" and "add-on parts" than I have using terms like "non-restrictive clause" and "summative modifier". Regardless of the terminology involved, you're still learning about the relationship between expression, meaning, and sentence structure, and that's what improves your reading.

Getting Started

Using the "sentence part" terminology introduced here, "diagram" a few sentences in a book you are reading. This isn't traditional sentence diagramming, of course, but it is useful in ways that traditional diagramming is not. For one thing, it's much easier to apply to original writing. With a little practice, you can easily to "lift" the patterns you find and insert your own ideas. This can have a dramatic effect on your sentence fluency when you write.

Phrase Craze

What are the units of meaning in a text, the "chunks of information" you encounter that are understandable to some degree all by themselves? From largest to smallest, here are some of the possibilities: a book, a chapter, a paragraph, a sentence, a phrase or clause, a word, a syllable, a phoneme, or a single letter.

Now, think about how you build comprehension as you read. What chunks are useful? Whole novels and whole chapters seem far too long. You have to identify significantly smaller chunks of text because your brain's capacity to retain language in short term memory is so limited, even most paragraphs are too long. Obviously, there's little meaning one can get from a single letter or phoneme; these are far too small.

Certainly, we can gain meaning from a sentence, but some are long or logically complex. Therefore, readers must do most of their processing at the phrase and clause level. And this is the key to using expressive reading to help you understand more of what you read.

Real-time comprehension, the kind most readers rely on for most of their reading, is accomplished by figuring out phrase- and clause-size chunks. Without fast and accurate reading of phrases and clauses, you miss the meanings of the sentences that contain them and you begin to lose the thread of your understanding.

On a literal level, the act of reading is a process of "decoding and recoding." First, individual words are decoded and then, just a few milliseconds later, the brain "recodes" this data into a larger chunk of information that is more meaningful.

Readers have to constantly split text into chunks that are optimized for immediate understanding. By learning how to read expressively in a way that improves your ability to quickly and accurately identify these chunks, you can dramatically affect your comprehension, improve your fluency, and increase your reading rate as well.

Phrase Breaking: The Ultimate Comprehension Tool

I have found that the single most effective strategy for improving comprehension is something I call "phrase breaking." Take a look at this short passage:

> The bus lurched along the switch-backed mountain road, throwing Keith against the window at every turn. They had left the village at 5:30 that morning after standing in the dark predawn chill for an hour and he was thoroughly exhausted. It was now midmorning, and the African sun was getting hot. Keith was already drenched in sweat, tormented by the fact that he couldn't get any fresh air. Several times he tried opening the window next to his seat a few inches, only to draw protests from his fellow passengers.
>
> —from *A Roadside Understanding* by Ben Hippen

Now, imagine that it was being read like this:

The bus
lurched along
the switch-backed mountain road,
throwing Keith against the window
at every turn.
They had left the village
at 5:30 that morning
after standing
in the dark predawn chill
for an hour
and he was thoroughly exhausted.
It was now midmorning,
and the African sun
was getting hot.
Keith was already drenched in sweat,
tormented by the fact
that he couldn't get any fresh air.

When you break the text into small, meaningful chunks, your comprehension, fluency, and reading rate all improve. The key here is to read the writing the way it was written. Writers fuss over their sentences, phrase by phrase, until everything is just perfect, One aspect of this perfection is that every sentence should be easy to read and understand regardless of how complex it is.

Secrets of Phrase Breaking Revealed

Breaking phrases like this may seem foreign to most readers, but actually it's a normal thing we do all the time — just not always when we read from a book. Take a look at this well-known text:

> I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands...

But we don't read it that way, we read it like this:

> I pledge allegiance
> to the flag
> of the United States of America
> and to the republic
> for which it stands
> ...

Notice that when we read "The Pledge of Allegiance" in the normal way, we naturally do the phrase breaking. In fact, not doing the phrase breaking doesn't sound right at all. So how do we do it?

- **Tuck the little words into the bigger ones.** Notice that each phrase starts with a "little" word ("I", "to", "of", "and", "for"). These kinds of words often signal the beginnings of phrases. Larger words often come at the end ("allegiance", "flag", "America", "republic", "stands").

- **Break phrases into groups of three to six words.** Occasionally, you'll break for a one- or two-word phrase, and once in a while you have to go to seven or even eight. But even these longer phrases can be broken down into shorter ones. In general, a "phrase" as I'm using the term here is a very short group of words.

- **Pause slightly between phrases regardless of other punctuation.** Everybody knows to pause when we see punctuation, but most people don't know that they should also pause just slightly when come to the end of a phrase. After all, putting a slight break between phrases is the whole idea.

Why is Phrase Breaking so Important?

Phrase breaking seems a little tedious especially when you're just starting. Why is it worth the trouble?

- **It matches the way the English language works.** The grammar of English — the rules by which sensible sentences are constructed — is called a "phrase structure" grammar. This means that sentences are made out of groups of words and not just single words. As I said at the beginning of this article, phrases are the smallest, most meaningful units in a text.

- **It matches the way our eyes scan text.** In a normal size book with normal size print, our eyes don't read one word at a time. But they don't read a line at a time or a sentence at a time either. Most readers

scan a line of text in three to four "chunks" depending on the line length. Because most books are typeset with 10-15 words per line, this means that our eyes see three to five words each time they move along a line from left to right. Not coincidentally, this is the size of the average phrase.

- **It matches the way we speak and listen.** Listen to a great speech and you'll hear some great phrase breaking. Why do speakers take such great pains to break their phrases so perfectly? Because they want to be absolutely sure their listeners understand every word.

Even though it may not seem normal at first, rest assured that phrase breaking is the natural way to read. It's natural to your eyes, your ears, and your brain. And this is what makes it the natural choice for readers who want to improve their understanding of what they read.

When Should You Use Phrase Breaking?

If you read well, or if a text is very easy for you, you probably phrase break without even knowing it. It is, after all, the normal, natural way to read. But there may be occasions when you want to "switch it on" and be more conscious about it:

- **When you're having trouble decoding words.** Stumbling over a word will hinder your fluency by interrupting the normal rhythm and flow of your reading. What you end up with are "false phrase

breaks" right before big words. As I noted from "The Pledge of Allegiance" example, this is the opposite of what you want.

- **When you're having trouble with new vocabulary.** I'm not talking here about having troubles decoding new words, I'm talking about not knowing what they mean. Many readers skip over unknown words. Not only does this rob them of the chance to figure out what they mean, it messes up their phrase breaking causing their comprehension to break down even more.

- **When you need very detailed comprehension.** If you're reading something complicated and you need to be 100% certain about what it means, careful phrase breaking is the most effective way to reach your goal.

- **When you're reading above your reading level.** Want to read a book that you know is too hard for you? No problem. Just make sure you do your phrase breaking. In fact, conscious phrase breaking in a text that is just above your independent level is probably the fastest way to become a better reader.

Is it a Phrase or a Clause?

While there is a difference between a phrase and a clause (a clause includes a verb, a phrase doesn't), this distinction is generally not meaningful to most readers and not very useful in teaching reading. For the purpose of comprehension instruction, I call every meaningful group of words a

"phrase." It just makes the teaching and learning easier for everyone to deal with.

Getting Started

I like to practice phrase breaking chorally by taking a short passage, putting it on an overhead, and marking in the phrase boundaries with a colored pen. I try to show kids different ways to phrase the same sentences so they know there are many different choices. In general, the more difficult the text, the shorter your phrases should be.

The Plot Thickens

When you sit down to write a book review, you never know whether your readers have read the book you are reviewing. In fact, one of the main reasons people read reviews is exactly because they haven't a read a particular book -- they want to know what someone else thinks about it first.

Because of this reality, almost every book review contains some kind of information about the plot usually in the form of a plot summary. But how long should your summary be? And how should you go about writing it?

A summary is a brief retelling of a longer text. The average adult novel is 100,000 words. So how long should a summary be? 50,000 words? 10,000 words? 5,000? 500? How about 50? Here are three important things to consider:

- **Hit the highlights.** Only include the most important aspects of your book in your summary. Don't worry about all the little things that happen.

- **Support your important points.** What you decide to include in your plot summary should be determined primarily by which parts of the book you plan to comment on in your review and the arguments you plan to make about them.

- **Don't spoil it.** Don't tell your readers anything about the book that might spoil it for them. After all, the purpose of writing a review is to help readers decided which books they might want to read — not to do the reading for them!

For some reason I've never quite figured out, young readers like to do long plot summaries — very long plot summaries. It seems like they want to keep adding more details until their summaries are so fat and thick I feel like the kids I'm working with want to rewrite the entire novel for me. This is not necessary. If I'm that interested in the book, I'll read it myself, thank you very much. So, as a rule of thumb, I suggest to students that no more than 25% of a review be devoted to the plot. Keep your plot summaries clean and lean. Don't let them swell to gargantuan proportions and take over your entire review.

Summarizing Strategies

There are many ways to summarize a book. But here are two that seem to work well.

1. **The One Paragraph Wrap-Up.** This one is just what it says it is: a quick overview of the entire book in a single paragraph. This is my personal favorite as it leaves the rest of your review for comments and insights -- the stuff review readers want to know most. Below is a summary of Beverly Cleary's *Ramona Quimby, Age 8.*

Ramona Quimby, Age 8 is about a girl in third grade. She started school with a surprise gift from her dad, only to have it stolen by a boy she called "Yard Ape." One day at lunch she tried to be cool and show off for her friends by cracking an egg on her head and found herself in a big mess. When flu season hit she learned how awful it felt to throw up in class. As time goes on, Ramona and her family solve their problems, and learn to be more caring for each other. They also learn to be more considerate for each other when time alone is needed.

2. **The Teaser.** In this approach, the reviewer draws you into the story and then leaves you wondering about the end. Below is a summary of two very similar books ("The Golden Touch" and "The Chocolate Touch") a reviewer was reviewing in what I like to call a "double book" review.

These two books are about some greedy people. One is a boy named John Midas, the other is a man named King Midas. John LOVES chocolate. I mean absolutely LOVES chocolate. And the king was filthy rich with gold. One day they each got a taste of there own medicine because they were so greedy.

John was on his way to a friend's house when he decided to take a different route. He ran into a candy story and that's where his chocolate touch began. Whatever he put into his mouth it turned to chocolate. And the king? Well, Midas was sitting in his treasure room dreaming about all his gold when he looked up and saw a stranger standing next to him. And that's where his golden touch began.

They liked their touch… for a while. But then one day, a terrible thing happened. Now you read the rest of these books to find out what those terrible things were.

Getting Started

A great way to teach yourself how to summarize a novel is to tell someone about it out loud. Give yourself a short time limit, like a minute, and force yourself to cover the entire book in that short time. You'll naturally create a summary that works. Then, just write it all down.

The Beginning of Interpretation

In my time as an English major in college, one of the most exciting classes I ever attended involved a brief but fascinating introduction to literary interpretation – the art of discovering and discussing the meaning of a text from a reader's point of view. In a single class period, the professor developed half a dozen completely different readings of the book we had just finished, each one based on a different set of beliefs. It was fascinating to see how one person could come up with wildly different understandings of the same text simply by looking at it from different perspectives.

The point of the lecture was that each interpretation was derived from a particular way of looking at the world and at human nature. In one short exercise, the professor showed us the essential truth of literary interpretation: How we read is who we are.

All readers filter what they read through their own world view, the set of beliefs a person holds about the nature of life as influenced by their personality and experience. Things that stand out for one reader may not register much for another. It is the elements of a story a reader finds most interesting that form the foundation of his or her interpretation.

Learning to interpret a text is not an easy task. But there is one way I can help you get started, a simple approach every reader can take regardless of age or ability. My favorite thing to do is to help readers explore their favorites, the things they like best about a particular book.

Focusing on the aspects of a book that seem most interesting to you, and trying to explain why these things are so important, provides the perfect starting point for discussions of theme and main idea, the key elements in every interpretation. Looking at your favorite part also helps you learn things about yourself and help you see that your opinions about a book are just as important anybody else's – even those of the author!

Playing Favorites

Once upon a time, I invited two classes of 5th graders, who had just finished *Holes* by Louis Sachar, to tell me what they liked best or thought was most important about the book. Specifically, I asked them "What do you dig about *Holes*?" Their responses were delightful, but more to the point, they revealed for me a bit of how each student read the book, what they cared about, and how those things might fit into their interpretation of what it was all about.

What Do You Dig About "Holes"?

"I dig the part when Zero told Stanley about his life as a little boy. His story was about his mom leaving him on a playground and never coming back. I felt sorry for Zero because I think he had to go through a rough situation." — Christina

"I dig it when Stanley is at the wrong place at the wrong time because of the curse, so the curse seems bad. But without it Stanley would never have

gone to Camp Green Lake, got in shape, met Zero, and found the treasure. What I'm trying to say is that bad things happen to people with or without a curse, but in Stanley's case, the curse was a blessing." — Michael

"I dig the idea of God helping Stanley and Zero survive after they leave Camp Green Lake. They find "sploosh" which keeps them alive. They see lightning which shows them how to get to God's Thumb. Once there, they find onions to eat and water to drink. I don't think they could have survived without God's help." — Justin

"I dig when Zero dug Stanley's hole. That was very generous of him. Zero did that for Stanley because Stanley was teaching him how to read. That's what friends are for." — Ben

"I dig *Holes* because it's about how believing in yourself can bring about great change. When Stanley is first sent to camp, he's a coward who has no faith in himself. At camp, he learns that he can do things on his own. He helps his peers and has enough faith to rescue his friend Zero. At the end he is self-confident. He has proven that when you believe in yourself, great things happen." — Mrs. Johanson

Getting Started

When I ask kids to tell me about their favorite aspects of a book, I make sure to ask them why something is so important to them. I also ask them to reflect on this based on their life experience, their likes and dislikes, and the things that matter most to them in life. If you do it this way, you'll find some interesting connections between who you are and how you read.

Character Matters

When you were a little kid, maybe three or four years old, and your parents were reading you stories, you probably couldn't help wanting to know what was going to happen next. If you're like most kids, in fact, it was this incredible sense of anticipation that got you hooked on reading in the first place.

Little kids always want to know what's going to happen next. And that's a perfectly appropriate way for them to begin their lives as critical readers. But as soon as they begin to read novels, around 3rd grade for most, a persistent focus on the the plot may cause some young readers to miss out on the meaning.

To improve your critical reading abilities, an important lesson you need to learn is that stories are less about what happens and more about who they happen to. The reason we can become so interested in fictional characters is because they aren't completely fictional. For a reader wrapped up in a story, they represent real people (sometimes ourselves) facing real problems in the real world. And this is exactly how you should try to experience them as you read.

Just like real human beings, characters are dealt a certain hand in life. Some hands are good ones, others aren't. How characters play out their hands determines their fate. It is the experience of that fate, as strongly as we can feel it, that we follow as we read.

Every main character is challenged in some way. One way of looking at this challenge is to see it as a situation in which a character's abilities and experience are insufficient to solve the problem at hand.

It is by engaging in these challenges, overcoming some, succumbing to others, that characters develop; they change as a result of what happens to them as they try to solve their problems and reach their goals. And it is this change, or set of changes, that often holds the key to unlocking a story's meaning.

