

Summer 2012

# The Mailbox

Literacy Collaborative at Lesley University

## **Making a Winning List: Choosing Books for Text Talk with Intermediate AND Middle Grade Students**

*By Irene Fountas*

When students talk with each other or with you, they share their thinking. Interactive Read Aloud and Literature discussion groups, rooted in texts worth talking about, are ideal opportunities to expand students' confidence, thinking and knowledge. A powerful book choice is the beginning of a worthwhile discussion.

As you close out this school year, think about the books that your students couldn't stop talking about. Now is the time to take your notebook and create a page for titles you want to be sure to include for next year's small and whole group talk. Keep your notebook nearby, so you can add more titles over the summer as you browse them in bookstores or on the web. Consider the quality of your titles –and be sure to collect titles that represent a variety of genre.

It seems that there are some important areas to consider in choosing great books for “grand conversations.” Review your list consistently and think about some of the following criteria.



### Interest Level:

- Does the book demand student conversation?
- Is this a book my students would select themselves?

### Craft:

- Is the book well crafted? For example: are the voices authentic, the narrative structure complex, the dialect believable?

### Characters:

- Will my students care about the characters?
- Are the characters well-developed?
- Do the characters wrestle with difficult issues?

### Issues:

- Does the book address issues intermediate or middle school students find relevant to their lives and care about?
- Does the book expand students' views of the world?
- Does the book help them think about different perspectives or cultures from a variety of perspectives?

Let's be sure that we make available to our students those books that they just can't stop talking about. Time to start making our winning list!

## Taking Care of the Coach

By Toni Czekanski

Summer is here, and schools everywhere are closing for vacation. Teachers have time to rest and recharge, and literacy coaches will hopefully have some of that time as well. On paper that's what it looks like, but in reality, we all know that as coaches you are already thinking about the professional development sessions you will have in the fall (some of you are probably even doing work this summer...either with your teachers, in your book rooms, or with administrative teams). Is there no rest for the weary? Let's consider that question for a few minutes.

I was rereading a book the other day called, *Coaching for Balance: How to Meet the Challenges of Literacy Coaching* by Jan Miller Burkins. (2007, IRA). Chapter 3, "Taking Care of Yourself: Conserving Your Personal Resources," drew my attention. Since summer is a time to renew our spirits and those tired, weary bodies, I thought this might provide some good food for thought for our summer Mailbox issue. Burkin asks the question, "Who takes care of the coach?" Well, we all know that having support people in our lives, at school and at home is important, but it really comes down to one person who needs to do that job, and that person is YOU! So let's think about some of the things we might want to keep in mind.

Burkin suggests that creating coaching environments and "leaving margins" is a good way to begin. I love the term "margins" as it is used in this context. We talk a lot about coaching schedules and how full they can become - and how easily they can be disrupted by last minute meetings, or cancellations. Take the time to build "margins" - planning and reflecting time - into your schedule. It's OK, and important to have time to think! By building in this into your schedule every week, you know you can look forward to some time when you can sit down and consider what you have done, or what you will do next.

Be careful not to give up those margins when folks want "just a few more minutes" of your time. It is OK to say, "How about tomorrow at 2:00? I have to do some planning right now." Coaches can be their own worst enemies in this department, as we all know. Creating a coaching environment is akin to setting norms...what will your colleagues expect of you, and what will you expect of them? Setting expectations at the beginning of the year is a good way to build your "coaching space" and create routines that will allow you to keep your sanity.

Taking care of your bodies is another big point. How many times have you tried to eat lunch as you have answered emails, or skipped lunch to have a conference with a teacher or administrator (not to mention staying late at school and feeling stressed about getting home to see your families, or take the dog out for a walk)? There needs to be time to eat, rest, and enjoy life outside of school. Making time during the day to drink water, eat healthy foods, and get some time away from work where you can enjoy your other interests and family are essential to good health. It's OK to make the time to stay healthy!

Practicing positive habits is another way to contribute to a less stressful way of life. Burkins says to practice positivity and avoid negativity as much as possible. When we think about teachers, or when we talk about students, try to avoid negative comments. Focus on what people *can* do, rather than what they appear not to do. We know that we start our teaching by meeting learners where they are and working from there. So try to celebrate what people *do understand*, and "presume positive intentions." Burkin says this is a challenge, but if you can't *own* positive feelings, at least "rent" them as often as possible. (continued next page)

Recognizing limitations and letting go of some responsibility are important as well. We all have administrators and school literacy teams who are part of the “implementation team.” Building shared leadership is a big part of the Literacy Collaborative initiative. Are you helping to build leadership in your school? You can do this by letting go of some of the tasks you do on your own and making room for others to engage in the work. Encourage members of your team to step up and take an active role in the work you do together. Not only will this help you, but it will help each individual on the team to realize leadership potential, and make for a stronger implementation and a stronger school.

