

Characters and Episodes that Provide Models for Middle School Writers

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Abstract: While conducting a content analysis of award-winning, middle school fiction, I identified a number of episodes and characters that might be used as models for students' writing. Research suggests that teachers can motivate students (Bruning & Horn, 2000; Codling, Gambrell, Kennedy, Palmer, & Graham, 1996) to respond to character-writers (Van Horn, 2001), make connections between their writing and reading (Elbow, 2004; Gilrane, 2009), utilize the writing process (Graves, 2003) to create a finished product (Alvermann, Phelps, & Gillis, 2010; Dyson & Freedman, 2003), and learn to overcome their own writing problems as they identify with characters who are overcoming problems common to their age and maturity levels (Farris, Werderich, Nelson, & Fuhler, 2009; Griffith, 2008). This article provides a list of books with detailed descriptions of character-writers and writing episodes. Middle school teachers seeking to introduce students to writers are encouraged to use these characters and texts as models (Dorfman & Capelli, 2007; Hansen, 2009, Ray, 1999), leading students to metaknowledge regarding the writing process.

Teachers who want to encourage students' motivation to write and metaknowledge of writing might find the following list of books useful. This list was developed from a sample delimited to middle school-level fiction tradebooks from three sources: Newbery Award and Honor books, 1999-2008; Boston Globe-Horn Book Award and Honor books, 1999-2008; and the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) list of books about writers and writing (*40 Books about Writers and Writing*, 2003). The books on the following list provide specific examples of characters who write:

The Wanderer (Creech, 2002)
Hattie Big Sky (Larson, 2008)
Love that Dog: A Novel (Creech, 2001)
Fruitlands (Whelan, 2002)
Surviving the Applewhites (Tolan, 2002)
The Color of My Words (Joseph, 2000)
Elijah of Buxton (Curtis, 2007)
Olive's Ocean (Henkes, 2003)
A Year Down Yonder (Peck, 2002)
Kira-kira (Kadohata, 2006)
Kalpana's Dream (Clarke, 2005)
Feathers (Woodson, 2009)
Criss Cross (Perkins, 2007)
A Corner of the Universe (Martin, 2004)

Each book on the list presents opportunities for teachers to point out processes engaged in and products created by character-writers. Both explicit and implicit writing episodes are included in these texts. Although the implicit episodes might not be identified as writing by middle school students reading independently, teachers can use the implicit samples to discuss writers and writing.

For example, in *Love That Dog* (Creech, 2001), Jack's writing is implicitly presented. However, when a teacher introduces that book with a discussion of the first two poems, middle school students will be able to recognize that Jack is the writer of all poems not attributed to a professional writer. This researcher suggests that after such a discussion, students will be able to respond to the poems as the work of a young writer, even though the character's act of writing is not explicitly portrayed in the text.

Books must meet two criteria to appear on the previous list. First, the books present one or more character-writers who provide models for students. Second, the books picture characters engaged in writing by choice and/or for authentic reasons. In addition to those two basic criteria, the books on the recommended list have the following characteristics, collected through the use of a content analysis instrument, a researcher's journal, and aesthetic readings of the texts.

Discussion of Recommended Books

In *The Wanderer* (Creech, 2002), the reader is introduced to two character-writers, Sophie and Cody, who each write for different reasons, providing a female and male character to whom middle school readers might respond (Farris, et al., 2009; Probst, 2004). Both character-writers discuss the effort involved in writing. In addition, Sophie states that her primary motivation for keeping a journal is to remember the details of her life. Teachers, then, could use *The Wanderer* when presenting a lesson regarding the reasons students write and/or obstacles students face when they engage in an extended writing project. In this case, teachers would be using a mentor text (Ray, 1999) to help students connect reading and writing as well as identify motivating factors in the character-writers' lives.

Hattie Big Sky (Larson, 2008) offers teachers multiple examples of character-writers (primarily Hattie) engaged in authentic writing, providing examples of writing that meets real purposes (NCTE, 2008). Teachers could ask students to identify motivations behind characters' decisions to write. The teachers could ask the students to extend their thinking to generate authentic reasons why the students write.

Love That Dog: A Novel (Creech, 2001), as mentioned earlier, is a rich example of a writer's development, providing examples of a character-writer producing poetry. This book would be good to use as a read-aloud as it should give both reluctant and eager writers food for thought. The book also provides mentor texts from professional poets, thus providing opportunities for readers to experience vicariously the excitement of interacting with published authors as well as with a young, developing author.