Character Analysis

Because thinking about characters is so important, I like to give students a simple framework to use when they start. This framework will guide you in looking at five different collections of human attributes (physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and philosophical) and provide you with some basic questions in each category to get you off to a good start.

- **Physical.** What does the character look like? How do the character's physical attributes play a role in the story? How does the character feel about his or her physical attributes? How does the character change physically during the story? How do these changes affect the character's experience?

- **Intellectual.** How would you describe this character's intelligence? What does this character know? How does this character's intellect compare to others in the story? Is this character smart enough to

thrive in the world in which he or she lives? What does this character learn as the story develops?

- **Emotional.** How does this character feel most of the time? How do his or her feelings change throughout the story? How does this character feel about himself or herself? When faced with challenges in the story, what emotions come up for this character?

- **Social.** How does this character get along with other characters in the story? Who does this character choose for friends and why does this character choose them? Where does this character stand in the social order? How does this character's social standing affect events in the story?

- **Philosophical.** What does this character believe about the way life is? What are these beliefs based on? How do these beliefs affect the choices this character makes? How do those beliefs change throughout the story? Do others in the story share these beliefs?

Ultimately, the big question I hope you think about is this: What can we learn from this character about how to live in the world? Reading a story is, after all, like watching an experiment. Given a set of characters and circumstances, we sit back and watch the results unfold. The greatest value in fiction, it seems to me, lies in what we can learn about our own lives when we take time to analyze someone else's — even if that someone else is just a character in a story.

Getting Started

Physical attributes are usually the easiest to start with. Don't forget that a character's age can also be considered a physical attribute. Often, this has a large impact on how a character experiences their life. In each of the five areas, it's often interesting to compare how characters see themselves in contrast to the way other characters see them.

Themes and Variations

When it comes to critical reading, the concept of "theme" is one of the most important things readers need to understand. And yet it's quite hard to teach. For one thing, it can't easily be explained simple language. If you look in the dictionary, you'll find definitions like: "A topic of discourse; A subject of artistic representation; A unifying idea that is a recurrent element in a literary work; etc." What in the world does that mean?

As we go through school, we pick up many variations on the basic idea. By the time we reach college, some of us figure it out, but most are confused just like I was when I started taking my first classes as an English major. There are no easy answers here; it's a tough concept to work with. But here's where I like to start out.

Things that happen in a story sometimes have two meanings: a literal meaning where something that happens is just what it appears to be, and a figurative meaning where that same something is an example of an idea like loneliness, friendship, trust, courage, hope, honor, love, etc. When several different things that happen in a story share the same figurative meaning (different examples, same idea), we often say that the author is exploring a theme, especially if the figurative meaning deals with something important in life that could apply to many people.

Sometimes, I find it easier to teach kids about themes through their own writing. I'll use *The Five Facts of Fiction* to help them create a framework for their story and then I'll ask them something like this: "If you wanted to

say something about courage, for example, what kinds of scenes would you put into your story?"

In this situation, it's usually easy for them to come up with examples that work. And it's this kind of interaction, where kids are using plot elements to represent abstract ideas in their own writing, that helps them develop a solid understanding of theme in the books they read.

Seven Things You Need to Know About Themes

In order to understand themes in fiction, there are certain things you need to be aware of:

1. **Events represent ideas.** It's not always easy to realize that stories carry both literal and figurative meaning and that the author is choosing specific events to convey specific messages.

2. **Experience evolves in patterns.** All beings are, to some extent, creatures of habit. Because of this, the same things seem to show up in our lives at different points in time. Characters in novels are like this, too. There's often a thread of similarity that ties together the important events in their lives.

3. **Fiction explores important issues.** People don't write fiction just to kill time or make a living, they write it to talk about important truths in a unique way. Many ideas in human existence are best

explored through examples. In one sense, a story is just a collection of examples that represent ideas a writer wants to talk about.

4. **Stories apply to many readers.** Ideas like envy, loneliness, and greed enter into all of our lives at one time or another. The best stories are those that speak to the most readers in the most powerful way.

5. **Themes are abstract nouns.** Themes are nouns, just things really. But they aren't the kinds of things one can easily survey with the five senses. In other words, they are not concrete. You can't see loneliness, for example, you can only see examples of it.

6. **Everyone takes a position.** Themes don't exist in stories for their own sake. We're supposed to think about them, to discern an author's opinion of them, and to see how that opinion squares with our own. It's not enough to say that a book is about the struggle between good and evil. What does the book say about that struggle?

7. **Fiction is instructional.** As a genre, fiction exists to entertain us, but it also exists to teach us valuable lessons, often the kind that are not easy to learn unless we're wrapped up in a good yarn. Themes are the subject matter of the lessons fiction writers want us to learn.

Getting Started

Any time I start to discuss theme with a group of students or adults, I ask them first to provide their own definitions. The ensuing confusion usually points up the need for a simple definition we can all agree on. That's when I introduce specific language to define the idea. So, what do you think a theme is?

What Can You Say About a Book Now?

You've just finished 15 articles about book talk and book reviews. You've learned what reviews are and how reviewers write them. You have many new tools at your disposal like The Five Big Questions, The Five Facts of Fiction, Read Like a Reader, and Read Like a Writer. You've learned about themes and plot summary and character development. For all this time you've been hearing what I have to say about books. Now it's your turn. What can you say about a book?

Honestly, it's not that easy, and I know it. Writing is always hard. Every writer is presented every time he sits down to write with the most intimidating thing he can imagine: a blank page.

The author E. L. Doctorow said, "Writing is an exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go." Earnest Hemingway, perhaps the most famous American writer of the 20th century, put it more poignantly: "Writing is a lonely life." But my favorite quote about writing comes from author and humorist Dorothy Parker: "I hate writing. But I love having written."

That's me for sure. As much writing as I do, I'd have to admit that I don't really like doing it all that much. But I love to see my words in print. I love to hear from people that something I wrote made a difference in their lives. I love to know that people are influenced by my ideas.

So what do I do when I'm stumped? I look at the writing of other writers just like me. If I were you, and I had to write a book review, and I wanted to get some ideas about what I could say about a book, I'd look at the reviews of other writers just like me to see what they had to say. Then I'd copy them. Not their words exactly, that would be plagiarism. Instead, I'd copy the kinds of things they were writing about; I'd copy their topics.

It is said the imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. So go out there and imitate. Find reviews you like and use them as models for your own.

Book Review Excerpts

Here are some excerpts from book reviews by 5th graders I worked with who read the book *Holes* by Louis Sachar.

Two Different Leads

"Who would think? Who could imagine digging a hole every day at a dried up lake? Louis Sachar, that's who!"

"How would you like it if you had to dig holes day after day in the hot sun? That's what Stanley Yelnats had to do in the book *Holes* by Louis Sachar."

Background From the Author's Life

"You might be wondering why Louis Sachar wrote *Holes.* He got the idea of writing this when he moved to Austin, Texas. It was so hot in Texas that he decided to write a story about suffering in the scorching heat."

Insights About the Main Character

"In the beginning of the book I think Stanley was very lonely. It never mentioned anything about him having a friend. He seemed to hate his life. He was always glum and depressed.

On the Theme of "Fairness"

"A question Louis Sachar might want us to ask is, Is life fair? Based on the book, I would answer that life can be fair, even though it might not seem like it. Life wasn't fair for Stanley because something bad was always waiting around the corner ready to spring on him. But in the end, life was fair for Stanley because he persevered and got rewarded by making a life-long friend, finding treasure and getting released from Camp Green Lake."

On the Main Idea

"In *Holes,* Louis Sachar wants you to know that you can't control things that happen in life. For example, Stanley couldn't control the fact that he

was falsely accused of stealing shoes and ended up at Camp Greenlake. Zero couldn't control the fact that his mother left him one day and never came back."

A Recommendation

"I highly recommend *Holes* to most readers all around the world because I think they will learn a lot and I'm sure they will enjoy it. They will think about life and take it more seriously. They will also think twice before doing anything bad."

Getting Started

When I teach book reviews, I always start by showing kids models. Amazon.com is a great source for book reviews, many written by kids. Just type in the name of a book you read and see what comes up. Some books, particular the big award winners, have more than 1000 reviews you can read. You can also post your own reviews — so get to it!

The Giver

An Eye-Opener!

Jonas lives in world where everything is under control. Everything is planned out for everyone, and everyone is the same. If someone breaks a rule, they are released from the community. Jonas is selected to be the next "Receiver of Memories" the person who gathers the memories of the past. This job includes pain, sorrow, and happiness. Jonas realizes that the world he lives in is not all that great after all.

I have heard that this book has been banned from some schools, and personally, I think that is ridiculous. These are the only reasons that the book has been banned: a 12 year old having sensual feelings toward a girl he likes, and injecting a deadly needle into someone who is being released. OK, well the injecting is not really pleasant, but the reader does not need to focus on that. For this book focuses on more important issues that that.

The Giver gives an important message to people: Living in a world where there is independence and choices is better than living in a world where everything is perfect.

Lois Lowry did an awesome job making this book. I like the way she always kind of hinted that the perfect world was not that good after all. I recommend this book to people ages 10 and up.

This is Lowry's Best Book

In this book, Lowry captures your heart and soul. She makes you think about the things in life we take for granted and what you would do without them. She makes you realize that there is no perfect world. In this book, there are very strong emotions and acts of bravery and love.

This book has changed my life forever and I will always treasure the memory of reading it. I would recommend this book to any one who likes Lois Lowry's writing skills and who loves books that change your life. In the book there is a world with no pain or suffering and the people who live there are always protected. It sounds like a place you'd want to live but after you read it you just might change your mind!

An Adult Book Disguised as a Children's Book

This book preaches on the dangers of conformity as the supreme value. It includes such topics as infanticide, mercy killings, and child suicide. This book is not meant for children. Yes, blind conformity is evil. But this vehicle to preach against conformity is not for children under 14.

Adults: Read this book before you decide to give it to a child. Is your nine or 12 year old ready to read about the killing of a newborn with an injection in the skull? Do you want your 11 year old to read about how suicide solved a twelve year old's problem? This book haunted my sleep and thoughts for quite a while. I pulled this book from my elementary school library shelves.

The Giver

"Disturbing" is a Good Thing

While reading some of the reviews that gave the book less than five stars, I was simply shocked. I loved this book. I believe I have three copies at home, and I've read it at least eight times. Some of the reasons people gave for not liking the book were that the novel was confusing, they didn't like the ending, it didn't explain things enough, or (and this is the worst) it was "disturbing." I'm sorry, people, but that is the whole point of the book.

I'll first address the fact that this book is confusing. I think it is a valid point, the book does confuse the reader. The reader goes into the novel with assumptions, and the author takes those assumptions and smashes them down the garbage disposal. The first thing you must realize is that this world is entirely fictional, but like *Fahrenheit 451* and *Brave New World,* it is set in the future of humanity. Any confusing events are there to make the reader think. If you are wanting a simple read, just to take your mind off life, I do not recommend this book. The book is thought-provoking. Lessons are revealed on many levels, and after many reads. If you find the book confusing, stick with it, read it again, and again, and I guarantee it will make sense.

The ending of the novel is just another method the author uses of involving the reader, making the reader think. I won't describe it (you'd all hate me forever), but the ending is basically a fill in the blank. It kills me every time I read it, but every time, I fill in the blank with hope. You'll understand when you get there. Basically, it is ambiguous for a reason. The question the author is asking you is, how will you make the story end? Will you give up your humanity for peace and contentment and boredom, or will you fight for your right to feel, and see, and think?

As for the people who thought the author didn't explain things enough, just deal with it. The author wrote the book the way the author wanted to write the book, and maybe the explanations have a reason for being ambiguous. The novel isn't a detailed science report, it is a book with a message, and the author is entitled to whatever poetic license the author wants. Think about the ambiguity and maybe there is a purpose behind it. Facts that don't illuminate the message would just detract and confuse people.

And now for the other point. Granted, I only read one review that said that the book was disturbing, but that made me so angry that I had to put down my thoughts right away. The book is SUPPOSED to be disturbing. If you didn't think it was, then YOU are disturbed. But the point is to look at the disturbing parts. It disturbs you to make you look at your life. Are you the kind of person who would go along with this society that murders babies and those who don't conform? The message is about the price of individuality.

Don't just take a shallow view of this book. If you want shallow, read *The Boxcar Children*. This book is for kids, a lesson against peer pressure, but also for anyone who is willing to take the author's challenge and actually THINK for once.

The Giver

Suspenseful Plot and Awesome Theme

I loved *The Giver* because the plot was very creative, the theme was magnificent, and the setting was vivid.

I think you should read this book for many reasons. The theme of this book is clearly represented: freedom, the right to make your own choices, uniqueness, and individuality are worth dying for.

In a community that is all the same lives Jonas, who discovers he is very different. In Jonas's community, a committee selects one's job, war is unheard of, all people wear the same attire, and all are assigned spouses and families.

When Jonas is given the special, wonder-filled occupation of becoming the Receiver of Memory, he finds that there is much more to life. Through his task of becoming the Receiver, he discovers the meaning of love, pain, frustration, color, and cold.

Life soon becomes overwhelmingly unbearable in his world of "sameness." He finds life isn't worth living without the qualities (ones that we often take for granted) he discovered. That is when Jonas goes on a dangerous journey to find a land that is different.

The setting in this book made it quite a pleasure. Everything in the community was predictable and pre-planned. The housing units were all the same. There were designated spots for everything.

The mysterious ending leaves one filled with curiosity and wonder.

This book is guaranteed enjoyment, especially for someone who likes a good theme and a plot that ties in with the setting. I loved this book, and I truly believe that everybody should read it!

Amazingly Vivid

Can you imagine a place where the people that live there have no memories of the past, no emotions, no colors, and none of earth's wonders? *The Giver* by Lois Lowry takes place in this kind of a community.

Jonas is an 11-year-old boy who is about to turn twelve. He is soon to receive a job assignment because at that age one is considered an adult. At the birthday ceremony Jonas is chosen to be the only holder of memories in the community. Once Jonas receives a few, he realizes that his community isn't quite as he perfect as he had been brought up to believe. What will Jonas do to help his community see the error of its ways?

The Giver is a truly unique book because it tells about a different kind of lifestyle in a strange community. People are assigned their jobs and their families. And everyone just does whatever they are told.

You should read this book because it is very realistic and it has true emotions attached to the characters. When Jonas sees the way his community is living, his emotions of sadness, anger, and regret are extremely vivid.

This book might appeal to you because it is an intriguing story that tells about a turning point in a young man's life. In the story Jonas is turning twelve and experiencing

The Giver

Excellent Book But I Don't Get the Controversy

There are a few books released every year that gain both wide-ranging critical acclaim and deep popular support. They are few and far between, and fewer still when they stir up as much controversy as has *The Giver*. Personally, I don't see what all the controversy is about; everything in here that could possibly be seen as questionable is an echo of a canonized piece of science fiction . Yet, as soon as you try to boil down the classics for the kid-lit crowd, hackles get raised.

A distillation this may be, but it is in the same way that Things Fall Apart is a distillation of Greek tragedy; there's enough there for the author to have worn her heart on her sleeve, but the themes are places within a different framework of characters well-enough drawn that no one's ever going to be accusing Lois Lowry of plagiarism.

