



## Change the Literacy Depression in Your School: Read Teens a Story!

Reading aloud to teens is the highlight of my job. It is not a “story time.” It is a comfortable combination of literature appreciation, book club, and literary circle format. It is time to expose the top titles and engage students who too often walk past, not into, the library.

North Country School is a junior boarding school in upstate New York. Our students are typical middle school kids who boast: “I hate reading!” That changed when we began Reader’s Workshop. Working in tandem with the English department, this read-aloud class bolsters curriculum instruction. Reader’s Workshop is a weekly 40-minute period that is part of the academic schedule for

is deliberately avoided and abandoned once it becomes an independent venture loaded with intellectual risk.

Reader’s Workshop provides time to booktalk new titles that have arrived, or rediscover some of the older “sleepers.” But, mostly, it is the moment to transform the library from a utilitarian resource zone into a welcoming space to enjoy the founding roots of a library: literature, communication, and information.

When I ask students what they like most about Reader’s Workshop, they say, “It’s a time when we can relax!” Reader’s Workshop allows busy students time to enjoy literature that’s being written specifically for young adults.

English curriculum, support collaborative instruction, and keep special needs in the forefront. For instance, if you are having an author visit later in the year, Reader’s Workshop is the platform to read his or her works, discuss them, look at the author’s autobiographical highlights, biographical blurbs, and have students well prepared to get the most out of the visit.

In real estate the motto is: “location, location.” In read-aloud, it is: “selection, selection.” There will always be those hallmark moments when the perfect story fits with a current event or a holiday, as well as times when new books come in that you are itching to launch with a booktalk. Then there will be titles from your upcoming visiting authors. Reader’s Workshop provides time for all of this.

Keep in mind: selection, selection, which brings us to *humor*. My students tell me funny is “the bomb!” It is a genre when reading “down” works for older students. Seventh graders love hearing about themselves failing to become civilized; ninth graders love reliving those humiliating moments of being the *young* seventh grader; and sophisticated high school seniors look back with fond nostalgia at being the clueless and gullible seventh grader. *Space Station Seventh Grade* (Spinelli), *Jack A Drift: Fourth Grade Without a Clue* (Gantos), *Jack on the Tracks: Four Seasons of Fifth Grade* (Gantos), *How Angel Peterson Got His Name* (Paulsen), and *King of the Mild Frontier* (Crutcher) are excellent read-alouds serving this purpose. Humor through master storytellers has multiple levels of emotional implications and literary complexity. (Note: Before reading any title out loud, always read it first. Many YA titles have profanity and sexual inferences that seem much *louder* and apparent when given public exposure. You know your audiences’ maturity and your personal comfort level. This is your professional judgment call.)

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every fourth through seventh grade class. Our eighth and ninth grade students are offered similar classes during mini-semester units, or during an arts elective block called “Book Club.”

Elementary school children love story time. Removing a read-aloud structure from the secondary curriculum places an inordinate amount of stress on students who struggle with independent reading skills. Naturally, reading becomes a source of dread and often failure. No wonder literature

One day, an enthusiastic independent reader came in for a chat.

“We’re going on a three-day car trip so *finally* I’ll have some time to read!” she exclaimed. In a nation rich in material goods, *reading* time is scarce.

### Read What They Like

If you select the right material, students will reward you with their enthusiasm. They’ll not only show up for class on time, they’ll show up even when they don’t have class. The only thing you’ll have to fear is an annoyed teacher down the hall waiting for late students.

Start with brief and sure-thing selections, building upon your confidence and your students’ engagement. Select titles with your student audience in mind, but develop guidelines that will shore-up the



By Alison M. G. Follos  
Author Photo by Jan Johnson

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### Reader’s Workshop Can Change Lives

Students who are forced to read books in their classes—books that they endure and mostly struggle with, books they consider dull and old fashioned—learn one thing well: their distaste for literature is warranted. Such an educational system contributes toward the growing misconception that reading is a dull, intolerable, and pointless activity.

Statistically, boys are the well-documented endangered readers in our culture. Their brains develop differently and they learn differently. Consider these statistics:

- Boys enter elementary reading a year-and-a-half behind the average American girl. By 11th grade boys are reading three years behind girls.
- Seventy percent of the Ds & Fs in American schools go to boys (Gurian, Michael. *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).
- One-in-three boys are in remedial reading classes by third grade.
- Eighty percent of high school dropouts are male.
- Ninety percent to 95 percent of kids coded for ADHD are male.
- Boys between five and 12-years-old are 60 percent more likely to have repeated at least one grade (Sullivan, Michael. *Connecting Boys to Books What Libraries Can Do*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2003 and “Connecting Boys to Books Professional Development Presentation,” North Country School, Lake Placid, New York, Nov. 10, 2005).
- Between ages five and 14 boys are 200 percent more likely to commit suicide than girls (Cart, Michael. “What about Boys?” *Booklist* and Gurian, Michael. *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

The intellectual divide intensifies through middle and high school, with negative emotional reactions and depression that erodes their confidence, undermines their progress, and short-changes their scholastic interest. A read-aloud class levels the playing field. Male

students are especially fond of adventure, action, and humor. They like to listen to literature in a group environment with their peers. They gain confidence, become engaged listeners, active, and productive participators, and *risk* picking up a book to read on their own.

