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Toward a More Loving Framework for Literacy Education 2

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Toward a More Loving Framework for Literacy Education

Clio Stearns

*I'll not ask for the impossible;
one learns to walk by walking.
In time I'll forget this empty brimming,
I may laugh again at
a bird, perhaps, chucking the nest—
but it will not be happiness,
for I have known that.*

– Rita Dove, “Demeter Mourning” (1996)

There is a way of reading that we know about before we learn to decode or comprehend a physical text, a way of reading that has everything to do with becoming and being human and learning to participate in the narratives that comprise our personhood. As we grow older and transition from early to middle childhood and into the world of school and curriculum, many of us lose touch with this first form of reading. It is a serious loss—one that dehumanizes us as well as our stories. The loss is mitigated by opportunities for exploration and autonomy on offer in our new, literate universe, but we might enjoy the liberating aspects of that autonomy more fully if school did not expect us to forget an affective, intimate side to reading.

The story I want to tell is about a confluence of maternity, desire, and learning. This story takes place during the second year of my daughter’s life and the first year I returned to teaching after giving birth to her.

Because this is a story about love, it is also a story about desire. Cohler and Galatzer-Levy (2006) cite Boutilier’s (1994) observation that “desire is a wellspring to creativity in the classroom” (p. 256). They write about the importance of “recognizing that the erotic transference reflects the complex transference-countertransference matrix of learning and teaching” (p. 254). In other words, there is an extent to which all desire is erotic, and teachers and students must recognize that such desire is an element of the mutual relationships we form.

Certainly it is taboo within elementary education for a teacher to speak of students in terms of desire. Yet this denial belies the erotic nature of instruction, disclosure, and exploration, the potentially exciting idea that “I know something you don’t know.”

When a curriculum is standardized and a teacher and her students feel pressured to get through it, there is a push to lose track of reading as a relationship. It is a formative relationship between reader and text. It is also a performative relationship, one in which reader enacts both parent and

child to story, to language, and to herself, and in which text represents both the danger and the possibility of a wider world.

When a teacher involves herself in the reading process, she too must perform. Her professional purpose is defined by the “success” of the readers, and she takes on the responsibility of reading her students even while she both presents and represents text for them. For the teacher as well as for the students, other relationships are recalled, rehashed, and potentially revised via reading. But just as children burdened with mastery of a daunting curriculum are expected to channel all of their energies into a narrow conceptualization of forwardly progressing learning, teachers are similarly not meant to bring the rest of our lives into classroom work. We are not supposed to also be daughters, lovers, or friends. To the extent that we are asked to be parents, social expectations permit us only the most sterile, sacrificing, bloodless representation of that role. We are meant to happily nurture and care for our students, but not get too attached or worry about the compartments anyone else has spoken for.

Ultimately, though, it requires a farcical degree of self-deceptive hubris to imagine that despite working within mandatory and starkly defined versions of curriculum, teachers can exist outside a matrix of desire. If we are to want things for our students, we will also want things from them, and the specificity of what we want will, for us as for anyone, derive from our stories—from the way that, as Grumet (2007) describes, “...every day we leave our kitchens, coffee cups on the counter, maybe kids on the bus already, the dog outside, and grab a train or drive to schools where we talk to other people’s children about their lives in the world” (p. ix).

“Mommy-Read-a-Book”: The Romance (and Romanticization) of Early Literacy

It is an unquestionably familiar scene: the curling up on the sofa of parent, child, and book. With my daughter, just shy of two, it happens multiple times a day and frequently begins with the demand “Mommy-read-a-book.” Already, in 22 months, we have traversed a fickle assortment of titles: *Good Night, Moon*, of course, read and then quietly recited each evening in the rocking chair; board books and textured, touch-and-feel books with furry kittens, scratchy beards, bumpy dinosaurs.

More recently, my daughter’s growing attention span has allowed my wife to enjoy with her picture books and characters fraught with nostalgia: Max and Ruby, the rabbit sibling pair in which the hapless brother always manages to unwittingly defeat his wiser, long-suffering sister; Little Bear, who goes fishing for a whale to outdo his fisherman father. (“How ’bout a fish?” our daughter quips in anticipation.)

I have spent some time wondering why my wife has so many memories of childhood picture books and I have so few. The simplest answer is that my father “read” to me without books. He was a storyteller and producer, and he spun amusing and memorable tales. Most were about the Goodheart Family, whose patriarch, Provider, consistently foiled his wife’s evil brother, Herbert Meanie. My father’s insistent generativity showed me a version of story that was clever but not passionate, discursive but not recursive, illustrative but not visual.

There are picture books that mean a great deal to me, too; I came to them later in life. My first year as a graduate student at Bank Street College, I took a course entitled “Language, Literature and Emergent Literacy.” Two evenings a week, 30 students gathered to hear picture books read aloud. It was an indulgence: our professor was old enough to be our father, and his New York accent grew ever more intense as he engaged emotionally with text. I remember when he started sobbing so hard halfway through Polacco’s (1994) *Mrs. Katz and Tush* that he couldn’t finish. That course was where I was introduced to Raschka’s (1993) *Yo! Yes?*

Yo! Yes? has only nineteen words. The simple dialogue and illustrations cooperate to construct this narrative: One boy discovers another alone and initiates a conversation. The second is reluctant to engage, and it turns out that he is gloomy because he has no friends. The first boy offers up his own companionship, and after brief hesitation, the two high-five and start playing together.

One boy in the illustrations looks black, the other white. One boy seems exuberant and outgoing, the other dejected and cautious. The setting is barely present, and the age of the boys is equally imprecise. There is plenty of room for projection, and teachers can use *Yo! Yes?* as a classroom read-aloud for any number of purposes: talking to kindergartners about making friends, for example, or analyzing with fifth graders what sorts of interactions can help relationships transcend racial or linguistic boundaries.

When my daughter asks to cuddle up on the couch with a book, the kind of reading she longs for is much less guarded than that. Bakhtin (1940/1981) writes of our earliest reactions to literature involving the absurd: “parodying the direct word, direct style, exploring its limits, its absurd sides...the creating artist began to look at language from the outside, with another’s eyes, from the point of view of a potentially different language...” (p. 60).

In our earliest histories as individuals, all language is a “potentially different language”; the youngest child sees all literature “with another’s eyes.” My daughter projects all of her experience onto the books in her life, pulling Sal’s (McCloskey, 1949) carefully sketched blueberries from the page and popping them sensually into her mouth, patting illustrations of dogs, snuggling close to images of sad children.

“Mommy-read-a-book. Read *Yo! Yes?*”

I introduce her to the book during a weekly winter library excursion, and we quickly hit a point where we are in trouble over having to return it. We read it cuddled up on the sofa. We read it over dinner, me frantically scratching bits of rice off the pages as we turn them. “Yo!” she shouts one day, when I pick her up from day care, then, “Mommy, say ‘yes!’”

What is she learning through her relationship to this text and through the triangular relationship she creates among the book, herself, and me? Before long, she becomes more dictatorial during our reading sessions, demanding, “(Turn to the) PAGE (where the) BOY (is) SAD!” She interacts more

directly with the plot. “Happened, Mommy?” My explanations are inadequate or confusing, so she asks again, “HAP-pened?”

Soon, her transactions begin taking place directly with the characters: “Are you okay?” The fact that the child feels sad arouses her empathy as well as evident anxiety, and she begins to almost frantically intervene. “Want some snack?” she asks the character, pinching the air and then feeding imaginary Cheerios to the portrait on the page. “Need more?”

We turn the page and she looks to me, “Feel better?” I might say, “Well, he doesn’t feel better yet,” prompting another round of “HAP-pened?” I try to explain that he feels he has no friends, and she points to the other child, and says, “That’s a friend!” Then she points to herself and says, “I a friend!” She sees from his stubbornly deflated physiognomy that this isn’t enough.

My daughter’s experience of friendship is, at this point, limited. The empathy she is expressing likely has less to do with a worry about having no friends than with a broader fear of loneliness and possibly guilty anxiety over causing pain—both ideas more familiar and alarming to her.

Grumet (1988) posits, “what is most fundamental to our lives as men and women sharing a moment on this planet is the process and experience of reproducing ourselves” (p. 4). The images on Raschka’s pages allow my daughter to reproduce her experience of loneliness and desertion, her emerging awareness that she can and must exist autonomously. In allowing for this reproduction, the text evokes all the same terror, excitement, guilt, and longing for relief that go along with those original feelings.

