

Venturing into the Deep Waters:

The Work of Jordan Sonnenblick

As the 2005 National Council of Teachers of English roared to life in an expansive convention hall at the Pittsburgh Marriott Convention Center Hotel, Frank McCourt, Pulitzer Prize winner for *Angela's Ashes*, took the entire audience of several thousand in the palm of his hand, regaling them in his charming, lyrical voice, with funny and poignant stories of students and schools. Punctuating with the occasional tirade against the powers-that-be who impose their ill-informed will on schools and teachers in the alleged name of school reform (did he actually name *No Child Left Behind*?!), Frank recalled his 26 years of experience as a high school English teacher in New York.

Mr. McCourt's emotions often came to the surface and, like all great teachers, his love for his students was palpable. Very early in his talk, Frank couldn't resist acknowledging a former student of his any longer, and pointing to a young man sitting in the front row, he proclaimed, "and one of 'em's sittin' right there in the first row, Jordan Sonnenblick, and he owes everything he knows to me!" The audience roared with laughter. A quick tip of his cap to Jordan's overnight success in the world of young adult literature—*Drums, Girls and Dangerous Pie* continues to receive accolades around the nation—and Mr. McCourt moved on, moving the crowd to tears and titters. We laughed until we cried, and sometimes we just cried unashamed tears as he plucked at our heart strings.



As proud as Frank McCourt may be of his former student, Jordan Sonnenblick, the relationship almost never was; in fact, the two might very well have never shared the teacher-student experience—unless you count homeroom at Stuyvesant High School, where Jordan pleaded with Mr. McCourt to let him into his class for two years:

"Please, please, please Mr. McCourt. Let me into your creative writing class!!!"

"And what can you do that 770 others students can't do? Besides, there's not going to be a seat for you."

"I don't need a seat; I'll stand if you'll let me in."

And so it began, although Jordan did get to sit down.

Like the best of teachers, Frank McCourt had expectations equal to his students' potential, not just their comfort level. He saw something in Jordan, a very special talent, and he would be satisfied with nothing less. As Jordan himself remembers,

I wrote like a madman, but I really only ever wrote funny things. I was writing for that audience of one, to make my friend Kate laugh. And when it would be my turn to read in writing workshop, I would sit on the reader's stool and read, and everyone would laugh, and then I would slowly and painfully look up at Mr. McCourt, and he would always have this look on his face as if he had swallowed something horrendous, and he would say:

"That's very *witty*, Jordan. You're a very *amusing* writer."

And I would just wilt. But once he took me aside and told me that “one day [I] would venture into the deep waters.” That was his expression.

And Jordan’s senior year rolled along and came to an end, but as it ended and Jordan attended his graduation ceremony in Manhattan’s Avery Fisher Hall, he found out, much to his surprise, that Frank McCourt had chosen him as the recipient of the creative writing award. Afterwards, in Jordan’s yearbook Frank McCourt signed his name and wrote:

“Yes, you have an awesome comic talent, but there is deeper stuff waiting to come out. You’re a born writer. Love, Frank.”

Thus began Jordan Sonnenblick’s fifteen-year quest to “venture into the deep waters.” Frank McCourt’s prediction that Jordan would one day move beyond humor was underscored by the example of his own writing. Jordan credits *Angela’s Ashes* with showing him that wit and humor need not be abandoned in meaningful story-telling; in fact, “The saddest times of life are also when you laugh the most hysterically. There’s a leavening that takes place when you balance the sadness with the laughter. I’ve thought about this a lot.” From *Angela’s Ashes* Jordan learned that the best of writers plumbed the depths of the human experience and included it all, the sad and noble, the troubling and triumphant. As Jordan now realizes, “It was very much like a final lesson from my guru. I had learned so much from him and all that remained was to meet the right person to give me the subject matter.”

