



Important Resources!

Nancie Atwell in *In the Zone* (Scholastic) states: “The teachers at our school are committed to helping every boy and girl establish the habits of a reader and a lifelong love of books.” (130). This is what *ALAN* is all about. Atwell details in this excellent book the importance of having classroom time every day for students to choose books they want to read and to have time for reading in class and at home. She and I agree there is a false notion that there is a period for “supplemental reading.” What is supplemental reading? Any book a student reads is a primary learning experience. When you went to party last night and had a great time, because you enjoyed yourself, was that supplementary? When one reads *Side Effects* by Amy Goldman Koss (Roaring Brook) and learns the painful experiences that Izzy has when she learns she has cancer and has to have the necessary treatments for containing it, there is hardly a person who won’t feel the suffering and appreciate the “humor” that makes this novel so memorable. Joan Kaywell’s *Dear Author: Letters of Hope* (Philomel) contains responses to young people’s letters

to authors expressing their reactions to books they have read. For example, Chad states in his letter to Marion Dane Bauer:

When I first got *On My Honor*, I thought, “It’s probably just another boring book, because I don’t like reading most books. I liked this one because it made me let out feelings inside me. . . .” (32)

This is what reading is all about. No matter what one reads, that touching of the heart, that compelling the reader to think about himself/herself is the ultimate literary experience. Following Chad’s letter is a response by Bauer explaining how and why she wrote the book.

Kaywell has reached out to many authors to share the letters they have received and for copies of their responses. Included are Laurie Halse Anderson, T. A. Barron, Chris Crutcher, Lois Duncan, Alex Flinn,

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Adrian Fogelin, John H. Ritter, Jerry Spinelli, Ellen Wittlinger, and many others. This is an important book, and the book is fittingly dedicated “In Memory of Ted Hipple, 1935-Thanksgiving Day 2004, ALAN and the Authors Wish You Well Eternally.”

James Blasingame’s new book, *Books That Don’t Bore ‘Em*, (Scholastic) states that “Good young adult literature is powerful. It grabs kids’ interest and speaks to them in language they can understand about the very issues they worry about on a daily basis. . . .” (7). He goes on to credit John (Jack) Bushman and Aileen Pace Nilsen as his tutors in his sojourn to the remarkable journey of young adult literature. The book goes into great depth explaining what young adult literature is and why it is important to adolescents. He provides bibliographies of good books for the young adult reader, and there is an exceptional section on brief interviews he has conducted with many such authors. He notes that teens want “authenticity in their reading.” Any teacher can vouch for this. Blasingame’s excellent text offers guidance for educators who are looking for good

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resources to bring readers and books together in meaningful ways. There is no shilly-shallying here. Blasingame and the authors present the case for using books that will develop lifetime readers.

Jim Trelease's *The Read-Aloud Handbook: 2006-2007 Edition* (Penguin) reaffirms why reading aloud is important for any age. This dynamic educator has been doing presentations all over the world, sharing his insights and ideas for developing readers by having good books available in the home as well as in the classroom. Parents and teachers are partners. He even cites how he got his own twelve-year-old to sit still for a story. (72-73). Trelease points out that one doesn't have to use just books; magazine and newspaper articles are good also. It is important "to make positive connections between the child and the reading experience."

But he relishes the days when a student says, "Do you know of any more books like that one?" He cites Avi's *Wolf Rider* as a real grabber for most reluctant readers. Of course, parents, teachers, and librarians will appreciate the briefly annotated lists of books he provides for those in search of titles.

Roxanne Coady and Joy Johannessen have edited a most interesting book, *The Book That Changed My Life* (Gotham Books). This is an adult book for adults, but could serve as an excellent model for a school project in which students could develop their own anthology. Seventy-one authors responded to the request "to write about a book that changed their lives, not only to enjoy their stories, but as a reminder and a provocation that books indeed change lives" (xxi).

Billy Collins, Poet Laureate of the United States (2001-2003), lists two books, *The Yearling* and *Lolita*. He states:

What more deeply connects the two books—one written for children, the other about a seducer of children—is their capacity to expand the natural sympathies of the reader... If reading enlarges our sympathy for others, strangers mostly—here a boy and a man whose loves are doomed by their desire—then these two books, alien to each other, widened my world and awakened empathies I had never felt before. (61).

Jack Prelutsky chose *A Child's Garden of Verses*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Through the Looking Glass*, and *Wild Animals I Have Known*.

Hardly an author was able to list just one book. But each described the emotional impression the books made. Regardless of the genre or the topic, something struck

home, deep inside. There is a lasting effect when one recalls the titles and authors who made such an impression and caused the reader to value the literary experience. This reminds me of a book I co-edited in 1980 for Avon Books, *Books I Read When I Was Young*. We asked famous people to cite three books they read as children or young adults which made a lasting impression upon them.

Different Places, Different Times

Philip Wooderson's *The Plague* (Kingfisher) is an interesting dual book that describes the effects of the plague in London in 1665 as told first by Rachel and then by Robert. This is a grim recounting of one of the deadliest epidemics to strike, and the author describes the horrible conditions, the bodies being carted away, the fears, and the desperate feelings people have over something none seems to understand:

Joe was in the large room at the back, fingers pegged to his nostrils. The stench was nauseating. He said the door had been closed, but he'd smelled something bad from the passage. Nothing could have prepared him—or me—for what we beheld in that room.