There is something vaguely frightening, even off-putting, to me about the extent of the furor my daughter shows. Touched as I am by her concern, appealing as I find her passion, I admit to wanting her to calm down, to understand that this is just a book. One implication of my own father’s textless reading was a comforting belief that we could meet our aesthetic and intellectual needs without a lot of input from an outside world. I could author myself to sleep, usually laughing. This saved my early reader-self from the pain of locating and expanding my own feelings in another’s words and images. At the same time, it prevented me from discovering a certain openness and a certain consolation, and from addressing a realm of desire that is metaphysical, neither aesthetic nor intellectual. I am anxious about my daughter’s inability to control herself, but I envy, idealize, and love it too.

“Stroller,” my daughter decides, insistent. “Put in the stroller.”

Now we have transcended the reading experience altogether and gone into a routine she follows when nurturing a favorite doll. The loneliness, the limitations of her real mother—these are unacceptable. She grabs the book from my lap, puts it sideways in her doll stroller and says, “Strap in.” She covers it with a swaddling blanket and pushes it back and forth all over our apartment. Still unsatisfied, she takes the book out, blanket and all, and begins rocking it in her arms. “Carry,” she announces, tucking the awkward hardcover under her shoulder.

I begin to feel somewhat marginal at this point, and though I'm moved by her efforts, they continue to arouse my anxious confusion. Why so frantic? Why so incapable of making it better? I get up to start dinner, and she lets me know that my departure is unwelcome. "Mommy come!" Though I am no longer actively reading to her, we are still reading together. I am the "quiet old lady who was whispering 'hush' " (Brown, 1947, p. 8), entrapped in the experience to ensure that the page with the resolution is still accessible once all this sadness gets to be too much.

And sure enough, the moment comes. "Page feel better!" her high-pitched voice demands, and she snuggles up as I flip to the friends' high five. Still, it doesn't all quite make sense. "HAP-pened?" she wants to know, as puzzled by the simple fix as she was by the preceding despair. Then, once I've explained and she's nodded sagely, apparently understanding what she feels prepared to understand, she shuts the book, stares at it for a time, then passes it back to me, requesting, "More?"

To ignore the desire evident in this reading experience is to ignore its significance. Every interaction my daughter makes with Raschka's text is about inserting herself into the story, coming as close as she can to the narrative and the images, drawing them into her life and under her wing while retaining a grasp on me. She longs to take possession of the book in the combined forms of nurturance and deep, total comprehension—empathy, to be sure, but also a joining together that is as oppressive as it is reproductive and as consoling as it is productive.

This is not the only way to read, and some might argue that it is not reading at all. As an adult reader, I long to follow a linear narrative, mediated by text. My daughter wants to flip back and forth from one page to another, focus on a particular picture, position the book as a character in her life instead of herself as a borrower of the author's intentions. I want to be able to set the story down when the clock or my body mandates that it is time for something else. She finds all of the something else right there within the story.

More challenging and less obvious is the disquiet of such an egocentric relationship to literature. My daughter, largely unable to conceptualize a book as about anything but herself or her immediate world, appears forced to see a character's sadness as something she both has created and must experience. She is frantic and needs to be held at the end of some reading sessions. Grumet (2006) plays with the idea of book as transitional object. Indeed, it can function as such, but unlike a doll or a security blanket, a book requires even its earliest handler to remain of the world and to cope with the reality of the story that has been written without its audience's participation. Romantic it is, but it is not easy to be an early reader.

When the Reader Comes to School

I took a year away from teaching after the birth of my daughter. When I returned, it was to a part-time position as a reading specialist for fifth graders at an elite independent school near Boston. My previous experience with reading instruction, all in public schools, had been within a widely used workshop model in which teacher-guided minilessons focus students on predetermined reading

skills or concepts throughout a unit. The architecture of a lesson remains approximately the same regardless of its content (Calkins, 2010).

Following the minilesson, students break off to read independently, with partners, or in small groups. They stop to ruminate verbally or in reading notebooks, and, ideally, the teacher circulates to confer with students. The teacher might also gather a group of students to work on explicit skills, including anything from phonemic awareness to questioning an author's purpose. At the end of a reading period, the class comes together for a reflection.

Despite notable strengths of the workshop model, it is quite—and possibly dangerously—standardized. Boldt (2009) reminds us of the significance of creativity and a sense of play in children's literacy development. Any rigid approach, she suggests—and maybe particularly one, such as the workshop model, with the pretense of promoting individual freedom—risks shrouding a classroom environment in fear, prioritizing conformity.

Salvio and Boldt (2009) problematize the use of a standardized program for literacy education, arguing that while such a program might ostensibly prescribe a form of democracy in the classroom, the very fact of the program's hegemony undermines and mocks an authentic democratic end. A rigid, standardized, and even liberally scripted reading program by necessity detracts from learning reading as a relational, transformative process.

When teaching within the workshop model, I found it difficult to have meaningful conversations with my students about books; each student was reading something different. Sometimes I had read the books, but often I had not. Hard as I would try to keep up with publications for this age group, it was an endeavor that did not leave me feeling better equipped to teach.

Further, though brief reading conferences were useful for assessing students—particularly when the students had struggles with vocabulary, decoding, or the more tangible aspects of comprehension—I found these short meetings utterly useless when it came to helping children engage in deeper, more emotional ways with text. Following the workshop structure promotes a very concrete definition of reading, compartmentalized into isolated skills, divorced from anxiety or desire, anger or love.

It is possible that it is not the role of the elementary school teacher to help students engage affectively with text. Perhaps this has to happen on a slower timeline, or outside the constricted context of school. Much is made in childhood education, though, about critical thinking. In the upper elementary grades, teachers are encouraged to explicitly teach inference skills. Unfortunately, the strategies we are given for doing this are so laughably concrete that it is almost impossible to imagine them leading to abstract thought or, less still, feeling.

We teach students to make predictions or connections. There is admittedly something charming about a nine-year-old raising his hand to say, "I have a text-to-self connection," but this language is ultimately reductionist, demonstrating some understanding of text but only limited

understanding of self. We are encouraged to have our students participate in “book clubs” or “literature circles,” where they might take on roles such as “artful artist” or “literary luminary” (Daniels, 2002), filling out worksheets meant to then give structure to the students’ discussion of texts.

Such structure, justified as a form of scaffolding, ensures that a period gets filled with talk, but it also does a good job of defending students and teachers against whatever fear we might associate with silence. Ultimately, this is a form of standardization that prevents us not only from reading but even from understanding why we might prefer not to read.

A Reading Group

I was intrigued to learn that the independent school in which I would be working mandated a more traditional approach to reading instruction. Students worked in small groups, and everyone in the grade read the same books. The fifth-grade book list was a preselected group of novels chosen to support the social studies curriculum, a sweeping yearlong survey of US history. The timeline for completing the novels was also predetermined, and I was provided with a scope and sequence of language arts skills to cover as we read.

My groups were comprised of the ‘weakest’ fifth-grade readers, as determined by standardized tests as well as from input from their previous year’s teachers. Leonard, Eli, Amy, Gloria, and Dory¹ were the five students in one of my groups.

Leonard, on the younger side for his grade, approached everything with juvenile energy, laughing off challenges. He was socially adept and well loved by his peers, even though he remained interested in stuffed animals and pretend play. Leonard was a fluent oral reader but struggled with comprehension, and his summaries of stories were often imbued with erroneous understandings. His conversations about books veered so quickly and so far from the text that I often wondered whether he had read them at all. Leonard’s father lived far away and saw Leonard rarely, but Leonard often told fantastical tales of their weekend adventures together.

Like many students I worked with, Eli had been diagnosed with dyslexia and saw a tutor twice a week outside of school for decoding and vocabulary support. He came from a wealthy family with no known history of learning disabilities. He often came to class ready to boast about his weekend on Nantucket or the fancy party he attended in the Caribbean over vacation. Eli was athletic, popular, and funny. He had reasonably strong comprehension but was cool and disinterested when it came to reading, and he rarely picked up a book on his own time. He read haltingly and often omitted or misread longer words.

¹ The students’ names used throughout this essay are all pseudonyms, and identifying features have also been changed.