That person did indeed arrive: one of Jordan’s very own middle school English students, someone whose misleading appearance concealed great pain underneath. Jordan quotes Frank McCourt as often saying, “a teenager’s job is to fool the adults around them,” and Jordan found himself duly fooled by this young woman who seemed to be coping so bravely and well with one of life’s most difficult trials, the terminal illness of a sibling. “She’s such a trooper; she’s handling this awful thing so well,” Jordan told her mother. As it turned out, however, nothing could have been farther from the truth, and as the loving mother explained: “She’s not handling it well, she’s hiding it well.” Jordan thought that just the right book might help and he offered to find it—a book about a young person in similar circumstance attempting to

make sense of a world come unglued. But the right book never appeared.

Necessity really is at times the mother of invention and once again, Jordan Sonnenblick found himself writing for an audience of one, but this time it was his student and others like her, and this time his goal was much more than to be “amusing.”

I saw a void, I loved this kid, and I wrote the book that wasn’t there for her. People say they climb Mt. Everest because it’s there, well I wrote this book because the need was there.

And that was the genesis of *Drums, Girls and Dangerous Pie*, the story of eighth-grader Steven Alper, whose five-year-old brother Jeffrey is dying of leukemia.

Writing a novel that has the terminal illness of a child at its center is a task fraught with hazards and pitfalls. Sonnenblick was determined to avoid “Hallmark card” triteness, or to hack out some saccharine piece of fiction that kids would reject as a lie. “I didn’t think that would be comforting to my student or anyone truly experiencing similar events. Readers won’t believe the message if you don’t give them the truth and they will abandon a book without even finishing it.” And telling the truth included being accurate with the details. For help with the details, Jordan called on B.J., a lifelong friend, now a doctor, who would provide him with the needed authentic information: specific medicines, dosages and timetables of symptoms. As youngsters, Jordan and B.J. had

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proclaimed their life dreams: B.J. to become a doctor and cure cancer, Jordan to write a famous book. B.J. is now researching cures for cancer, and Jordan is among the most popular of new young adult novel authors. Back to that audience of one:

Again, I wasn't writing this for the general public but for people who had experienced it and in particular for my student. It was that important to me to be steeped in the medical fact of a condition that my intended audience was living through. It needed to be perfect. A very special reader was trusting me to tell her the truth, and when someone hands you the ball of their trust, you don't drop the ball.

Authenticity also called for calling out the usual suspects that families of terminally ill patients must endure, such as the afore-mentioned complements for heroically dealing with the situation when nothing could be farther from the truth, or attempting to make the right secret deal with God (has anyone faced with a dying loved one *not* attempted this?), the horrible toll of chemotherapy, the strain on family relations and the five stages of grief. For young readers, wandering into this minefield of hurt and suffering in real life, seeing these experiences in print, recognizing their own situation, seeing themselves in the story, helps them to cope, acting, as acclaimed young adult author Chris Crutcher often says, as "powerful medicine." Jordan also uses a medical analogy:

Flu inoculations give you a weakened, non-lethal dose of flu germs, which makes you better prepared to handle the real flu. You can better handle the real sadness of life having experienced it in a non-lethal dose combined with humor in your reading, helping you survive what might otherwise feel like unbearable pain in real life.

Why and how has this book, written for an audience of one, become such popular reading for so many (a recent trip to amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com showed very impressive sales ratings)? The topic alone might easily have exiled it to counseling offices and hospice bookshelves; in fact, when Jordan was writing the book, his older sister, whom he acknowledges as a "sometimes, somewhat-cynical observer of his said, 'Oh, good! You're writing a book about leukemia! It sounds like a real blockbuster!' (Sarcasm might be a family trait [we might add that Jordan's main character, Steven Alper, has a similar talent for sarcasm])." And when he told friends and associates what the book was about, they said, "You

must be crazy! No one is going to want to read this book. It's going to be such a bummer!"

But the real-world response has been quite the opposite. Among the messages from flattering fans, at least one email a day arrives on Jordan's computer that is from a reader or parent of a reader who suffered through a similar experience, saying, "Thank you for this book, my son never talked about this when his brother died from cancer years ago, and he started talking today." And for the author, this has proven to be the greatest reward: writing a meaningful book that helps young people actually living through this awful hardship. The book's popularity, however, is obviously universal and not merely among those who have experienced similar stories to that of Steven and Jeffrey Alper in the book. John Mason, winner of the 2004 ALAN Ted Hipple Service Award and Director of Library & Educational Marketing, Trade Books Group, for Scholastic explains, "In literature, the specific becomes universal because the specifics are true. General readers sense the book's accuracy, even though they may not know from experience, and it makes it that much more real to them, too." Jordan says, it's a sort of paradox that it was for an audience of one, "I wrote it for this one person I cared about" and it became that much more universal through its accuracy.

