

Teens Take

Time to Listen

When You

Make Time to

Read Aloud

► ALISON M. G. FOLLOS

When I was a child, my father used to say, “You think logically.” I wasn’t sure if it was a compliment or a criticism. Fifteen years ago, I began what we call “Reader’s Workshop” in our school. In essence, Reader’s Workshop is a children’s and young adult (YA) book club—a literature appreciation class that intentionally delivers story by reading out loud. For the nonreader, it puts good stories into their lives. For the reader, it puts more good stories into their lives. I was sick of hearing students *boast*, “I hate reading.” Introducing books that are likely to enthrall and entertain a listener was my logical solution.

At our junior boarding school in upstate New York, our read-aloud class for middle grade students serves a single purpose: getting books to students who would otherwise miss or ignore them. As one student wrote, “I’m a big reader, so I like having a class that’s all about books. But Reader’s Workshop introduces me to stories that I wouldn’t necessarily pick out on my own. Also you always ask us a lot of questions, and so it makes me think differently about a book than when I just read on my own.”

Our read-aloud class tells students a story slowly, so the listeners hear it, absorb it, and tap into their intellectual and imaginative resources. This process is internally empowering. The listener is in charge, responsible for the magnitude of involvement and entertainment. I strive to select material that is immediately engaging

TEENS READ—BUT AT WARP SPEED

At the June 2006 American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference in New Orleans, outgoing president Michael Gorman

welcomed noted scholar Dr. Kevin Starr, an advocate for the “importance of reading and literacy to society and the life of the mind.”

During their session, “Reading: The Essential Skill,” they discussed the literate, illiterate, and alliterate cultures in our country. According to a December 2005 report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), thirty million American adults lack basic literacy skills, including seven million who are considered illiterate.

The problem is not about being *unable* to read but about *wanting* to read. Many teens today find no pride or purpose in being “readers.”

Teens do read—but at warp speed. They pick up bites of information that fly across a screen, entire pages flowing by as speedily as a mouse rolls across the pad. That’s too fast to think about, process, and consider the reading. Who could wrap his mind around something that flits by so fast? Even a jet stream trailing in the sky leaves a mark to gaze at and wonder about. A good story, essay, or article should do the same.

In school libraries across the country, students claim that there is “nothing to read.” I counter that statement by introducing my flourishing young adult literature collection, up-close-and-personal. Reader’s Workshop has changed my students’ “I hate reading” declaration to “When is our next Reader’s Workshop class?”

INTERRUPT THE CHAOS TO TELL A STORY

We have become a culture that is willingly, aggressively, and anxiously “connected.” We accept multiple telephone intrusions to

any real-people conversation. It was once considered rude for a person to interrupt a conversation without an “excuse me,” but electronic communications have no such protocol. A telephone’s “call-waiting” feature encourages conversations to be interrupted multiple times. From e-mail to IM (Instant Messenger) to a cell-phone apparatus worn like a body ornament stuck in the ear, people stride the streets, convention halls, malls, and airports, resembling *Star Trek* extras.

Caught up in “private” conversations, making deals, driven to distraction, we walk blindly past good fellows, art, trees, birds, anything and everything, missing the moment. Speaking at a June 2006 ALA Annual Convention program, “How Adult is Young Adult? The Sequel,” Aidan Chambers, author of the Printz-winning **Postcards from No Man’s Land**, (Dutton, 2002/VOYA August 2002), referred to this constant electronic communication as CPA—continuous partial attention. Psychologist Jane Healy, author of **Endangered Minds** (Simon & Schuster, 1990) has said, “When you divide attention like this, it becomes harder to focus deeply on any one thing. They [children] may develop habits of mind that make it hard to do in-depth thinking” (*Electronic World Swallows Up Kids’ Time* by Marilyn Elias, **USA Today**, March 10, 2005, A1).

Reading requires concentration, which reading aloud helps to promote. In a library full of books, Reader’s Workshop is a designated time to absorb, contemplate, and appreciate clustered words, placed *just so* to express an author’s ideas. One student wrote, “I have a hard time paying attention. Reader’s Workshop helps with my listening skills by helping me to concentrate and follow the story. It makes me want to read.” Reader’s Workshop provides time to ponder, analyze, weigh differing viewpoints, internalize, and finally, form a personal opinion from a reading. Reading requires reflection.

Our forty-minute weekly Reader’s Workshop class is scheduled for every fourth through seventh grade class. Eighth and ninth grade students are offered similar classes during mini-semester units, or they select “Book Club” during their arts elective.

BAMBOOZLE BOYS WITH BOOKS!

