Dear Mr. or Ms. English Teacher:

I hope that by the time this arrives the hectic first days and weeks of school are behind you and that you’re settled into the work that you and I both love: teaching young people about writing, language, and, of course, literature. I have a keen interest in your work this year, not just because I, too, am a teacher, but also because three of my children are in your English classes. Joanne, my youngest, is in eighth grade and looking forward to her last year of middle school. Carrie, a ninth grader, is just beginning her high school career, while Jonathan, my only son, is in his final year of high school.

You probably don’t know Joanne or Carrie or Jonathan yet, but let me assure you that they’re good kids. They’ll participate in class discussions and activities, rarely be absent, and get their work done on time. I’m pretty sure they won’t distinguish themselves in your classes, but you’ll find them cooperative, hard-working, and pleasant students.

But this letter is not intended to convince you of the goodness of my children; you’ll know well their strengths and flaws by the end of May. I’m writing to ask you to work consciously to help my children become readers, not just readers of school assignments, but independent readers, the kind who will continue reading on their own long after they’ve finished school. I’ve been working on this all their lives, but now that they’re teenagers, they don’t listen to me like they used to. Most of the time, recommended reading from me is the kiss of death for a book, but your suggestions about books may actually get somewhere. Just suggesting good books alone, however, won’t be enough. I know my kids and their reading habits pretty well, and it will be your actions, along with your words, that will ultimately make an impression on them.

I realize I’m not their English teacher, but as their father, here’s what I hope you will teach my children about books and reading this year:

Help them (especially Jonathan) realize that reading books can be a refreshing and rewarding alternative to TV, movies, shopping, or hanging out with friends.

Like most other American teenagers, my children have active and sometimes interesting lives. They’re busy with sports, bands and orchestras, church activities, part-time jobs, and, of course, school work and study. They don’t have much free time, but on those rare moments when they truly are bored, I wish they would look to the bookshelf instead of the telephone or television for something to do.

Help them discover—or remember—the pleasures of reading.

You may already know that Jonathan despises reading. Carrie is ambivalent about it. Joanne sometimes likes it and sometimes doesn’t. Please help them encounter books or stories that will grab and sustain their interests. I’d like, just once, to have one of them stagger into the kitchen, bleary-eyed and late for breakfast, because of staying up all night to finish a novel. I’d love to see them curled up on the couch rereading a favorite book. I would go to my grave a contented old man if once before I die, and before my kids grow up, I could hear one of my children talking excitedly to a friend about a book just finished.

Allow them to exercise “The Reader’s Bill of Rights” (from Daniel Pennac’s Better Than Life [Coach House Press, 1994]) whenever possible.

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 tastes.
I know that “The right to not read” is a little problematic in English classes, and it would be the first right Jonathan would claim anytime reading is mentioned in school. But I would hope that you will teach my children that these are the rights that real readers, people no longer confined to schools, live by. Maybe you can allow them to exercise most of these rights when it comes to their outside, elective reading. Maybe you can talk to them about how you as a reader exercise these rights. Maybe you can help them understand how to negotiate the requirements of school with the rights of readers. Maybe you can simply use Pennac’s Bill of Rights as a springboard for a discussion about reading, how it works, and why it’s important. I’m convinced that whatever you do to help my children understand and exercise these rights will contribute to their becoming lifelong readers.

Please don’t mistake me for the pushy parent that I really am, but in addition to thinking about what I hope you’ll teach my children, I’ve also thought about how you can teach it:

Require and encourage outside, elective reading.

You and I both know they’re busy, but we also know that they probably won’t read much unless they have to. You’re in a much better position than I am to encourage/coerce them to read something other than the required texts for your classes.

Steer them toward good YA books.

Joanne loves Mildred D. Taylor’s books, and any book that helps her appreciate the value of families, high standards, and integrity is fine with me. She’s already crazy about sports and boys; I think she’d love YA sports novels by R. R. Knudson, Tessa Duder, Chris Crutcher, Dean Hughes, and Robert Lipsyte, but as her overprotective and probably paranoid father, I’d really appreciate it if my barely thirteen-year-old daughter didn’t read books that would fan her romantic imagination any hotter than it already is.