The initial publishing of this wonderful book did not prove to be too difficult, but keeping the book in print was a story in and of itself! *Drums, Girls and Dangerous Pie* might have been called terminally ill itself at times due to events unrelated to the book's topic or the quality of its writing. Eventually, its genius would be recognized (Don Gallo recommended it to *The ALAN Review* when its first publisher was going out of business), and Scholastic would pick it up, thus ensuring the publicity needed to get it in the hands of hundreds of thousands of readers (maybe more), but at first there were moments when the book could easily have died a natural death. After finishing the book in April of 2003, Jordan signed a contract for its publication on July 1, 2003, with a "lovely, small, literary press" who subsequently went out of business in June 2004, just three weeks after *Drums* had rolled off the presses.

The saving grace here was probably the book's nomination for a Fall 2004 Book Sense Children's

Award and an American Library Association 2005 Best Books for Young Adults Award, ironically, just a few days after the original publisher's closing. In order to remain in the running for these awards, the book had to be available, and Jordan self-published enough copies to prevent its demise long enough for publishing giant Scholastic, Inc., to take notice and pick up not only *Drums* but also Jordan's next book, the soon to be released *Notes from the Midnight Driver*.

From Jordan's perspective:

There were a series of serendipities in my life that brought me to the point of writing the book and surviving the folding of my small publisher. I wasn't completely, strictly buffeted by fate, I have done some things to make this happen, but I do look back and marvel because I have had a lot of luck, too.

To which John Mason replies: "and you were ready for those serendipities when they came."

Jordan Sonnenblick is truly a talented writer, but his background was uniquely suited to telling the story of a 13-year-old at school and at home, as well. Jordan has been a middle school English teacher for 10 years at Phillipsburg Middle School in Phillipsburg, New Jersey, and so is steeped in the atmosphere and environment of middle school culture. He comes from a long line of teachers, as well as mental health professionals. His mother is an educational psychologist, and his grandfather, a man whom Jordan credits as having a tremendous influence over his life, was a high school biology teacher whose relationship with Jordan looms large in his second book, *Notes from the Midnight Driver*. Jordan's late father, a psychiatrist and great Freudian, held that humor is the breakthrough of the unconscious, a belief that may very well find purchase in *Drums*.

Not unlike *Drums* circuitous route to success, Jordan's route to teaching was somewhat roundabout. Having been a camp counselor, working as a high school tutor in his mother's tutoring center, and having grown up with teaching and schools as a regular part of daily family life growing up, education courses did not seem a necessity for success in the classroom to Jordan. In addition, his grandfather, out of a desire to see Jordan have the best of advantages, insisted on paying for coursework on the path to medical school but not for education methods class. And so Jordan entered his middle school classroom, a

soldier in Teach for America (Mr. McCourt mocks Teach for America, Jordan smirks to point out). The Peace Corps also called to his sense of duty to humankind, but why travel to the other side of the world when kids needed his help right here at home?

Although it was not his first choice for his grandson, Jordan's grandfather was forced to accept the highest of praise, imitation:

He was determined that I would be a doctor, but all I ever wanted was to be like him—a teacher. While I wrote the first book [*Drums*] for one person, I wrote the second book *about* one person; I was trying to immortalize my grandfather. When my protagonist in *Notes* is convicted of drunken driving as a minor, he is sentenced to 100 hours of community service in a nursing home, and his mom pulls strings behind the scenes to get him assigned to Sol, the most cantankerous old man in the home. I took a walk and while I was on the walk, most of the story came to me, and when I returned from the walk, I got a call that my grandfather, probably the most formative person in my life, had pneumonia and was in the hospital and I should come now, and even if I left immediately, I might not get there in time to see him. After having spent all day generating this plot based on my grandfather, it was an eerie experience. When I got there the next morning, he was sitting up in bed singing at the top of his lungs to the nurses in Yiddish and everybody was laughing. The intravenous antibiotics had facilitated a miraculous recovery.