Amy seemed to enjoy school, but she frequently moaned and called herself “stupid.” Her body language too was self-effacing. She spoke a great deal about her one-year-old half brother, with whom she lived on alternate weeks. She was also exceptionally open about her close relationship to her mother, and she told me that her mom really wanted her to like reading more. But Amy said she had never liked to read because she was a slow reader and “just not that into it.” Her self-determined goal for the year was to find books she could like more. Amy’s oral reading was accurate though slow, but she had weak comprehension and struggled especially with tasks that required her to make connections among the different parts of one story.

Gloria was Amy’s best friend. She was a devoted student with a charismatic personality. She knew that reading and math had both been challenging to her in the past, but she seemed equally aware of her many strengths, which included interpersonal and leadership skills. Like Amy, Gloria had a young half-sibling by her father—a sister, whose “cute” antics she frequently exclaimed over but whom she only saw about once a month. Gloria was a fluent reader, though she stumbled over polysyllabic words and had not yet mastered some of the linguistic patterns that make vocabulary acquisition easier. She had excellent concrete comprehension but seemed unable so far to take her understanding beyond exactly what happened on a page.

Dory had an understated demeanor and a calm, quiet style. She was an only child of high-achieving parents whose expectations were strict; her mother arrived at our first conference with highlighted, annotated copies of the previous year’s report cards. Dory loved baseball more than anything and was a vocal Red Sox supporter; she was mortified to discover that I had moved from New York, calming down when she learned that I was not, in fact, a Yankees fan. She also loved big words, humor, and the Harry Potter series. In fact, Dory read voraciously, so it was curious that she still had struggles with comprehension. She often read to the end of a page or chapter and then summarized it, describing every detail accurately but missing a hugely important aspect of the plot, particularly when there was conflict or injustice involved. She presented herself as a reader with such poise and conviction that it would have been easy to overlook these gaps. Dory was friendly with other girls in the grade but seemed not to have close connections among her peers.

Acknowledging Conflicts in the Classroom

From the beginning of my work with these students, I observed something frustrating about our interactions. I admitted that there was a degree of envy-imbued resistance preventing me from feeling committed to these largely affluent children. But my students did not have it easy. It is a humiliating and painful experience to be labeled a slow learner at an elite institution that flaunts academic rigor and privileges a showy sort of cognitive success. Even acknowledging this, I felt unable to ignite the empathy for engaging deeply in our interactions. I began to fear that becoming a mother had taken the teacher out of me, that I did not have that ephemeral “enough to go around.”

Britzman and Pitt (1996) write about transference in teacher-student relationships. They bring to bear “the idea that the teacher possesses a conflictive inner world” (p. 117). Citing Anna Freud, they

write of “the ethical obligation teachers have to learn about their own conflicts and to control the reenactment of old conflicts that appear in the guise of new pedagogical encounters” (p. 118). Part of what made it so difficult to meet this obligation and analyze my own conflicts in relation to my students was the insistent and oppressively impersonal third party present in our relationships: curriculum.

Curriculum has the potential, when permitted, to evolve as a natural outgrowth of the relationship within which it is performed. It does not control the relationship, but it allows focus, and it outlasts the relationship. Yet curriculum, when rushed or externally imposed, can also be a mediator, defending teachers and students against becoming too close, too afraid, too desirous. Grumet (1988) writes, “curriculum...is our way of contradicting the orders of biology and culture” (p. 169). Indeed, we tell students, “now it’s time to read,” and 40 minutes later tell them, “now stop!” as if we could tell someone “now fall in love...now forget about it!”

Salvio (2007) problematizes the application of Winnicott’s (1958) “good-enough mother” to pedagogy: “The metaphor of the ‘good-enough mother’ is inadequate for educators because neither the mother nor the teacher can remain continually attuned, placid, contained or unflappable...” (p. 102). A rigid curriculum with predetermined endpoints demands just this unflappability, effectively preventing teachers as well as students from figuring out what is transpiring between them. Children at my rigorous school shuffled from one room and one teacher to another so frequently that attachments were unlikely at best. This problem also supplied me, I came to understand, with the opportunity I sought to withhold myself from my students in the interest of saving myself for my daughter, whom I fantasized crying for me at daycare a mile away.

If it was the challenge of separation from my daughter that led me to unwittingly appreciate the structured distance I felt from my students, it was echoes of my father, the teller of stories without books, that pushed me to long for more from them.

Writing psychoanalytically about her experience seeing her own son work toward reading, Boldt (2006) reminds us that children may resist reading for any number of reasons. Some of these reasons are located within a parent or teacher’s own subjectivity. Memories of my father’s storytelling, so witty, so insulating, so always new and forward-moving, triggered a resistance in me, and I came to identify this form of reading, this rush, with masculinity. Seeing the hurried anxiety in my students, I gradually began to understand, was part of what enabled me to conceptualize them as “other.”

Contributing further to our problematic distance was the fact that my students presented themselves from the very beginning as unusually well bred. Colleagues who, like me, had previous teaching experiences in urban public schools spoke of the relief of working with “good” or “nice” kids. This sentiment struck me as inherently classist and racist, and I felt self-righteous about the extent to which these students’ “goodness” infuriated me.

Rereading Delpit (1995), I realized that I was conceiving of my students as “other people’s children” and fantasizing all the same cultural conflicts she describes occurring when a white teacher works with children of color. However, I, like most of my students, am white. Like most of them, I was raised with class privilege. I recognized that the otherness I was experiencing was not racial or socioeconomic, but somehow more primal. Their stellar behavior infuriated me because it struck me as a rejection and repression of myself, my maternity, my desire, and my capacity for love.

It was never that the children behaved ideally, but that they were so easily refocused. Eli might put his feet up on the table; I would ask him to take them down, and he did. Gloria and Amy might whisper a private joke; one sidelong glance from me and they would settle down or share with the class. They did not get angrier or rebel against my reprimands. There was no reason to dig deeper.

Reading, too, remained at a surface level. Though each of my students expressed the angst that Britzman (1999) points out is a necessary component of education differently, collectively the group presented as lacking in it. As I got to know the students, I gradually established goals for them, but our interactions, as well as our mutual transactions with text, continued to feel distant and unproductive.

My students actually knew a lot already. Once, when he read about a character in a book who broke his leg, Eli asked, “I wonder if it was his femur or his tibia?” I was impressed and told him so, and the whole group proceeded to bombard me with information about human anatomy they’d remembered from science last year.

In many areas, these students, recipients of a purportedly rigorous education, knew more content than I did, but their relationship to knowledge and learning was reminiscent of the musician who plays with technical perfection but no emotional involvement. They needed me to know how much they already knew—assuming, perhaps, that this was the sort of performance I would value—but that was the only way they could admit to needing me.

“Can’t We Just Read?”: Using Curriculum as Defense

Despite their differences, the students in this group shared an inability to hook into literature, to read with their emotions. This assessment was admittedly born of what might be interpreted as my own excessive zeal, my own need to be needed. Charged with the task of helping the students along, though, I began hunting for ways to make the process less painful. I let the students read for homework, and we spent class periods discussing the book, enacting it through a variety of modalities and writing reflectively. “Can’t we just read?” my students would ask with a lighthearted, self-defeating moan.

I scaled back on homework and we did more of the reading together in class. I let the students read silently while I beckoned them over for individual conferences. “Can’t we just read?” they would ask when I pulled them aside. I let them read aloud as a group, calling on one another to take turns.

They enjoyed this, but when I stopped the reading to engage in discussion or activities, they would again respond with, “Can’t we just read?”

Salvio (2007) describes a possible solution to the impossibility of a teacher being “good enough”: “By creating a place for the students to struggle with the teacher’s subjectivities as well as their own, writing can be used as a process of inquiry through which to achieve a deeper level of interchange” (p. 102). The rigidity and hurry of our curriculum did not allow for this place. Instead, my desperation to recreate my daughter’s passion, to justify my separation from her, and to prove to myself that we weren’t losing each other, was left unacknowledged, causing me to feel anger over my students’ entreaties and their defenses.

And their defenses were strong! As we worked on *Tuck Everlasting*, Amy began to make some interesting predictions about character behavior. Encouraged, I prodded her to say more about why she thought those things would happen. “I don’t know,” she shrugged, pulling back, “I guess ‘cause we’re only halfway through the book, so I know SOMETHING has to happen.”

“Yeah,” Eli chimed in, “that’s just the way books go.”

“We know it all, don’t try to shock us,” they seemed to cry out. I grew uncertain, worried again that I was failing to find the right strategies for offering support. Midway through *Sign of the Beaver*, I offered graphic organizers and asked my students to write in any genre about an emotion evoked by the book. Leonard wrote a poem, “This book is sad/though not bad/it’s about a lad/who misses his dad.”