Jonas, on the brink of turning twelve at the beginning of the novel, in a utopian society where there's no crime, no poverty, etc. Jonas is chosen to be the new Receiver of Memory for the colony; he's something of an uber-consultant, the person to whom the ruling council turns when they come across something they have no way to understand. Jonas, and those Receivers before him, store the collective memories of those things which their society has managed to forget over the time they've been apart from the rest of the world (by the way the characters talk about the world previously, it's been hundreds, if not thousands, of years).

Lowry sets things up well. There's a wonderful revelation about halfway through the book that alone is worth the price of admission when Jonas figures out the he sees things (literally) quite different than everyone else. Lowry has managed throughout the beginning of the book to lull the reader into such a state that the reader hasn't even realized what it is that's missing.

While this is the only real surprise here, the predictability of much of what comes after is forgivable enough. Lowry sets up a number of easy endings, none of which she takes, and the predictable pieces to the puzzle are all part of that setup. Just because the end result could have been done better doesn't mean it's not good as it stands. Highly recommended.

A Disappointment Compared to Lowry's *Number The Stars*

My son's 6th grade teacher read *The Giver* to his class a few months ago. I am into children's literature of all types and I as his mother like to read what he is assigned in his class. I was very disappointed with *The Giver*. Number The Stars was absolutely 5 star fabulous. But, *The Giver* — too adult for one.

I especially didn't like the way Ms. Lowry degrades womanhood and motherhood in this book. To be called as a 'birthmother' in this book is to have a dishonored scum life. I already see enough in our society of the degradation of motherhood — I don't want to read it in a book — much less have my son exposed to such absurdity.

Also, the part in the book where all boys had to take a pill once the pubescent stirrings begin was a very out-to-lunch kind of notion. I realize this is a fictional book. But, how about keeping books perfectly clean in all aspects?

Number The Stars was clean and uplifting in all regards. Ms. Lowry has such a gift for writing. I'd like to see her keep to clean, uplifting, inspiring content. Good books are my escape from society's ills. *The Giver* reminded me too much of our own social problems.

The Giver

The Giver: Worst book I've Ever Read!

The Giver by Lois Lowry is a very opinionated book. Different people will think different things about the book and I think there are too many choices to make at the end of the story. In *The Giver*, a child named Jonas is getting his new 'assignment' for his life and he just happens to get the 'Receiver of Memory'. He then must receive memories of things that other people in the community do not know.

In *the giver*, Lowry tried to make some sort of utopia (a perfect world) and wanted to show that this would probably never happen and that this world might be perfect but that there are still some flaws in it. The author also tries to show that our world also has flaws. I think the author tried to go too far into the future because it might be a long time until we invent or do things as bad as what they have in the story.

I believe this book should not be intended for children or young adults. I think it should be for people 14 years and up. This book should not have been made for everyone because it shows a kid that committing suicide will get you out of a problem or a bad situation.

This book haunts me in my sleep and I am 12. I'm not scared of hardly anything but this book scared me. Just think about it, would you want your child to be reading a book where a 12 year old washes and cleans an elderly person? Would you want your child to be reading a book where somebody injects a baby in the head with some sort of liquid? Would you want your child to be reading a book where a boy dreams of bathing a girl in his sleep? If I could, I would ban this book in any library or store. Because of these reasons, I think *The Giver* is a terrible book. I wish I'd never had to read it.

Makes You Think About Life

Jonas is the twelve-year-old protagonist of this novel. He is living in a world without colors, pain, and love. In the Ceremony of Twelve he receives his assignment: He is the one who is chosen to be the new "Receiver of Memory". When he meets *the giver*, who gives him these memories of pain, love, and the ability to see colors, his life changes.

The journey to Jonas's realization that his society's system is not the right way to achieve peace and silence is suspense-packed. At first, the daily life of the members of the community is described so well that you think it is almost real. Every detail that the author mentions helps to create the apparent harmony of this "clean" atmosphere.

When Jonas realizes that there must be a change, the dark secrets of the system come out and the action rises. The suspense keeps growing right up to the end.You can describe the development as a chain reaction — everything Jonas believed in was a lie.

I think that Lois Lowry has created a world like this to show us that our life — with all its positive and negative sides — is better than living in n utopia without the thing that made us human-beings human-beings: our humanity.

Holes

A Lead …

How would you like it if you had to dig holes day after day in the hot sun? That's what Stanley Yelnats had to do in the book *Holes* by Louis Sachar.

Background From the Author's Life…

You might be wondering why Louis Sachar wrote *Holes*. He got the idea of writing this when he moved to Austin, Texas. It was so hot in Texas that he decided to write a story about suffering in the scorching heat.

Insights About the Main Character…

In the beginning of the book I think Stanley was very lonely. It never mentioned anything about him having a friend. He seemed to hate his life. He was always glum and depressed.

On the Theme of "Fairness"…

A question Louis Sachar might want us to ask is, Is life fair? Based on the book, I would answer that life can be fair, even though it might not seem like it. Life wasn't fair for Stanley because something bad was always waiting around the corner ready to spring on him. But in the end, life was fair for Stanley because he persevered and got rewarded by making a life-long friend, finding treasure and getting released from Camp Green Lake.

On the Main Idea…

In *Holes,* Louis Sachar wants you to know that you can't control things that happen in life. For example, Stanley couldn't control the fact that he was falsely accused of stealing shoes and ended up at Camp Greenlake. Zero couldn't control the fact that his mother left him one day and never came back.

A Recommendation…

I highly recommend *Holes* to most readers all around the world because I think they will learn a lot and I'm sure they will enjoy it. They will think about life and take it more seriously. They will also think twice before doing anything bad.

Holes

A Wonderful Book Called *Holes*

Holes is a wonderful book for the young reader which will jumpstart kids' imaginations. Because of it's well constructed structure, *Holes* won the Newberry Medal for the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children.

Stanley Yelnats is a young teen who is going to camp Green Lake for the summer, but this is no fun camp, it is a camp for juvenile delinquents. In fact there is no lake and definitely no fun. There, Stanley meets a crazy group of guys called Armpit, X-ray, Zigzag, Magnet, Squid and Zero. They named Stanley Caveman, but it isn't as good as it looks, because each day the kids have to dig a five-by-five foot hole on the bottom of the lake, ''to build character''. You would think they could find a way out of this, but they all fear the Warden, who was known to kill kids who disobeyed her.

During the story, Stanley thinks to himself about his no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather. Stanley's family blames everything on him when anything goes wrong. But there was one factor missing there. How did his great great grandfather become so unlucky? It was because of Kissin' Kate Barlow, who robbed him and left him in the desert. Some people said that she buried her treasure out here somewhere. Could it be that the Warden is making them dig to try and find Kissin' Kate's treasure, or is there something else we don't know?

This is an exciting and exhilarating story that will amaze you. Your breath will be taken away by Stanley's actions and how he slips out of the Warden's grasp. But can he do this forever? Don't be surprised if you can't put the book down because that is what happened to me when I read the fabulous book *Holes*.

Not What I Thought it Might Be

The story is about a kid who gets sent to court and then out to a boys camp for a crime he did not do (stealing a pair of shoes). He meets some kids out there, becomes buddies with them, and near the end makes a break for home with one of them named Zero.

Being a fan of jail break stories, I thought the book sounded pretty good. Boy, was I wrong about that.

The story was totally unbelievable, is over done, and makes no sense at all. I should have thought more about what I was getting into. I could see where a little kid would like this, or someone who dose not think about the realism of what they are reading. This book had lots of holes in it.

Holes

I'm 25, and I Love It!

This is a great and amazing book! I highly recommend it for adults! I read this book as my 8-year-old had a copy and proclaimed it his favorite. I was shocked at how much depth and richness there was to it. I hope this book takes off like Harry Potter.

It is a rich, detailed story; funny and smart. The book starts out with a boy who is cursed. He's sent to a detention camp for a crime he didn't commit, sentenced to digging holes to build character. From there, the author sets up some history, essentially telling several different stories at once. There are so many twists and turns, layers of stories. But the book is quite easy to follow. It's a great adventure

This is a fun and serious with a pack of kids just like such great movies as *Stand by Me,* or *Sandlot,* with a touch of *Lord of the Flies*. The book is more about enduring bonds. It's suspenseful and thrilling. You'll be rooting for the main character from beginning to end.

The cover and back page don't do justice to the book, but I guess that makes it that much more exciting when you discover what's waiting inside. I am so excited about this book that I will be buying copies for my friends' kids and my nieces and nephews.

Holes

"Camp Green Lake is a camp for bad boys. If you take a bad boy and make him dig a hole every day in the hot sun, it will turn him into a good boy."

Stanley Yelnats wasn't really a bad boy. He had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. It must've been the curse that began with his "no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather." The bad luck of his family landed Stanley at Camp Green Lake. Sure, it sounds like a nice place, but in fact it is not; it's just the opposite. There is no lake at Camp Green Lake, hardly anything is green, and it's certainly not the kind of camp most kids think of going to. The boys spend their days digging holes five feet wide and five feet deep. This labor is said to build character, but it isn't before long that Stanley suspects that the Warden, who runs the camp, is looking for something. But what?

Twisted into this book is a second and third plot line, another plot about Elya Yelnats, Stanley's "no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing great-great-grandfather", Madame Zeroni, and one about an outlaw, Kissin' Kate Barlow. In the end, all three plots are tied together so that everything fits perfectly like a jigsaw puzzle.

Louis Sachar won the Newbery Medal for this prize story. It is fun-filled, imaginative, and unique. This is a story that will make people laugh, and it is perfect for a variety of readers. It's written in a simple manner so it is easy to read and could probably be read by a 9-year-old, yet the plot is fully developed.

There is never a dull moment; there is always action. I couldn't put this book down. It's like a mystery to the reader trying to figure out how the three story lines relate. It's not until the end that all the loose ends are tied up. This is a light, humorous story everyone should read.

Young Adult Books Too Young?

Where Have All the Real Books Gone?

I just finished skimming a teen book news letter that I can not seem to unsubscribe from. Every week or two this newsletter infects my e-mail box with its presence. Sometimes when I have nothing better to do I will skim it. I am almost always disappointed with what I find. The majority of what is reviewed are serial books that are based on "teen aimed" TV series. Along with their reviews of these pathetic spin-offs, they also include nauseating polls, usually on the subjects that the writers believe are the "latest teen crazes."

One day, though, they printed something that seemed useful for a change. A list of authors who write for the young adult genre but whose prose and subject matter could also have a place in the regular fiction section. Despite their best efforts, I was once again for the most part disappointed. Included in the list were Walter Dean Myeres and Cynthia Voight. Walter Dean Myeres intentionally type casts himself, thus effectively limiting his audience to those who like reading books of that type. Cynthia Voight's era has passed, and though I have not read any of her books I also suspect that her books are aimed at a female audience.

As I was looking at this newsletter today, I saw more of what I have just described and I thought to myself: Where have all the real books gone? I remembered as I was skimming that I had read an article in Time where the author thought she was making an astute observation when she noted that books aimed at teens were dealing with tougher issues and that the they were a far cry from the "teen problem novels" of her youth. She used three books to support her argument: *Monster* by Walter Dean Myeres, *The Facts Speak for the Themselves* By Brock Cole and Louis Sachar's *Holes*. I had read Cole's book and enjoyed it. I was not interested in Myeres' *Monste.r* So that left Sachar's *Holes.* I decided to look it up on Amazon and read some reviews.

One review was by a mother who's third and fifth grade children had enjoyed this book. That proved my suspicion that *Holes* would be nothing more than a sugar coated children's book. Which brings me back to my question: Where have all the real books gone?

For those who want a more serious read, I do have a few sugesstions: anything by Raymond Chandler, John Steinbeck, and John Grisham. I realize that it is possible that I am getting too old for the young adult genre (I am 14, now) and that my age might be the reason I am discontent with it's offerings. But on the other hand, the only reason many books are classified as young adult is because they feature a teenager as the protagonist. And so, I ask one more time: Where have all the real books gone?

Catcher in the Rye

Universal Tale

I've read The Catcher in the Rye many times—when I was 11, 13, 15, and 17 years old. Seriously. I loved it from the first time I read it, but it didn't hit home until I was a junior and senior in high school.

I AM HOLDEN CAULFIELD. Well, not literally and exactly. But almost. Holden is an extraordinary character. His absolute terror of leaving the wonderful, innocent, carefree world of youth is something everyone can relate to. I'm about to graduate from high school, and even though I'm excited to be a free, independent adult, I can't help but be terrified of the corruption and hard reality that lays ahead, which I have been blind to, as a young person. I mean—who wouldn't miss being a kid?—living at home for free, not having to do anything or be responsible for yourself or anyone. Holden embodies this. To me, that's what I related to most from the book.

Most kids I know don't like the book cuz they're forced to read it for class, which is understandable. I wish they could see the beauty, and heartbreaking universality of Holden's story, though. It is something J.D. Salinger had the talent to grasp and share with the rest of the world.

Dear Holden: Please Jump

I'll be the first to confess to a cultural Achilles' heel that runs up my back, over my skull, and down to the unlovely bags under my eyes. As such, I am frequently at a loss to understand what the fuss is about. And it is perhaps for this reason that I still remain perplexed — nay flummoxed — by the cult status of this book and that of its repulsive protagonist, Holden Caulfield.

When I first endured this merciless literary thumbscrew, it was in the late 1970s, at the behest of a high school English teacher who wore clogs, wooden jewelry, and ambulatory tents made of faded denim. She believed with almost anguished sincerity that her students would "connect" with Holden, or find something "relevant" in the book.

I quickly came to a conclusion that a recent re-reading has done nothing to dispel: Holden is a jackass. He's a spoiled prep school jerk who's so sickeningly self-involved that he has no clue that the people around him exist as anything other than background figures in the melodrama going on entirely in his own head. He constantly refers to anything that doesn't meet with his schoolboy approval as "corny" and labors under the delusion that he's the first person who ever noticed that the transition out of childhood is awkward and uncomfortable. Listen, you pompous little spud, we all go through it, and it's about as cosmically significant as a crumpled wad of used Kleenex.

Maybe half a century ago, this hog wallow of teen angst was something fresh. But if Salinger had some larger point to make about coming of age it has all but disappeared in the fetishization of adolescence that took off not too long afterward, and has clung to our culture ever since.

Catcher in the Rye

True Feelings of Coming of Age

I've read this book many times over the years, from my first encounter in high school, to the most recent times, discussing it with my high-school children as they read it for the first time. Each time I read it, I'm struck more deeply by how truly it captures the rebellion, exhilaration, worry, fear, and rootless wandering which faced or faces us all as we journey from youth to adulthood.

The language is crisp, funny, never lags. Holden Caulfield's adventures catch and keep our interest, and we care what happens to him as we accompany him through his wanderings. But the thing that strikes me after all these years is how deeply JD Salinger captured the feelings that Holden was living with each day: What happens to those ducks in winter, what happens to us all as our warm and safe childhood lives slowly become the cold, hard, unyielding lives of adulthood, and who is there to catch us as we pass through the rye? Does anyone look out for us any more? Are we alone, on our own?

"Catcher in the Rye" is a beautiful, evocative book, for teenagers, adults, or parents helping their own teenagers navigate this remarkable journey.

