

Rise Up

Matt bursts into my room waving *Looking for Alaska* (Green, 2005).

“I finished it! I couldn’t put it down,” he smiles at me, “I didn’t even watch the Celtics last night, Kittle; I kept reading.”

I smile and eagerly pester him, “Okay, so the big thing that happened—did you see it coming?”

“No—not at all.”

“I know. It made me crazy.” I notice the other students filling their seats; the bell will ring any second. “What are you going to read next?”

“I don’t know,” he scans the shelves along one wall, “do you have any more books like that one?”

As I reach for *The Abundance of Katherines* (Green, 2006), I cheer silently for Matt. This is a seminal moment. He told me he didn’t read any of the required books in seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, or eleventh grade, so he didn’t read *any* books at all. Man, that’s a lot of time. He stopped trying after his class plodded through *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in middle school. He didn’t hold a grudge against his teachers or his schools; he just knew English wasn’t for him. He was exactly what Smith and Wilhelm (2002) described in *Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys*, the boy who sees no purpose for English in his life, the boy who has lost that haunting call of a story he must race to finish. He’s forgotten there is reading and writing that feeds the soul.

Matt learned shortcuts to get by, and in that, he had lots of company. “No one reads those books,” he tells me. From his view of the world, he’s nearly right. Although it would surprise him

to learn how many honors students used Spark Notes to survive English just like him, he has come to *believe* that reading and writing are activities for other people: he’ll get by with as little of each as he can. That thought keeps me awake at night. In the fall, Matt will begin a college program in early childhood education, and he tells me, “I’ll never have to read literature again!” I sigh and watch him collapse into the pages of John Greene’s novel. I hope this semester might change him, but I have the weight of a lot of years to press against. Why do I feel so alone in this mission sometimes?

Matt is in a mixed-ability class of seniors, a course called Writing where students read what they choose to read and write from their own ideas and topics as we study the complexities of writing well. You know this place: It’s a reading-writing workshop classroom. In 1987, there was Romano *Clearing the Way* for it. That same year, Atwell inspired us with *In the Middle*. Graves was observing our youngest writers in *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (1983). Before him, Elbow wrote *Writing without Teachers* in 1973. In fact, it was more than 30 years ago (1977) when Donald Murray gave us “Our Students Will Write—If We Let Them” (reprinted in Murray, 1982). He said, “Our students want to write—but not what we want them to write. Our students want to write of death and love and hate and fear and loyalty and disloyalty; they want to write the themes of literature in those forms—poetry, narrative, drama—which have survived the centuries. They want to write literature, and we assign them papers of literary analysis, comparison and contrast, argumentation based on subjects on which they are not informed and for which they have no concern”

(p. 146). In the dozens of books he wrote until his death in 2006, he showed us how to inspire and challenge writers of all ages.

Yet here we are.

Too many students aren't engaged in literacy: they aren't given the choices they need to discover personal joy in reading and writing. The more time I spend on the road presenting at conferences for teachers, the more dismayed I am at how rare reading-writing workshop classrooms are in middle and high schools today. A woman asked me in California this weekend, "I love all of what you're showing us, but I have to teach my curriculum. How can I convince my school to recognize the importance of student work like this?"

Here's the answer I've come to as I fly from palm trees to six feet of snow in my front yard: It's up to us. It is time for another revolution: and yes, I want to change the world. We need to upend the collection of unmanageable mandates and improve our focus on engaging teenagers in reading and writing. Do students read enough? Do they write and, more important, rewrite enough? And if not, what would you have to change to make that happen? It's time to derail the lock-step march through curriculum, so that students inhale books at a rate of 12–25 a semester (as I watch in my classroom) and draft and redraft until they've created something beautiful. Free teenagers to develop a reading habit and unleash a vibrant, articulate voice, poised to confront ideas that must be debated and stories that must be told.

It is time.

We are the experts on our students. We know when covering content buries the beauty and passion of young voices. We know when giving into the sludge of an archaic, unreachable text leaves children with no logical response except refusal to try. So let's stop it already. Bring in only poetry that makes you giggle or wince or reach for your heart to contain its splintering. Bring to your students the drafts of writing you've struggled to create about moments and ideas that matter to you. (Mine dissected this piece you hold today, and it

is better for their influence.) Make changes in your classroom that you can *believe* in.

Emilie was working on her piece about farming today. She shared her storyboard last week: the building of hay forts to jump on, the hand-calling work of bringing in the harvest, and the simple peace of sleeping in the sun beneath a cloudless sky after the milking is done. She's writing each moment in the voice of the age she was then: you can imagine the challenge. She is undaunted. She'll have another draft for me to read tomorrow. By June, she'll have a collection that might represent all she is capable of, and in that process of finding meaning, revising her words to more precisely explain, detail, and support her ideas, she'll be a more skillful, intentional writer: ready for college.

What is in the way that you can change today to make that more likely for your students? It is time to turn up the volume on "Revolution" (Lennon & McCartney, 1968) and change the world for the readers and writers before you. They need your courage in *this* age.

References

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