Novel Lessons: Choice!

LINDA RIEF WITH HER EIGHTH GRADE STUDENTS

It’s not a novel lesson. The research has been around, and significant, for nearly a hundred years. (Atwell, 1987, 2007; Kittle, 2013; Rosenblatt, 1965, 1983; Schoonover, 1937) Choice. That’s the Not-So-Novel Lesson. Letting kids choose the books they want to read, giving them time to read, and talking to them about these books turns them into readers. Readers who ask questions about themselves and about the world in which they live. Readers who notice not only what the book says, but notice how it is said and what impact even the how has on a reader.

Giving our students choice for a significant portion of their reading does not mean we relinquish all we know about reading. I work hard at surrounding students with good books from a variety of authors in a variety of genres. I give frequent book talks. In writing-reading notebooks, I ask students to talk about their thinking as they read. We look at craft techniques and what those moves do to a reader. I hold frequent reading conferences: How’s it going? What are you noticing as you read? What’s worth talking about? What are the questions that come to mind as you read? What are you noticing about the writing? Any problems in the reading? How can I help?

Given these conditions, here’s what some of my eighth graders have to say about their reading.

Caden S.
Each book I read this year has changed me in one way or another, but the two with the most impact were Origin and The Cellist of Sarajevo. In Origin by Dan Brown (2017), the questions that were asked over and over again were “Where did we come from?” and “Where are we going?” These questions still nag at my consciousness every day. This book tried to reveal the answers to these questions but it makes me wonder how true they might be. I wonder if Edmond was right about technology becoming a part of the human race, and I wonder if there is a right religion.

These questions have haunted me. I have realized that religious beliefs are more than a way of thinking. Religions provide reasons that attempt to explain extraordinary events, like the creation of earth and life. Before scientific advancements, these seemingly inexplicable events were explained through religion. I learned that you can be a religious thinker but still believe that the scientific findings are right and accept them into your beliefs. The priest Father Bena represents this in an exchange with the main character, Langdon.

“Oh, please!” Bena said, laughing. “I don’t believe that the same God who endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect… (Langdon finished his [Bena’s] thought) “Intended us to forgo their use.” (Brown, 2017, p. 454).

This type of flexibility allows humans to remain open to new ideas, stretch and evolve intellectually, to facilitate advancements in the world.

The Cellist of Sarajevo (Galloway, 2008) changed my perspective completely on war. It showed me that war is not black and white. It showed me that war is not black and white. I don’t think of one side as the bad guys in
the black hats battling the good guys in their white hats. I try to see from both perspectives. I attempt to unravel the bundle of reasons why each side is fighting. This book demonstrates that on both sides, the soldiers are just regular people, and on both sides, there is unforgettable violence and suffering. Obviously, there is the factor of innocence in the face of evil, but where is the line drawn when both sides have done harm to others? Both sides might commit similar acts of violence, and yet the tendency is to paint one as completely evil, while simultaneously glossing over such actions by those on the “good side.” War is thorny and complex, and the book underscored this point repeatedly.

Cellist changed the way I read books. Ever since reading this I have tried harder to understand the deeper meaning of the book, rather than just read it for the words on the page. The multidimensional approach to reading for more complex meaning has helped me realize that books are much more interesting when you do not solely focus on the action.

Zach S.  
Inheritance (Book 4) (Paolini, 2012) is my favorite book ever. I love everything about it. Inheritance is that perfect ending to a decent fantasy series. This book taught me to think in terms of knowledge, instead of thinking about gossip all day. Some of the characters in this book have their minds focused on learning and amassing information, which actually showed me that I don’t have to revolve around the lives of other people. Instead, these characters have taught me to pay attention to government, morals, and most importantly, ideas. Indirectly, Inheritance is the reason that lately I have become politically obsessed. For example, the main character, Eragon, spends a large amount of time learning about the inner workings of the opposing government, and why they are wrong. Often times he would turn to intellectuals when he did not know the answer. In this way, he has taught me to enjoy the exchange of ideas, and listen to what the experts have to say on topics.

Morgan F.  
The book 1984 (Orwell, 1950) challenged my views on society, our current government, and cultural norms, making me wonder how our societal advancements can be compared and contrasted with the society depicted in 1984. It also made me think about how important language is in understanding and talking about ideas. This is because Big Brother is controlling most of the language used in news and politics, which is slowly leaking into everyday speech. This “Newspeak,” a language made out of words smashed together with no creativity and very rigid definitions, makes it hard to talk about ideas that Big Brother does not wish you to talk about.

In comparison, To Kill a Mockingbird (Lee, 1960) made me think about how we are so quick to distance ourselves from the past, but the past is closer to us than we imagine, and we need to stop and reflect on the progress that we’ve made, but even more, on the progress still yet to be done.

Charlotte C.  
Out of all of the books I’ve read this year, a few stood out, maybe because they opened my eyes to a new topic or maybe because the plot was simply so good. I began Milk and Honey by Rupi Kaur (2015) in the summer before eighth grade, and I finished it in two days. It’s a journal filled with poetry and prose about growth and life. There’s almost no filter on the writing, so it’s raw and relatable. This book showed me a new way to look upon myself, to understand that I deserve respect from people and to not be ashamed of myself as a female.

The second book is the sequel to Milk and Honey, which is The Sun and Her Flowers (Kaur, 2017). Milk and Honey is mostly about heartbreak and trying to deal with it, while the sequel shows the reader how to move on and to learn to survive on your own. This book showed me I can grow and flourish by myself, and although it is not easy, it is accomplishable.