Seventh grade students pride themselves on reducing new teachers to tears, or better yet, forcing them out of the educational profession altogether. They are merciless and victorious in their unruliness. Suddenly outclassed by their intellectually sophisticated and sexually emergent female classmates, boys feel *forced* to command attention by disturbing the peace and destroying the classroom structure. I have witnessed seventh grade boys throughout eighteen years as a school librarian and embarrassingly, as the parent of a boy who smirked when his seventh grade science teacher resigned mid-year.

Styles and electronics come and go, but middle school students don’t change. They can plummet a classroom into a state of chaos. They practice the mastery of gaseous and obnoxious smells and noise—the stinkier and louder the better. They stuff their cheeks with innumerable grapes to look like monkeys, or wedge an orange peel between their lips to strike another pose. They’re so fidgety, they seem ready to jump out the window at any moment. If there’s a snow bank on the other side of the window, they might.

What do educators do with these boys? We bore them. We force them to sit and do work that they hate. Then we punish them for their impulsive behaviors. These students are the victims of an educational institution that doesn’t work. Are we so flummoxed by our seventh graders that we’ve lost our minds? Or are we simply overwhelmed by arbitrary standards and thus caught in a trap of rigid instruction?

A recent **Newsweek** article claimed: “In the last two decades, the education system has become obsessed with a quantifiable and narrowly defined kind of academic success . . . and that myopic view is harming boys. . . . ‘Very well meaning people,’ says Dr. Bruce Perry,

a Houston neurologist who advocates for troubled kids, ‘have created a biologically disrespectful model of education’” (Andrew Murr et al, *The Boy Crisis*, January 30, 2006).

In our Reader’s Workshop class, middle school students fill the reading room of the library: one child diagnosed with Aspergers syndrome, another seven coded with attention-deficit syndrome as ADHD (no surprise in any middle school classroom), and five Korean students in English as a Second Language (ESL). All wait attentively for the

story to start. We’re reading **The Lightning Thief**, the first title in Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* series (Hyperion, 2005/VOYA August 2005).

I read aloud for thirty minutes and then ask a question about the reading. Students record their feelings in their reading response journals. The only wrong answer is no answer. Spelling, grammar, and all inhibiting rules of the English language are absolved. This free-write exercise limbers up their attraction to written expression without putting obstacles in the way.

Then we have a group discussion on ancient Greece and Greek mythology: symbols, gods, goddesses, architecture, the Oracle. I grab a **National Geographic** on ancient Greek civilization to illustrate the text. The students beg me to read “for just a few more minutes.” Some dawdle, checking out Greek mythology books. I’m shooing them out; they’re late for the next class.

Students can be very convincing and persuasive in showing us what works—if we pay attention. Watch teens relax, unwind, listen, and show up for class on time. They’ll even show up when it’s not their class, acting confused and—without much conviction—asking,



PHOTO CREDIT: LAUREN MCGOWEN

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READING RICK RIORDAN’S *THE LIGHTNING THIEF* TO SEVENTH GRADERS.

“Don’t we have Reader’s Workshop today?” The daunting academic stigma of the library dissolves, and all students feel welcome and included in this community space.

Here’s the most convincing testament that I can give on whether or not reading aloud promotes independent reading: We’ve finished our class. One student eyes **The Lightning Thief** as I place it on my desk. “May I borrow it?” he asks. “No,” I respond. “If you read it, you’ll be bored when I read it aloud in class.”

For all their antics, middle school students are smart and stealthy. “No” means “must.” They beg their parents for both titles in the *Percy Jackson* series. The books are circulated throughout the school like magic cards. Students sit in the hall, oblivious to their surroundings, their noses in the novel. They walk with “the book” tucked under their arm. When we meet the following week, five students have finished the book, and two others have finished the second in the series, **The Sea of Monsters** (Hyperion, 2006/VOYA June 2006). They’re whining that the third book won’t be out until January 2007. Here’s a problem that any educator would welcome!

Suddenly the tables are reversed because the library’s copy of **The Sea of Monsters** has not arrived. I ask a student, “May I borrow your book?” His harsh response: “No. Stuart is reading it now and Anthony gets it next. When they’re done, you can have it.” In a few days, it’s my turn. I bring the book home for the weekend.

The book’s owner approaches me first thing on Monday morning. “So, did you finish it yet?” he demands. I haven’t. He shakes his head and says, “I’m disappointed in you.” Earlier in the year, this student claimed, “I hate reading!” This runaway book had lassoed a flock of readers. Reader’s Workshop class didn’t make this book a success—that credit goes to the author. Yet what allowed this success to occur was having a read-aloud class that provided time to introduce the book and discuss it seriously, giving all students the opportunity to enjoy it on a level intellectual playing field.