Eli, too, chose to express himself in rhyme, “At first I thought this book would have action. But that was only a fraction. The book is sad and it makes me mad.”

I was infuriated by an undertone of mocking in their responses, which lacked not only emotion but any evidence of even surface engagement with the text. “Let’s talk about what’s happening here,” I suggested.

They exchanged glances. “Can’t we just read?”

I spent a lot of time analyzing what was happening when students responded, “Can’t we just read?” The entreaty would have bothered me less without the “just.” Their plea lacked the passion—either loving or aggressive—I’d encountered in previous resistances from students, registering instead as a dull, easily quashed but persistent whine. My choices in response were to play either the sadistic, authoritative taskmaster (“No, you can’t ‘just’ read! You have to WORK!”) or the indulgent mother (“Oh, my poor thing, you work so hard all the time. Go ahead, ‘just’ read.”)

My instincts led me in both directions: indulgent, because my students were pushed harder than children their age should be; authoritarian, because, after all, I had a job to do, and I resented their desire and growing ability to render my identity as teacher moot. This ambivalence led me to harp

at my students unproductively, demanding more even while I understood that I was causing them to offer less.

I began to realize that “Can’t we just read?” was striking me as a rejection with hints of the erotic. “Can’t we just cuddle?” they might as well have been asking. “Let’s just leave our clothes on. None of that lusty, animalistic thinking and talking for us.” It was crucial for me to understand the nature of the rejection I was experiencing because I then came to realize exactly how much I was requiring of my students. Their desire to remain unengaged felt like a rejection or disciplining of my self and my desires to see them love something. In my students’ eyes, did I hold so much power that the only way to defend against my intensity was to laugh it off?

Though these students seemed so unchildlike to me, they were, in fact, children—children with real needs, vulnerabilities, and even terror regarding the ways they viewed themselves as inadequate. A well-cloaked, defended loss is still a loss. I needed to consider the scope of the pressures, pain, and challenges my students faced both by simply existing as humans and because of circumstances specific to their lives. For them, stopping to talk, to think, or to feel might mean falling even further behind.

I started to wonder, as we plodded our way through the school year, whether the child who snuggled her picture book in a stroller was necessarily quite so lost to the fifth grader who resented the implication that reading should evoke emotion. Part of the reason we move away from picture books is that as we acquire more language, we become better able to create our own pictures. This imagining brings power and control as well as delight—but if readers lack emotional and cognitive resources to commit to that interaction, are they actually reading?

As I observed and bemoaned my students’ ostensible disinterest, I watched my daughter’s own engagement in literature with increasing awareness, anxiously foreseeing the day when she would want to “just read.”

“Mommy! Read Yo! Yes?”

Paley (1999), who listens so acutely to what small children say, writes that in the end there is only one story, the story of a mother and a child. She acknowledges the simplicity of this statement, but her students—somewhere in age between my daughter and my fifth graders—do seem to constantly return to that narrative.

Yo! Yes? is not, in fact, about a mother and her child—and yet it is. It is, because it is about loneliness and, albeit imperfect, salvation. It is, because the boy feels sad and then he feels better, but if you turn two pages back, he feels sad all over again. “It will not be happiness, for I have known that.” It is, because it is a story told with few words. It is a story about a mother and a child because my daughter and I read it together.

Swaddling Blankets and Revolutions: Romancing the Disaffected Reader

The last mandated book of our school year was *My Brother Sam Is Dead*, by Christopher and James Lincoln Collier (1974). It tells the story of the American Revolution from the viewpoint of preadolescent Tim, whose older brother Sam runs away to fight for the Patriots. Their father, a Connecticut tavern owner, is a Tory who opposes Sam's involvement in the war. Tim is torn and does not have an autonomous political viewpoint. He envies his brother's adventures at the same time that he is angry and scared about Sam's desertion.

I read *My Brother Sam Is Dead* for the first time as a fifth grader myself. Revisiting the text in preparation for beginning it with my students, I was struck by the cleverness of having the conflict between Sam and his father mirror the war between the colonies and the British. The mother stands by her husband but maintains a secret relationship with Sam.

After the father gets killed and Sam is executed, she proclaims the stupidity of the whole conflict. She and Tim move to Pennsylvania, and they start a new tavern there. (In the end, every story is about a mother and a child.) Tim's anger toward both his father and his brother is rewarded: the war gets fought, they both die, he gets his mother all to himself—and a free country to boot.

Ironically, the lack of subtlety of the book's title created for my students an element of mystery, and relieved the pressure of having to work to figure out what would happen. "So, like, we already know he's going to die," Eli said, explaining his interest. "That makes me want to know how."

In fact, Sam's death was not the only aspect of the novel's ending that was already known. Clearly, the Patriots won the war—that was hardly a surprise to any of us. My students seemed titillated by the mystery in the lack of mystery. If we already know the beginning and the end, what could the middle possibly reveal?

After some preliminary discussion of the American Revolution and relevant vocabulary, I asked my students to read the first chapter silently, in class. Instead of circulating, I reread the chapter myself, alongside them. "We want to discover something all new," they had told me via their fascination with the give-everything-away title. "We want to discover what's on offer between beginning and end."

Tim, the novel's main character, longs for just that sort of adventure and excitement as he forges his identity. He is a devoted son, a hard worker, and a good student, but early in the novel he expresses his resentment over the fact that his brother has all the exciting experiences. What's more, he longs to impress his brother as a way of becoming closer and asserting his own manhood. "I wanted to have Sam there and listen to him talk about the fighting and everything. I wanted to tell him about everything I'd done, too, all the things that would make him proud of me and respect me, like finally being able to throw a stone clear over the tavern" (p. 44).

Yet Tim fears that his emulation of Sam will distance him from and, more frighteningly still, upset his father. After Sam runs away, Tim "...could see into the taproom. Father had his head down on

the table, and he was crying. I'd never seen him cry before in my whole life; and I knew there were bad times coming" (p. 66). Tim is caught in the middle and has a great deal of figuring out to do.

I tried to remember when I had first encountered the concept of revolution, thinking it was sometime around fourth or fifth grade, in the context of a vague and probably standardized study of US history. Revolution does a good job of codifying, problematizing, and simultaneously glorifying the notion of otherness, especially with the privilege of distance from its ravages and uncertainties. But do we ever fully have that privilege?

Borrowing the Collier brothers' cleverness—their application of the process of revolution to the trajectory of preadolescent development—I started to relax my idealization of my daughter's intensity and to consider the lovely aspects to her inevitable drives for autonomy. We had survived—even enjoyed—nearly a full school year of daily, short separations. It was my job to remember the imperfections and dangers of excessive symbiosis. It was my job, at school and at home, to work through both the swaddling and the revolutions, to be a little bit Great Britain and a little bit father, even when, for any number of “revolting” autobiographical reasons, I was loathe to locate those aspects in myself.

Reading Together

I began to remember precisely what I have historically loved about working with fifth graders. Still preadolescent, they also recall so much about what it means to have started in the world. In fact, Amy, Gloria, and I had our best connecting moments when they arrived at class a few minutes early and told stories of their toddler siblings. Eli and Leonard, on the other hand, would tell tales of their teenage older sisters, and everyone would shrug, roll their eyes, and mutter “Teenagers!” as if the phenomenon were totally foreign and unfathomable, instead of just a few years away.

Knowing their beginnings, knowing what comes next—even, in some ways, beginning to grasp the notion of an end—children at this age are grappling with how to fill the pages between. It is unfortunate that many versions of standardized curriculum—based perhaps on fear of children's discoveries, perhaps on some obsolete conception of latency—force children to be at their utmost remove precisely at this age. In public schools, the upper elementary grades are often where high-stakes testing begins. In independent schools, it is at this age that many curricula move away from a developmental model toward something more standardized and externally imposed.

Children are expected to have learned to read by the age of eight. We, their parents and teachers, have grown impatient by the sloppiness of development and all too eagerly accept any willingness children express to shelve it for a while. Even gaps in teacher-written narratives, which tend to focus either on early childhood or full-blown adolescence, reflect the way that this age group—grades 3–7, approximately—fails to capture our interpretive and loving imaginations.

I glanced up 15 minutes into our silent reading to see Leonard with his book shut. He was staring at the illustration on the cover, and I looked at him questioningly. “Sorry,” he said, opening the book again. “It’s okay,” I responded, “you can look at the cover, just...”

