Chapter 2

Kittle, P. Book Love © 2013

Understanding Readers and Reading

Why Students Won't Read What We Assign

It's the end of the semester, so I've been interviewing my students all week. I began these interviews years ago in response to my principal's challenge to make listening to students one of our all-school goals. In the face of our increasing dropout rate and low SAT scores, he said we should listen to our students more. It made good sense, but it was a courageous move. Some of my colleagues ignored this goal. They were busy people, too busy. Some risked learning about their own teaching through the eyes of their greatest critics. I decided to ask questions that were nagging at me about teenage reading habits and videotape my students' answers. Seven years later, I am still filming—and still getting the same answers.

On Friday I sat beside Ryan. A determined nonreader, he told me honestly that before he entered my class as a senior, he hadn't read a book since fifth grade. He didn't read the books assigned in English class. He laughed at the suggestion that *anyone* reads those books. He didn't know a single person in College Prep English who actually read *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Lord of the Flies*. Those books not only did not entice him to read, they convinced him reading was not for him. Throughout middle and high school whenever his teachers assigned a report on a book of his choice (a common technique to highlight the importance of pleasure reading) he used the same report on *Wringer*, which he had read in fifth grade.

"Did you ever try to read those books assigned to you?" I asked—a new question for me. In the past few years as student after student catalogued his (and her) nonreading habits, I accepted that the books just didn't interest them and they didn't bother reading because pretending to read is so easy. I wondered if students were just lazy or rebellious. Those are adjectives too often used in the staff room to describe

today's teenagers, but they do not represent my experience with students, so I pressed farther. My students are anything but lazy readers. They exceed their individual reading goals more often than not, which means they read well beyond two hours outside school week after week. And not just some of my students, almost all of them.

I asked Ryan, "Did you ever try to read the assigned books?" And he and every student I asked said yes. Yes, but only a page or two; yes, but after the first two chapters I figured, why bother? Ryan's answer was revealing. "I tried like the first two chapters, but the next night it would be two or three more, and then two or three more, but it was taking me so long to read and it wasn't getting any better and I was getting farther behind so I just figured why bother? I wasn't understanding any of it anyway." Clearly, he was outmatched by the text.

There is a bidirectional relationship between will and skill, as established in a study by Morgan and Fuchs (2007): "As argued by Spear-Swerling and Sternberg (1994), 'Once children have entered the "swamp" of negative expectations, lowered motivation, and limited practice, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to get back on the road of proficient reading'" (178). Ryan's willingness to read is impacted by his skill level, and his skills, of course, are impacted by his willingness to work on them. These foundations of independent reading are critical to understanding why teenagers have stopped reading in high school.

Frustration undermines the will to read. Ryan did not have the skill to comprehend his reading, so he lost the will to try. Because he won't try, his skills will stagnate. *Ryan isn't trying hard enough*, you might say, but I would add, *and he's in a text that isn't helping him.* As Dick Allington (2009) has said, "In order to read fluently, all readers need texts that they can read with a high degree of accuracy and automaticity. When readers are provided with texts that are too difficult, fluent reading is impossible" (26). If Ryan reads page after page and ends with no understanding, we need to build his capacity as a reader in texts he *can* understand.

Reading Hurdles: Vocabulary, Context, Sentence Length

Accuracy impacts comprehension. Allington suggests that a 98–99 percent accuracy rate is appropriate during independent reading (27)—one or two errors out of a hundred words read. A novel has between two hundred and three hundred words on every page, so even stumbling over five or six words per page, a student could still keep reading without confusion. Once a student is tangled in a text, however, frustration impedes understanding and cripples the will to read. As Allington suggests, "If I were to design a program that would foster dysfluent reading, I would create lessons where readers were given a steady diet of too-difficult texts, texts they cannot read

accurately" (34). We need to remember this as we consider increasing complexity in texts. Students need to build stamina for those texts through their independent reading.

I decided to rate the fluency of one page of *Crime and Punishment* (see Figure 2.1) after a frustrated student abandoned it. Renaissance Learning (2012) ranks the reading level of this novel as grade 8.7, but I noticed as I read that the sentences were sometimes so long I felt I was working my way through a labyrinth. Long sentences require a reader to keep a great deal of information in her head and see how clauses relate to the main idea. I kept track of sentence length because I sensed how it would trip up my students. I also underlined words or phrases most of my students wouldn't recognize, knowing it slows readers down and often requires rereading. I then rated the fluency of a page from a book currently popular in my classroom, *The Other Wes Moore* (see Figure 2.2). Both have merits as texts, but *Wes Moore* has a waiting list and *Crime* gathers dust. Jacob had been the first student in years to pull *Crime and Punishment* off the shelf by choice. Which would you more likely read?