ENJOYMENT MATTERS

Both boys and girls show up early for our Reader’s Workshop class. They sit down before class to relax and read magazines. The students who once avoided the library now come in with a positive attitude. They feel welcome and know how to enjoy the space. They whisper together over snowboard equipment, fashion, MTV, or movie stars. They read **Teen People**, **ShoJump**, **Snow/Skate Boarding**, or **Popular Science**—magazines they like.

When we begin class, students have a few minutes to put away the magazines and grab some cut-up squares of paper and boxes of colored markers or pencils. They draw and doodle while I read.

Their art will contribute to the library’s next bulletin board. The library is a picture of a calm and attentive classroom. Visitors come and go, other classes mill about using the computers, working on research on the other side of the library. When I stop reading to answer a question, listeners plead, “Keep reading!”

During the 2006 President’s Program at ALA, Kevin Starr astutely pointed out that without language—stories read to people or by people—we impose upon ourselves a “generalized autism.” Reading aloud is a grounding and galvanizing group experience. Sharing a story by considering its theme and purpose—followed by a group discussion of individual impressions, the commonality of human emotions, empathy, and the impact of one author’s perspective—bonds people together who might have little else in common.

At his ALA program, Michael Gorman commented that more and more people consider literacy a burden; an obstacle. “It is a time when a materially prosperous middle class takes their intellectual impoverishment casually.” We are a material-hungry culture that is deliberately starving our intellectual welfare and emotional growth. We are living a lifestyle driven to distraction.



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WITH HER NOSE STUCK IN A BOOK, THIS STUDENT CHATS WITH YA AUTHOR JANET MCDONALD.

converse with one another about common experiences that have been stirred by the reading. Reading stories with teens gives them a platform of expression and a handle on empathy. Our students are vulnerable and thirsty for identity; why eliminate this anchoring component from their education? One student wrote, “I think Reader’s Workshop is important because in an educational way, it gets kids open minded to discuss different events in a story that may reflect things in real life.”

HOW TO CHANGE

As professionals, our biggest challenge is to face a bureaucratic educational system. How odd is a system that turns out large numbers of high school graduates who require reading remediation in college? Children learn vocabulary and pronunciation more effectively with books they like than with books they hate. Students who fear independent reading and sleep-inducing vocabulary lists don’t need more obstacles. This recipe has been tried with these results: Middle and high school students are frustrated, resentful,

PERFECTION IS A MYTH

The best part about Reader’s Workshop is that teens enjoy it. They love a good story. Why do we stop sharing read-aloud stories just shy of middle school? They supplant a manufactured, artificial, self-medicated, “electronically enriched,” perfection-oriented society. Perfection is a myth. Stories blow perfection out of the water by prodding at tender wounds and goading our worst fears. Stories highlight and reflect humanity. Students

PHOTO CREDIT: LAUREN MCGOWEN

Selecting the Right Material

- **Short Stories:** The beauty of short stories is that often they can be completed within one class period. Collections often pivot around a theme with contributions from multiple authors in diverse styles. Anthologies are rocking the market, offering various genres, writing styles, diversity issues, and literary complexities and challenges.

- **Novels:** Select novels with lots of dialogue and action. Mystery, adventure, suspense, and humor all work well. Many novels lend themselves to stand-alone chapters that can be completed within one class. Jack Gantos's *Jack Henry* stories, such as **Jack on the Tracks: Four Seasons of Fifth Grade** (Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999/VOYA February 2000), are fine example of novels with chapters that can be read independently. These novels progress from fourth through eighth grades, making them suitable for various audiences.

Use the first part of the school year to introduce a novel that will be followed by a visit from its author—a grand opportunity to prepare students for meaningful conversation and memorable experiences when the author arrives later in the year. Collaborate with the English department to integrate the visiting author's work into the classroom. This dual approach encourages students' interest and inclination toward independent reading.

- **Novels-in-Verse:** They beg to be read aloud. They have a lyrical tone meant to be heard, and their poetic between-the-lines inference gives much fodder for discussion.

- **Author Autobiography:** Collaborate with the English department and use young adult autobiographies to teach by example. Students will benefit from hearing prolific YA authors turning their daily experiences into humorous anecdotes. This collaborative instruction helps students to understand the concept of "using your own voice" when drafting essays for secondary and/or college applications.