“...I know.” He nodded.

The cover conversation was one we’d had with each of our novels, and this conflict was one I’d traversed with any number of students. It went something like this: they would stop reading to stare at the cover, or they would turn our conversation about a text into an argument over which face on the cover represented which character, or whose edition of the book had a better cover illustration. I would grow irritated, explaining that the cover art was not by the author and that in many cases the author had nothing to do with it.

The fixation with the cover illustrations struck me for a long time as a desire to veer away from the text, but bringing my daughter’s less regulated relationship to books into the classroom helped me understand Leonard’s apparent distraction differently. I watched him read more, then shut the book and stare again at the illustration. It depicted a solemn colonial boy in the foreground, soldiers shooting guns in a background scene. In a second background scene, the boy and a young man, presumably Tim and Sam, are in conversation. Sam is leaning on a bayonet. I asked Leonard, “What do you notice there?” Instead of describing the images, he pointed to the segment showing the brothers talking and said, wistfully, “Tim looks like he really loves Sam.”

Amy too flipped back to the cover now and said to me, “Tim looks a lot like you!”

It did not matter that the particular image was so tiny it was impossible to see any facial expressions. It did not matter whether the Collier brothers had sanctioned the illustrations, or which scenes from the text the pictures were meant to portray. What mattered here was the image giving Leonard and Amy emotional entry points, and, in Amy’s case, a means for experiencing attachment to me, her teacher. She did this brilliantly, not—as I’d unwittingly expected all along—by reproducing my version of reading, but by reading her way and Leonard’s way, and reminding me that there was love in that. Flipping back and forth from cover to text was a way of igniting empathy, love, and a desire to insert themselves, me, and their multifaceted subjectivities into the reading experience.

After we read the first chapter, we stopped for a discussion of the book, and the children responded with a now habitual resistance. They tried to direct our conversation in a way that showcased their factual knowledge about the Revolution, which was (unsurprisingly) significant. We talked about the history for a time, and then Eli said, “Let’s go around and say which side we would have been on!”

I was less than thrilled by this activity, which registered with me as immature and largely irrelevant to engagement with the novel, but the students were enthusiastic and I figured it would not take

long. Everyone chose a side, until we got to Gloria, who said, “I don’t know...I don’t really care. It’s like, who really cares, anyway?”

This seemed so uncharacteristically fatalistic and gloomy that I probed, “What do you mean?”

She shrugged, “No one REALLY cares about stuff like that.”

“Yeah,” Amy agreed, “Even Sam. He went to join the Patriots and all that, but I don’t think he actually cared about being free from the British.”

I was mystified. “Why do you think he bothered, then?”

“Easy!” Amy continued, “He wanted to do what his friends were doing, he wanted to be cool.”

A few months earlier, I might have grown frustrated by this comment, so removed from the text and predicated solely on personal, preadolescent experience. Recalling the romance of *Yo! Yes?*, though, helped me understand that a textual relationship predicated largely, even solely, on personal experience was not necessarily an illiterate one. Moreover, the modified, more textual version of “who cares?” that I was getting here made me just anxious enough to realize I needed to let it play out. “Is there anything in the text to support what you are arguing?” I asked.

Dutiful as always, my students opened their novels, leafing through the early chapters in search of evidence. “Here,” Eli found, “on page nine.” He read aloud from Tim’s description of his brother, ““Of course Sam was almost a grownup himself. He was sixteen; he’d been away at college for almost a year, so you couldn’t really call him a child anymore. I guess that was part of the trouble; he thought he was a grownup, and he didn’t want anybody to tell him what to do. Except, I could tell that he was still afraid of Father.””

It struck me that the passage Eli selected as proof actually had nothing to do, at least not directly, with Sam’s desire to be accepted by his peer group, but rather reflected Tim’s perception of Sam’s conflict between rebellion and obedience. My initial thought—that Eli was either grasping at straws in his selection of the passage or had misunderstood what he was reading—was problematized by the other children’s complete acceptance of his argument.

“See?” Leonard chimed in, “All he cares about is himself.” This statement about Sam was presented not as a criticism, nor even as a particularly surprising point. Instead, it was, to my students, completely natural. To them, the process of development, the individuating Sam was going through in his rebellion against his father, was inherently but not problematically narcissistic. It seemed not at all troublesome to my students to understand the entire American Revolution in terms of a teenager who just wanted to be cool.

Eli’s oral reading of the passage above was also shockingly fluent, expressive, and accurate. Borrowing from Sam’s own determination, perhaps, he was able to read confidently and convince his peers—convince me, even—that his excerpt really did constitute proof.

I do not by any means pretend that emotional investment can compensate for the various challenges imposed by dyslexia. Still, inserting oneself into a story and bringing the book into a relational context can help make reading about much more than the decoding of words and the blending of syllables—it can be a powerful motivational force and a means of both accessing and transcending a loss significantly more primal than a learning disability. Explicit phonics instruction, sight word memorization, and repeated oral reading for fluency practice are all crucial aspects of teaching a child to read. Yet if the deep-rooted potential for an authentic relationship with and around text is forgotten, then teaching is meaningless and reading remains a mechanical act—maybe gratifying, but with no tenderness.

“Do you really think,” I challenged my students as we moved through the novel, “that everything is so personal, that it’s genuinely impossible to care about world issues?” I wondered, as I invoked the challenge, what I was aiming for. I unfairly sought absolution and consolation from my students, but they refused to grant it, remaining instead determinedly untroubled. They were willing to accept the somewhat egocentric motivations of the characters but simultaneously acknowledge the good that came from those motives.

Dory was the one student in the group frustrated by her classmates’ arguments. “How can you guys think that?” she kept insisting, “Of course Sam cares about America being free!” I wondered if it was as an only child that she spoke. Since she had no siblings to contend with, her relationship to conflict and envy was different than the other children’s. At the same time, I questioned whether perhaps she was only taking that position as a way of pleasing me. Very perceptive to the needs of the adults in her life, she could see my longing for something more than self-interest in the story, so she argued for it. Her view remained unchanged, and it impressed me as simultaneously victorious and distancing that she would not cave no matter how vehemently her friends disagreed.

We spent so much time hashing out this issue that we fell far behind the other groups in the text, but not once did my students express anxiety about that, not once did they ask to “just read.” We did, however, read. We read more slowly, but better, than we had at any other point in the year. There were many factors making it better: we’d had time to get to know one another; the students’ skills were sharper; we’d finally landed upon a book that gripped their imaginations; and the relief of summer vacation was in sight.

Still, the single most important factor enabling our progress was the permission we’d silently granted ourselves and each other to become present as we read—to be vulnerable, to have selves, and to expose them. For my students, this meant allowing themselves to exist and work in relation to each other and to me. For me, it meant permitting these relationships to grow without requiring any of us to deny ourselves.

Vulnerability resurfaced even more visibly later in the book, after Sam and Tim’s father died. Leonard, in particular, was appalled at this turn of events. Tim goes with his father to New York to sell cattle, and they get stopped by Patriot soldiers who are affronted that the meat would be sold

to Tories. Tim and his father manage to escape but get stopped again soon after, more violently, and the father sends Tim home to safety. Like Leonard's own father, Tim's father is then absent for quite some time, during which Tim takes care of his mother, their household, and their business. Then, at the beginning of Chapter 12, Tim explains, "In June of that year, 1777, we found out that Father was dead...There was one funny thing about it, though—it wasn't a Rebel prison ship, it was a British one. We never did figure out how that had happened. It had just come out of the confusion of the war somehow."

That the death could happen so meaninglessly, and at the hands of his own side, was horrifying to my students—yet not intolerably so. Leonard described his reaction: "I know Sam is going to die, because that's, like, in the title, but to make the father die too, I NEVER thought that was going to happen. That seems, like, too sad. Just too sad!" He spoke with a tone of quiet awe for the authors who, through the safe poignancy of narrative, had conveyed the type of loss Leonard feared and longed for most of all through the safety of fiction. Tim could be a man, now that his father was gone. How could that not strike a chord with the happy-go-lucky, bright, but resolutely unserious Leonard?

This turn in the plot, though, spoke to everyone, allowing them to experience childish feelings and expose their confusion helpfully. As we teased out the meaning behind Tim's father's death, Eli asked with uncharacteristic hesitancy, "How do wars, like, start, anyway?"

Eli's classmates appreciated his asking. Gloria chimed in, "There are wars right now...right? Aren't there?"

"But where?" asked Amy.