Finally, build a support system for yourself...both at school and in the larger work community. For those of you who have been coaching for many years, these systems are probably already in place. But if you are feeling “out there on your own” in your work environment, take some of that time for reflection that you have built into your schedule and use it to consider how to beef up your work support system. Do you need a weekly meeting with your principal to discuss the issues and stress of your work? If so, try to work toward positive outcomes during this meeting. Go in with the goal of leaving with an action plan that will help you deal with whatever stressor is getting the best of you. Make your meetings systematic and planful, with the goal of feeling better when you leave (remember, take a positive stance). A pipe dream, you say? Give it a try.

There are so many important things that you do every day to help teachers, administrators, and students in your schools. You are a giving person, who makes a difference for your school and district. It’s important to take care of yourself, mentally and physically, so that you can wake up tomorrow and continue to do your best. Sometimes doing your best means taking

a breather to renew your energy and commitment. I hope you will take some time this summer to think about how you can build in some of these suggestions during the next school year...and think of even more that you can do to take care of yourself. As a matter of fact, if you do come up with some other ideas for “taking care of the coach,” send them along, and we’ll post them in our next newsletter. Till then, have a wonderful summer...and take a break!

### **Has your school taken advantage of the LC Network Discount?**

#### **Save up to \$95 off 4-day Institutes**

- ✓ Summer Literacy Institute, K-8
- ✓ Early Literacy Institute, PreK-K

*LC Network Cost: \$500 per person  
Regular Cost (per Institute): \$595;  
\$570 (online) per person*

#### **Save \$450 on “The Effective Literacy Coach”**

- ✓ 9 days of face-to-face training and 30 hours online
- ✓ Offered in Summer and Spring

*LC Network Cost: \$2,500 per person  
Regular Cost: \$2,950 per person*

#### **Save \$150 on “What Every School Leader Needs to Know”**

- ✓ 5 days of face-to-face training
- ✓ Offered in spring and summer

*LC Network Cost: \$1,700 per person  
Regular Cost: \$1,850 per person*

## Reflections of Reflecting

By Jessica Sherman

***“We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future.”***

***John Dewey - Experience and Education***

For decades scholars have been writing about the power of reflective journaling as a way for professionals to elevate their practice. They have claimed - whether you are a doctor, a principal, an athletic coach, a teacher, a social worker, or a literacy coach - having a disposition for self-reflection and self-analysis impacts professional growth and outcomes. We know about this research and accept its validity, but how many of us actually have committed to implementing a formalized written reflective practice that we use to improve our own coaching and teaching? Why are we so resistant to making journaling a habit of mind?

For me, my initial distaste for formalized written reflection really began in my first teacher training courses where we were constantly asked to write reflections on readings and videos we had watched during class. We were to complete a two-column table with a summary of the text on one side and our reflections on the text on the other side. We had to do this for every single chapter we read and for every single video we watched. I now understand that these reflections were somewhat useful to me as a learner. As we all know, the act of writing about reading (or video) demands that we organize and articulate our thoughts and therefore expands our thinking. These written reflections were also somewhat useful to the instructor. They gave her a sense of what I was taking away and held me accountable for the assignments. But honestly, after a while, they blurred together.

The task I was being asked to complete felt like busy work because, although it required analysis and reflection, it lacked a personal connection to the problems and decisions I was going to face every day in my classroom.

As a novice teacher, my eyes seemed to involuntarily roll when the suggestion to keep a reflection journal was made by a staff developer. She recommended that I answer a series of questions at the end of each day such as “What were three things that went well today? Why? What are three things you’d like to improve tomorrow?” Those unending reflection assignments from my training certainly were partly to blame for this reaction, but I also felt their request disavowed the “on-the-run” reflecting that I felt confident I did all day long in every interaction I had with my students. Of course I was thinking about my previous observations when I made an instructional decision for the group! Of course I was using data inform my teaching! Why did I actually need to take time from my frantic schedule to actually write down some long drawn out narrative when it was all in my head? I was already overwhelmed with the daily demands of teaching.