Drop Dead, Holden Caulfield

First of all, I can see why people might like this book. J.D. Salinger writes well, and this novel was certainly different from anything else being published at the time. However, I think this book stinks. Why? You see, the backbone of the book is the protagonist, the self-absorbed, shallow, wimpy, bitchy, neurotic Holden Caulfield. *Catcher in The Rye* is basically the ramblings of a lame character, and if you can't stomach Holden's incessant whining there is nothing else to enjoy.

Holden Caulfield is not someone I can relate to, nor do I see similarities between him and my peers. He's like the weirdo in high school you felt sorry for but made fun of anyway. I have absolutely no sympathy for Holden. He's a stereotypical rich, privileged snob, and too stupid to realize that he's as affected and materialistic as the "phony" people he despises.

Holden is depressed, I'll admit that. But instead of facing his problems, he gets kicked out of school, drinks too much, treats women poorly, and spends obscene amounts of money. What a role model. Let's not forget about his relationship with his kid sister, Phoebe. I don't understand why a sixteen-year-old boy would brag about his exploits to his prepubescent sister, burden her with his troubles, and pinch her bottom.

Is Holden Caulfield the voice of a generation? I hope not. He is undisputedly a depressed, hormonal teenager. He is not, however, hip, edgy or worth reading about. Holden Caulfield is, in his own famous words, completely and utterly "phony."

Catcher in the Rye

To All the Phonies Who Hated This Book

The only dispassionate thing one can say about J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is that it is a book that cannot be read dispassionately; both its numerous supporters and detractors are equally ardent in their respective admiration and disdain.

The novel is already noteworthy on the strength of its style, which represents the culmination in the development of a distinctive American idiom — a process begun by Hemingway and continued by the likes of Hammett and Chandler. In the deceptively simple voice of Holden Caulfield, Salinger strikes a tricky balance between slang and profundity that many writers have since striven for, but rarely duplicated. Holden may or may not be "phony" himself, but his voice is most decidedly not, as it is free of pretension or self-consciousness.

To call the novel a self-indulgent outpouring of "teenage angst" does it a grave disservice. Holden's problem is as old as Hamlet's, probably as old as mankind itself — a struggle to find purity of purpose amid intense feelings of fright and confusion toward the strangeness of human behavior. While Holden's various adventures alternately amuse and move the reader, the novel's real heart lies in his relationship with his sister Phoebe, who manages to be cute, earnest, and intelligent all at once; their climactic encounter near the end has the force of genuine tragedy.

In the final analysis, *Catcher in the Rye* proves to be nothing less than one of the major literary achievements of the 20th century.

Read it First Without the Reviews

I think part of the reason why some people can hate this book so much is because they began with a preconceived notion of what it was already about. I read it with barely any prior knowledge. I knew it was a famous classic, but I didn't know anything about its plot or characters or adolescent cynicism, and it turned out to be one of the best books I've ever read.

It wasn't because I felt like Holden Caulfied was a great guy or my friend, I probably couldn't stand him as a friend. He's a jerk and as moronic as he says he is. Nor because of the plot. It's not that it lacks one, but that the plot can't proceed because Caulfield is too paralyzed emotionally and mentally to push forward. He just gives up all together.

The book is great because it gives you a chance to see the world in a different way. If you ever wanted to know what life would be like if you just gave up, this book gives you a chance to explore that in great depth, in the most extreme way, as opposed to the idiotic-American-Pie, mushy-teen-coming-of-age-romance way we see in too many movies and TV shows. And there is a sort-of plot, and there is some heart to it, especially in the scenes where Holden's with his little sister. It's almost adorable.

Catcher in the Rye

I Read it Like a Madman

After you read *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield will live on in your mind, hanging around, speaking through you, informing the way you think of yourself and others. It's a masterpiece of writing, in which the author clearly and completely presents to you another person's mind and soul.

It is an incredible exercise in empathy. It really was. As I read it, I realized that Holden was far from perfect, but I cared so much what happened to him, I could feel his loneliness and could see him resisting getting the help he needs. Salinger's recreation of a boy headed "to a fall," as Mr. Antolini tells him, is an amazing opportunity to be someone else for awhile.

The colloquial speech of the novel is well suited for reading aloud, and I really enjoyed that aspect of it. I really did. I read it like madman whenever I could. I'm not kidding.

I guess I just want to say that I like Holden Caulfield, and I hope, somewhere, he's alright.

The Book Kids who Hate Books Love

It might be that Salinger invented adolescence. Previous to this American standard or classic, whichever you choose, we were a less adolescent-obsessed, less teen-preoccupied society. That maligned condition has since expanded by many years. It now starts at 11 and ends around 32. Give or take.

The book transforms kids from book-bored to book-possible. I have never come across, in 30 years of work with kids, one young person, in any culture, of either gender, who having read the book, (implying that they could), did not love it. They claim it, and feel as though it were a personal match, ("That's how I feeel!") They are still, of course, in a state of complete self-centeredness. They join with it in symbolic affiliation.

No matter how desperately close the imitators have gotten, there just is no other book that generates this kind of response. It is a one shot deal, but often sufficiently positive to further attempts with the literary life.

Only in America could a Holden Caulfield come along and capture generation after generation. Just as Huckleberry Finn did before him, great characters show us who we are, they help us define ourselves more sharply.

Catcher in the Rye

The Difference Between This Book and Other Books

I first read this novel in college. That was forty years ago. Ever since, I have always had a copy of it in my library. I think about it every so often.

The difference between this book and other books is the immediacy of the writing. From the famous first sentence, Holden Caulfield talks to you as a real confidant. You are immediately his best friend. He confides his private thoughts to you without any hesitation as to your relationship to him. There is an unspoken conclusion that he needs to talk to you about. And he needs you now.

David Copperfield, which opens with that other famous first sentence, addresses you formally. His verbs are properly conjugated. and his diction is polished. David does not get close to you. He tells you his story from the podium.

Holden sits right next to you, leans against you, and chats. His language is informal, his diction not so great. But you don't care. Suddenly, someone is confiding in you. You want to hear him out.

That is why the novel works. Holden immediately accepts you, blemishes and all, as his best friend. He tells you his story even though you've just met.

Thomas Hardy tells a good story. He converses plainly and directly to the reader. Dickens addresses the reader skillfully and stylishly. Salinger confides. This is the immediacy of the novel.

That is the difference between this book and the others. We all want to be someone's confidant.

Just J.D. and Me

Anyone who has yearned to tell a spontaneous, elaborate lie to a total stranger, just for the heck of it, will love the character of Holden Caulfield in this book. That's OK as far as it goes, but when assassins of pop cultural icons, like John Lennon's killer, seek to relate their motives for evil actions by referring to this book, what does that mean? It means this book can also function as a magnet for the unhinged, who wish to be free by reinventing themselves.

The whole catching image articulated by irresponsible young Holden is hard to understand, too, and who really knows what a field of rye looks like anyway? Why the cliff? Could it be that being caught in a big whopping lie is like suddenly falling over a cliff? No way to repair it? Just time for sudden, dramatic consequences?

Salinger is a riveting personality in his own right, and also a great anti-hero, exemplified by his resolution never talk to a single critic about this book, with the sole exception of a girl writing for her high school newspaper. Maybe he was tired of over-serious, over-credentialed literati types, who are too late and too ill-equipped to redeem their ponderous and boring lives from their earlier failure to embrace a little more spontaneity, a little more fun, a little more high school newspaper derring-do.

Whatever it is, it's still fun to read. Buy this book and carry it around and just watch the looks you get. Especially at airports and bus stations teeming with would-be foils for the next Holden Caulfield whoever he (or she) may be.

Catcher in the Rye

The Quintessential Teenager? Puh-leeze!

What a prison of pessimism. Reading *Catcher in the Rye* felt like bathing in a toxic waste plant.

T.S. Elliot said, ''April is the cruelest month'' of the year because the sun reveals some things we'd rather not see. Likewise, Salinger's work conjures up the darkest memories of adolescence, memories I'd ceremoniously burned (along with my acid wash jeans and Debbie Gibson cassettes) years ago.

Of course, I must recognize that my response is perhaps reflective of my aged removal from young adulthood. As an educator, it is imperative that I am tuned in to what makes my students tick. If there's one redeeming element of the book, it is that I was reminded of what a potential time bomb is the teenage brain. Regardless, I'm sure that point could have been made without harping on the most banal aspects of adolescent existence.

Having recently observed the teaching of *Catcher in the Rye* in a high school classroom, I experienced first hand student's reactions of apathy and distaste for the book. Student editorials discussed Holden's narrow character development. One student made the point that if Caulfield is a character adults use to peer into the adolescent mind, they are largely misled. The common consensus among the students held that Holden is hardly the quintessential teenager.

So I think it unfortunate that students suffer through the *Catcher* experience. While I cannot speak for everyone, the specific classes I observed were most turned off by Holden's language, poor decision making, and overall depression. Many explained that Holden is not a character they would strive to be like. Rather, he is merely someone to feel sorry for. Who wants to read an entire book where the primary emotion invoked is pity?

I will acknowledge that there are certain themes in the book that are universal. These include loss of innocence, rebellion from society, mental instability, death, immaturity in sexual relationships, and resentment toward parents. While these are issues most any teenager can relate to, presentation is of the essence. Unfortunately, based on my high school classroom observations, Salinger's writing style and characters have little to offer today's breed of students.

I wonder if my reaction to the book would be different were I ten years younger. But as for now, I already know how bad raw sewage reeks, so why expose myself to such noxious fumes page after page? The masochists can have their *Catcher*. I'd rather drink my tea with two sugars, thank you very much.

Harry Potter

The Magic Awaits

I turned eleven the month that *Harry Potter and the Sorceror's Stone* came out in the US. Harry Potter was not yet famous here. Nobody had ever heard of Harry, nobody knew what Quidditch was, and not a single person had any idea how to pronounce "Hermione."

I bought the book at a book fair because I thought the cover looked very nice. I read it about six times before I found out that there was more to come in the form of six more books.

Every day of my eleventh year, I hoped and prayed for a parchment envelope with my name on it in green ink beckoning me to a school of witchcraft and wizardry. But the letter never came.

I turned twelve, and Hogwarts was forever closed to me. But the story was not, and it continued.

Each year Harry turned a year older, so did I. Harry has always been my age, every time a new book comes out, I just have time to catch up with him. When he finishes his story in the seventh book, it will be hard to pass him by, knowing that I will be leaving him behind, that *he* will never catch up now. But the magic won't leave the books, they will always be waiting. And the first one, the one that began it all, the tale that brought 11-year-old Harry to Hogwarts and started his long adventure, will still be lying on the shelf, holding within its covers a story that has created magic where once none could be found.

It is the book that created Harry, that brought the fantasy of a secret world to life, and it is why now the name "Harry Potter" seems more like an expression that means "delightful thrills" than an English schoolboy moniker.

So what more could a reader wish for, than to see the delightful collector's edition waiting for him under a Christmas tree in a colorfully wrapped package, its exterior pulsing with Hogwarts and wizarding, from the emerald leather to the golden gilding to the glittering lightning bolt spelling out Harry's name. As for the interior, well, what more need be said? Harry Potter is a magical being who exists only on paper, or so they say. But all who have avidly followed his every move for the past four years know better.

Harry may not be seen by others, but we know that he is there, whether in the kindly librarian who points him out on the shelf, the small child who weeps when Harry vainly tries to contact his lost parents in the Mirror of Erised, or in the man walking down the street, who barely comes up to your waist and has on a tall top-hat, complaining loudly about the commotion made by Muggles.

The book needs only opening, and it will do the rest on its own. The magic awaits.

Harry Potter

I am Ashamed of My Kinsmen

Why? Because I believe in God, and I believe in the Good, but I have been ashamed to read the misanthropic and vindictive attacks upon this book by people who claim to share my beliefs and values.

Harry Potter is a magnificent and fascinating book. There is nothing at all offensive about witchcraft or sorcery as portrayed within it, It is about the ultimate use of powers for the proper ends. Even the deceit is justified, following soul-searching and worries. That is life, and sometimes I suppose some people feel that it's better not to know such things. I disagree.

The book is imaginative and thrilling, with genuine originality used to spice up a well-trodden theme (*The Worst Witch* school stories, for example, predate the idea of a school for witchcraft), and references to the ancient myths. Thus, it is educational. It informs you about such things as mandrakes, unicorns, phoenix, and the like, and about the myths and legends connected to those beasts.

The book encourages you to imagine and to think for yourself. It was truly frightening, but everything ended happily and satisfactorily. The plot was logical enough for a child, yet elaborate enough to please the mature mind.

Of course, Harry's uncle and aunt are grotesque. They embody the narrow-mindedness of my so-called kinsmen, who lack magic and joy for life in their souls, and who lack the imagination to understand that magic is all in the mind. "But children will start dabbling in sorcery!" Indeed. And so what if they do? They are very likely to go on to become eminent scientists or great philosophers. They may write, paint, or create works of art. They will use their brains to make life interesting, and they will be open-minded.

In *Harry Potter* they are reading, and learning, and they know from the world around them that such things cannot happen to them. There are positive Muggles, too, just as there are positive and negative wizards, creatures and monsters, and there are people who are neither totally good or evil, just like in the real world.

If your child cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality at 8 years old, what kind of parent can you have been? There is fantasy everywhere. Even the wholesome *Sesame Street* is a fantasy. Do children grow up thinking that birds talk, and that monsters live in garbage cans? No. So why pick on this immensely popular book? It is a much, much better book than most books written for children. Long live *Harry Potter.*

Harry Potter

Bland, Unoriginal, Dull, Not a Thinking Book

I am a fifteen-year-old girl whose friends adore *Harry Potter*. I read this book in an attempt to see whether it would live up to all the hype surrounding it. I thought that I would perhaps enjoy it, as I am normally a big fan of "different world" stories. Boy, was I disappointed.

This story moves like a television series, each storyline acting as an episode. But there is one difference: television shows do a much better job depicting characters and storylines. J. K. Rowling's use of description is bland and amateurish. I realize that this book was written for children, but couldn't Rowling have at least attempted to use a higher sense of vocabulary? Roald Dahl uses very simplistic vocabulary in his stories, too, but he comes off as charming. Rowling just seems to be somebody who can't use a nice vocab word every now and then.

Let's move on to the actual story. This is where the "unoriginal" trait comes in. Can we say "Cinderella" here? The story of Harry Potter is too contrived. We've all seen the main storyline before: kind orphan boy/girl who just so happens to be whisked away to someplace "magical"; is great at everything and wins the admiration of practically everybody, with the exception of a few jealous enemies here and there. This storyline has been done to death and this book doesn't do it any better.

This book is definitely not a classic. *The Chronicles of Narnia,* that's a classic. *A Wrinkle in Time*, that's a classic. *Harry Potter* doesn't come even close.

My literature teacher once put books into two different categories: thinking books and non-thinking books. *Harry Potter* belongs in the latter. This is a book that will go in one ear and out the other, not something that will stay with you for years on end. If this book ever becomes as "classic" as *Cinderella* or *Snow White,* the world will have lost its mind.

Worthy of the Hype and Much Better Than I'd Hoped

So much has been written about this wonderful book and its sequels, but I really must add that not only should author Rowling be feted for creating books that kids really want to read, book after marvelous book, adults who avoid them are also missing a lot. While never wavering from her entirely readable prose, the author flawlessly interweaves endless references, allusions, and myriad other techniques and devices which move her work from the merely grand books for the "tweenager" to something considerably more literate and "critically sound," in its most erudite and arrogant connotation.