It is no accident that there are so many children's books including the loss of a parent. Something about the death of this parent, though, allowed my students to regress just enough to open themselves to learning. They understood intuitively that the loss was both tragic and liberating, and they pushed me to answer their questions, to let them gaze at the cover—in short, to liberate them as well.

So we talked, and we felt. We talked about wars and how they start and how no one totally understands. We talked about different ways of interpreting death and violence. We read some newspaper articles, even some Tolstoy. The students acted out battle scenes and reflected on what that felt like.

I began to worry that this learning was only happening because the safe exit provided by the end of the school year was in sight, but I decided it did not really matter. Then, midway through a class period, as we were opening up our novels to move on, Dory looked at me and said, "Next year, when we are in sixth grade, can we come have lunch with you sometimes?"

"Yeah," Gloria added wistfully, and the whole group got sidetracked by a conversation of these fantasy picnics, where we would have them, what we would eat.

It was a startling and humbling realization that the close of the school year, which I had been interpreting as representing relief, also represented loss to them, a loss reified by all the talk and work around death, violence, and aggression we'd been doing. It also seems no coincidence that Dory's request revolved around food, around mutual consumption. Perhaps she no longer felt that I was swallowing her, nor did I feel as devoured by my students as I had during earlier peaks of self-imposed pedagogical frustration. "Can we partake of something together?" she was asking.

I gave them a sad smile and said that yes, of course we could have lunch, but Dory's comment made me reflect on my own hesitancy to attach. I knew that the truth was that they would come by to visit, and we might have the occasional lunch, but that they would lose interest—and rightfully so—as they immersed themselves in the world of sixth grade. This was all the more frightening because it echoed my fear of my daughter's metaphorical weaning, the heavy preknowledge of letting her separate, the agony of realizing our idealized romance was neither all that ideal nor all that romantic.

Like language, reading can bring us together, but like language, it can also separate us and spark a certain fear in the permission it grants us to move forward. "Didah!" my daughter sometimes exclaims when she wants to connect with an inanimate object she loves, then, "Didah, Mommy, didah!"

The pleasure of nonsense words is that only a select few—only those who really try—can understand them, so they keep us rooted in the primitive, with all the comfortable passivity that lies therein. My students were growing, learning to read in an unfamiliar way, and this was lovely and frightening for all of us. If there is real learning, there is real love. If there is real love, there can be real loss.

Brother Sam Is Dead

Ironically, as we approached the end of the book and our time together, I was the one who had to push my students to "just read." I grew worried that we would not finish the book before the school year ended, and the narrative begged for closure. My students seemed completely unconcerned when I presented them with this issue, but they agreed to pick up the pace.

And so we came to Sam's death scene. Like his father, Sam is killed by soldiers on his own side, who accuse him of cattle thievery. Prior to his death, his mother grows depressed and makes several angry speeches about the worthlessness of the war. Tim attempts to save Sam before the execution, but his efforts are for naught.

Dory read the execution scene aloud: "...at that moment Sam slammed backwards as if he'd been knocked over by a mallet. I never heard the guns roar. He hit the ground on his belly and flopped over on his back. He wasn't dead yet. He lay there shaking and thrashing about, his knees jerking up and down. They had shot him from so close that his clothes were on fire. He went on jerking with flames on his chest until another soldier shot him again. Then he stopped jerking" (p. 208).

There was a long period of silence in our room, which seemed only appropriate. We were all lost in private musings until Eli spoke up, “I was about to say that would make a really good movie, but then I changed my mind.”

“I was thinking the same thing!” exclaimed Gloria. “The scene seemed like a really good movie scene, but...in the book it’s more ‘boom,’ more like really sudden and really emotional...in a movie it wouldn’t be as emotional as this. Because how you read it...A movie couldn’t capture the moment.”

“In the book, we have, like, the wording...,” Leonard added, “in the movie they couldn’t say that, you’d just see it so it wouldn’t be as epic.”

“That’s the fun part, making the picture for yourself,” said Amy, “when you read it, it makes you feel different than when you watch it...when you watch it, it just happens, you can’t stop and think.”

“Was it worth it?” I asked the group once they seemed finished with their meditation on form. “Do you agree with the mother that it was all meaningless violence, or was it worth it in the end?”

“Half and half.” Amy spoke up right away. “Like maybe not worth it, but worth it at the same time. It’s like, not like a lesson to be learned, nothing like that, but...,” she trailed off.

Leonard added his perspective. “Because he died it made the book better. A happy ending isn’t as interesting, he dies but you can still have a good ending. Sam dying made the book more intense—more exciting to read, like you’re waiting for one thing to happen...If Tim had saved him it would have been like every other book.”

Gloria was uncertain. “I don’t know, I still don’t think Sam should have died. I would agree with the mom, I would just want it to be over. I kind of agree but kind of not, because everyone wants it to end, even people who are involved...it’s too much fighting. I would really want it to end, but then does that mean you don’t care who wins?”

It was not until I had gained a great deal of distance from this conversation that I realized the extent to which the father’s and Sam’s deaths might have been my death as well. At the end of a school year, maybe the student has to kill the teacher just a little bit. “Does that mean you don’t care who wins?” I would like to hope so, but what seems more important in pedagogy and maybe in maternity as well is ensuring that the knowledge that you will be killed is grounded in a strong desire to fight for survival. This means remembering that loss engenders literacy. This means pretending to believe we will have picnics—leaving the possibility open—even when I know we probably will not. This means turning back to the page where the boy feels better as many times as it takes before the child wants to turn pages herself, before one narrative wears out the specificity of its welcome.

In the Absence of a Picnic

Last year's students look tall when I greet them in the halls. They *are* tall, tall and sort of calm, with just a little bit of distance to their smiles. I see Amy and Gloria in earnest conference next to their lockers, right outside the sixth-grade language arts classroom, giant stacks of books and papers tucked under their gangly arms. After an awkward pause, they greet me profusely, even ask after my daughter. Their new teacher rhapsodizes before a staff meeting about a poignant essay Amy wrote about the impact of divorce.

Dory goes so far as to stop by my classroom once in a while. "Do you miss us?" she wonders with a twinkle in her eye that is somewhere between wise and prurient. "Are this year's fifth graders bad?" Eli has transferred to a different school, but I see Leonard out at recess, running so fast he nearly knocks me down. Several feet away, he glances back and waves over his shoulder, then keeps running.

My daughter is taller, too, her daily conversations peppered with endless renditions of "why?" She has started a new preschool, and it is easy to see the ways in which this does not, in fact, represent a loss. She comes home literally spinning in circles of joy over the wideness of what she has discovered.

There certainly is a lot to read. "Please can you read me a book?" she now asks. One of the most exciting ways we read is to enjoy fairy tales. The three pigs, the three bears, and then Jack and the beanstalk are favorites. When we look at published versions of the stories, she is ever so slightly less interpretive, slightly more wedded to what's actually there, than she used to be. Unable to completely convert a hairy giant into something different any more, uninterested in pushing Jack in her stroller, she instead puts her hand over the illustration. "I'm going to cover the giant up for a few minutes," she informs me, then continues, "Why giants are big and hairy? I don't think there's any giants in my room."

My new group of fifth graders meanders with a bit more resistance through their curriculum, and sometimes I laughingly ask myself why exactly I had yearned for this. I wonder how many of my colleagues are experiencing a similar unspoken, necessary, and enlivening exhaustion: struggling to get their children's shoes on, drawing lines about exactly how many stuffed animals can come in the car to preschool, committing traffic violations to come and struggle with a different set of children over how many chapters they need to read or how long their paragraphs should be.

At the library again, my daughter stands in front of the fairy tale shelf and pulls out Zelinsky's (1997) rendition of *Rapunzel*. Both of us are taken by the detailed portraiture, the intricate geometry of Zelinsky's gardens and forests.

"One more book!" she begs one morning, shoes and jacket already on. "I need Rapunzel!" So we cuddle up on the sofa. She will not be rushed through the story. She still "picks" vegetables from illustrated gardens, and today she offers me some of the witch's tomatoes. We move solemnly,

linearly through the plot. “Maybe the baby is crying,” she postulates when infant Rapunzel is wrenched from her parents.

Zelinsky shows Rapunzel romping through the grass, bending and smiling, and my daughter considers why Rapunzel might be dancing. “The witch is singing!” my daughter exclaims. And then we come to the page with the tower. “Yet no door led into this tower, and its only window was at the very top,” I read, and my daughter interrupts. “Why? Why the witch locked Rapunzel up?” I offer an explanation, and she nods.