It wasn’t until I gained more experience as a teacher that I *really* began to understand potential the power of keeping a reflection journal. As a Reading Recovery teacher I was trained to scrutinize my running records to discover patterns in my students’ responses, and it started to occur to me that I probably had patterns of responding too. I realized that a journal could not only be a place where I could address my day-by-day or week- by-week problems, but it might also be a record that could illuminate my own patterns. I had finally learned enough to look at my work critically and purposefully. This was actually a context in which journaling could be effective for me. (continued next page)

In my experience, I have found that reflective journaling is most powerful when I am able to:

- **Determine a purpose for writing**
- **Identify strengths and needs in my practice and in my environment so that I can focus my energy productively**
- **Ask myself the kind of questions that are necessary to unpack a problem so that I can begin to examine the causes and to imagine possible solutions**
- **Feel empowered to enact change in my environment so that all of my reflections can be applied to my work**
- **Take on written reflection as a habit of mind so that I can notice my own patterns and capture my own growth over time.**

I feel like as I grow in my professional role, my journaling potential increases. As my journaling potential grows, I grow in my professional role. It's a beautiful cycle!

So... how does all of this impact our work? As coaches, we try to help teachers understand their own beliefs about teaching and learning, become keen observers of children, and implement effective teaching practices that positively impact student achievement. It is also crucial that we ask teachers take on a reflective mindset so that even when we are not in their classroom, they can see the teaching and learning in their classroom through a critical lens. Journaling is a place where all of this can really come together. The challenge is in understanding where a teacher is at a certain moment and helping them find a way in to this practice that meets their needs right where they are. Once they experience the power journaling has to lift their thinking, they will likely be hooked. If I had been skillfully coached as a novice teacher, maybe I would have come to understand the power reflective journaling much sooner.

How can we help our colleagues build this habit of mind? Here are some ideas:

- **Model the power of this tool. Keep your own journal and refer to it regularly.**
- **From the very start, encourage teachers to keep a journal that is completely devoted to their own literacy practice. Try to find money to provide nice journals for your class.**
- **Plan writing time into your professional development sessions. Provide specific prompts that are good examples of the kind of reflections you'd like teachers to do independently. Begin a session with some journal "share time" where teachers can discuss what they've been reflecting on with their colleagues.**
- **Incorporate written reflection into your one-on-one coaching. Use written reflection as a way for you and the teacher to process what has just happened when there is limited time between the lesson and the debrief or to record thoughts when there is too much time between lesson and debrief. Ask teachers to write their goals in a journal after a coaching conversation. Based on those goals, help each teacher find a journaling structure to use independently that addresses their individual needs.**

How have you used journaling in your own work? How have you built this habit of mind for yourself and for the teachers you support? Let us know, and we will share with others.

## Great Summertime Reads: Poolside PD

By Cindy Downend

**One of the best parts of summer is having the time to catch up on reading some really good books, both professionally and recreationally. Although summer is filled with institutes and training for us at the Center, we still carve out a bit of time to escape the hubbub with texts that re-nourish both our minds and our souls. Here are a few recommendations to consider adding to your must read list of professional texts.**

**How Will You Measure Your Life** by Clayton Christensen: This one caught my eye on a list of best sellers in the business world, but sounds very relevant for many of us. The text is based on a speech that was given in 2010 by world-renowned innovation expert Clayton M. Christensen to the Harvard Business School's graduating class. Drawing upon his business research, he offered a series of guidelines for finding meaning and happiness in life. He used examples from his own experiences to explain how high achievers can all too often fall into traps that lead to unhappiness. This one is on my nightstand and is helping me to ponder those deeper issues in life.

**Opening Minds** by Peter Johnston: If *Choice Words* changed your thinking about the language we use with students, watch out! You may find that *Opening Minds* will have an even greater impact on your thinking about how teachers' use of language can empower or squelch students. *Opening Minds* will help you to consider whether your language is supporting students in developing an open stance to learning or leading them to develop a fixed mindset. Powerful stuff!

**Sit Down and Teach Up** by Katie Wood Ray and Matt Glover (Primary level): This ebook is available both as an app for Ipad and in pdf form from Heinemann. Ray and Wood offer us wonderful video clips of the two of them conferring with young writers and also discuss their thinking behind each of the conferences. If you can't make it to our Early Literacy Institute where Matt will be featured or to the Summer Institute with Katie, then be sure to pick up a copy of this "text."

**Pathways to the Common Core** by Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, and Christopher Lehmen: I suggest this text with a word of caution. The authors help the reader to consider how the demands of the *Common Core State Standards* can be met through strong teaching in a reading and writing workshop model. They also urge us to approach the standards with logic and to not abandon what we know to be effective teaching. My note of caution arises because some of the writers' theoretical understandings about the reading process are a bit divergent from our understandings of reading as a complex process. The three authors advise us to start with what we are already doing well in our teaching, and to build on our strengths to help students meet the standards outlined in the CCSS.