Plot. Character. Incredible settings. It's all there, but thankfully, blessedly, there's so much more. Authors like Rowling and the wickedly wondrous Lemony Snicket are raising the standard for quality children's literature to where it should always have been: identical to that of any great writing.

Maniac Magee

Not Everything Can Be Perfect

Maniac Magee (whose real name is Jeffrey) is a homeless kid who lost his parents in a trolley accident. He wants a real home with a family and that is what he looks for in the story. He's really unusual. He is famous for running everywhere. He's so fast no one can beat him. He's really good at sports. He even hit a "frog" ball and turned it into an inside the park homerun. He can untie very complicated knots. Little kids bring him all their troubles and he helps solve them. He wins a lifetime supply of pizza but he's allergic to pizza. Everyone loves him — well, almost everyone. That's what bothers him and keeps him running all night.

Maniac doesn't see any bad in people. He keeps thinking they're nice. But some are so mean that he finally figures out they don't like him. He blames himself. Maniac meets a girl, Amanda. She has lots of books and he really wants one. She lets him have one to read. When he returns it she invites him to live with her family in the East End. Only black people live there. Maniac doesn't see any difference between the black and white people. When he sees there are some who don't understand each other he tries to get them to like each other. But this doesn't happen very easily.

After Maniac runs away from Amanda's house, he lives with the buffalos at the park zoo. One day he meets Grayson who used to be a Minor league pitcher. Grayson and Maniac become really close like grandson and grandfather. They do everything together. You'll have to read what happens next. It's very emotional.

Maniac runs away from all of his temporary homes because he wants things to be perfect. He learns that not everything can be perfect. Does he find what he wants in the end? You'll have to read the book to find out.

Run Like a Maniac and Get This Book

Maniac Magee is not your typical kid. After all, do you know anyone who can run 200 miles in only 51 days and not even be tired? Well that's Maniac!

Throughout the story, Maniac meets many different kinds of people, some black and some white. For example, the Beale's are a black family who are quite nice and they take Maniac in. Other blacks in the town don't like Maniac (he's white) and he doesn't understand what the racism is all about. He believes that everyone is the same no matter what color they are.

Then Maniac has to teach Grayson, an old white man who is Maniac's closest friend, that blacks eat, drink, and use toothbrushes the same way that whites do. But this is not the only lesson *Maniac Magee* teaches about racial equality. You'll have to read this book to find out what else happened.

So if you're into modern-day tall tales and you have not yet read this book, then my advice is to run as fast as Maniac would to the nearest book store or library today.

Maniac Magee

What a Great Book

In "Before the Story", an introduction to the novel, Jerry Spinelli writes, "What's true, what's myth? It's hard to know." Was Maniac Magee really a superhero in an urban legend of childhood or was he just an extraordinary, though very human, young boy? Again, even for those who have read the story several times, it's hard to know. I doubt if Spinelli himself knows the answer.

Even the rest of the characters have that half-unbelievable, half-real quality about them, though not as powerfully. For instance, few people have ever known an Amanda Beale who carries her entire library to school everyday; but it is easy to believe that someone like Amanda does exist somewhere out there. And most kids could interview all the old park hands in their states and probably not find one who has struck out Willie Mays, or any other major league baseball player, for that matter. Yet it is still easy to believe that the novel's Grayson has a real-life counterpart. Beginning with Chapter One, when the first strange characters, Uncle Dan and Aunt Dot, are introduced, readers may suspend their disbelief and experience one of the most wonderful adventures in modern children's literature.

I call it an adventure because, whether he or the readers know it or not, Maniac is on a quest. He is looking for a place to call home, a place where he can be accepted and happy. Readers follow him from his first home in Bridgeport to his final home in a place you will have to read the novel to know about. This quest is not the only mythical element in this great novel: the hero also has several tasks to perform and dangers to brave before he achieves his dream. Along with all his "superpowers," he even has a "fatal flaw" to overcome: his naive and trusting nature when it comes to others.

Some of the tasks Maniac has to perform are as simple as undoing an impossible knot. Others are as dangerous as trying to make peace between blacks and whites in a neighborhood. Something else mythical is Maniac's experience in the West End, which can be called a "Descent into the Underworld". Like a modern Odysseus, he makes many educational stops on the way to his own special Ithaca. (The three parts of the book mark these stops.)

All of this is told in Jerry Spinelli's beautiful prose, which sometimes nearly becomes poetry. For example: "For most of November, winter toyed with Two Mills, whispered in its ear, tickled it under the chin. On Thanksgiving Thursday, winter kicked it in the stomach." At other times, the narrative seems to come straight out of a character's mind, with Spinelli taking on the voice of that character.

Interestingly, the novel does not make any fixed judgments about running away. First it seems to say that running away is not the answer and that homes must be worked on as much as found. Then it reminds us that Maniac would not have found his home had he not run away to look for it in the first place.

This story tugs at the heart and enriches the soul, but it also opens the mind.

A Wrinkle in Time

This Book Definitely Deserved the Newberry Medal

Meg Murry is miserable. She's an outcast of sorts at her highschool, her five-year-old brother, Charles Wallace, is a genius, and worst of all, her scientist father is gone on what seems to be a dangerous and mysterious mission in space. But help for her father comes in a very unlikely way. Charles Wallace meets three mysterious "witches" (Mrs. Who, Mrs. Which, and Mrs. Whatsit) who soon have Meg, Charles Wallace, and Calvin O'Keefe (a newly-found friend of Meg's) journeying through space on a treacherous quest to save her Mr. Murry.

After stopping for rest on a breathtakingly beautiful planet during their travels through the galaxy, Meg, Calvin, and Charles Wallace find themselves on Camazotz, a planet that has succumbed to the "Dark Thing" (evil). Their quest for Mr. Murry becomes increasingly difficult as they realize the incredible evil they are fighting.

A Wrinkle in Time is definitely the best fantasy book I have ever read. Madeleine L'Engle's imagination is unrivaled, and her descriptions of the various planets the characters travel to are wonderful; it almost seems like L'Engle's been there.

But this book is more than just a meaningless yet prettily written fantasy. L'Engle's unique and moving thoughts on good and evil, as well as our responsibility towards fighting evil are readily apparent in this book. Some very profound things are said, and some very profound concepts are embedded where you'd least expect them. For a treat for your imagination and food for thought, just read *A Wrinkle In Time*.

A Wrinkle in Time

This science fiction thriller is almost impossible to put down. This book has a great, amazing and creative story line. It's a very strong book in that it is expressive and attention capturing right from the start. One second the setting is dull and gray, and the next you're zooming through a world of color and great mystery. These are only some of the things you will experience when reading *A Wrinkle in Time.*

This book is about Charles Wallace and his sister Meg. They lost their dad years before while he was working on a project for the government. But he was not dead he was just lost.

At the beginning they meet three mysteriously weird ladies, whose names was Mrs. Who, Mrs. Which, and Mrs. Whatsit. They take Charles, his sister, and one of his sister's friend, Calvin, and wrinkle through time to try and find their father.

This was a great book. I liked it because it makes you not want to put it down. I think it is a great book and I think anyone that reads this book will agree with me. I encourage any that like to read to read this book and I am pretty sure that you will enjoy it as much as I did. So go read *A Wrinkle In Time*.

Bridge to Terabithia

The Story Comes Alive

This is a great book. I think children will enjoy it, even though it deals with death.

Jesse's main ambition is to be the fastest kid in the fifth grade. He practiced all summer, only to have a girl beat him. The girl is Leslie. At first Jesse refuses to be friends with Leslie, but after he sees how much they have in common they become best friends. Leslie is a very intelligent and imaginative girl who teaches so many things about life to Jesse, an average farm boy. They build a secret and magical kingdom called Terabithia. The only way to enter this magical kingdom is by swinging across the gorge on a rope.

One day, when Jesse returned from a trip to Washington D.C. with a teacher, he learns of Leslie's death. The rope broke as Leslie was swinging over the gorge into Terabitha. At first, Jesse refuses to accept her death. Then he almost feels happy because he is now the fastest kid in the fifth grade. He finally comes to terms with Leslie's death as he goes to Terabitha to perform a funeral ceremony.

Paterson develops the characters so well that they seem real. She gives an accurate description of their lives and of the events that occur on the playground. The reader can relate to the things that happen to Jesse and Leslie and how they handle these things. Paterson shows the reader that a boy-girl friendship can happen and that it can be a great one. She does an excellent job of making this story come alive for the reader.

A Very Good Book, Though it Contains Some Hard Lessons

This was a very sad, very difficult book. Not because of difficult language or readability, but because of the intense lessons it teaches about grieving and death. This book cannot be read lightly. It takes you through the main character's process of making a new friend, learning to love and trust her, having that trust betrayed, and finally, learning to move on with his life. Despite its deep and painful context, this book was very worthwhile, and I completely reccommend you give it a try.

Too Depressing for Me

I found this book to be very depressing. Jess Aaron's parents are horrible parents and his sisters are the same, except for Mae Belle. The only uplifting point in this book is when he meets Leslie Burk, but that also ends tragically. I do not believe that the author did enough foreshadowing for the awful event that happens near the end of the book. It was a total shock! She could have done a better job warning the reader ahead of time, especially because this is a children's book. One of the main reasons that children read is for pleasure, and there is nothing pleasurable about this book. The tone was extremely sad throughout most of the book. The only reason I liked it at all is because I like Katherine Paterson as an author and it is well written, but I really think she has many other better books out there. This book was too depressing for me to read. I prefer something a little bit more uplifting.

Bridge to Terabithia

It'll Make a Grown Man Cry

"Leslie was more than his friend; she was his other, more exciting, self, his way to Terabithia and all the worlds beyond."

Okay, before I make this unmanly confession, let me first state in my own defense that I have two small children and I was listening to the conclusion of this book at a very early hour, before I'd even had breakfast to fortify me for the day. That said, I'll now acknowledge that I very nearly started sobbing.

In 1976, Katherine Paterson's son David was 8 years old when his friend, Lisa Hill, was struck by lightning and killed. A year later *Bridge to Terabithia* was published, winning a Newberry Medal and becoming, if such a thing is possible, an instant classic. Ms Paterson drew upon this personal tragedy to create the story of a boy, Jess Aarons, and a girl, Leslie Burke, in rural Virginia, who become the best of friends. Jess is the middle child, and only son, of a reticent father, who struggles to earn a living. Leslie is the daughter, and only child, of two successful writers who have moved to the country, next door to the Aarons, for lifestyle reasons.

The friendship between the two kids is hesitant at first, particularly after Leslie usurps Jess's title as the fastest runner in their 5th grade class at Lark Creek Elementary. But both have some trouble fitting in with theirs peers, Jess because of his interest in Art, Leslie because of her scholastic ability and her parents' very 70s social attitudes (like not having a TV), and this shared awkwardness gives them a unique bond. Leslie creates an imaginary kingdom called Terabithia for them to rule over, accessible only be a rope swing over a local creek. The imaginary adventures they share there and a series of incidents at school bring the two closer and closer together. But then an ugly reality intrudes upon their idyllic world and the various characters are forced to deal with a tragic death. To say more might ruin the story, so let's leave it at that.

I understand that the use of this book in classrooms is frequently challenged by parents. If the reason for this is that they feel that the central crisis of the book may be too intense for children, I can sympathize with their feeling. But it seems like an intensity that is well worth their children's while. Ms. Paterson handles the situation quite beautifully and affords a real opportunity for parents to discuss the matter of death with their kids, a topic which most families hopefully haven't much had to cope with. Reading the book is a difficult emotional experience, but better to first confront these emotions in a controlled fictional setting and begin to learn how to deal with them, than to remain totally sheltered and have to deal with them, completely unprepared, when the tragedy is real.

Bud, Not Buddy

Bud, Not Buddy

Bud, Not Buddy is an award-winning book written by Christopher Paul Curtis that takes place during the Great Depression. This was a period of history when the overall world economy was suffering. The main character in this story is Bud Caldwell, a ten-year-old orphan, who is transferred out of the Home (i.e., orphanage) to live with a foster family, the Amoses.

After a short while, Bud finds it hard to get along with them. Therefore, he decides to leave the Amoses and go in search of a well-known musician, Herman E. Calloway, whom Bud believes is his father. That is when he stumbles upon a great discovery.

This is a book that is worth reading because the author makes the plot very unpredictable. For example, when Bud is in the Amos's shed, he finds what he thinks is a vampire bat. Because he does not want to get his blood sucked, he uses his jackknife to slice the creature. This fools the reader into thinking that Bud has just slaughtered an innocent animal. In reality, Bud has not killed a bat. He has cut off part of a hornets' nest and aggravated those living within.

In addition, the author also does an excellent job in giving Bud a distinct voice. He purposely uses some incorrect grammar and other casual diction so readers can actually hear Bud talking to them. The techniques that Curtis uses make this story seem realistic.

This is an excellent book with many interesting incidents, but my favorite part occurs near the end, when Bud shows Herman E. Calloway his collection of rocks with the writing on them that his mother had given him. This is the most suspenseful episode because at this point, Herman looks ready to give Bud a beating because he thinks Bud stole them from him, and Bud appears ready to prove that Herman is really his father. When Bud insists that he had received them from his mother, Herman demands that Bud reveal his mother's name. When Bud says that her name is Angela Janet, Herman looks stunned. Soon, Bud finds out that Herman is really his grandfather on his mother's side of the family, not his long-lost father.

I found this discovery very surprising because Bud's constant conviction that Herman was his father led me to believe that he was right. Bud's finding a relative makes the ending of this book satisfying.

Bud, Not Buddy

In Search of His Father

Can you imagine growing up without your mother and not knowing who your real father was? *Bud, Not Buddy* is a book a about a young boy who has no parents and is still in search of his father. Bud adventures across the state meeting new and peculiar people while in search for the man who he believes to be his dad.

Bud, Not Buddy keeps you entertained with all the drama that this young child is going through. This book is very descriptive and gives great detail about the places and people Bud visits. It presents itself with real life examples and enough description so that you're able to picture what Bud is seeing. For example, "The cooler was drenched with bags of blood and blood stained ice." A book like this puts you right in Bud's shoes.

Bud, Not Buddy targets audiences of all ages, from teens to young adults. The entire book has easy and understandable words which keep you from stumbling. Bud goes through tough times, so this storyline is appropriate for mature teens and young adults. The amount of emotion in this book might be too much for younger kids. For example, "My mom died when I was little." This might be something too overwhelming for younger children to imagine. Teens and young adults, though, will understand and enjoy this book.

Emotion is found throughout this book. In the beginning, you're sad because you find out what Bud is living through, and in the end the whole mood of the story changes to being much happier. Seeing Bud fight and strive toward his goal is what makes *Bud, Not Buddy* a great book. Bud's determination to find his father moves you as you read about his perseverance.

Everyone Has a Place to Belong

Bud, Not Buddy, by Christopher Paul Curtis, is a book to be enjoyed by old and young alike. The story, based on events that took place during the Great Depression, is told from a child's point of view. It shows an orphaned child's journey to find where he belongs in the world.