Then my daughter hops down from the couch, ready to go, willing to stop the story there this time around. She looks at me, looks at the tower once again and concludes, using one of her favorite new preschool phrases, “That wasn’t very nice.”

No, I think, it wasn’t.

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Near & Far

Madeleine Grumet

Like Stearns, I also read stories to my children. I wonder if they, now in their 40s, remember the huge maroon velvet couch we would settle into to read the *Snipp, Snapp, and Snurr* books or *Mary Ann's Mud Day*. Rather than reading to them, their father made up stories for them, leaning against the doorframe or sitting on the children's beds before they fell asleep. And my father too told stories; he made up versions of Dr. Seuss's *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, recounting fantastic tales of the adventures he had had on his way home from work.

I did not learn how to tell stories until I had grandchildren. Here is how it worked. I had an old book of poems that my kids had loved that I would wedge into my suitcase whenever I visited Bella, my first grandchild. The inside of the covers and the flyleaf were illustrated to show the interior of a four-story house, with 21 children from infants to about eight- or nine-year-olds playing on the various levels. Bella named each child and decided that Stevie, perched on the third floor, would have a chronic sneeze that required frequent visits to the pediatrician. As her intense interest in the dynamics of the family (whom she named the Clumberstones) quickly eclipsed her interest in the poems inside the book, successive visits led to more and more elaborate versions of events interrupted by Stevie's sneezes. Gradually a formula developed: an outing was planned, and lost shoes, sibling skirmishes, and parental urging accompanied the family's departure. Once they had arrived and were engaged in an amusement park, restaurant, soccer game, or department store, the Clumberstones would freeze in horrified anticipation as Stevie's sneeze would slowly build until it exploded, sending dishes, soccer balls, cotton candy, merchandise, and the Clumberstones themselves flying madly through the air. Now a pretext for this ritual narrative, the "Grandma" book provided the occasion for our negotiations. Over the years, Bella and her sister and brother, Julia and Adam, would dictate the tale, in an extended dispute that I would finally, with impatience, settle by declaring that I was the storyteller and must be allowed to proceed.

Stearns's vivid memoir of reading has led me to wonder why I read to my children but told stories to their children. It will not surprise Stearns that I return to *Bitter Milk* (Grumet, 1988), which she quotes in her piece, for an explanation. There I surmised that mothers, engaged in constant and intimate exchange with their children, yearn for the presence of a third party—another parent or caregiver, a text, a world—to give them all a little space as well as the stimulation of the new. Conversely, following the object relations scheme, I concluded that fathers—more distant from their children—would yearn to be the authors of their offspring's experience, in this case becoming the source for their stories.

As the visiting grandparent, living in another state, I too author a piece of the world for Bella, Julia, and Adam. I am shifted into this role by my own desire to claim some part of their experience as well as by their exhausted parents' desire to have a third party intervene. And yet I am in constant negotiation with them as well, for they determine access, presence, and sometimes, texts.

I am intrigued as Stearns juxtaposes her own mothering literacy with her work as a teacher of other people's children. Amused by her account of her daughter's narrative assertions, I recognize Stearns's dismay as she hears, "Can't we just read?" from her students. In their request, I hear them clinging to their text as a retreat from the world we share with them into a place where they can relinquish responsibility for choices and escape the annoying requirement that they negotiate their responses with other students or with us, their teachers. They sound like children who crave solitude—not unlike my own students, university undergraduates, fleeing from surround sound.

After years of standing in the front of the room eliciting discussion of texts, I have exchanged this interpretive stance for a performative one that invites students to express their associations and thoughts first through movement, improvisation, music, or visual representation. And so I am not surprised to see Stearns's students riveted to the cover of *My Brother Sam Is Dead*. Tactile, vocal, and visual associations with text and feeling become vehicles that bring us to the conversations and ideation that Stearns describes as her students later talk about revolution and death.

I know that we are all weary of complaining about the ways that testing and the expanding core standards, in their obsessive focus on exposition, disregard these processes, but let me take this moment to think about the phrase that Stearns cites, "curriculum... is our way of contradicting the orders of biology and culture" (Grumet, 1988, p. 169). Written over 20 years ago, that assertion challenges me to bring it to this piece about the curricula of home and school. What are the accounting practices of our current curriculum craze contradicting? I imagine that this obsessive measuring, sorting, and blaming has evolved to deny anxieties about an economy that is not only flailing but also cannot be understood, successfully predicted, or controlled. Ironically, procedures that evolved to promote equity now stigmatize the poor through a revival of meritocracy fervor whose promises of credentials and security for our dwindling white majority are chimerical.

The curriculum that Stearns describes is not a part of this national clench. She reconsiders the comfort of her father's linear narrative, with its forward momentum that carried her to sleep, as her daughter repeats, returns, undoes, twists, and insists on detours. Stearns finds that mercurial curriculum again in her work with her own students. And as her piece concludes, I am left with the wish that what she has discovered in maternal and classroom pedagogy might be extended into the work of school faculties and their communities so that curriculum could provide a channel that flows from its loving sources to a larger society. Even though curriculum has always presented a world that is more clear, more certain, and more secure than the experience in the world that has authored it, if our collective deliberations about curriculum could tolerate presence, feeling, negotiation, and revision—endless revision—perhaps school might offer our children a place where they actually get to read, together.

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Dirt & Early Reading

Timothy J. Lensmire

I was thoroughly engaged by Clio Stearns’s article. I was especially struck by her accounts of early reading with her young daughter. Too often, as Stearns well knows, such scenes are rendered in overly simplified and sentimental ways. It is much better to register the simultaneous anxiety and envy that Stearns felt in relation to her daughter’s “inability to control herself”; much better to conclude, “Romantic it is, but it is not easy to be an early reader.”

Her work inspired me to tell another story of early reading, drawn from a larger study investigating whiteness and white racial identity in a rural, white, working-class community in the Midwest (Lensmire, 2010; Lensmire, 2011).

Delores (a pseudonym) had brought her young son and daughter to get their pictures taken. Her children had not had many (if any) interactions with African Americans, and the photographer was black. As Delores described the scene:

I had the experience of taking my children, when they were preschoolers, to one of those photographers set up at Penny’s or Kmart or wherever. And the photographer took the pictures and was showing us the proofs and he was African American and my daughter asked why his hands were dirty. Right away, he tried to cover for me and said, “That’s okay. I’m not offended.” And I took his hand and said, “His hands aren’t dirty. He’s African American and this is his name,” and I gave her his name. But I thought, for me, if she thought that was dirt—and she was old enough to know that I don’t go for dirt—that, no, his hands are not dirty. I will touch his hands.

Delores and other white people I interviewed from this community often reported being fearful of big cities, in part because people of color lived there. However, in this story, Delores’s interaction with the black photographer was not characterized by fear, but by something more like politeness, and perhaps even mutual, genuine decency. The photographer tried immediately to “cover” for Delores, to help her avoid feeling embarrassed because her daughter asked why his hands were dirty. Delores responded by holding the photographer’s hands and telling her daughter his name.

Delores’s young daughter had read the photographer’s hands as *dirty*, and, as Kovel (1970) reminds us in his classic book *White Racism: A Psychohistory*, dirt—or more correctly, a *fantasy about dirt*—plays an important part in white people’s racial imaginary. Kovel noted that:

Every group which has been the object of prejudice has at some time been designated by the prejudiced group as dirty or smelly or both... The English upper classes regarded the English middle and lower classes as dirty... and if the lower classes had “Untouchables,” as in India, they would have doubtless exercised the same privilege over the lowliest as did the various castes within Indian culture. Indeed, lowest in social scale connotes the idea of dirtiest and

smelliest, and untouchability sums up all these concepts in the framework of aversion. (pp. 81, 82)

Clearly, Delores understood this fantasy of dirt, and she took action to disrupt or disable the development of this fantasy in her daughter. It is striking to me—and an almost perfect counter to the aversion, the turning away from, that the fantasy of dirt encourages—that the crucial actions for Delores were to (a) hold the photographer’s hands and (b) tell her daughter his name. I interpret the latter as an act meant to individuate this man, to not allow him to be reduced to being merely a representative of an unworthy group (see Boskin, 1986, on the importance of names in US racial history). As for the former, Delores explained that her three-year-old daughter was old enough to know that she (Delores) did not “go for dirt.” She was anxious that her daughter understand that this man was not dirty. As Delores said later, “When [my daughter] made that comment, it’s just that she was wrong and I didn’t want her thinking there were dirty people in the world.”

