Leveled: Fiction That Could One Day Be True

The characters in this story converse about the humorous, yet horrifying, ramifications of leveling students for reading instruction.

Brenda Miller Power

It’s my favorite place to spend a lazy Saturday afternoon. Sure, a lot of my snotty friends boycott the Happy Bookland bookstore chain, but I love it. Over in the corner, there’s fresh coffee with an exotic scent of almonds brewing, fat scones, and expensive Belgium chocolates for sale. I love the books even more—two whole floors of them! Every week a few new hardcovers on the long, wide tables beckon right inside the front door. And every few days, a few more of the paperbacks I’ve been waiting to buy finally appear on the bestseller shelves. I used to spend more time in the poetry stacks, but for obvious reasons, now I limit most of my browsing to the new books. It’s too depressing to look through the older books of poetry and long for something I won’t be allowed to buy.
The line snakes slowly to check-out—sales are down, but delays like this are expected with the laws changing every month. I check the discreet code labels on the back of the six books I carry one more time, to make sure there won’t be any problems.

I get to the front of the line and glance up at my cashier. Can’t help but grin at the clerk—two tattoos on his arm and three pierced earrings in one lobe. I think it must be part of the interview process—no piercing or body art, no job at Happy Bookland. He scans my reading certification card into the register, and then the first book—an abridged history of the Civil War. It’s actually a gift for my father-in-law, and only a level A-12 anyway. The soft beep sounds for the second book, a novel by a new writer, Amy Comstock, that’s gotten great reviews. He flips over to the back cover and reads the level—“TNTBR.” He looks at me sheepishly, “Yeah, like, it’s ‘Too New To Be Rated,’ so you can’t get it.”

What?! All five of the books I have in my hands are TNTBRs, which is why I picked them. I’m only certified through level K-47 books, so TNTBRs are my lifeline. I’ve read all the books I want to at my certified level, and panic begins to descend. “What do you mean I can’t buy these books? Anyone can buy TNTBRs until they get their ratings six months after publication.” I’m not going to back down on this one, and think ahead to the week I have that includes two long plane rides and a three-day weekend. My sense of panic grows. What in the world is coming, and so is Linda Pastan. It’s not like they have much money for lawyers.

Anyway, that seems like a good place to start. “Don’t I know you from poetry readings on campus?” I ask.

“My name is Lisa,” explains the manager. “I thought I recognized you, too, from the comprehension battery after last week’s poetry slam. Did you get many points?” she asks.

“Eight,” I reply, a little smugly. There were only ten points maximum. “Good for you! I only managed six.” She leans in. “Listen, I’m so sorry about the new law. I like you, and goodness knows we’re in the business of selling books. But the law is the law. What I don’t get is why you have such a low certification. I mean, I pulled your file and you work professionally as an editor, for cripes sake! You had to start at about a level D with that kind of education.”

I tell my story with some sheepishness. “Here’s the problem. It would be different if I lived in the city, but there’s only one book club at my level here in town. There’s this really obnoxious accountant in the group who dominates every discussion. It’s like he overdosed on the McLoughlin group or something—every time I open my mouth to give my opinion, he points his finger in my face and yells out ‘Wrong!’ It’s humiliating. Plus I’m out of town for work on many nights the book club meets, and I don’t like spend-
ing the time away from my family. So I'm having trouble moving up my certification."

As I continue my tale of woe, she nods sympathetically, but I can tell she's already distracted by what will come next. This is always the worst part of the book conference. She walks over to the K tubs, and brings one over.

"Luckily, we do have quite a few new books at your level this month," she says in a too-bright voice. "How about Debby Boone's new autobiography? The first one was great, and Twenty More Years of Lighting Up Your Life is supposed to be even better!" she says, with what even I can see is false enthusiasm.

"Look." I pause, weighing my words. "I think it's amazing how long Debbi has managed to keep her big hit playing in elevators around the world, but I'm just not interested. I do like autobiographies—Salman Rushdie's is TBR and in my pile to buy today. Wouldn't you make an exception just this once, or even charge it against my account for new books next month?"

"Salman Rushdie! You've got to be kidding. There's a lot of questioning whether Salman is even certified to read his own autobiography! He hasn't attended a book club in months, and the excuse that his life is in danger is wearing a little thin after all these years. We all have to live with terrorism." She continues to flip through the books in the tub.

"And its many forms," I mutter, hopefully far enough under my breath that she can't hear as she shuffles through the tub. She stops and pulls out a paperback. "Here we go—Volvo Car Repair for Dummies. I know from your profile that you have purchased How-To books in the past. What do you think?"