Carrie, my softest-hearted and most empathetic child, would probably be troubled by some of the good but hard-edged YA novels around. She may be ready in a few years to take on books that deal with the darker side of human experience, but for now I’d prefer it if you’d point her to books like *Shiloh*; *To Kill a Mockingbird*; *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry; Finding My Voice; All Together Now,* or nearly any one of Gary Paulsen’s adventure books. She might also enjoy some of Lurlene McDaniel’s tear-jerkers or YA fiction or nonfiction about female athletes.

Please give my children opportunities in class to discuss informally what they’ve read.

As an avowed “reluctant reader,” Jonathan is a tougher nut to crack. He will resist all attempts to read, but because he is essentially a good student—or at least because he really wants good grades—he will read when it’s required. He didn’t like Cormier’s *I am the Cheese,* but I think he might like *Tunes for Bears to Dance To.* He’s had good experiences with most of Gary Paulsen’s books, including *Nightjohn* and *Sam* and might like Paulsen’s new historical novel *A Soldier’s Heart.* Because he likes ideas and facts, you might encourage him to discover good YA nonfiction.

Help them connect with what they read.

Please give my children opportunities in class to discuss informally what they’ve read. Rather than ruining their reading experiences with the standard book report, allow them some freedom in deciding how to respond to what they’ve read. Maybe you can simply conduct an informal interview with them about their most recent outside reading.

Nudge them to works related to what they’ve just read, or, if they’re in a reading rut, nudge them into something different.

I believe in momentum. If one of my children likes a particular book, encourage further reading by saying something like, “Well, if you liked that, I’m pretty sure you’d also like this.” Of course, I believe that nearly any reading is better than no reading, but if my children happen to fall into a real reading rut, please encourage/coerce them into something new or different.
Read yourself and talk to my children and their classmates about what you read.

I worry that my kids have the idea that reading is something only students do. Sure, they know that their mother and I are readers, but we’re merely their old, slightly eccentric parents. The more you demonstrate your own enthusiasm for reading, the more my children will begin to see that reading may actually be a worthwhile activity pursued by people who have real lives.

Read some of what they read.

If, for example, Jonathan ever got excited by a book, I would hope that you’d read the same book as soon as possible so you could talk with him about it. The fact that you would read something that one of my children read and liked would validate not only their reading experience but also the book they read. Too often YA books are demeaned by English teachers, so your willingness to read—and to admit enjoying—a book read by one of my children would give them and me great pleasure.

Read aloud in class.

My teenagers probably wouldn’t admit this, but they like being read to. As an English teacher, you’re a good reader. Would you mind taking a few minutes every once in a while to read aloud to my children and their classmates? Even Jonathan, the twelfth grader, would like listening to you read a good story.

Give them time to read in class.

You’re busy. You have a million things to cover in class. Your day is already too short. I know all that, but I also know that my kids’ lives are crammed with activities outside of the school day. They can find time to read at home, but it would be great for them to have even a little regular reading time in English class. It might help them get into a slow-moving novel that they would otherwise give up on. It might help them avoid procrastinating their outside reading. It might show them that you value reading enough to give them some class time to do it.

I know you’re busy, overworked, and underpaid. I appreciate what you do, and I sincerely hope you will have your best school year ever. But for as much as I care about your success as a teacher, please know that I care infinitely more about the success of my children. For many years, what they did and learned was strictly up to me and my wife, but now we share them with you because you’re in a position to give them many things we cannot. I trust you’ll do just that, and by the end of this year that they’ll be better off than they are now.

But please, amid all the classes to teach, papers and tests to grade, standardized tests to administer, meetings to attend, dances to plan and chaperone, and the myriad other things you’ll have to do this year, please, please don’t forget that one of the most important things you’ll do in the next nine months is help my children love reading.

With all best wishes,

Chris Crowe

Discoveries: New or Overlooked YA Books Worth Reading

Bat 6 by Virginia Euwer Wolff (Scholastic, 1998). For fifty years, the small Oregon towns of Bear Creek Ridge and Barlow have sponsored an annual softball game between their sixth grade girls’ teams. Set in 1948 and 1949, this novel uses alternating narration of the twenty players to tell about the prejudice and eventual understanding that results from the big game.