Sold by Patricia McCormick (2006) tells the story of a girl from Nepal named Lakshmi, who is sold into sexual slavery in India. This book is heartbreaking—it made me cry in the middle of LA class. Lakshmi is thirteen years old and has her dream life set in front of her. Things quickly turn when she is sold into sexual slavery. She is raped, drugged, abused, and alone. This book tore me apart because it was simply so sad and made me realize how much I take for granted in my life.

Alessia G.  
In the beginning of the year, I didn’t read very much because I couldn’t find any books that I liked and I was just lazy. As the year progressed, I read some good books: Moloka’I by Alan Brennert (2003), First & Then by Emma Mills (2015), and Flipped by Wendelin Van Draanen (2001). These books made me want to read more, encouraged me to read, showed me there is a book for everyone in the world, and proved to me that I can like reading.

Andy C.  
Rush for the Gold (2012) really showed me the bad side of being a sports star. I believed everything (about being...
a star) was amazing and happy, but now I realize it’s a business. It’s not fair, as well. Usually we never hear about the agents. I figured any decisions came from the players, but clearly agents have quite the impact. In the future, I hope I remember that everything has a business side that isn’t as nice as we think it is.

Libby V.
*The Princess Bride* (Goldman, 1973) taught me that if you love something, you have to take risks for it; it won’t always be easy but you have to push yourself. Before reading this book I always looked for short and easy books. When my book club partner wanted us to read this book together, I was terrified. I had never read a book this long in such a short amount of time. As the book went by, I realized I could never seem to be able to put the book down. I was reading in every spare minute I had. Challenge can be enjoyable.

*Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) taught me how important teamwork was. Katniss and Peeta worked together by taking risks for each other to survive. They showed me that nothing will change if you don’t accept the challenge put in front of you and work together to solve it. As a writer, I realized I need to add action to my writing. To let loose as a writer. Not to fear the action. I take risks with my writing now.

*Perfect* taught me so much about myself as a person. As a teenager, self-confidence issues can be quite the struggle, especially in a public school where so many students can be judge-y. In this book, all of the characters struggled with the thought of being perfect, wanted, and loved. I saw a shift in my own thinking and writing after reading this book. It made me feel like I can continue to explore new opportunities as a reader and writer. My writing has definitely become more emotional and in-depth since reading this book.

Hannah K.
I want to read more interesting books that make me think more about myself as a person. If a book is not interesting, I need to put it down and try a different one.

Gianna C.
One of my goals is to be able to think and relate deeply to a book that I read and enjoy. To accomplish this, I can do more reading responses. I think that if I take the time to respond to what I’ve just read, it’ll help me figure out what the book means to me.

What the book means to me! This is what I hope all of my eighth graders are learning to do as readers. It is a not-so-novel approach to reading.

### Students Recommend

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>All the Light We Cannot See</em></td>
<td>Anthony Doerr</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Scribner</td>
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<td><em>The Boy in the Striped Pajamas</em></td>
<td>John Boyne</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Random House</td>
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<td><em>Butter</em></td>
<td>Erin Jade Lange</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Bloomsbury Children’s Books</td>
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<td><em>Code of Honor</em></td>
<td>Alan Gratz</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Scholastic</td>
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<td><em>Everything, Everything</em></td>
<td>Nicola Yoon</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Random House</td>
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<td><em>The Girl Who Drank the Moon</em></td>
<td>Kelly Barnhill</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Algonquin Books</td>
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<td><em>If I Stay</em></td>
<td>Gayle Forman</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Dutton Books</td>
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<td><em>Me and Earl and the Dying Girl</em></td>
<td>Jesse Andrews</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>ABRAMS/Amulet</td>
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<td><em>Prisoner B-3087</em></td>
<td>Alan Gratz</td>
<td>2018</td>
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<td><em>Projekt 1066</em></td>
<td>Alan Gratz</td>
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<td><em>Refugee</em></td>
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<td><em>The Running Dream</em></td>
<td>Wendelin Van Draanen</td>
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<td><em>The Soul of an Octopus</em></td>
<td>Sy Montgomery</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>ATRIA Paperback</td>
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<td><em>Speak</em></td>
<td>Laurie Halse Anderson</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Farrar Straus Giroux</td>
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<td><em>The Tragedy Paper</em></td>
<td>Elizabeth Laban</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Random House</td>
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### References


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2018 NCTE Linda Rief Voices from the Middle Award

Congratulations to **Shelly K. Durham** from Central Junior High in Moore, Oklahoma, for her article "Some Things a Poet Does: Sharing the Process," from Vol. 25, No. 2, December 2017, selected to receive the 2018 NCTE Linda Rief Voices from the Middle Award.

"We Must Write Together" from Vol. 25, No. 2, December 2017, by Peter Anderson, Arlington, Virginia, and Kaitlyn Kraushaar, St. Louis, Missouri, received honorable mention.

The award recognizes outstanding *Voices from the Middle* articles written by classroom teachers or literacy coaches.

The award is named in recognition of Linda Rief, esteemed middle level educator, long-standing member of and leader within the Middle Level Section, and one of the original editors of *Voices from the Middle*.

The award presentation took place at the Middle Level Luncheon during the 2018 NCTE Annual Convention in Houston, Texas. Learn more about these award winners at http://www2.ncte.org/awards/journal-article-awards/linda-rief-voices-from-the-middle-award/.