I pause again, and speak even more carefully. "I do like nonfiction, but I don't even own a Volvo. And I have this real aversion to any books that have "For Dummies" in the title. I know it's an elitist quirk on my part, and I'm working on it." In the middle of my response, Lisa's face lights up. She pulls out her palm pilot, and punches in a few letters.

"I knew it!" she exclaims. "Aversion is a three point word, and you used it naturally in speech! I can get those three points added to your rating. We can fill out the forms before you leave, and in no time, you'll be rated for L books." She smiles, pleased for me, and I see she genuinely wants to help.

It's the moment of truth I've faced more than a few times in the past few years since the reading laws for adults began to be phased in. I realize I'm not leaving the store with any books today. Even a year or two ago, I was able to talk my way into buying a few books above my level. But these days, no amount of charm and pleading is going to work on a clerk who could lose her job by selling me the wrong book.

And so I decide I might as well chat with Lisa for awhile, before I go home and reread one of the authors I love who I no longer have access to—the Barbara Kingsolver novels and David Sedaris essays published and bought before the laws changed. I think grimly about the new Barbara Kingsolver book coming out next month, along with something by Jonathan Franzen. They are sure to be rated at least somewhere in the Ms. I know it's only a matter of months before the final portion of the law is phased in, and the TBR category is eliminated. Pretty soon there will be no point in visiting Happy Bookland, unless I'm desperate for a great cup of coffee or oversized muffin.

"What I can't believe is that it's come to this," I say, this time loud enough for Lisa to hear. I've had this conversation so many times, and I guess I think if I talk about it with enough adults, maybe one day I can understand. "Who would have thought one reading study conducted in Guam with four adults would lead to this state of affairs?"

I muse, remembering the study that began it all.

"It was only four adults, but it was reliable, replicable research, which is why the National Institute of Health and Well-Being promoted it so heavily. The study proved conclusively that any adult who reads books with unknown vocabulary words has a 37% chance of losing a statistically significant number of brain cells." Lisa rattles off the information as she pours herself another cup of coffee. I don't envy her having to repeat this discussion a dozen times a day.

"But it wasn't reliable and replicable," I know she's probably heard it before, but it's my therapy to go through the discussion one more time. "The research team didn't measure brain cell death, but no one else has verified that. Every other researcher who tried to use the machine says it measures normal brain activity, not decreases in neurological function."

"Sure," says Lisa. I can tell she likes talking about it, too, and is happy she doesn't have to dig through that tub of lousy books for me anymore today. "But the National Institute of Health and Well-Being wouldn't certify those alternative studies as reliable and replicable." She looks
around, notices no one else is watching, and leans in more closely. Now she is whispering, “What a coincidence, wasn’t it, that as soon as the autitron machines were installed in all first- through fifth-grade classrooms, ending all funding for elementary reading research, the National Institute suddenly showed such a big interest in adult reading?”

“Yeah, some coincidence!” It’s always a pleasure to meet someone else who knows the whole story, who got ahold of the investigative reports before they were rated too high for lay people to read. “Just at the moment their work was done in schools, and their funding was about to run out, they suddenly come up with this study that gets them 15 billion dollars to regulate adult readers!”

“Ah, but it’s all about national security, you know. Can’t be losing all our brain cells!” Lisa chimes in, with a weak smile. She looks me straight in the eye. “Do you have a friend?” “Yes,” I respond. That’s the code among all us low-level readers—“Do you have a friend?” A friend is someone who can get you the books you want to read. Sometimes it’s a way into getting the highest level books, sometimes it’s a way into learning about someone else who desperately wants some books passed along. “Do you have a friend?” is a phrase I hear all day who love books. Now all I do most of the time is look for someone who might have a book club she can bear. So I dutifully shows up every week and accumulates her points. I skip mine too often, forget to log on and take my comprehension batteries after I do attend, and so am stuck in this quagmire of b-list celebrity bios and how-to books for morons.

Ruth’s level T-36, and after she reads a book she thinks I’ll like, she sends it along in a brown paper wrapper. I pass them along, too, to other friends, but it’s not like the glory days when I got to discover authors on my own and send them Ruth’s way.

“When do you have your job?” I ask, because I truly want to know. What’s a smart cookie like Lisa doing in a Happy Bookland Reading Discussion room, pushing the “For Dummies” series? “I used to love my job,” replies Lisa. She stares into her coffee, long since gone cold, but I know she’s loathe to go back onto the floor and get back to work. “Not this job, which was fine before levels. What I really liked was my job as a first-grade teacher.”

“You were a first-grade teacher?!” I ask. “Yes.” Lisa pauses, seems to gather her composure. “That’s when they got rid of the autitron machines,” said Lisa. She sighs as she turns the pages of leveled books. “Somehow I can’t see you manning an autitron machine!”