Curriculum Collaboration

Brainstorm with the English department to shore up their curriculum needs. Use contemporary literature that exemplifies and reinforces classroom instruction, but don't duplicate it! Work together on a multicultural literature program. You'll be able to introduce lots of contemporary material to bulk up the core curriculum's subjects: Harlem Renaissance, Native American, African American, Asian American, and more. Take advantage of introducing fresh material to which librarians have access.

Journal Entries

After a thirty-minute read aloud, students enter a free-write in their personal Reader's Response journals. Prompts can be as simple as "Did you like the story? Why or why not?" or "Explain how the author makes this tragic story seem so funny." Here is a response from one of my students to Jack Gantos's **Jack's New Power** (Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995): "I've noticed that he is not afraid to make a fool of himself, and that's why his stories and characters are so exciting and real."

Read It First

Always read any selection to yourself before reading it to an audience. Familiarize yourself with the content and be prepared for a premier read-aloud experience. Don't chance being surprised by material with which you or your audience might be uncomfortable. Your reading confidence, enthusiasm, and comfort level will be reinforced when you know your material in advance of your class.

Read Slowly

The biggest mistake that people make is rushing through a read aloud. Read slowly enough for your students to hear, absorb, and think about what the author is saying. You might need to pick up the pace when a section is very descriptive. Don't be overly dramatic—save that for reader's theater. In a read-aloud class, the emotion and drama should come from within the listener, as it does while reading independently.

resistant, self-proclaimed, *and* unashamed non-readers. Read-aloud classes are a logical link to attract students to literature for enjoyment and knowledge, and ultimately for literacy proficiency and independent thinking.

I am not a "do-it-by-the-book" person. Everything that I do or learn well has come through a tangible experience. My *logical* conclusion is that students who are forced to read books that they endure or dread or consider old fashioned, have their distaste for literature underscored. This educational style contributes to the growing attitude that reading is a dull, intolerable, and archaic activity.

In a well-balanced, innovative educational system, students should believe that there are plenty of books to enjoy. For students whose connection with literature has been severed, or for whom

independent reading has become a source of failure and thus stress, reading aloud makes a difference. To get teens to love books, try reading them books that they will love.

Administrators and statisticians will ask, "But does reading aloud get students to read on their own? Where's the documentation? Where are the compiled statistics showing that reading aloud helps with literacy proficiency, vocabulary skills, and SAT scores?" This skewed attitude makes me think about acid rain and global warming. Politicians copped out with their "Where are the scientific facts?" response instead of entering into a unified global emissions-control agreement that would make a difference. Administrators can work wonders simply by instituting time and faculty support for bringing read-aloud classes into the secondary school core curriculum.

One of my duties as a librarian is to find material that people need for information. As the teacher of Reader's Workshop, I find stories and books that students want to hear. One of my independent, voracious readers wrote: "I think we should have Reader's Workshop because it helps me understand books. It helps me to become articulate and helps my vocabulary grow. Like in English class, except more creatively. You get to explore more different books and genres than in other classes. Also it is a relaxing environment so it is easier for students to focus than in an uptight classroom."

Teens hang out in the library, relaxing and wanting to listen and talk about stories. Teens go on to read more on their own. In my logical mind, that's winning evidence.

TEN SUREFIRE READ ALOUDS

Creech, Sharon. **Walk Two Moons.** HarperCollins, 1994. 288p. \$16.99. 978-0-06-023334-1. PLB \$17.89. 978-0-06-023337-2. \$6.99 Trade pb. 978-0-06-056013-3. VOYA February 1995. MJ

Three parallel story lines weave together tragedy, humor, and melodrama as Salamanca Biddle faces the hard truth of her mother's fatal accident.

Crutcher, Chris. **King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography.** Greenwillow, 2003. 208p. \$16.99. 978-0-06-050249-2. PLB \$17.89. 978-0-06-050250-8. \$6.99 Trade pb. 978-0-06-050251-5. VOYA June 2003. JS

From having his teeth batted out by his dream girl to having his brother shoot him in the head with a BB gun, this side of the author seldom shows up in his controversial YA literature.

Flagg, Fannie. **Daisy Fay and the Miracle Man.** Warner, 1992. 320p. \$13.95 Trade pb. 978-0-446-39452-9. Ballantine, 2005. \$13.95 Trade pb. 978-0-345-48560-2. SA/YA

This laugh-out-loud account of a young teen living in 1950s Mississippi with an out-of-whack father has scrupulous literary pacing.

Grimes, Nikki. **Bronx Masquerade.** Dial, 2001. 176p. \$16.99. 978-0-8037-2569-0. \$5.99 Trade pb. 978-0-14-250189-4. VOYA February 2002. JS

This novel-in-verse that unmasks pretensions, dissolves stereotypes, and reveals the power of taking risks might ignite an Open Mic session in your class.