Figure 2.1 Crime and Punishment *page*

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from the day he had moved in with him; yet at the same time he seemed a little apprehensive of him. On arriving in St Petersburg he had put up at his lodgings not merely out of stingy thrift – though that had probably been his main motive – there had been another motive, too. Back in the provinces he had heard of Andrei Semyonovich, his former pupil, as one of the foremost young progressives, who even played a significant role in certain curious and legendary circles. Pyotr Petrovich had been struck by this. For these powerful, omniscient circles with their contempt for everyone and accusations against all and sundry had long inspired Pyotr Petrovich with a peculiar, though wholly vague, sense of terror. It went without saying that, back there in the provinces, he had been unable to form even an approximate conception of *what it was all about*. He had heard, like everyone else, that particularly in St Petersburg there were to be found progressives, nihilists, public accusers, and so on, and so forth, but, like many people, he tended to exaggerate and distort the sense and significance of these labels to the point of the absurd. For several years now he had feared more than anything else being made the victim of a *public accusation*, and this was the principal reason for his constant, exaggerated sense of anxiety, especially when he had dreamt of moving his practice to St Petersburg. In this respect he was, as they say, 'affrit', in the way small children sometimes are. Some years earlier, in the provinces, when he had only just been beginning to organize his career, he had encountered two cases involving the merciless public accusation and exposure of rather important persons in local government to whom he had been attached and who had afforded him official protection. One of these cases had ended in a particularly scandalous manner for the man who had been accused, and the other had very nearly ended in outright disaster. This was why Pyotr Petrovich had made it his object to discover, as soon as he arrived in St Petersburg, 'what it was all about' and, if necessary, to get ahead of the game and curry favour with 'our younger generations'. In this matter he had placed his reliance upon Andrei Semyonovich and had, for his visit to Raskolnikov, for example, already learned how to roll off certain phrases parrot-fashion . . .

Figure 2.2 The Other Wes Moore *page*

Introduction

This is the story of two boys living in Baltimore with similar histories and an identical name: Wes Moore. One of us is free and has experienced things that he never even knew to dream about as a kid. The other will spend every day until his death behind bars for an armed robbery that left a police officer and father of five dead. The chilling truth is that his story could have been mine. The tragedy is that my story could have been his. Our stories are obviously specific to our two lives, but I hope they will illuminate the crucial inflection points in every life, the sudden moments of decision where our paths diverge and our fates are sealed. It's unsettling to know how little separates each of us from another life altogether.

In late 2000, the *Baltimore Sun* published a short article with the headline "Local Graduate Named Rhodes Scholar." It was about me. As a senior at Johns Hopkins University, I received one of the most prestigious academic awards for students in the world. That fall I was moving to England to attend Oxford University on a full scholarship.

But that story had less of an impact on me than another series of articles in the *Sun*, about an incident that happened just months before, a precisely planned jewelry store robbery gone terribly wrong. The store's security guard—an off-duty police officer named Bruce Prothero—was shot and killed after he pursued the armed men into

I am not making the argument here that one text is better than the other. I am simply saying that one is more likely to be read accurately (independently) than the other. Yes, I can walk Jacob through *Crime and Punishment* page by page and help him understand. In fact, we teachers work hard to summarize and explain a text this challenging. However, our students need to gain facility as independent readers, and without accuracy this just isn't likely. We have to commit to helping students choose texts they can navigate alone, then teach the skills needed to unravel more difficult texts in class, so that their skills increase while they experience the pleasure of reading. When skills and pleasure align, students begin to choose more difficult texts to read independently.

A key factor with this student and this text was Jacob's stamina. When he came to me as a senior he had been fake-reading for years. He found books he liked early in the year and then jumped to *Crime and Punishment* that winter. He worked hard to read it, but finally, after nearly four hundred pages, abandoned it in frustration. Had he been actively working on stamina in the years prior to entering my classroom, I believe he would have finished the book.

