

“This Is a **GREAT BOOK!**”

101 events for building enthusiastic readers
inside and outside the classroom
— from chapter books to young adult novels

LARRY SWARTZ

SHELLEY STAGG PETERSON

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Novels in the Classroom

“Among the encompassing definitions we could give ‘the novel’ . . . is this: a novel is a vast heap of sentences, like stones, arranged on a beach of time.”

— Jonathan Lethem, *New York Times Review*, 3 June 2007

When young people read a novel, they are invited to step outside their own lives and step along the “vast heap of sentences, like stones,” becoming spectators observing imaginary events that might or might not occur in real life. At the same time, they become participants in these events as they are drawn into the story and share the feelings and experiences of the characters. Reading novels thereby provides young people with an opportunity to reflect on human behaviors, emotions, values, relationships, and conflicts. They can discover joy and satisfaction when teachers introduce a selection of books and give them the autonomy to choose their own books for independent leisure reading. When reading novels in the classroom, students do more than learn to read; they create identities as readers and come to feel that they are part of a community of readers.

As young people develop as readers — a lifelong process — they will appreciate a story not only by identifying with the characters but also by seeing through the eyes of the author. In reading and responding to novels, students become aware of how authors use their talents and skills to create stories. They learn to note an author’s choices in terms of style, language, action, and characters. As they read, they can rewrite the novel in their minds, creating their own meanings from the novel. They can reflect on their interaction with the text and make connections between that novel and their personal library of literary experiences.

In the classroom, students can explore novels that have been read as a class or by a group, or that the teacher has read aloud. Teachers can introduce and have students engage in response activities that prepare them to read the novel, that accompany the reading of the novel, or that help them reflect on the novel. Novels contain a wealth of stories, and response activities will lead students to uncover dozens more.

In 2015, Daniel Pennac's *Better Than Life* was published in paperback as *The Reader's Bill of Rights*, translated by Sarah Ardizzone, for a young adult audience with illustrations and foreword by Quentin Blake.

Liberating Readers

Sometimes, early enchantment with reading dwindles, diminishes, or even gets quenched as the students move through their school careers. This problem may occur when students are required to read books that do not interest them or are asked to complete novel study activities that they do not find meaningful. It may be that the “study” in novel study does not reflect authentic reading behaviors outside school — how likely is it for an adult reader of *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, for example, to design a new book cover once finished? Talk and the desire to share enthusiasms, criticisms, and wonders about a book can, however, be considered authentic responses. In *Better Than Life*, Parisian author and educator Daniel Pennac challenges teachers to think about ways to sustain or restore students' enchantment with reading with this liberating *Reader's Bill of Rights*:

1. The right to not read
2. The right to skip pages
3. The right to not finish
4. The right to reread
5. The right to read anything
6. The right to escapism
7. The right to read anywhere
8. The right to browse
9. The right to read out loud
10. The right not to defend your taste

One Way to Identify a Great Book:

The DIRRI Test

In a 9 August 2015 *New York Times* interview, fantasy author Ursula K. LeGuin was asked to name some of her favorite fantasy books. LeGuin, author of the Earthsea trilogy, said that she applies the DIRRI test (Do I ReRead It?) to identify favorite great books. Her list included *Alice in Wonderland*, *Gormenghast* (series), *The Sword in the Stone*, *The Jungle Book*, and *The Lord of the Rings*.

What Is a Great Book?

The underlying premise for this book is that teachers value teaching through great books, as we do. They teach through great books because they believe that reading is a gift that can bring enjoyment. Great books are the best way to help students become independent, purposeful readers who will think carefully about what they have read and develop a lifelong love of reading. A great book can give students vicarious experiences. It can help them live more lives than they think they have, expanding their experiences and worldviews. By doing so, students gain a deeper sense and understanding of their own beliefs, relationships, and values as citizens of the world.

But what *is* a great book? The word *great* has implications we must consider when working with our students. We may be aware of an excellent award-winning book but find it to be outside the realm of our students' lives. Or, a book that we consider to be great may not make it on another critic's list. Yet we can say that there are great books that are popular, great books that are censored, great books for reluctant readers, great books in a continuing series, great books for a lazy afternoon, great books to escort us into night-time sleeps, great books that talk about our communities, cultures, childhoods, and family and friendship circles, great books for our stories, and great books for our dreams. For us, the word *great* denotes a book that will have significant impact on a young reader: that will stay with the reader long after it has been returned to the shelf. The ability to say “This is a great book” depends on the child, the context, the culture, and the occasion.