Bud lost his mother when he was only six years old and spent the last four years in foster families and group homes before he set off to find Mr. Herman E. Calloway, whom he thought must be his daddy. Even though his momma never told him who he was, he thinks the old fliers she left behind with Mr. Calloway's picture will lead him to his father. Thus begins his journey that will take readers off for a surprise ending.

It doesn't take but a minute for the reader to take to Bud. His humorous ways of looking at what happens to him makes the reader laugh out loud. He quotes from his book, "Bud Cadwell's Rules and Things for Having a Funner Life and Making a Better Liar Out of Yourself," throughout. Rule Number 87 is "When a Adult Tells You They Need Your Help with a Problem Get Ready to Be Tricked — Most Times This Means They Just Want You to Go Fetch Something for Them." Kids will really identify with such humor, bringing them deeper into the story.

There is a valuable lesson to be learned through this wonderfully written story: everyone has a place to belong. There are many children who may feel the same emotions Bud felt about losing his mother. Even those who do not can put themselves in his shoes.

Bud, Not Buddy is a well-written story with a realistic plot and a character readers can identify. It is sure to be a favorite book of many and well deserving of the Newberry award.

Lord of the Flies

The Movie was Good, the Book is Even Better

This enthralling novel of survival will have you thinking and wondering. After a plane full of British school boys crash land on a deserted island, sense and savagery collide. Without adults to provide a "column of strength," the boys are left to live on their own.

The boys started out as a united tribe of sorts, but somewhere down the line they begin to split. A small group of boys with the main character, Ralph, as their chief, believed that the most important thing was to keep a fire going and to be rescued. The other boys, lead by stubborn Jack, wanted to hunt and kill. This group was soon decorated in "war paint" and doing tribal dances around the fire.

As you read, you will most likely find yourself rooting for the sensible, protagonists of this story, but think about this: Do you think most people might end up acting the same way as the "savages" ended up? Is it not human nature to want to rule and survive? Can the boys be blamed for losing their heads, especially under the conditions they were in?

Symbolism Abounds

I have watched "horror" movies that scared me less than this book did. Equal parts *Robinson Caruso* and *Children of the Corn*, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding explores human nature in a way I've not seen before.

Stranded on a uninhabited island, a group of English boys are left to survive without the influence of an adult. Chaos slowly materializes as the boys gradually lose track of their main goal: to be rescued. Nighttime comes to symbolize fear and death as a mysterious "beast" rears its ugly head. Ralph and Piggy struggle to remain "civilized" while Jack and others begin to be absorbed by their animalistic urges.

One thing that stood out to me was Golding's use of imagery. From the tiniest details of the island to the almost palpable tension that develops, Golding does a magnificent job of portraying it all.

However, the aspect of this book that makes it outstanding is the psychology behind the story. As the children begin to realize that there are no adults to give them guidance, a darkness falls over them. Long term survival becomes secondary to the immediate need to have "fun." The children evolve from being hunted to being vicious hunters.

I highly recommend this as both a good story and as a psychological study. I believe it could be an invaluable guide for high school students leaving home for the first time and experiencing a sense of freedom that can parallel that of the boys in this novel. Even if you are well past that stage, it's worth reading to get an understanding of what people might be experiencing.

Lord of the Flies

Absolutely Devastating, Absolutely Essential

This wicked parable of society is firmly in the Top 10 novels of the 20th century.

If you're reading this review, I'll assume you're one of the few people that didn't have read *Lord of the Flies* at some point for high school or college. If so, there's no excuse for not picking it up immediately.

It starts, famously, with English schoolboys in an airplane crash on a deserted island in the wake of nuclear war (and — lest we be too hard on the boys — this point is deliberately made to show that adults fared no better than they will). The pilot, the only adult on board, is killed and the boys have to create a civilization from scratch.

Eventually factions are formed, and tensions arise between the "rescue" faction led by a boy named Ralph, which focuses on keeping their shelters in repair and a signal fire burning, and the "hunting" faction led by a boy named Jack, which becomes less focused on prioritizing rescue and slowly start to like their hunting a little too much.

Eventually the rescue faction dwindles to Ralph, Piggy, a stereotypical nerd who nevertheless becomes Ralph's firmest ally in keeping some kind of order, Sam and Eric, two basically decent twins, and Simon, a kind, painfully shy epileptic who has the firmest handle on what's really happening to them.

With things spinning out of control, Ralph and Piggy confront Jack to try to restore a semblance of sanity, while Simon faces psychic battle with the Lord of the Flies, who represents, depending on the reader, Simon's prodigious understanding of chaos, the evil within not only all the boys but all of us.

Absolutely Atrocious

Symbolism is nice and quite beautiful in some places and for certain writers, but this book had way too much of it. Golding's novel is horrendous. His absolutely mind-numbing style immediately drove me away and his tedious and unnecessary description wasn't at all striking. I'll give it a bit for having good description in a few places, but only a miniscule few.

But that isn't even the reason why I hate it somuch. What I found most unpleasantly appalling was the content of this so-called classic. It completely and utterly disappointed me in its horrific plot that I wouldn't even care to mention. Am I a happy-go-lucky reader? No. In fact, I quite often enjoy the sad and angry scenes in many novels, but there was an element of this one that I still can't quite name, and don't care to, that made those scenes so obtuse. This book should be completely wiped off and eradicated from the lists of classics to be read and analyzed in schools.

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry

A Powerful Book for Adolescents Learning About Courage

Mildred D. Taylor has given adolescent readers a powerful account of the Great Depression and the economic hardships it placed on many families, particularly blacks. As seen through the eyes of the Logan family, students learn about the inequalities between blacks and whites, beginning with the four Logan children being splattered by mud from a school bus that transported white children only. A further indignity occurs when the Logans are given dirty, tattered textbooks that have been discarded by the school for whites.

Much of what Taylor describes in this novel packs a strong punch for adolescents. Further, to fully understand the story's context, students need to understand a good deal of U. S. history, specifically, the Great Depression, the Restoration, the sharecropping system, and segregation practices in the South during this period. Yet, teachers and students who take on the challenge will be well rewarded.

Teachers and administrators in the Boston Public Schools have been so impressed by the powerful themes in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry,* that they have selected it as one of six core novels for sixth graders as part of the Max Warburg Courage Curriculum. The other five novels are: *Taking Sides, Number the Stars, Bridge to Terabithia, So Far from the Bamboo Grove,* and *Maniac Magee.* As with *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry,* each novel addresses the theme of courage — different types of courage, what it takes to act courageously, and how even small acts of courage can have enormous consequences in everyday life.

As an educational consultant for the Courage Curriculum, I highly recommend *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.* Taylor does not speak down to students. Instead she presents them with genuine characters in a drama that reflects the story-telling tradition she was steeped in as a child.

Don't Leave This One on the Shelf

In a word, I can describe this book as amazing. This book is about the Logans, a Black family living in Mississippi in the 1930's who overcome racial segregation and bias, struggle to stand up to their white neighbors, and fight to keep their land.

The land is the center of the Logan's love toward each other. Their land is what holds the family together. The story is written from the main character, Cassie's point of view. Taylor does a great job in maneuvering Cassie so she can overhear certain conversations that are important to the book's development.

I was introduced to this book when it was assigned as a literature study in my English class. Though I, along with others, groaned when the assignment was made, I must now take that moan back. Once I started, I couldn't stop. The author's suspense, humor, setting, and a great use of southern dialect for the dialogue make this book a hard one to put down.

Though I have only read this book once, I plan to read it many, many times in the future. Take my advice, this book is unbelievable. Don't let the dust gather on it too much longer; it deserves to be read and cherished.

Roll of Thunder

A Vert Good Book

Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry shows us the harsh realities of prejudice through the eyes of a child. I felt that this book helped me to understand prejudice in a more complex way. Ms. Mildred Taylor has a strong message and she chose to bring it to us through the young character, Cassie. I believe that she succeeded in sending this message.

In this story, Cassie is telling the story of her family and friends. I thought this was very well thought out, because sometimes children are set aside as "too young to understand", when in reality they are the ones who are witnessing it all. They are the ones that need to be taught about these hardships so they could understand. Ms. Taylor knew this very well. This is one of the book's strongest aspects. I feel that if this book would've been told through an adult's views, there would have been much more anger and hostility. When Cassie tells it, you see and almost feel the innocence that she has inside her. You see the problem of prejudice the way it should be seen, with a clear mind, so that it could be fixed.

The characters in this book were also very good. You had people of almost every personality, and almost every age. My favorite ones, however, were Little Man and Christopher-John. Although they were very close in age, they were also very different.

Christopher-John is much calmer about the things they go through. He seems to find a more cheerful way to deal with it instead of getting mad about the situation. He is the brighter figure in this book. Christopher-John is the one who could probably keep you from going and beating someone up. He could probably make you smile by simply looking at his face.

Little Man, on the other hand, gets very angry about their problems and doesn't stay quiet about it. He is young and chooses to just speak his mind. This could be a good or a bad thing. It could be good because you know how he feels and are able to help him with his feelings. However, it could be a very bad thing, considering their situation of prejudice. The white people did not tolerate the kind of behavior that Little Man portrayed. So he could've gotten in a lot of trouble. However, this is what makes him my favorite character. He speaks his mind and doesn't think anything of it.

Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry is a great book and I would recommend it to anyone over the age of ten. The reason I say ten is because I feel that that is the age when they would probably start to understand the hardships presented in this book. I thought this book was really good and I could tell you right now that I really do not like to read. So, for a book to be able to grab me the way this book did takes a very good book.

Romeo and Juliet

Innocent Young Love Doomed Due to Unavoidable Circumstances

At least that's what I feel should have been a worthy epitaph for these two ill-fated lovers. I read this classic work of fiction because I've never read anything by Shakespeare before. Being a romantic, I found it appealed to me as one unfathomable story of doomed love, and may I say the ending could not have been any other, even if it hadn't been a fictitious story. I agree with Ms. Paster, who in this edition gives a final, parallel account of the story in comparison to modern times; when she says that Romeo and Juliet's only way out to consummate their love was through death, because they had trespassed socially acceptable conventions of the era, and not just due to a family feud. This is true especially of Juliet, who, because she was a woman, had the least advantages and the most pressures to be married to someone previously chosen and approved by her father. She defies the world, literally, and runs to the arms of her Romeo to be married in secret. I cannot imagine the terrible strain and fear a woman would have gone through in the 1500's should she choose to follow her heart in such a way. I find Juliet, in this sense, a true pioneer of women's rights. She definitely risks it all, defying even her own father (the man who would "owned" her until she got married). The passage where he confronts her about her arranged marriage to Count Paris has to be one of the cruelest speeches in classic literature. She certainly would have to make use of a humongous supply of nerve to defy convention.

Romeo, on his behalf, is truly besotted with Juliet. He admires her beauty more than her courage and, like most men when in love, shows himself a pathetic spectacle. However, he loves her and cannot live without her. He only has eyes and, what's really important, heart for her. That is why, when he receives news of her death, he decides to go to her tomb and kill himself there. The ill-fated destiny plays these lovers a bad hand when Romeo does not get a letter in time explaining his beloved's circumstances for her death.

I enjoyed Shakespeare's language the most during the first half of the book. When Romeo climbs to Juliet's window and stays with her for a few hours in the night (the only time the young lovers have for each other throughout the play). He expresses his love with unforgettable lines. He wishes he would be someone else, so that he could love her freely: "Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized." (2.2.54)

This edition by the Folger Library has new comments and offers historical background on the life of William Shakespeare as well his times and his theatre. Dimensions of The Globe and explanations on how the plays were acted are shown in detail; together with illustrations of engravings of the period. It all helps to give a good understanding of the play. If, like me, you are new to Shakespeare, you will find the left pages in the book an invaluable resource since they are like a mini-dictionary clarifying words, idiomatic expressions of the era and even full verses. Above all, fear not; dare to dive into this torrent of love.

Romeo and Juliet

Not Shakespeare's Greatest Work; Read His Other Plays

I love the works of Shakespeare. They offer life, comedy, tragedy, love, and more, but of all Shakespeare's plays, *Romeo and Juliet* ranks very low.

The story is rather tragic, but it is unoriginal and over done (asit was even in Shakespeare's time). After all, Shakespeare got it from another contemporary story which got it from another story and so on. It is also rather extreme and unrealistic. Many say it is the perfect teen love story, however, it does little to explore true love. Bring me proof that "love at first site" can actually exist and I might consider this a realistic love story that real people can relate to.

Many educators wonder why so many children and teenagers are so uninterested in Shakespeare. Perhaps it is because they are required to read this particular play. For those who love tragedy, I recommend *Othello* or *Odepius Rex*, and for those who like Shakespeare, I recommend *Much Ado About Nothing, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Tempest,* the history plays (i.e. *Henry IV, Henry V,* etc.) and almost any other play by Shakespeare, except *Romeo and Juliet!*

Give Me a Break

I'm sorry, but this was awful. You can burn me for a heretic, but it was. It was supposed to be tragic; I thought it was hilarious.

First, everybody says that Romeo and Juliet were lovers torn apart by fate. Fate had nothing to do with it. They died through sheer stupidity and melodrama on their part. Had they not been so hasty, they both would have come out alive.

Second, the characterization was extremely shallow and one-dimensional. Third, Romeo and Juliet weren't "in love" at all. How can you love someone you've known for all of five minutes? When they meet at the Capulet party, all Romeo does is ramble about pilgrims and hands and prayer. Then he leaves and Juliet declares she's in love. They didn't even have a real conversation.

On the plus side, the language was very pretty, once you got used to it, although it did become irritating by the end. Sometimes you wish someone would just say something straight out, instead of dressing it up with so many frills and flowers you don't know what they're trying to say. But I have nothing against Shakespearean English.

If you want to read good Shakespearean tragedy, read *Macbeth*. Now that was good. *Julius Caesar* wasn't too bad either. And if you want a good comedy by the Bard, go with *Much Ado About Nothing.* But don't waste your time on this one unless you have to. It was that bad.

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On the Reactions of Other Readers

I have heard that this book has been banned from some schools, and personally, I think that is ridiculous. These are the only reasons that the book has been banned: a 12 year old having sensual feelings toward a girl he likes, and injecting a deadly needle into someone who is being released. OK, well the injecting is not really pleasant, but the reader does not need to focus on that. For this book focuses on more important issues that that.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

I'll be the first to confess to a cultural Achilles' heel that runs up my back, over my skull, and down to the unlovely bags under my eyes. As such, I am frequently at a loss to understand what the fuss is about. And it is perhaps for this reason that I still remain perplexed — nay flummoxed — by the cult status of this book and that of its repulsive protagonist, Holden Caulfield.

—Excerpt from a review of *Catcher in the Rye*

While reading some of the reviews that gave the book less than five stars, I was simply shocked. I loved this book. I believe I have three copies at home, and I've read it at least eight times. Some of the reasons people gave for not liking the book were that the novel was confusing, they didn't like the ending, it didn't explain things enough, or (and this is the worst) it was "disturbing." I'm sorry, people, but that is the whole point of the book.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

As for the people who thought the author didn't explain things enough, just deal with it. The author wrote the book the way the author wanted to write the book, and maybe the explanations have a reason for being ambiguous. The novel isn't a detailed science report, it is a book with a message, and the author is entitled to whatever poetic license the author wants. Think about the ambiguity and maybe there is a purpose behind it. Facts that don't illuminate the message would just detract and confuse people.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

There are a few books released every year that gain both wide-ranging critical acclaim and deep popular support. They are few and far between, and fewer still when they stir up as much controversy as has *The Giver*. Personally, I don't see what all the controversy is about; everything in here that could possibly be seen as questionable is an echo of a canonized piece of science fiction. Yet, as soon as you try to boil down the classics for the kid-lit crowd, hackles get raised.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

The only dispassionate thing one can say about J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is that it is a book that cannot be read dispassionately; both its numerous supporters and detractors are equally ardent in their respective admiration and disdain.