Independent reading requires concentration and in-depth thinking. Reading *aloud* is a stepping-stone to this. Reader’s Workshop is held in a library stocked full of books to absorb, contemplate, and appreciate clustered words, placed *just so*, to express ideas.

Looking for a reading incentive that works?

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## “Students develop an affinity for reading in a read-aloud class.”

The readers/listeners bring along their personal experiences and interpret the story, making it their own. One of my students, plagued with ADHD and Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome 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.”

For children and teens this makes sense; it helps them focus, to eagerly, willingly, and painlessly buff-up their listening skills, it offers them fine examples of good stories, and like the book club craze—from Oprah to book clubs in your town—it promotes literary conversation. Institutions that pride themselves on being on “the cutting edge of education” should pick up on the social and literary appeal of the “book club” craze for secondary school students.

As a middle school librarian, I am well aware that honest, tough, and radical literature impacts the emotional growth of students. One year, our English curriculum and Reader’s Workshop collaborated on a literary theme that concentrated on cultural differences. One of my well-fed, well-clothed, well-traveled—yet perhaps overly protected—seventh grade students was taken aback while listening to a story about an unwed teen mother in the projects of New York City (Janet McDonald’s *Spellbound*. New York: Frances Foster Books, 2001). My student’s reaction was: “This is a bad girl. This is a bad story and I don’t want to read it.” Many, many stories and novels later—in fact two years worth—she reflected in her Reader’s Workshop response journal about the celebrated (and censored) upcoming visit from author Chris Crutcher.

She wrote: “I think Chris Crutcher’s books show us how secluded some of us are. We live in a world where our precious little ears can’t take what’s going on right in front of us. Going on with our friends, classmates and even in our colleges. This kind of stuff happens every day and because it does, it makes people deaf to it. We think that if people don’t read books about it, or write books about it, that if we aren’t exposed to anything that educates us about the issues that

people deal with, they don’t exist, or won’t happen.”

### Take Time to Make a Difference

Start by reading a whopper of a story. Short stories are an excellent choice. They span every genre and many can be concluded within a single class period. Watch teens relax, unwind, listen, and show up for class on time. They’ll also show up when it’s not their class, acting confused and saying—without much conviction: “Don’t we have Reader’s Workshop today?”

Our current educational reading practices have been tested and this is the outcome: middle and high school students are frustrated, resentful, resistant and self-proclaimed *nonreaders*. Standardized test sticklers and formalized “do it by the book” educators may question my tactics, but children learn vocabulary and pronunciation as rapidly and effectively with books they like, as well as with classics. Serious books do not quicken vocabulary skills any more seriously than humorous stories. Engaged listeners will pick up vocabulary and sophisticated content comprehension—perhaps more so because they’re actively listening, as opposed to being fraught over independent reads, or put to sleep by studying vocabulary lists.

The most convincing testament that I can provide on whether or not reading aloud promotes independent reading is this: our seventh grade Reader’s Workshop class is over. We’ve been reading aloud Rick Riordan’s *The Lightning Thief* (New York: Miramax/Hyperion, 2005). One student eyes the book as I place it back on my desk. “May I borrow it?” he asks. “No,” I respond, “If you read it, you’ll have to listen again when I read it to the rest of the class. You’ll be bored.” He pleads, “No I won’t! I love it and I’ll want to hear it again. I read Harry Potter three times!” Another student is hanging back, watching way too intently when I re-shelve the novel to an out-of-reach location. She flippantly advises him: “Just go and get it from the public library, through interlibrary loan.” I’m thrilled that they’ve learned the pluses of interlibrary loan. But I’m “in charge,” so I hide the book.

Over the next several weeks, students are seen everywhere with their noses stuck in *The Lightning Thief*. Then, they strengthen forces and suddenly the second title in the Percy Jackson series is circulating through the ranks. They are passing their personal copies around to one another like contraband. They come in smirking with *The Sea of Monsters* (Rick Riordan, New York: Miramax/Hyperion, 2006) tucked under their arm, boldly complaining, “The third book won’t be out until January 2007!” I know I’ve lost the battle—and I’m victorious!

Students can be very convincing and persuasive in showing us what works—if we pay attention. For the student with poor literary proficiency, a Reader’s Workshop class will help. Students develop an affinity for reading in a read-aloud class. As children’s reading skills progress, their confidence should too. We are a rich nation with oodles of leisure time and material stuff. Yet our literacy skills are starving. Reading out loud to teens initiates, develops, and solidifies a love of literature. Why do we stop? ■

### Book List

Crutcher, Chris. *King of the Mild Frontier an Ill-Advised Autobiography*. Greenwillow, 2003. ISBN 0060502495

Gantos, Jack. *Jack Adrift: Fourth Grade Without a Clue*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003. ISBN 9780374437183 (pbk)

Gantos, Jack. *Jack on the Tracks: Four Seasons of Fifth Grade*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999. ISBN 9780374437176 (pbk)

McDonald, Janet. *Spellbound*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001. ISBN 014250193X

Paulsen, Gary. *How Angel Peterson Got His Name and Other Outrageous Tales About Extreme Sports*. Wendy Lamb Books, 2003. ISBN 0385729499

Riordan, Rick. *The Lightning Thief*. Miramax/Hyperion, 2005. ISBN 0786856297

Riordan, Rick. *The Sea of Monsters*. Miramax/Hyperion, 2006. ISBN 0786856866

Spinelli, Jerry. *Space Station Seventh Grade*. Little, Brown, 1982. ISBN 0316807095

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