Been Clever Forever by Bruce Stone (HarperCollins, 1988). “I am smart, is the problem,” says sixteen-year-old Stephen Douglass. His precociousness gets him into all kinds of trouble, especially with an emotionally disturbed teacher. His funny wise-cracking first-person narrative will appeal to bright students who themselves have felt alienated from school.

The Boy Who Owned the School: A Comedy of Love by Gary Paulsen (Orchard, 1990). Painfully shy Jacob Freisten’s goal is to make it through high school without being noticed. His plan is foiled when a beautiful classmate notices him and when he’s trapped into participating in a school play. This hilarious novella is a great text to read aloud to your students.

50 Short Science Fiction Tales, Isaac Asimov and Groff Conklin, eds. (Macmillan, 1963). This book has plenty of short stories that work well as read-alouds in class. Many of the stories are by

ENGLISH JOURNAL
classic science fiction writers, and most of them have the kind of ironic twists that appeal to junior high/middle school students.

*Ki Te Ao* by Apirana Taylor (Penguin, 1990). This collection by a New Zealand author combines the Maori and Anglo culture in nineteen stories that are a mix of whimsy and witchery, social conflicts and cultural stresses.

*Lives and Works: Young Adult Authors*, Marilee Foglesong, Maureen Barbieri, and Dana L. Fox, eds. (Groszler, 1999). This is a handy reference guide to contemporary and classic authors read by teenagers. The eight volumes contain short biographies on 248 authors from Douglas Adams and Louisa May Alcott to Richard Wright and Paul Zindel.

*Lizard* by Dennis Covington (Delacorte, 1991). Thirteen-year-old Lucius Sims is called Lizard because of his deformed face, and even though he's not mentally disabled, he's been placed in the Louisiana State School for Retarded Boys. He manages to escape and joins a traveling repertory company, which introduces him to a series of interesting characters and adventures.

*The Oxboy* by Anne Mazer (Knopf, 1993). This mythical allegory is set in a world where humans and animals once intermarried but where humans now search out and destroy those who are not purely human.

*Permanent Connections* by Sue Ellen Bridgers (HarperCollins, 1988). At seventeen, Rob has run out of second chances and is sent to spend a semester in his father's rural hometown in North Carolina. Rob initially resists the positive influences of his new environment but is gradually transformed by good family and friends.

*Shades of Darkness: More of the Ghostly Best Stories of Robert Westall* by Robert Westall (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994). Westall's benign ghost stories are spooky and eerie without being gratuitously gory or violent. Experienced readers will appreciate Westall's fine writing; inexperienced readers will enjoy the suspenseful stories.

*Wrestling with Honor* by David Klass (Scholastic, 1989). Klass combines excellent wrestling scenes with an ethical dilemma: Should an athlete compete if to do so he must violate his own ethics? This is what wrestling team captain Ron Woods must decide when he fails a drug test despite the fact that he doesn’t use drugs.

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**Call for Papers**

Dedicated to teaching and learning beyond traditional disciplines and interests, *Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning (JAEP)* invites submissions for its sixth annual issue. We solicit theory-grounded manuscripts that discuss pedagogical concerns focusing on topics that extend beyond currently accepted attitudes toward, and paradigms of, language. We invite an exploration of subjects that range over a spectrum of interests including, but not limited to, emotion, imagery, kinesthetics, ecofeminism, situated knowledge, meditation, healing, inspiration.

Send by January 15, 2000, 4 copies of letter quality manuscripts (attach postage for mailing 3 copies to readers), MLA style, approximately 12–15 pages including works cited to: Linda Calendrillo, Co-Editor, *JAEP*, Department of English, 600 Lincoln Avenue, Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, IL 61920, e-mail: cfltc@eiu.edu.

Send editorial inquiries to: Kristie S. Fleckenstein, Co-Editor, *JAEP*, Department of English, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306-0460, e-mail: kflecken@gw.bsu.edu.