Most of the first-grade teaching jobs are taken now by veterans of the 4th Gulf War or grads of the “Reap to Read” displaced farmers program—Lisa just doesn’t fit the profile.

“No, no, this was 20 years ago. Back before the research, the levels, the machines. You know what my favorite part of teaching was? I loved late August, going to Happy Bookland and picking out a few extra copies of Frog and Toad, Hop on Pop, and Lilly’s Plastic Purple Purse. Every year, without fail, I had a kid who would fall in love with one of those books. Oh, the kid couldn’t read most of the words, but it didn’t matter. She’d drag that book everywhere, make you read it with her 50 times.” Lisa’s voice gets weaker, as if she’s running out of energy dredging up the memory. I’m vaguely remembering the dog-eared copy of Green Eggs and Ham that I used to carry everywhere when I was six years old, the one that finally fell apart from so many readings.

“My job was like capturing magic in a bottle,” she went on. “I might help the kids sound out words till they could follow along on their own, or drag their finger under them, or look at the pictures and words together. But if kids found a book they wanted to read, no level was going to stop them. I couldn’t bear to take those books away from them at the end of the year, so I’d buy new copies, and think of what fun I’d have matching each kid to the book.” By now, I know Lisa has to get back to work, but she seems to want to finish her story, and so I stay silent.

“It was bad enough when everything was leveled. At first, it was a help to know something about readability, or decoding skills for individual kids. But even read-alouds were leveled. When the new research came out that said some kids were turning the pages of leveled books too quickly, and it was certified by the National Institute as reliable . . .”

“And replicable!” I chimed in. Lisa pauses, seems to gather her composure. “That’s when they got rid of books altogether and I had to leave. Lots of us left first grade, and moved up in the grades. But the levels kept following us, and there were fewer and fewer books in classrooms and schools. My job wasn’t about magic and loving books anymore.

“It doesn’t take much brainpower to turn on a bank of autitron machines,” said Lisa. She sighs as she pushes herself up out of her seat. She stops and turns to me, anxious to keep talking. “I liked this job at first, just being among people all day who love books. Now all I do
is enforce the new laws, and they get stricter every few months. It’s starting to feel more and more like I’m a policewoman.”

For the first time in my life, I hate being surrounded by books, can’t wait to get out of this place—even that great new book smell I’ve always loved is making me a little nauseated. But Lisa’s not quite finished yet. “You know why I stay? I take the closing shift, so that I can read whatever I want after everyone leaves. Sometimes I sit with a book of poetry that I can’t begin to comprehend. I read the words out loud, just savoring the rhythm of them, the understanding just beyond my grasp. It’s like swimming underwater with your eyes wide open. I think of my first graders, probably all young adults now. I hope they see that tattered copy of *Frog and Toad* on a shelf and remember the joy of reading something that was almost beyond their grasp.”

The last look she gives me as she walks out the door is almost wistful. “It was magic, wasn’t it?”

**Taking Political Action**

**But What Can I Do?**

I can see what’s coming,
But what can I do?
I’ll close my door,
Hide the books
  Hide the bears
  Hide the paints and papers and bean bag chairs
  Hide their poetry, plays, and songs
And pretend we’re playing the company song.

They came for my colleague down the hall,
But what can I do?
She had her door open
  Her bulletin boards full of artwork and science
  She should have known better than studying lions.
  But if she had done such awful things
  She should have done them privately.

Our school building has one voice,
But what can I do?
We all say the same thing
  Said at the same time
  Said to the same kids
  Said in the same way so anyone can hear
  Said to children whose differences disappear
  And without any thinking on our parts or theirs.

My students are failing
But what can I do?
I’ve got to do what I am told.
  I’m doing the program
  I’m going by the book
  I’ve swallowed the system—line, sinker and hook.
  We’re all told we’re doing what is best
  Oh, how we succeed on those program-based tests.

My heart is shriveling,
But what can I do?
The pressure is on, now
  I’m just one person
  I’m just one teacher
  I’m not an organizer, counselor, or preacher.
  How much must my students and I be in pain
  Before we make learning our own once again?

I’m searching for hope
There may be one thing to do
Perhaps I can end my isolation
  Just maybe, by shedding my silence
  Just maybe, by talking to friends,
  Families and colleagues again.
  In being the first voice, the silence ends
  Speaking softly is known for the message it sends.

—Rick Meyer

**Author Biography**

*Brenda Miller Power* wrote this essay while she was a professor of literacy instruction at the University of Maine. She currently is a full-time editor at Stenhouse Publishers where she can be contacted at bpower@stenhouse.com.