Fruitlands: Louisa May Alcott Made Perfect (Whelan, 2002) is a fictional portrayal of a portion of the life of the 19th-century author, Louisa May Alcott. Alcott's true life and the books

she penned lend credence to the multiple examples of poetry, drama, and personal narrative recorded in *Fruitlands*. Teachers can use *Fruitlands* alone or in combination with *Little Women* and other Alcott books to expand lessons on writing purposes and/or writers' motivations.

Surviving the Applewhites (Tolan, 2002) was chosen for this list because the book offers samples of multiple writing processes from the standpoint of fictional professional writers. The mother writes best-selling mysteries, the aunt writes poetry, and a visiting reporter submits book and media proposals to editors. The mother seems to jot notes and mumble over ideas more often than she participates in her children's world. Her writing processes are pictured as she chews on pencils and experiences writer's block, offering teachers opportunity to discuss individuals' writing processes (Graves, 2003).

The Color of My Words (Joseph, 2000) provides nuanced emotions from the tip of the protagonist's pencil. Her first note, followed by her first poem and declaration of her desire to be a writer, all indicate the potential influence of writing in this story, set in the Dominican Republic when only the country's president was allowed to write books. The protagonist memorizes her words until the volume of ideas causes her to pilfer paper bags and napkins as writing material. Reader response (Probst, 2004) might lead middle school students to develop authentic writing projects guided by critical literacies in order to promote outcomes important to the students. In such a case, reader response could lead to writing motivation and students' recognition of reading and writing connections.

The remaining books on the recommended list have been included because teachers can develop lessons from excerpts rather than from an entire book. Elijah from *Elijah of Buxton* (Curtis, 2009), not only writes, but he thoroughly engages in the writing process. When presented with the writing task, Elijah asks how long he will be allowed to ponder the work (prewriting). He models the persistence writers need (Bruning & Horn, 2000), filling "pages and pages" in his notebook (drafting); his mind continues working, drafting and revising even when other duties await his attention. The boy even notes that thoughts about the writing push their way into his consciousness while he attempts to engage in his favorite recreational activities.

The most powerful writings in *Olive's Ocean* (Henkes, 2003) center on the journal page given to the protagonist, along with her attempts at poetry and novel writing. Teachers can use these excerpts to discuss writing motivation and writing processes. *A Year Down Yonder* (Peck, 2002) is included in recommendations to teachers due to the pleasure depicted by Mary Alice when she writes. Reader response may be promoted to encourage motivation to write as readers recognize they, too, may use writing to develop material that provides fun for the writer as well as the reader. *Kira-kira* (Kadohata, 2006) offers examples from two characters' writings in journals and in the essay-eulogy written by the protagonist. *Kalpana's Dream* (Clarke, 2005) offers examples of writing process, including revisions written in the middle of the night because that's when the ideas jelled. As stated earlier, *Feathers* (Woodson, 2009) portrays a teacher engaged in process writing instruction, along with the protagonist's budding writing abilities over a period of months. Both *Kalpana's Dream* (Clarke, 2005) and *Feathers* (Woodson, 2009) provide teachers positive examples of instructional methods that promote the use of recursive writing processes. And, because the genre of song-writing would interest some

middle school students, *Criss Cross* (Perkins, 2007) is included in this list as one of the characters composes pieces of songs.

Finally, *A Corner of the Universe* (Martin, 2004) is recommended with qualification only because the book's significance far outweighs the opportunities for writing lessons. The book is another nuanced story of love and family and tragedy. If the teacher is using the text for a purpose such as read-aloud or read-along or if a student or group of students is reading the book for personal purposes, the teacher might use the invitations or letters written by characters as examples of authentic writing. Two of the letters show characters involved in process writing. However, neither removing the letters from the text nor reading the text only to study the letters would be wise (Edinger & Feldman, 2008; Probst, 2004).

Final Thoughts and Implications

Characters who write exist in the sample of award-winning, middle school fiction tradebooks that were analyzed. The books identified and discussed in this study can be used to introduce students to characters, similar to and different from the students, who write in particular genres for particular purposes. Experts have recommended using such characters to teach and encourage writing (Kane, 1985; Parsons & Colabucci, 2008). Research is needed to learn if those recommended practices actually do motivate middle school students to engage in writing. Teachers can conduct action research in their classrooms using the books recommended here. Action research conducted by teachers or by teacher/university collaborative research teams would be advantageous because researchers need children with whom to work and teachers need research partners to share time-intensive study procedures. Middle-school students can be the beneficiaries of such action research when the identified books are used as tools in the study of students' writing processes, writing-reading connections, reader response, and/or motivation to write.

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