Guys Write for Guys Read: Boys' Favorite Authors Write About Being Boys. Jon Scieszka, Ed. Viking, 2005. 272p. \$16.99. 978-0-670-06007-8. \$10.99 Trade pb. 978-0-670-06027-5. VOYA June 2005. MJ

Depend on this collection for fill-in stories and stand-up comedy, with contributions from 96 of the "Who's Who of Guy Authors" in the YA market—all written with a reluctant male reading audience in mind.

Kidd, Sue Monk. **The Secret Life of Bees.** Viking, 2002. 320p. \$24.95. 978-0-670-03237-2. \$14 Trade pb. 978-0-14-200174-5. VOYA August 2002. SA/YA

In the deep south of 1964, Lily runs from a murky truth in her father's accusations, with a heap of wisdom about bees, nature, mothers, daughters, racism, and the soul that binds friends and society.

McDonald, Janet. **Spellbound.** Frances Foster Books/Farrar Straus Giroux, 2001. 144p. \$16. 978-0-374-37140-1. Puffin, 2003. \$5.99 Trade pb. 978-0-14-250193-1. VOYA October 2001. JS

Raven's aspirations of going to college are dashed by the reality of being an unwed teen mom in this story that doesn't shirk from the truth.

Park, Barbara. **Mick Harte Was Here.** Knopf, 1988. 96p. \$5.50 Trade pb. 978-0-679-88203-9. MJ

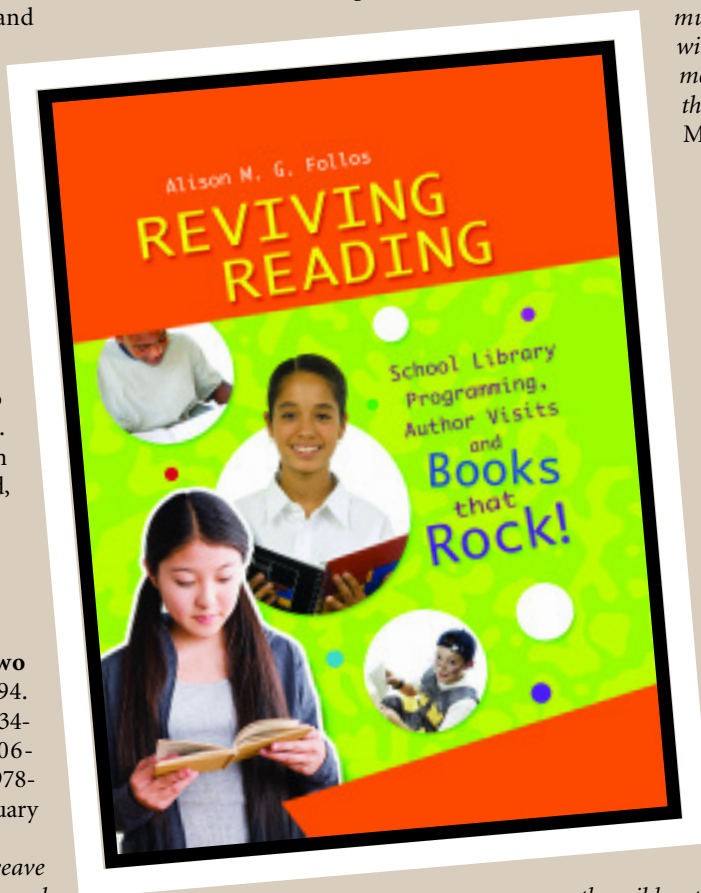
This perfect balance of tragedy and comedy bursts with the celebration and longing for a sibling who died too young.

Paulsen, Gary. **How Angel Peterson Got His Name and Other Outrageous Tales About Extreme Sports.** Wendy Lamb Books/ Random House, 2003. 128p. \$12.95. 978-0-385-72949-9. PLB \$14.99. 978-0-385-90090-4. \$5.99 Trade pb. 978-0440-22935-3. VOYA April 2003. MJS

Short-story-like chapters highlight the wild antics of thirteen-year-old boys, from hang gliding with a World War II vintage parachute to landing in a pigsty.

Wynne-Jones, Tim. **The Boy in the Burning House.** Farrar Straus Giroux, 2001. 224p. \$5.95 Trade pb. 978-0-374-40887-9. VOYA October 2001. MJ

Two teens work hard to expose small-town hypocrisy as an unsolved murder mystery creeps up from the past. ■



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