The air was soon seething with flies, woken up by the light of our candles. And in the bed, Widow Blunket lay propped up with bolsters, as if she'd been waiting to greet us.

Her face was like leathery parchment. It was gnawed away on one side, exposing chalky white bones and a grin made of crooked brown teeth. . . (81)

Arturo Martinez's *Pedrito's World* (University of Texas Press) is the story of a Mexican American family living as tenants on a farm

in South Texas in 1941 and celebrates the gifts of life as the world gradually drifts into World War II. The main character, Pedrito, is six years old, and the descriptions of him going to school, learning English, and coming home to interested parents who want to know all that he has learned, show a love and devotion to learning with the hope that he and other Mexican American children will have a better life. This is a novel filled with love and is an important contribution by an author who is writing from his experiences as well as from his heart.

The Garden by Carol Matas (Aladdin) is an engrossing story of the birth of Israel and the conflicts not only with Arab neighbors, but also the British who were “protectors” at the time. Anyone who follows current events in the Israeli-Palestine conflicts will find this historical novel riveting. Young people, both Israeli and Arab, are thrown into confrontations for self-survival. It would seem that both sides would want peace. Ruth, Nate, Zvi, and Fanny know they have to do special tasks, smuggling arms into Israel, in order to protect their kibbutz as well as safeguard the newly formed state of Israel. Even then suicide bombers attack public transportation. But not all Arabs are in favor of such hostilities. Fast reading. (A good novel for parallel reading is *Habibi* by Naomi Shihab Nye (Simon Pulse).

At the Sign of the Star by Katherine Sturtevant (Sunburst), set in eighteenth century London, is the story of young Meg Moore who discovers her father plans to marry again. She is not happy because she thought she would inherit her

father’s book store and then would be financially independent to live her life as she wants. Books give her the inspiration and courage to be independent and to dream of a future she really desires. What happens if her stepmother gives birth to a son? Who will inherit the store then? An interesting tale that brings forth honest thoughts for its time.

Stolen by the Sea by Anna Myers (Walker) is the gripping tale of the effects of the Galveston, Texas, hurricane which occurred in 1900. Maggie McKenna lived in a big house with many luxuries. Felipe Ortega was an orphan who worked on the lawn and did odd jobs around the McKenna home. When the storm hit, both young people struggled to escape the damaging storm that ruined Galveston and killed many people in the sweeping waters. This is a great novel, based on historic facts,

to help people understand the Katrina.

Of Lives and War

Stolen Voices: Young People’s War Diaries From World War I to Iraq edited by Zlata Filipovic and Melanie Challenger, brings into focus the impact of war upon the lives of youth. Many students have read *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank (Doubleday). Now they can continue to see how diaries reveal the fears, suffering, pains that wars throughout the century have inflicted on families. The entries include victims of WWI, WWII, including the Holocaust, Vietnam, the Balkans War, the Second Intifada between Israel and Palestine, and Iraq. The diary entries should make readers wonder how many understand the impact of war upon individuals as well as communities. Zlata Filipovic, who records her experiences in the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1991-1993) sums it up: June 29, 1992:

Dear Mimmy.

BOREDOM!!! SHOOTING!!! SHELLING!!! PEOPLE BEING KILLED!!! DESPAIR!!! HUNGER!!! MISERY!!! FEAR!!! (214)

London Calling by Edward Bloor (Knopf) is an engrossing novel of how a radio transfers Martin back to the London blitz during WWII. The radio makes it possible for Jimmy, a boy in London during the war, to make contact with Martin and to bring him over to see war in all of its realities. How can Martin convince people of his experiences? Outstanding.

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Tomorrow When the War Began by John Marsden (Scholastic) has been reissued and is the story of some friends who go away on a camping trip and return to find that their country has been invaded and everyone is gone. This is the first in a series of books that could be used in social studies as well as English classes to show struggles for survival when the unexpected happens.

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas by John Boyne (David Fickling) is another WWII novel that tells the story of a German boy and his family who have to leave their Berlin home to move to a special house way out of town. The boy, Bruno, can't understand what is happening and why his father's job forces the family to move. As he looks out of the window of his house, he sees in the distance a fenced-in area. What is this place called Out-With? Where are the children to play with? As Bruno

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looks out of his window, he sees people beyond and wonders who they are and what they are doing. He decides he ought to go exploring:

And, as often as he had watched the people, all the different kinds of people in their striped pajamas, it had never really occurred to him to wonder what it was all about. . . . And who decided which people wore the striped pajamas and which people wore the uniforms? The one thing Bruno tried not to think about was that he had been told on countless occasions by Mother and Father that he was not allowed to walk in this direction, that he was not allowed to walk anywhere near the fence or the camp, and, most particularly that exploration was banned at Out-With. With No Exceptions. (100-102)

My final recommendation is *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* by Bernice Eisenstein (Roaring Brook), another look at the Holocaust and its effects on people. This book is quite different. The illustrations lighten the tone, and the writing is really beautiful. Yes, a child can raise many questions about what has happened, and she doesn't always find easy answers.