—Excerpt from a review of *Catcher in the Rye*

On the Reactions of Other Readers

I am ashamed of my kinsmen. Why? Because I believe in God, and I believe in the Good, but I have been ashamed to read the misanthropic and vindictive attacks upon this book by people who claim to share my beliefs and values.

Harry Potter is a magnificent and fascinating book. There is nothing at all offensive about witchcraft or sorcery as portrayed within it, it is about the ultimate use of powers for the proper ends. Even the deceit is justified, following soul-searching and worries. That is life, and sometimes I suppose some people feel that it's better not to know such things. I disagree.

—Excerpt from a review of *Catcher in the Rye*

If your child cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality at 8 years old, what kind of parent can you have been? There is fantasy everywhere. Even the wholesome *Sesame Street* is a fantasy. Do children grow up thinking that birds talk, and that monsters live in garbage cans? No. So why pick on this immensely popular book? It is a much, much better book than most books written for children. Long live *Harry Potter.*

—Excerpt from a review of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

I understand that the use of this book in classrooms is frequently challenged by parents. If the reason for this is that they feel that the central crisis of the book may be too intense for children, I can sympathize with their feeling. But it seems like an intensity that is well worth their children's while. Ms. Paterson handles the situation quite beautifully and affords a real opportunity for parents to discuss the matter of death with their kids, a topic which most families hopefully haven't much had to cope with. Reading the book is a difficult emotional experience, but better to first confront these emotions in a controlled fictional setting and begin to learn how to deal with them, than to remain totally sheltered and have to deal with them, completely unprepared, when the tragedy is real.

—Excerpt from a review of *Bridge toTerabithia*

On the Author

Salinger is a riveting personality in his own right, and also a great anti-hero, exemplified by his resolution never talk to a single critic about this book, with the sole exception of a girl writing for her high school newspaper. Maybe he was tired of over-serious, over-credentialed literati types, who are too late and too ill-equipped to redeem their ponderous and boring lives from their earlier failure to embrace a little more spontaneity, a little more fun, a little more high school newspaper derring-do.

—Excerpt from a review of *Catcher in the Rye*

On the Main Character

In the beginning of the book I think Stanley was very lonely. It never mentioned anything about him having a friend. He seemed to hate his life. He was always glum and depressed.

—Excerpt from a review of *Holes*

Holden is a jackass. He's a spoiled prep school jerk who's so sickeningly self-involved that he has no clue that the people around him exist as anything other than background figures in the melodrama going on entirely in his own head. He constantly refers to anything that doesn't meet with his schoolboy approval as "corny" and labors under the delusion that he's the first person who ever noticed that the transition out of childhood is awkward and uncomfortable. Listen, you pompous little spud, we all go through it, and it's about as cosmically significant as a crumpled wad of used Kleenex.

—Excerpt from a review of *Catcher in the Rye*

Is Holden Caulfield the voice of a generation? I hope not. He is undisputedly a depressed, hormonal teenager. He is not, however, hip, edgy or worth reading about. Holden Caulfield is, in his own famous words, completely and utterly "phony."

—Excerpt from a review of *Catcher in the Rye*

Maniac Magee is a homeless kid who lost his parents in a trolley accident. He's really unusual. He is famous for running everywhere. He's so fast no one can beat him. He's really good at sports. He can untie complicated knots. Little kids bring him all their problems and he helps solve them. He wins a lifetime supply of pizza but he's allergic to pizza. Everyone loves him — well, almost everyone. That's what bothers him and keeps him running all night. Maniac doesn't see any bad in people. He keeps thinking they're nice. But some are so mean that he finally figures out they don't like him. He blames himself.

—Excerpt from a review of *Maniac Magee*

On the Reader's Favorite Part

This is an excellent book with many interesting incidents, but my favorite part occurs near the end, when Bud shows Herman E. Calloway his collection of rocks with the writing on them that his mother had given him. This is the most suspenseful episode because at this point, Herman looks ready to give Bud a beating because he thinks Bud stole them from him, and Bud appears ready to prove that Herman is really his father. When Bud insists that he had received them from his mother, Herman demands that Bud reveal his mother's name. When Bud says that her name is Angela Janet, Herman looks stunned. Soon, Bud finds out that Herman is really his grandfather on his mother's side of the family, not his long-lost father.

—Excerpt from a review of *Bud, Not Buddy*

On Making a Recommendation

If you are wanting a simple read, just to take your mind off life, I do not recommend this book. The book is thought-provoking. Lessons are revealed on many levels, and after many reads. If you find the book confusing, stick with it, read it again, and again, and I guarantee it will make sense.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

Don't just take a shallow view of this book. If you want shallow, read *The Boxcar Children.* This book is for kids, a lesson against peer pressure, but also for anyone who is willing to take the author's challenge and actually THINK for once.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

I believe this book should not be intended for children or young adults. I think it should be for people 14 years and up. This book should not have been made for everyone because it shows a kid that committing suicide will get you out of a problem or a bad situation.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

I highly recommend *Holes* to most readers all around the world because I think they will learn a lot and I'm sure they will enjoy it. They will think about life and take it more seriously. They will also think twice before doing anything bad.

—Excerpt from a review of *Holes*

So much has been written about this wonderful book and its sequels, but I really must add that not only should author Rowling be feted for creating books that kids really want to read, book after marvelous book, adults who avoid them are also missing a lot. While never wavering from her entirely readable prose, the author flawlessly interweaves endless references, allusions, and myriad other techniques and devices which move her work from the merely grand books for the "tweenager" to something considerably more literate and "critically sound," in its most erudite and arrogant connotation.

—Excerpt from a review of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

If you're into modern-day tall tales and you have not yet read this book, then my advice is to run as fast as Maniac would to the nearest book store or library today.

—Excerpt from a review of *Maniac Magee*

I highly recommend this as both a good story and as a psychological study. I believe it could be an invaluable guide for high school students leaving home for the first time and experiencing a sense of freedom that can parallel that of the boys in this novel. Even if you are well past that stage, it's worth reading to get an understanding of what people might be experiencing.

—Excerpt from a review of *Lord of the Flies*

On How the Book Affects the Reader

In this book, Lowry captures your heart and soul. She makes you think about the things in life we take for granted and what you would do without them. She makes you realize that there is no perfect world.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

This book has changed my life forever and I will always treasure the memory of reading it.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

This book haunted my sleep and thoughts for quite a while. I pulled this book from my elementary school library shelves.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

This book haunts me in my sleep and I am 12. I'm not scared of hardly anything but this book scared me. Just think about it, would you want your child to be reading a book where a 12 year old washes and cleans an elderly person? Would you want your child to be reading a book where somebody injects a baby in the head with some sort of liquid? Would you want your child to be reading a book where a boy dreams of bathing a girl in his sleep? If I could, I would ban this book in any library or store. Because of these reasons, I think *The Giver* is a terrible book. I wish I'd never had to read it.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

This is an exciting and exhilarating story that will amaze you. Your breath will be taken away by Stanley's actions and how he slips out of the Warden's grasp. But can he do this forever? Don't be surprised if you can't put the book down because that is what happened to me when I read the fabulous book *Holes*.

—Excerpt from a review of *Holes*

I've read this book many times over the years, from my first encounter in high school, to the most recent times, discussing it with my high-school children as they read it for the first time. Each time I read it, I'm struck more deeply by how truly it captures the rebellion, exhilaration, worry, fear, and rootless wandering which faced or faces us all as we journey from youth to adulthood.

—Excerpt from a review of *Catcher in the Rye*

On How the Book Affects the Reader

After you read *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield will live on in your mind, hanging around, speaking through you, informing the way you think of yourself and others. It's a masterpiece of writing, in which the author clearly and completely presents to you another person's mind and soul.

—Excerpt from a review of *Catcher in the Rye*

The book transforms kids from book-bored to book-possible. I have never come across, in 30 years of work with kids, one young person, in any culture, of either gender, who having read the book, (implying that they could), did not love it. They claim it, and feel as though it were a personal match, ("That's how I feeel!") They are still, of course, in a state of complete self-centeredness. They join with it in symbolic affiliation.

—Excerpt from a review of *Catcher in the Rye*

This was a very sad, very difficult book. Not because of difficult language or readability, but because of the intense lessons it teaches about grieving and death. This book cannot be read lightly. It takes you through the main character's process of making a new friend, learning to love and trust her, having that trust betrayed, and finally, learning to move on with his life. Despite its deep and painful context, this book was very worthwhile, and I completely reccommend you give it a try.

—Excerpt from a review of *Bridge to Terabithia*

Okay, before I make this unmanly confession, let me first state in my own defense that I have two small children and I was listening to the conclusion of this book at a very early hour, before I'd even had breakfast to fortify me for the day. That said, I'll now acknowledge that I very nearly started sobbing.

—Excerpt from a review of *Bridge to Terabithia*

On the Edition Being Reviewed

This edition by the Folger Library has new comments and offers historical background on the life of William Shakespeare as well his times and his theatre. Dimensions of The Globe and explanations on how the plays were acted are shown in detail; together with illustrations of engravings of the period. It all helps to give a good understanding of the play. If, like me, you are new to Shakespeare, you will find the left pages in the book an invaluable resource since they are like a mini-dictionary clarifying words, idiomatic expressions of the era and even full verses.

—Excerpt from a review of *Romeo and Juliet*

On Themes

This book preaches on the dangers of conformity as the supreme value.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

A question Louis Sachar might want us to ask is, Is life fair? Based on the book, I would answer that life can be fair, even though it might not seem like it. Life wasn't fair for Stanley because something bad was always waiting around the corner ready to spring on him. But in the end, life was fair for Stanley because he persevered and got rewarded by making a life-long friend, finding treasure and getting released from Camp Green Lake.

—Excerpt from a review of *Holes*

It might be that Salinger invented adolescence. Previous to this American standard or classic, whichever you choose, we were a less adolescent-obsessed, less teen-preoccupied society. That maligned condition has since expanded by many years. It now starts at 11 and ends around 32. Give or take.

—Excerpt from a review of *Catcher in the Rye*

The whole catching image articulated by irresponsible young Holden is hard to understand, too, and who really knows what a field of rye looks like anyway? Why the cliff? Could it be that being caught in a big whopping lie is like suddenly falling over a cliff? No way to repair it? Just time for sudden, dramatic consequences?

—Excerpt from a review of *Catcher in the Rye*

Interestingly, the novel does not make any fixed judgments about running away. First it seems to say that running away is not the answer and that homes must be worked on as much as found. Then it reminds us that Maniac would not have found his home had he not run away to look for it in the first place.

—Excerpt from a review of *Maniac Magee*

But this book is more than just a meaningless yet prettily written fantasy. L'Engle's unique and moving thoughts on good and evil, as well as our responsibility towards fighting evil are readily apparent in this book. Some very profound things are said, and some very profound concepts are embedded where you'd least expect them.

—Excerpt from a review of *A Wrinkle in Time*

As you read, you will most likely find yourself rooting for the sensible, protagonists of this story, but think about this: Do you think most people might end up acting the same way as the "savages" ended up? Is it not human nature to want to rule and survive? Can the boys be blamed for losing their heads, especially under the conditions they were in?

—Excerpt from a review of *Lord of the Flies*

On Why the Reader Liked the Book

I loved *The Giver* because the plot was very creative, the theme was magnificent, and the setting was vivid.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

The language is crisp, funny, never lags. Holden Caulfield's adventures catch and keep our interest, and we care what happens to him as we accompany him through his wanderings. But the thing that strikes me after all these years is how deeply JD Salinger captured the feelings that Holden was living with each day: What happens to those ducks in winter, what happens to us all as our warm and safe childhood lives slowly become the cold, hard, unyielding lives of adulthood, and who is there to catch us as we pass through the rye? Does anyone look out for us any more? Are we alone, on our own?

—Excerpt from a review of *Catcher in the Rye*

The book is great because it gives you a chance to see the world in a different way. If you ever wanted to know what life would be like if you just gave up, this book gives you a chance to explore that in great depth, in the most extreme way, as opposed to the idiotic-American-Pie, mushy-teen-coming-of-age-romance way we see in too many movies and TV shows. And there is a sort-of plot, and there is some heart to it, especially in the scenes where Holden's with his little sister. It's almost adorable.

—Excerpt from a review of *Catcher in the Rye*

The book is imaginative and thrilling, with genuine originality used to spice up a well-trodden theme (*The Worst Witch* school stories, for example, predate the idea of a school for witchcraft), and references to the ancient myths. Thus, it is educational. It informs you about such things as mandrakes, unicorns, phoenix, and the like, and about the myths and legends connected to those beasts.

The book encourages you to imagine and to think for yourself. It was truly frightening, but everything ended happily and satisfactorily. The plot was logical enough for a child, yet elaborate enough to please the mature mind.

—Excerpt from a review of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

Paterson develops the characters so well that they seem real. She gives an accurate description of their lives and of the events that occur on the playground. The reader can relate to the things that happen to Jesse and Leslie and how they handle these things. Paterson shows the reader that a boy-girl friendship can happen and that it can be a great one. She does an excellent job of making this story come alive for the reader.

—Excerpt from a review of *Bridge to Terabithia*

On Why the Reader Didn't Like the Book

The story is about a kid who gets sent to court and then out to a boy's camp for a crime he did not do (stealing a pair of shoes). He meets some kids out there, becomes buddies with them, and near the end makes a break for home with one of them named Zero.

Being a fan of jail break stories, I thought the book sounded pretty good. Boy, was I wrong about that.

The story was totally unbelievable, is over done, and makes no sense at all. I should have thought more about what I was getting into. I could see where a little kid would like this, or someone who does not think about the realism of what they are reading. This book had lots of holes in it.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

One review I read was by a mother whose third and fifth grade children had enjoyed this book. That proved my suspicion that *Holes* would be nothing more than a sugar coated children's book. Which brings me back to my question: Where have all the real books gone?

—Excerpt from a review of *Holes*

First of all, I can see why people might like this book. J.D. Salinger writes well, and this novel was certainly different from anything else being published at the time. However, I think this book stinks. Why? You see, the backbone of the book is the protagonist, the self-absorbed, shallow, wimpy, bitchy, neurotic Holden Caulfield. *Catcher in The Rye* is basically the ramblings of a lame character, and if you can't stomach Holden's incessant whining there is nothing else to enjoy.

—Excerpt from a review of *Catcher in the Rye*

What a prison of pessimism. Reading *Catcher in the Rye* felt like bathing in a toxic waste plant.

T.S. Elliot said, "April is the cruelest month" of the year because the sun reveals some things we'd rather not see. Likewise, Salinger's work conjures up the darkest memories of adolescence, memories I'd ceremoniously burned (along with my acid wash jeans and Debbie Gibson cassettes) years ago.