But we have also asked students what they think a great book is. The statements below come from Junior students at Queen Victoria Public School, Toronto, and their teachers, Ernest Agbuya, Carol Nash, Susan Freypon, and Mehrdad Wellington.

“This Is a Great Book!” — Student Voices

“A great book is like a triple-layered ice cream sundae; it needs to be a combination of ingredients. Some humour, some action, a lot of suspense, maybe something to make you cry when you finish it and maybe just a little bit of romance as a cherry on top. It needs to make you finish reading and then say, ‘Damn, that was a good book!’” — M. S.

“There are many qualities to a great novel but I would say three main ones for me are: 1. It’s gripping. 2. It has to be moving. 3. It has to make me think.” — B. D.

“A book is a good book if YOU make it a good book. If you really like the story, then it is a good story and no one can change that. It does not matter what others think. It is what YOU think is a great book that makes it a great book.” — M. K.

“A great book always has to catch the spirit of everyone, no matter how diverse one person may be compared to another. Sure, some people may like a book more than another, but the greatest books have something for everyone. If you only expect one kind of person to read it, you might as well throw in a big ‘ages 10 to 11, no exceptions.’” — K. N.

“It’s amazing to think that a great book can change your imagination.” — M. T.

“A good book becomes a GREAT book when you can pretend to be the character you are reading about and what is happening to the character could happen to you.” — S. F.

“I like when the character is a role model.” — L. R.

“A great book is when you understand the story and you can’t stop reading it. It is a great book when you think of it even at school.” — T. A.

“If I can see pictures in my head of what is going on in the book, then it’s a great book. If I can relate to the characters or feel what they’re feeling, then that’s a great book, too!” — S. J.

“Something that makes a book great is the perfect order of the action because it gets you all hyped up.” — S. C.

“A great book is not made just for the money. When you put it down, you should be inspired.” — K. R.

“A good book is one that is different from others. It should relate to kids but make kids look into something new or make them break away from what they usually see.” — I. D.

“A popular question that is discussed is, ‘What is the most important part of a book: the setting, plot, characters, theme or conflict?’ These are all essential elements to be a good novel, but in order to make a book that everyone will enjoy, conflict is the most important. Now if two authors were on a book tour, and someone asked that question, perhaps the first author would say ‘plot’ is essential. Then the next author might say, ‘No, characters were the most important.’ That author would be saying that in a tone that clearly states that he disagrees with the first author. The two authors keep on disagreeing, and by that time, the crowd gets excited about which author is right. This is why conflict is the most essential part to a good book. It gets people excited.” — F. F.

Discovering Great Books: Life Lessons

What Did You Learn?

Here are three core questions to ask students so they will consider the impact of reading a novel on their lives:

- What did you learn about reading by reading this book?
- What did you learn about yourself by reading this book?
- What did you learn about life by reading this book?

Readers are bound to have learned something!

“Great books help you understand, and they help you feel understood.”
— John Green, author

In *Everything I Need to Know I Learned from a Children’s Book*, editor Anita Silvey features recollections from celebrities, authors, sports heroes, and media personalities about life lessons learned from books. From *The Secret Garden*, Katherine Paterson learned a sense of wonder. From *Peter Pan*, Gail Carson Levine learned how precious our time on Earth is. From *Charlotte’s Web*, Louis Sachar said he learned that if you see something in writing then it must be true, even if written by a spider on a web. Each writer featured in this anthology shares a favorite novel, picture book, or non-fiction selection to explain how books taught them about inspiration, understanding, principles and precepts, vocation, motivation, or storytelling.

When a book enriches a reader’s life or helps a person gain self-knowledge or new understanding of others, it can be considered a great book. Of course, this is not a matter of reading one great book. The more students read, the more they can learn. The more they learn, the more they can grow. If young readers understand that books can inform and teach, and that an author had a reason for writing a book, then they can better consider what makes a book great for them.