This semester I have a junior who has also been a fake reader. Justin has a thin, uninspired history of reading. It's just "not his thing." He found a few books he'd enjoyed in the past and reread them at the start of our time together but often found excuses for not reading regularly. I listened and nudged and when I challenged the whole class to find a "reach" book at the start of fourth quarter, he chose *The Fountainhead*. I asked why. He said it was the fattest book on the shelf in the hardest section: classics. I thought it a wrong choice, but he began it. And kept going. He finished it in seven days. We discussed it for a long while. I have to admit, I kept probing because I wondered if he *had* read it. This seems silly in retrospect. He had no trouble telling me he wasn't a reader, wasn't interested in reading, and he was fine with this identity early in the semester. Why would he lie now? He was eager to talk about the book, and although I never liked it, I remembered enough as I thumbed through it while we talked to engage him. He did most of the talking. He even said, "I know you didn't think I would read it." We teachers are so easy to read.

When I asked Justin what he would read next, he said, "Oh, *The Fountainhead* ought to count for the next month or so." I laughed; he was serious. I needed a good match to entice him to keep reading. I pulled *Townie*, by Andre Dubus III, off the shelf. I've given it to four men I know who are readers and each has confirmed its power. I was absolutely captivated by it. It's a memoir of a young boy in Boston trying to fight his way through life. It's brutal. It's beautiful. Yesterday Justin was a hundred pages in. I said, "Oh, so you're reading it?" He said, "You suggested it, so I am." Both of the books he's chosen this month are huge leaps in complexity and language, and he is increasing his stamina as a reader. However, the language of both

is accessible, so I believe his enjoyment is more likely and thus his willingness to keep trying. We can and must give students rich experiences with literature, but we also must pay attention to how texts can discourage them.

It's no secret that many students read thousands of text messages a month and chat online. These forms value brevity. We are all being changed by tweets and increasingly brief emails in which succinct language and efficiency rule. I happened on the 2010 National Book Critics Circle Award winner, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, by Jennifer Egan, and was intrigued by a chapter narrated by a twelve-year-old who writes in a form she calls a slide journal. It's a chapter of startling creativity with just a few words per page, but the format and the voice lead you in. I felt I was reading a character's private messages—just right for the voice of a teenager in a book that has a different narrator for each chapter.

Good writing exists in any form, of course, and those forms they are a-changin', as Bob Dylan would say. What I seek is access to any text form. When a student won't read, I look at the vocabulary, the context of the book, and the sentence length to see whether the text is a mismatch for the student's current skills. If I'm going to improve reading, students must practice reading skills in a text better matched to their ability and then continue to encounter more challenging texts as they increase volume and stamina.

We teach students first, then curriculum. It is not going to be easy to lead all our students to literature. But we can't give up, either.

How Many Nonreaders Are Out There?

This is how most people live:
sleeping on the bank of a fresh-water stream, lips dry with thirst.

—Rumi

Now that I'm asking the question, I've discovered that most teachers know many students aren't reading. I've asked groups of teachers in nearly every state and almost all the Canadian provinces. I get similar answers. Teachers tell me they think about 20 percent or fewer of their students actually read the literature assigned. Some books reach more students, but over the course of the year, how many of your students read regularly?

Teachers still teach books they know most kids won't read; they do it because they feel pressured by their curriculum. They pace the reading so it's not overwhelming for those who struggle, but they know they are selling the best readers short by moving so slowly. These are troubling adaptations in classrooms of mixed abilities in a high-pressure, never-enough-time age. Yet if you teach English in middle or high school, you've probably faced this dilemma. What to do?

First of all, we have to quit pretending that nonreading is somehow not our responsibility. As Kelly Gallagher says in *Readicide* (2009), "Never lose sight that our highest priority is to raise students who become lifelong readers. What our students read in school is important; what they read the rest of their lives is more important" (117). We are expected to create lifelong readers. I believe it is our most important goal. But when my beliefs do not align with my practices, I lose the energy to teach.

Bear with me for one last example of the complexity of this problem. Zach is in my twelfth-grade class and all my efforts to engage him with books are failing. He tells me he's never seen a movie in his mind when he reads. And this kid loves movies. He tells me that if he could see what he's reading, he'd read. He never has. Reading to him is a dull, monotonous voice—just words on the page. It is hard for him to listen well—or care. He stopped trying to read early in elementary school. He's had lots of interventions, but he never—ever—found a book he wanted to read. I can't believe anyone thinks *Julius Caesar* is the next best choice for him.

What's engaged reading for him? *National Geographic*. He likes the combination of pictures and text. And he chooses which articles to read and which to skip. Over the last month he's read seven pages in a novel he's chosen to read in my class. He's read almost all of several *National Geographic* magazines.

