Great Books for Collaborative Conversations about Literature

Book discussions are the centerpiece of middle grade literacy instruction. Book discussions let students explore and share their thinking with peers to create powerful understandings about literature and life. The options for forms and formats of classroom book discussions have never been greater. Students can blog about books, text about books, participate in online book discussions, and more, sharing reactions with a single friend or with a worldwide audience.

While many teachers still do whole-class book discussions, there are lots of good reasons for grouping students differently for these experiences. Small-group, paired, and individual reading experiences open up possibilities for student choice, multiple texts, and thoughtful comparison and sharing of diverse titles. These experiences widen the circle of reading in the classroom from a narrow focus on a single text to broad exposure to a range of titles that differ in topic, difficulty, and genre. This column will recommend titles that can be matched with students in a variety of grouping patterns for different instructional purposes.

Book clubs and literature circles, whether face-to-face or online, are often formed based on the study of a specific genre, literary element, or other characteristics. A good book for these purposes meets student interests, has compelling content, is at an appropriate level and length, and addresses the teachers’ instructional goals. Most important, however, a book’s content should lend itself to response; it should contain ideas that evoke important thoughts or feelings in the reader. The 2012 Newbery winner, Dead End in Norvelt by Jack Gantos (2011), is a book that can be mined for literary study on different levels. On the one hand, it is a wacky account of two summers in a small town boy’s life; on the other, it is a deep exploration of the concept of history and our place in it. The main character is the author himself, and a cast of bizarre characters creates a story of pathos, mystery, and history.

“. . . the universe was not kind to Auggie Pullman” (Palacio, 2012, p. 201). Auggie Pullman is a fifth grader with a severe facial deformity. Home schooled until fifth grade, he decides to attend a private school. Wonder (Palacio, 2012) is a powerful story of the cruelty of middle graders to those who are different; at the same time, it is a story of the power of kindness to transform lives. Told through multiple narrators, including Auggie, his sister, his sister’s boyfriend, and other characters, it is a realistic portrayal of the complexities of dealing with peer harassment even when family support structures are strong and loving. Both Dead End in Norvelt and Wonder contain complex characters that students will long remember. Both books have rich possibilities for discussion. Students might consider questions like these: How are these two characters similar? How are they different? How does each character change and develop over the course of the story? What was the author’s point of view toward each of these characters? How would you describe your own point of view toward them? How do the characters’ actions further the plots of the stories?
New versions of old tales are very popular with middle graders. For literature circles focused on fantasy, *A Tale Dark and Grimm* (Gidwitz, Grimm, & Grimm, 2010), *Breadcrumbs* (Ursu & McGuire, 2011), and *Cloaked* (Finn, 2011) are enchanting reads that build on familiar tales. Because of their familiarity with this genre, its archetypes, and its structure, students can move into deeper literary analysis than might otherwise be possible. *A Tale Dark and Grimm* extends the familiar Hansel and Gretel story, employing a breezy writing style. *Breadcrumbs* derives from the less familiar Hans Christian Anderson story *The Snow Queen*. *Cloaked* is a fun fairytale mashup from Alex Finn, the author of the popular *Beastly* (2007). In response to these titles, students might consider questions like these: How did the author use the original tale or tales to frame the work? What changes did the author make to the original story? What archetypes did you find in these stories? Are they similar or dissimilar to those found in the originals?

With the Common Core State Standards’ emphasis on informational texts, teachers will want students to engage with this text type more often, and books about contemporary culture have the potential to captivate readers. *Friend Me! 600 Years of Social Networking in America* (DiPiazza, 2012) is a history of social networking dating from the use of wampum by Native Americans to Facebook and blogging today. The author, a longtime blogger, takes the reader on a trip through the history of how humans network, whether through broadsides, telegraphs, calling cards, or iphones. *Can I See Your I.D.? True Stories of False Identities* (Barton, 2011) also takes an historical view by offering vignettes about 10 imposters, as described through second-person narratives accompanied by graphic-novel-style illustrations.

Informational texts don’t have to be books, however. Short newspaper and magazine articles are ideal choices for literature circles and book clubs. *Texts and Lessons for Content-Area Reading*:

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**CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK**

**Immersed in Books!**

ReadWriteThink.org has many resources dealing with books and literature:

- **ReadWriteThink.org Calendar**
  
  Not your everyday calendar, here you can find important events in literary history, authors’ birthdays, and a variety of holidays, all with related activities and resources that make them more relevant to students.

  http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/calendar-activities/

- **Text Messages Podcast Series: Recommendations for Adolescent Readers**

  *Text Messages* is a monthly podcast providing families, educators, out-of-school practitioners, and tutors some reading recommendations they can pass along to teen readers. Each episode will feature in-depth recommendations of titles that will engage and excite teen readers.