Jordan is not only a remarkable writer but a remarkable teacher, as well, one who walks the walk in regard to teaching writing. He describes his instructional approach in class as "somewhere between a pure reading and writing workshop ala Nancie Atwell and a more traditional approach with a little more structure." He not only appeared as an author at the 2005 NCTE Convention in Pittsburgh, but also presented in a concurrent session on techniques for teaching writing. Jordan's session was brilliant and included innovative strategies for eliciting quality writing from students. Like any good teacher, he not only *told* the group how to implement these strategies, but also *showed* those in attendance by leading them through the activities. Again, like most good teachers, he used illustrations from his own writing, one of which was really quite fascinating and brought the group full circle from Frank McCourt to Jordan Sonnenblick and back to Frank McCourt again. Jordan described a writing activity that Frank had taken students through at Stuyvesant High School in which

they are to imitate a famous author or attempt to write in the voice and style of a certain genre of creative writing, imitating (even parodying if they so chose) the syntax, word choice, plot devices and so on of that author or genre. Jordan showed how in so doing, a young writer would be covertly facilitated in recognizing all the nuances that go into writing and in the process of adopting and adapting a famous writer's style to his own (the young writer's) intended story, their own writing would grow tremendously. Those of us who remember the lovely movie *Finding Forrester* (Sony, 2000), starring Sean Connery, Rob Brown and F. Murray Abram, may remember Forrester using a similar activity to mentor Jamal—imitate a piece of writing by a famous author but make it your own. Jordan even showed us an example of an exercise in this he had done himself. The very first page of *Notes from the Midnight Driver* is a tribute in form, although completely different in content, to the very first page of *Angela's Ashes*.

Jordan also credits his loving and supportive wife, Melissa, and their beautiful and energetic children, Ross and Emma, who are all on Team Sonnenblick. After writing right through a weekend, sometimes for hours upon uninterrupted hours, "I finish a draft and my words are all used up. I'm totally aphasic, and Melissa says, 'honey, what do you want for supper?' And I struggle to even answer: 'Uhhhhhhhhh, uhhhhh, the red thing in the freezer?' I say. And my wife says, 'Beef, Jordan, you mean beef? You mean the roast in the freezer, honey? OK.' She understands."

All in all, it is no surprise that when asked the secret to his success as an author, Jordan attributed it to writing about "love and humor. Nobody on the planet can ever get enough of either." Jordan, thanks for taking us with you into the deep waters.

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A Message about the ALAN Speakers Bureau from Catherine Balkin

Dear ALAN Member:

Since the purpose of ALAN is to promote the reading, teaching, and appreciation of literature for adolescents, the Board has created an ALAN Speakers Bureau to advance the reading and use of young adult literature in schools, libraries and other settings.

We are currently collecting speakers' names for a posting on the ALAN website. If you are interested in becoming a guest speaker at school, library, or university functions, or if you already do a lot of speaking, a mention on the ALAN website could generate a number of requests for you.

If you would like to be included, please provide us with your name, address, phone number, and email address, and tell us your honorarium range, how many presentations you are willing to do each day, your audience preference (YAs only, adults only, both), what kinds of subjects you are comfortable with and how far you're willing to travel. On the ALAN website, we will publish only your name, school or university affiliation, city and state. All requests for speaking engagements will be filtered through the Speakers Bureau.

In return for this service, we ask that you pay ALAN a finder's fee of 15% of the honorarium you receive from each speaking engagement. The money that ALAN receives from this service will go back into the membership by way of grants, programs, etc., to advance our stated purpose. A satisfaction survey will be sent to each school or university after the speaker program, and upon request, we will be happy to share the results of the survey with you.

If you are interested in joining the ALAN Speakers Bureau, or if you have any questions, please contact Catherine Balkin at telephone 718-857-7605 or Catherine@BalkinBuddies.com. Also, if you were previously on the ALAN Speakers Bureau and wish to continue to be on it, please contact Catherine Balkin with the above mentioned details. We look forward to working with you on this enterprise.