Guided instruction, whether it is with a librarian, a teacher, a family member, or a friend, can help young readers of novels to appreciate a book and the experience of reading it. It does not matter whether the book was available from the classroom, school, or community library; purchased from a Book Fair; or given as a gift. As teachers guide students through their reading and response experiences, they are working to enable their students to get the most from the novel. It may be helpful for young readers to have recommendations and thoughtful guiding questions so that they can become better acquainted with great books that may come to matter to them. “When we give children books,” Silvey (2009, 11) writes, “we become part of their future, part of their most cherished memories, and part of their lives. Children’s books change lives.”

A Novel Reader *Despite* School: Recollections by Larry Swartz

Discovering great books was arguably not as easy for me as a child as for a young person today.

Gazing into the rear-view mirror of my own childhood interactions with novels, I have very limited recollection of successful experiences from Grades 4 to 6 in the 1950s and 1960s. There were no Dav Pilkey, Gary Paulsen, or Eric Walters books to choose from. Pickings were slim because it wasn’t until the 1960s and 1970s that novels for young people really became a recognized industry in North America.

I was, however, a fellow who enjoyed going to the local library and the bookmobile that came around to our community once a week. Still, most of my reading choices seemed to be biographies and autobiographies. If I signed out fiction, choices were likely drawn from classics, for example, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*.

Then I met *Homer Price*. This book was published before I was born and is likely the one I remember most fondly as a young reader. The book was funny (I thought it was), and there were amusing illustrations that added to the enjoyment of the book. Each chapter was a different episode, so technically the book wasn’t a novel but a collection of short stories. Mischief was part of Homer Price’s world and where but in fiction could I ever meet a snake oil salesman, encounter

a magical chemical called “Ever So Much More So,” or battle an unstoppable doughnut-making machine? From Homer (and author Robert McCloskey) I learned about my sense of humor and that I had one.

As for school reading in the middle years, we read *Cue for Treason* by Geoffrey Trease in Grade 7, *The Eagle of the Ninth* by Rosemary Sutcliff in Grade 8, and *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck in Grade 9. I say “we” because everyone in the class read the same novel. Everyone in the class answered the questions, chapter by chapter. The books and the responses we were obliged to prepare did not engage, excite, or entertain me.

I have an ugly memory of completing book reports each year, always with the same format: describe the major characters; describe the minor characters; describe the setting; prepare a plot graph to outline the story events from beginning, rising action, climax, and denouement; and give your opinion of the novel. I dreaded these occasions. The elementary years did not turn me on to becoming a lover of novels, and my passion was ignited *despite* my school literacy experiences, not because of them.

I don’t think my journey into the children’s book world began until I became a teacher.

I have to thank David Booth who, during my year of teacher training, introduced me to *Nobody’s Family Is Going to Change* by Louise Fitzhugh. That book showed how books can help me see families that were different than mine and consider gender issues, as when I read about Emma, who was determined to be a lawyer, and Willie, who wanted to be a dancer.

I also have to thank Olga Stephenson, a teacher-librarian who supported me in my beginning years of teaching. When my father passed away, Olga handed me a copy of Richard Peck’s *A Day No Pigs Would Die*. The book helped me deal with my grief. Olga went on to recommend many books to me which, in turn, helped me recommend many books to my students. And my world changed (as did that of the students I taught) with my weekly visits to The Children’s Book Store in Toronto and the wise conversations I had with Marion Searly, who really knew what a “great” book was.

From Reading Romp to Purposeful Pursuit: Recollections by Shelley Stagg Peterson

As for me, I have always loved reading. Although my parents were concerned that I spent far too much time reading when I should have been outside playing, my mother took me to the public library every week to pick up new books when I was a child in elementary school in Edson, Alberta. We reached a happy medium as I became an outdoors reader — finding places on the doorstep, under a tree, even sitting next to the lounging calves in the field when we later moved to a farm to raise cattle.

The public library was one of my favorite places in Edson. I remember that the lower shelf in the children’s section housed the series books — that was the first place I looked when left to select books on my own. The librarian knew about the treasures on other shelves, however, and helped me to find more challenging and enriching books than I ever would have found with my head in the bottom shelves. I recognize now that she was introducing me to Newbery Honor and Award books, but at the time, I simply put faith in her and topped up my stack of series books — for example, Nancy Drew, Bobbsey Twins, Pippi Longstocking, and Little House on the Prairie (Laura Ingalls Wilder) — with her suggestions.