—Excerpt from a review of *Catcher in the Rye*

I am a fifteen-year-old girl whose friends adore *Harry Potter*. I read this book in an attempt to see whether it would live up to all the hype surrounding it. I thought that I would perhaps enjoy it, as I am normally a big fan of "different world" stories. Boy, was I disappointed.

My literature teacher once put books into two different categories: thinking books and non-thinking books. *Harry Potter* belongs in the latter. This is a book that will go in one ear and out the other, not something that will stay with you for years on end. If this book ever becomes as "classic" as *Cinderella* or *Snow White,* the world will have lost its mind.

—Excerpt from a review of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

On Why the Reader Didn't Like the Book

I found this book to be very depressing. Jess Aaron's parents are horrible parents and his sisters are the same, except for Mae Belle. The only uplifting point in this book is when he meets Leslie Burk, but that also ends tragically. I do not believe that the author did enough foreshadowing for the awful event that happens near the end of the book. It was a total shock! She could have done a better job warning the reader ahead of time, especially because this is a children's book. One of the main reasons that children read is for pleasure, and there is nothing pleasurable about this book. The tone was extremely sad throughout most of the book. The only reason I liked it at all is because I like Katherine Paterson as an author and it is well written, but I really think she has many other better books out there. This book was too depressing for me to read. I prefer something a little bit more uplifting.

—Excerpt from a review of *Bridge to Terabithia*

Symbolism is nice and quite beautiful in some places and for certain writers, but this book had way too much of it. Golding's novel is horrendous. His absolutely mind-numbing style immediately drove me away and his tedious and unnecessary description wasn't at all striking. I'll give it a bit for having good description in a few places, but only a miniscule few.

—Excerpt from a review of *Lord of the Flies*

I love the works of Shakespeare. They offer life, comedy, tragedy, love, and more, but of all Shakespeare's plays, *Romeo and Juliet* ranks very low. The story is rather tragic, but it is unoriginal and over done (as it was even in Shakespeare's time). After all, Shakespeare got it from another contemporary story which got it from another story and so on. It is also rather extreme and unrealistic. Many say it is the perfect teen love story, however, it does little to explore true love. Bring me proof that "love at first site" can actually exist and I might consider this a realistic love story that real people can relate to.

—Excerpt from a review of *Romeo and Juliet*

I'm sorry, but this was awful. You can burn me for a heretic, but it was. It was supposed to be tragic; I thought it was hilarious. First, everybody says that Romeo and Juliet were lovers torn apart by fate. Fate had nothing to do with it. They died through sheer stupidity and melodrama on their part. Had they not been so hasty, they both would have come out alive. Second, the characterization was extremely shallow and one-dimensional. Third, Romeo and Juliet weren't "in love" at all. How can you love someone you've known for all of five minutes? When they meet at the Capulet party, all Romeo does is ramble about pilgrims and hands and prayer. Then he leaves and Juliet declares she's in love. They didn't even have a real conversation.

—Excerpt from a review of *Romeo and Juliet*

On Relating to the Main Character

I AM HOLDEN CAULFIELD. Well, not literally and exactly. But almost. Holden is an extraordinary character. His absolute terror of leaving the wonderful, innocent, carefree world of youth is something everyone can relate to. I'm about to graduate from high school, and even though I'm excited to be a free, independent adult, I can't help but be terrified of the corruption and hard reality that lays ahead, which I have been blind to, as a young person. I mean—who wouldn't miss being a kid?—living at home for free, not having to do anything or be responsible for yourself or anyone. Holden embodies this. To me, that's what I related to most from the book.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Catcher in the Rye*

Holden Caulfield is not someone I can relate to, nor do I see similarities between him and my peers. He's like the weirdo in high school you felt sorry for but made fun of anyway. I have absolutely no sympathy for Holden. He's a stereotypical rich, privileged snob, and too stupid to realize that he's as affected and materialistic as the "phony" people he despises.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Catcher in the Rye*

It doesn't take but a minute for the reader to take to Bud. His humorous ways of looking at what happens to him makes the reader laugh out loud. He quotes from his book, "Bud Cadwell's Rules and Things for Having a Funner Life and Making a Better Liar Out of Yourself," throughout. Rule Number 87 is "When a Adult Tells You They Need Your Help with a Problem Get Ready to Be Tricked — Most Times This Means They Just Want You to Go Fetch Something for Them." Kids will really identify with such humor, bringing them deeper into the story.

—Excerpt from a review of *Bud, Not Buddy*

On the Problem or Conflict

Holden's problem is as old as Hamlet's, probably as old as mankind itself — a struggle to find purity of purpose amid intense feelings of fright and confusion toward the strangeness of human behavior. While Holden's various adventures alternately amuse and move the reader, the novel's real heart lies in his relationship with his sister Phoebe, who manages to be cute, earnest, and intelligent all at once; their climactic encounter near the end has the force of genuine tragedy.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Catcher in the Rye*

On How the Book Compares to Others

My son's 6th grade teacher read *The Giver* to his class a few months ago. I am into children's literature of all types and I as his mother like to read what he is assigned in his class. I was very disappointed with *The Giver*. *Number The Stars* was absolutely 5 star fabulous. But, *The Giver* — too adult for one

Number The Stars was clean and uplifting in all regards. Ms. Lowry has such a gift for writing. I'd like to see her keep to clean, uplifting, inspiring content. Good books are my escape from society's ills. *The Giver* reminded me too much of our own social problems.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

This is a fun and serious book with a pack of kids just like such great movies as *Stand by Me,* or *Sandlot,* with a touch of *Lord of the Flies*.

—Excerpt from a review of *Holes*

The novel is already noteworthy on the strength of its style, which represents the culmination in the development of a distinctive American idiom — a process begun by Hemingway and continued by the likes of Hammett and Chandler. In the deceptively simple voice of Holden Caulfield, Salinger strikes a tricky balance between slang and profundity that many writers have since striven for, but rarely duplicated. Holden may or may not be "phony" himself, but his voice is most decidedly not, as it is free of pretension or self-consciousness.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Catcher in the Rye*

The difference between this book and other books is the immediacy of the writing. From the famous first sentence, Holden Caulfield talks to you as a real confidant. You are immediately his best friend. He confides his private thoughts to you without any hesitation as to your relationship to him. There is an unspoken conclusion that he needs to talk to you about. And he needs you now.

David Copperfield, which opens with that other famous first sentence, addresses you formally. His verbs are properly conjugated, his diction is polished. David does not get close to you. He tells you his story from the podium. Thomas Hardy tells a good story. He converses plainly and directly to the reader. Dickens addresses the reader skillfully and stylishly. Salinger confides. This is the immediacy of the novel.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Catcher in the Rye*

Plot. Character. Incredible settings. It's all there, but thankfully, blessedly, there's so much more. Authors like Rowling and the wickedly wondrous Lemony Snicket are raising the standard for quality children's literature to where it should always have been: identical to that of any great writing.

—Excerpt from a review of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

On the World of the Book

Jonas lives in world where everything is under control. Everything is planned out for everyone, and everyone is the same. If someone breaks a rule, they are released from the community.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

In the book there is a world with no pain or suffering and the people who live there are always protected. It sounds like a place you'd want to live but after you read it you just might change your mind!

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

I think that Lois Lowry has created a world like this to show us that our life — with all its positive and negative sides — is better than living in n utopia without the thing that made us human-beings human beings: our humanity.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

On the Book's Organization

Twisted into this book is a second and third plot line: another plot about Elya Yelnats, Stanley's "no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing great-great-grandfather", Madame Zeroni, and one about an outlaw, Kissin' Kate Barlow. In the end, all three plots are tied together so that everything fits perfectly like a jigsaw puzzle.

—Excerpt from a review of *Holes*

You might be wondering why Louis Sachar wrote *Holes*. He got the idea of writing this when he moved to Austin, Texas. It was so hot in Texas that he decided to write a story about suffering in the scorching heat.

—Excerpt from a review of *Holes*

In 1976, Katherine Paterson's son David was 8 years old when his friend, Lisa Hill, was struck by lightning and killed. A year later *Bridge to Terabithia* was published, winning a Newberry Medal and becoming, if such a thing is possible, an instant classic. Ms Paterson drew upon this personal tragedy to create the story of a boy, Jess Aarons, and a girl, Leslie Burke, in rural Virginia, who become the best of friends.

—Excerpt from a review of *Bridge to Terabithia*

On the Main Idea

The Giver gives an important message to people: Living in a world where there is independence and choices is better than living in a world where everything is perfect.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

In *Holes,* Louis Sachar wants you to know that you can't control things that happen in life. For example, Stanley couldn't control the fact that he was falsely accused of stealing shoes and ended up at Camp Greenlake. Zero couldn't control the fact that his mother left him one day and never came back.

—Excerpt from a review of *Holes*

There is a valuable lesson to be learned through this wonderfully written story: everyone has a place to belong. There are many children who may feel the same emotions Bud felt about losing his mother. Even those who do not can put themselves in his shoes.

—Excerpt from a review of *Bud, Not Buddy*

On the Author's Technique

Lois Lowry did an awesome job making this book. I like the way she always kind of hinted that the perfect world was not that good after all.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

Lowry sets things up well. There's a wonderful revelation about halfway through the book that alone is worth the price of admission when Jonas figures out the he sees things (literally) quite different than everyone else. Lowry has managed throughout the beginning of the book to lull the reader into such a state that the reader hasn't even realized what it is that's missing.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

One thing that stood out to me was Golding's use of imagery. From the tiniest details of the island to the almost palpable tension that develops, Golding does a magnificent job of portraying it all.

—Excerpt from a review of *Lord of the Flies*

On the Ending

The ending of the novel is just another method the author uses of involving the reader, making the reader think. I won't describe it (you'd all hate me forever), but the ending is basically a fill in the blank. It kills me every time I read it, but every time, I fill in the blank with hope. You'll understand when you get there. Basically, it is ambiguous for a reason. The question the author is asking you is, how will you make the story end? Will you give up your humanity for peace and contentment and boredom, or will you fight for your right to feel, and see, and think?

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

The mysterious ending leaves one filled with curiosity and wonder.

—Excerpt from a review of *The Giver*

On Why the Reader Read the Book

When I first endured this merciless literary thumbscrew, it was in the late 1970s, at the behest of a high school English teacher who wore clogs, wooden jewelry, and ambulatory tents made of faded denim. She believed with almost anguished sincerity that her students would "connect" with Holden, or find something "relevant" in the book.

—Excerpt from a review of *Catcher in the Rye*

I was introduced to this book when it was assigned as a literature study in my English class. Though I, along with others, groaned when the assignment was made, I must now take that moan back. Once I started, I couldn't stop. The author's suspense, humor, setting, and a great use of southern dialect for the dialogue make this book a hard one to put down.

—Excerpt from a review of *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*

On the Book's Reading Level

It's written in a simple manner so it is easy to read and could probably be read by a 9-year-old, yet the plot is fully developed.

—Excerpt from a review of *Holes*

Bud, Not Buddy targets audiences of all ages, from teens to young adults. The entire book has easy and understandable words which keep you from stumbling.

—Excerpt from a review of *Bud, Not Buddy*

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- **People.** *Individuals and interactions* over policy and politics;
- **Achievement.** *Maximum potential* over minimum competence;
- **Courage.** *Fierce collaboration* over comfortable compromise;
- **Agility.** *Responding to change* over following a plan.

The items on the right are important, but we value the items on the left more.

Agile Transformation is grounded in two principles: **(1)** People are more successful when they enjoy their work; and **(2)** Schools are more successful when they support people in developing the autonomy, competence, and relatedness that makes their work more enjoyable. Features of *Agile Transformation* include:

- **Paired Practice.** Nobody works alone. Everyone has a team and a teammate.
- **Rapid Iteration.** Sprint through big problems one small problem at a time.
- **Making Sense.** What do we do? Why do we do it? How do we know it works?
- **"Stand Up" Sessions.** What did you do yesterday? What are you doing today? What do you need to be successful? Agile leaders remove impediments.
- **Successful Failure.** Fail fast, fail smart. No blame games. Apply what you learn as you move closer to your goal with each iteration.
- **Souls and Roles.** Aligning what we do with who we are.
- **"Just in Time" Solutions.** Handle problems as they arise. Respond as needed.

"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Essential Elements of Agile Schools

The Qualities of Effective Educational Communities

1. **Agile schools work because people choose to make them work.** We believe in freedom of choice, and that making the choice to participate fully in teaching, learning, and leading is the most important choice we can make.
2. **Agile schools love to learn.** We believe that learning is inherently enjoyable and that giving learners a responsible degree of autonomy in their individual pursuit of knowledge and skill makes it even more so. Agile educators are learners, too.
3. **Agile schools take a constructive approach to failure.** We believe failure is a normal part of success. Kids struggle to learn. Teachers struggle to teach. Administrators struggle to lead. We all experience failure on the way to solving new problems. The faster we fail, the more solutions we try. The smarter we fail, the more knowledge we bring to the next iteration. Instead of looking back at problems, Agile schools look forward to solving them.
4. **Agile schools are always getting better.** We believe there's almost always a better way of doing something, and that it's almost always worthwhile trying to figure out what that better way is. Agile schools value progress, and the appropriate measurement thereof, because progress is the true indicator of learning.
5. **Agile schools empower people to empower others.** We believe that individuals—not systems or policies—are the true sources of power in our schools. Our responsibility is to use our power in service of the greater good, and to teach students how to use their power that way, too.
6. **Agile schools achieve extraordinary results.** We believe in transformative learning that goes far beyond incremental improvements in test scores. Adults in Agile schools also strive for extraordinary achievement in their profession as well.

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TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Essential Elements

continued...

7. **Agile schools are based on deeply-held beliefs, clearly-articulated values, and a firmly-rooted sense of commitment.** We believe that the most successful schools are those run by people who know what matters most to them and who possess an unshakable determination to get it.

8. **Agile schools are communities where people make a difference and connect with something greater than themselves.** We believe that the drive to contribute is part of human nature. Our role is to guide people in directing their contribution toward its highest and best use.

9. **Agile schools value ownership, positive attitudes, high expectations, and unwavering optimism.** We believe that making a good life is about making good choices, that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right, and that self-mastery is the key to its rightful exercise.

10. **Agile schools embrace the risk inherent in the achievement of great things.** We educate for maximum potential not minimum competence. We believe that all learners have within them extraordinary strengths and untapped resources, and that learning is only limited by our willingness to attempt what has never before been attempted. We welcome change, we innovate, and we seek out challenges that organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.

11. **Agile schools affirm self-knowledge as the most valuable knowledge and self-determination as the most basic right.** We believe that introspection, self-disclosure, and intellectual honesty are essential to personal transformation. We seek to support young people in becoming the adults they want to be.

12. **Agile schools are communities where no one is above the rules, everyone has a voice, freedom is sacred, equity and excellence are not mutually exclusive, and the highest goal of education is contributing to the present and future well-being of individuals who can thrive independently in a modern democracy.** Agile schools value college preparation, career fulfillment, and engaged citizenship, but we value something else even more. Collegiate, career, and civic achievement are important, but they are means to ends, not ends in themselves. Human happiness, meaningful contribution, and sustained well-being of self and community are the ultimate ends to which Agile schools aspire on behalf of the children and families we serve.

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