**Genre Study** by Irene Fountas & Gay Su Pinnell: Divided into 3 Sections, this text will help you to think about how to teach genre study from an inquiry stance, become more knowledgeable about the characteristics of specific genres, and show you how to help students apply their knowledge of genres in talking, reading and writing. When introducing the new text to our faculty, Irene urged us to be "analytical, not rigid, in our thinking about genres." The big idea is to consider how developing students' understandings of genre through the use of inquiry will help them to become proficient readers and writers.

## Middle School Book Suggestions

By Jill Eurich

Here are a few suggestions for Middle School books.

I just read *The Secret World of Walter Anderson* by Hester Bass, illustrated by E. B. Lewis. It is a beautifully written and illustrated biographical picture book of a naturalist artist from the Mississippi Gulf Coast. He is known primarily for his large murals and watercolors but also for many volumes of logs during his solitary visits to Horn Island filled with drawings, poetry and observations as well as other book illustrations, toys and linoleum block carvings. The book captures his estrangement to those close to him, his sensitivity to his surroundings and his many remarkable talents.

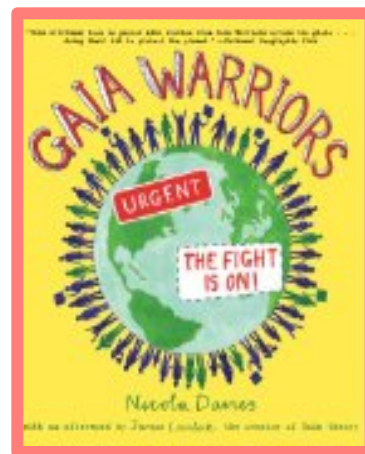
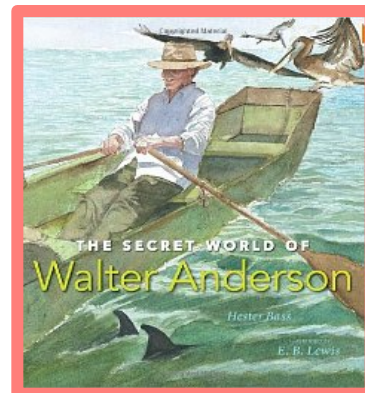
Other interactive read-aloud books you might enjoy:

*Blues Journey* by Walter Dean Myers,  
*I, Matthew Henson, Polar Explorer* by Carole Boston Weatherford  
*Eleanor, Quiet no More* by Kelly Rappaport  
*I Never Knew Your Name* by Sherry Garland

*Gaia Warriors* by Nicola Davies can be read in sections as a read-aloud but it could also be read in parts for a literature study or included in your classroom library. People of all ages and walks of life present facts, opinions and suggestions for problem solving global warming. The book has a wide range of graphic features and ways of making the case for all of us to become responsible stewards of our universe in a way that I found engaging and compelling.

Other possibilities for classroom library books that I have read or have been recommended recently:

*13 Hangmen* – Art Corriveau  
*The Cheshire Cheese Cat: A Dickens of a Tale* by Carmen Agra Deedy  
*My Most Excellent Year: A Novel of Love, Mary Poppins and Fenway Park* by Steve Kluger  
*Between Shades of Gray* by Ruta Sepetys  
*Facts of Life: Stories* by Gary Soto  
*Okay for Now* by Gary Schmidt  
*Trouble* by Gary Schmidt  
*Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper  
*Runaway* by Wendelin Van Draanen  
*Rubber Houses* by Ellen Yeomans



## National Website Gets a "Facelift"

Be sure to check out the new look of the National Literacy Collaborative website either on your computer or mobile device. All of the public pages have been redesigned with a fresh, clean format. We have also arrived in the 21st century with mobile-friendly designs for use on smartphones and tablets. Stay tuned for redesign of the password protected areas of the website. We would also love your feedback on the new look ([cdownend@lesley.edu](mailto:cdownend@lesley.edu)).

### The Effective Literacy Coach

*Blended Format*

**August 13-17, 2012  
September 28-29, 2012  
November 16-17, 2012**

### Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI)

*K-2*

**August 21-23, 2012  
October 23-25, 2012**

**For more information visit our website:  
<http://www.lesley.edu/crr>**

### Summer Literacy Institute, K-8

**July 9-12, 2012**

### Summer School Leaders

**July 30 - August 2, 2012  
(now with new RegOnline option)**

### Spring School Leaders

**January 15 - 17, 2013 &  
March 4-5, 2013**

## Literacy For All Conference

Professional Development in Literacy Training and Reading Recovery  
**November 4-6, 2012**

**Register online by August 3<sup>rd</sup> and get \$25.00 off!**

<http://lesley.edu/literacyforall>