In this scene of early reading, Delores was trying to help her daughter become the kind of white person who recognized the fundamental equality of all peoples. But it is significant that Delores used this black person to do so.

For we could read Delores’s story quite differently. In this alternative reading, Delores was presumptuous. She took the man’s hands without asking him whether or not he wanted to be touched by her, whether or not he wanted to participate in this lesson for her daughter on how to read other people’s skin. Delores was focused on her daughter, not the man. She used the man as little more than a prop to teach her daughter a lesson.

People of color, real and imagined, have been incredibly important for the meaning and self-making of white people throughout US history. As white people, we have obviously used people of color for their labor and our economic gain, but a major theme of my recent work has been exploring just how important people of color are to white people’s psychic and everyday lives—even in situations in which white people are mostly isolated from actual people of color (as is most often the case for white people in the United States). Indeed, novelist and essayist Ralph Ellison (1953/1995) thought that we should “view the whole of American life as a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant who, lying trussed up like Gulliver, forms the stage and scene upon which and within which the action unfolds” (p. 28).

To bring this back to Stearns’s rich and provocative article: Does Ellison’s proposal for how to read American life and history help us read and reread Stearns’s work in illuminating and generative ways? I think so.

As just one example, I wonder about the significance—for Stearns, for her daughter, and for us and our meaning- and self-making—that it is an *isolated white boy* who is the focus of concern in Raschka’s *Yo! Yes?*, and that this isolation is *overcome in relation to a black boy*.¹

It is difficult for me *not* to read Raschka’s text as participating in what Fiedler (1964) identified as a consistent theme of 19th- and 20th-century American literature and popular culture: a dream or myth of a “Garden of Eden with two Adams” (p. 129). Over and over, our novels and films feature pairings of a white male and a male of color, expressing what Fiedler called the “white man’s dream of reconciliation” (p. 109). (Think Queequeg and Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, or Twain’s Jim and Huck, or Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier’s characters in *The Defiant Ones*.)

For Fiedler (1955), this is a sentimental and outrageous dream, a dream with roots in white atrocities against people of color—genocide and colonialism and cultural eradication, slavery and lynching and Jim Crow. It is a dream born of fear that we, as white men, have cut ourselves off, forever, from the love of our brothers. As Fiedler put it:

Ishmael is in all of us, our unconfessed universal fear. . . that we may not be loved, that we are loved for our possessions and not our selves, that we are really—alone... Behind the white American’s nightmare that someday, no longer tourist, inheritor, or liberator, he will be rejected, refused, he dreams of his acceptance at the breast he has most utterly offended. . . Our dark-skinned beloved will take us in... He will fold us in his arms saying, “Honey” or “Aikane”; he will comfort us, as if our offense against him were long ago remitted, were never truly real. (pp. 150, 151)

I am grateful to Stearns for what she helps us understand about her daughter’s early and her students’ later reading, for what she helps us understand about being with and teaching the young. We need more accounts of reading and teaching that are like this, that attempt to render flesh-and-blood human beings who feel close to and distant from each other, who are excited by and alienated from what they are doing, and who are not always sure why. And as Ellison and Fiedler and many others remind us, this reading and teaching with the young is always taken up alongside and within older stories and scenes, with attendant lessons about old things like race.

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¹I follow Stearns, here, in assigning racial categories to the boys. As she noted, given Raschka’s minimalist text and illustrations “there is plenty of room for projection.” But I tend to read the boys as she did: “One boy in the illustrations looks black, the other white.”

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The Pedagogical Use of Loss

Alice Pitt

It is odd that I have been reminded several times during the past few months of the first essay Deborah Britzman and I wrote together. It too was about early literacy, but the literacy we had in mind was that of the beginning teacher. “Pedagogy and Transference: Casting the Past of Learning Into the Presence of Teaching” (Britzman & Pitt, 1996) meditated on “the possibility of learners implicating themselves in their learning” (p. 117). This is a theme that has continued to animate much of my work. Like Clio Stearns, I too have turned to the “confluence of maternity, desire, and learning.” Stearns begins with a definition of desire “as a wellspring to creativity in the classroom.” But then maternal desire plays a trick as the essay unfolds. Stearns’s exuberant discovery of reading as a relationship made with her infant daughter is first examined as belonging to the “matrix of desire” that, for teachers, is forced below the surface by the rush of the standardized curriculum. The essay then moves back and forth between stories of Stearns reading with her daughter and accounts of her reading with her students. Surprisingly, it is the survival of loss that comes to characterize a more complex relationship, one that blossoms in between the desire for a relationship characterized by a “first form of reading” and the demands of a rigid curriculum.

Reading, playing, and fixing dinner with her daughter allow Stearns to attend to the use of the storybook as a transitional object. The book is cuddled, gripped, tossed away, and reclaimed as the newcomer to language, story, and the world outside the mother/child dyad begins to grapple with presence and absence as aspects of both self/other and me/not-me relations. Stearns considers this passionate transitional reading in contrast to a cluster of modern pedagogical strategies for teaching reading that shoehorn reading into skill development and strip it of its emotional reverberations. She wonders if “it is possible that it is not the role of the elementary teacher to help students engage affectively with texts.” Critical observations help Stearns reframe this question as a pedagogical demand to understand why “we might prefer not to read.”

Stearns cites our 1996 article (among other sources), which explores the significance of the teacher’s conflictive inner world. She suggests that the curriculum has become “an oppressively impersonal third party” that serves as an obstacle to meeting what we describe as Anna Freud’s insistence on “the ethical obligation teachers have to learn about their own conflicts and to control the reenactment of old conflicts that appear in the guise of new pedagogical encounters” (Britzman & Pitt, 1996, p. 118).

Upon being asked to write an essay about his school days for an occasion in his honor, Sigmund Freud was astonished to find how easily the request turned into a demand on that very schoolboy. Similarly, when I revisited our article, I became once again a beginning scholar writing with my lover about my first course in a teacher education program; Britzman was not only a much more seasoned academic than I, but also the architect of the syllabus I used. I was forced to recall the enormity of the gap between the dread I actually felt teaching that course and facing students’

insistence that my role was to teach them how to teach and the tingling but still anxious pleasure I experienced working on the essay—the pleasure of becoming a teacher educator and scholar in an intimate relationship that blurred the boundaries between the professional and the personal.

In subsequent years I became a more confident teacher educator and better adept at holding onto the sheer difficulty of what we described as “our own obligation as considering Anna Freud’s demand for learning twice and for studying the qualities of our responses to students and curriculum” (p. 123). Like Stearns, I continue to challenge our various and complicated efforts to deny the force of erotic transference that animates classroom life. And yet, I have become much more aware that the curriculum, whether created or received, conceals not only what we so critically referred to as the “hidden curriculum” but also the fantasies we bring to it—fantasies about knowledge and knowing, teaching and learning, learning and not learning, and desire for and fights with authority. In 1996 I still believed that undoing self-mastery was a pedagogical act—a practice, if you will. What I was not then able to contemplate was the uncanny capacity of students to return the demand for mastery as a defense against their own helplessness at having to learn.

Stearns describes the conflict with her new class and their demand to be allowed “just” to read as the consequence of a crowded curriculum standing in the way of her desperate efforts “to recreate [her] daughter’s passion, to justify [her own] separation from her and prove to [herself] that [they] weren’t losing each other.” But she pushes through this when her reading group meets a story about loss that they attach to individually and together. She becomes attentive to what they thought about as they read, how they used the book cover illustration to say what mattered to them, and how they argued over meaning. And sprinkled throughout this section are several acknowledgements of the author’s loss: she actually survived the separation from her daughter and her daughter’s emerging autonomy as well as her daughter’s foray into language that means more than what you want it to. More important, she survived and became engaged by her students’ questions and interests, thus receding as the maternal force that had been such a part of her desire for her students. “At the end of a school year,” she writes, “maybe the student has to kill the teacher a little bit.” And then she arrives at the startling conclusion that “loss engenders literacy.”

I think this is true, but I want to add that the survival of loss engenders the teacher’s literacy. The good-enough teacher, like the good-enough mother, cannot, in fact, use her subjectivity as the grounds of her practice. But she can go on becoming as she survives the loss of the idea that desire can be the cure for the curriculum. A more loving framework, then, neither denies the erotic transference nor holds onto it for survival.

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