I believe books matter. I believe it is important to help Zach find a book that will lead him to sustained engagement with an idea or story over hundreds of pages, deepening his thinking. This prepares him for the sustained thinking in texts he'll encounter as an adult. But I bide my time. I let him find pleasure in reading *something* before I push for a longer text. That's the art of this work. Teaching reading will never be a script of simple steps at the end of which all readers become proficient. Teaching is far more complex than any publisher or program can imagine. But teaching is the only way to improve readers.

Everything I Needed to Know I Learned on My Guitar

Paul broke free from our father's instruction into a rhythm all his own.

—*Norman Maclean,* A River Runs Through It

I crave distractions when I'm struggling to revise. Last week I stopped trying to make a draft work and reached behind me for my son's guitar. My Fender, my first guitar, still has a beautiful sound, but the one that sits in my office now is Cam's. It is smaller, all black, and it fits my body better. I can change chords with ease. The memory of rhythm comes back the moment it is cradled in my arms. I'm back on the porch of

our house on Belmont Street. The trees move in the wind. The sky is blue, fading to dusk. I swagger to the edge of the porch like I'm on stage—imagine Joan Jett in black leather. I call to the squirrels and raccoons that roam the border of our yard, "Thank you for being here tonight." I play my first chords to the sky and sink into sound. The tension of being fifteen eases. I play for hours.

Even today I feel the effortlessness I experienced as a teenager during the thousands of hours I spent listening, tuning, and practicing on the back porch. I open the music for "I'd Rather Be with You," by Joshua Radin, a current favorite, and imagine playing alongside my son. I love the way strings lead that song.

In the years when I played my guitar every day I relaxed into rhythm. I learned to move before the stroke, to feel where the guitar players I listened to were headed. I studied classical guitar in college, and when I made the leap to reading music, I played with an attention to each note, a focus that led me to hear all music differently. I didn't know what I didn't know before then.

It's a good thing I have a high tolerance for approximation, though, because today my fingertips have lost their calluses, I stumble through chords that used to be simple, and I tire easily. The guitar has to be tuned almost every time I play because it sits too long unused and I have no tolerance for discord. But I've missed playing. What brought me back? It was the memory of beauty. I once could play, and I loved it.

Practice, of course, is most important. Anything we learn to do well follows the arc from stumbling to competence to confidence to stretching toward what feels impossible. You've heard of Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hours rule: the key to success in any field has little to do with talent, it's simply practice, 10,000 hours of it—twenty hours a week for ten years (Grossman 2008).

Volume matters.

I learned with my guitar that even if you leave a skill you once knew well, years later you retain the memory of rhythm thrumming somewhere inside you. I can tune to it and find my way. When my approximations start getting closer, I enjoy playing more. I start reaching for the guitar every afternoon, even for just ten minutes a day. I play to what I can't do yet but know will come.

What I want, though, is to reach behind my desk and just play like I used to. I want to blast along with Mumford & Sons' "Winter Winds" without the months it would take for me to approach even a tolerable imitation. And I know where that comes from: I play air guitar in my car much too often. Air guitar makes me feel I know how to play: pretend competence. The real thing is infinitely harder, of course—and infinitely more satisfying.

Too many people in power think reading is the sum of its parts, so we've got all these kids playing air guitar, if you will, with short passages and questions and multiple-choice answers. These abbreviated bits of reading are not the real thing.

Passages lack wholeness and feel like work without purpose. When we then give students books, thinking they can transfer their practice or that they'll even want to, we're surprised they don't have the interest or the stamina for it.

No one cares whether I can play a G chord. They want to hear a song. When I practiced chords the summer I first picked up a guitar, I always practiced them in songs. No kid should be mindlessly, endlessly practicing parts. They need to be reading books: books that move them, books that they follow and learn the rhythm of. And they need time to reread, because they'll know more when they do. Rereading is like playing the same song over and over, not only because I crave its familiarity but because I see and hear more the more carefully I listen. And the better I get at anticipating where the song is going, the more I can begin to put the parts together that help me know the whole of it.

Rhythm is about listening and "feel" and then finally creation. When you master imitation, you're ready to move your work beyond what you hear in others' to what you hear in your own. That's all of it, I think. That's writing and reading and thinking with words, isn't it? When you read well, you hear how the parts work together. Once you can do that, you can create writing from parts to a whole you couldn't imagine before.