- **Developing Reading Plans to Support Independent Reading**

  Students analyze their past readings and use that knowledge to create reading plans for the future.

  http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/developing-reading-plans-support-836.html

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With More than 75 Articles from the New York Times, Rolling Stone, the Washington Post, Car and Driver, Chicago Tribune, and Many Others (Daniels & Steineke, 2011) is a great resource for busy teachers, containing lots of high-interest articles with real “kid appeal.”

Inquiry groups, ideally composed of 2–4 students, can engage with a multiplicity of texts when exploring disciplinary content in depth; then they synthesize and demonstrate their learning through a project of some kind. Books for inquiry groups should be thematically related, but provide different perspectives on a topic. Titles can come from a single genre, such as informational books, or span a variety of genres. A science class, for example, might examine the study of evolution. Every Bone Tells a Story: Hominin Discoveries, Deductions, and Debates (Rubalcaba & Robertshaw, 2010), awarded an Outstanding Science Trade Book for Students K–12, uncovers the discovery of four hominins: Turkana Boy, Lapedo Child, Kennewick Man, and Ötzi the Iceman. The book examines the work of paleontologists and anthropologists and does not shy away from the ongoing debates surrounding our human ancestors. For a fictionalized vision of the father of evolution, The True Adventures of Charley Darwin (Meyer, 2009) colorfully portrays the tapestry of Darwin’s life and the amazing “Voyage of the Beagle.” Laurence Pringle’s (2011) Billions of Years, Amazing Changes: The Story of Evolution cites evidence for evolution in the form of fossils, the explorations and findings of Charles Darwin, the process of natural selection, and the role of genetics.

I Learned a New Word Today . . . Genocide (Hankins, 2009), Never Fall Down (McCormick, 2012), and Half Spoon of Rice: A Survival Story of the Cambodian Genocide (Smith, 2010) could provide the focus for an inquiry group on genocide throughout the world. The first title is a fictional story about an 11-year-old boy who, learning about genocide for the first time in school, is moved to social action. The second is a powerful novel based on the true story of a boy soldier’s survival of the Khmer Rouge regime, while the third is a fictional picturebook about the same time and place. Students exploring this topic could consider questions like these: How can genocide exist in the modern world? How have groups become victims of genocide and why? What can we do to prevent genocide in the future?

Independent reading gives students a choice about what to read. Texts provided for independent reading should cover multiple genres, topics, and reading needs. They need not be books of exceptional literary quality, but they should be titles that capitalize on and sustain student interest. After all, an important objective of independent reading is to help students develop pleasure in reading. However, independent reading need not be entirely independent. Pairing students to read the same book can address the needs of students who have common interests or support struggling readers. Furthermore, it can provide opportunities for students to engage in collaborative conversations around texts.

The Strange Case of Origami Yoda by Tom Angleberger (2010) and Janet Tashjian’s (2010) My Life as a Book are great independent reading choices for reluctant middle grade readers. The first title is about a boy named Dwight who wears an origami finger puppet of Yoda on his finger. The puppet becomes a kind of oracle for the sixth grade because it can predict the future. The story revolves around his classmate Tommy’s efforts to figure out the mystery of how Yoda performs his feats. The second book centers around the summer adventures of Derek, a boy who struggles with reading but loves to draw. Both books are funny, engaging, and easy reads.

Three additional titles incorporate unique forms of visual media sure to engage struggling readers. Chopsticks: A Novel (Anthony & Corral, 2012) is a difficult-to-classify book for older middle graders. Revolving around a mystery about a piano prodigy, Glory, who disappears, and a love story between two artistic teens, this book contains minimal text and is told through amazing images, including realia, photographs, instant messages, and much more. WonderStruck: A Nav-
*In Words and Pictures* (Selznik, 2011) is another extraordinary book by Caldecott-winning author David Selznik. Using the same “book as movie” technique found in *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (2007), Selznik weaves together two stories—one traditional and one visual—into a fascinating work. Both are quest stories about youth looking for missing pieces of their lives; one story is told through more traditional means, while the second, about a girl from the 1920s, is told entirely through visuals. Using a different visual form, *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children* (Riggs, 2011) mixes fiction with vintage photography to create a dark Gothic fantasy about a young boy who travels through time to discover the source of his grandfather’s extraordinary tales about Miss Peregrine’s orphanage. Students will enjoy discussing how these authors combined print images with visual ones to tell their stories.

According to Kate DiCamillo, the Newbery Medal-winning children’s author, the simple gesture of putting a book in someone’s hands can change a life. Great teachers change lives every day, and matching readers with books that spark rich discussions is one of the ways we make that happen.

**References**