My wish is for students to break free from instruction in parts to the beauty of literature found in a rhythm of their own, one that feels what I cannot, one that finds connections and discovers authors and works I've never heard of. I want students who tune the words they find to who they are. This will come only with practicing the whole of reading, writing, and listening to words.

The Volume of Reading in English Class

Teenagers must read more; I believe all English teachers would agree. The best fiction and literary nonfiction electrifies. Students must know the potency of great writing, and there is so much of it. I am relocated from my small New Hampshire town to a pickup truck racing across Oklahoma as dust blackens the horizon in Timothy Egan's *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl*. There are journal entries here, I tell my students, that take you inside the life, the fear, and the courage of that time. I can agonize alongside a young girl anticipating an arranged marriage in *The Bookseller of Kabul*, trying to understand a culture so unlike my own. Literature reshapes my ordinary life into high adventure. I climb Mt. Everest in a blizzard in Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*. I panic in the uncertainty of a tsunami in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* and suddenly have to know more about all the lives swept away in 2004. One moment

in one book leads me to weeks of reading newspaper articles, following a trail of stories. I look at a library and see gifts. There are simply so many astonishing stories to share. Why aren't our students reading them?

Here's one reason: English class has been dominated for decades by a few titles carefully parceled out chapter by chapter, year by year. We hold the keys to a library of increasing size and depth, but we steer kids to a small collection of titles and say, "These are the best, and we're going to study them thoroughly. We'll spend weeks on each one because in high school we study literature, we don't read and enjoy books. If you're interested in those other books, you can read those on your own time." Too many students are left with an abridged view of an expansive field, as if four or six or ten novels are enough reading for anyone in a school year, let alone developing readers we are trying to prepare for the increasing literacy demands of a modern world.

Students need guidance to choose well and develop sustained independent engagement. Many teachers don't know the great literature that is written just for teenagers, so they suggest more classics, which narrows the likelihood of additional reading to the students who already read. Our disinterested and struggling readers don't know how to choose books that match their passions and abilities, and without attention, they drift along without reading, or when pressed, they choose what's popular, not what's truly terrific writing. Popular fiction can entertain, but it rarely leaves students stunned by insight or transfixed by the resiliency of humanity. Literature is more than action and characters, and my mission is for every student to own this distinction.

What I am proposing in this book runs parallel to the accepted structure of English class. The study of literature is half the job; leading students to satisfying and challenging reading lives is the other, and we haven't paid enough attention to it. Studying literature often requires students to examine books they are unprepared to read, fails to give students enough practice in sustained reading, and often fails to develop a love of books. Although we may pass on a bit of cultural knowledge, reading classics rarely helps most students develop the commitment, stamina, and pleasure in reading that will last. We need a system for matching kids to books they'll love and monitoring their use of strategies that deepen comprehension, and we need teachers who will nudge them to increase the complexity of their reading over time.

It feels radical to suggest we look at individual students instead of groups in a time when the Common Core Initiative is driving thinking in education, but a reading appetite is quirky, singular, and essential. At the core of what I know about students, teaching, and learning is passionate engagement. Passions are peculiar, but passions drive readers to devour books.

Developing Stamina for College and Beyond

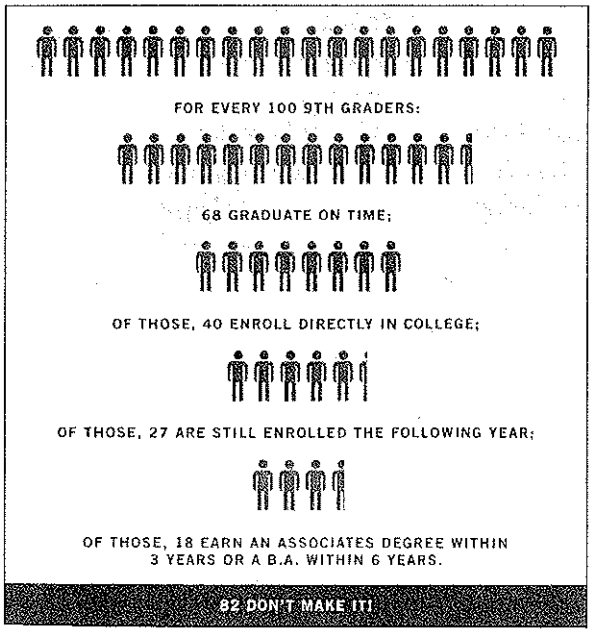
This book began by chance. I ran into a former middle school student of mine while getting coffee one morning on my way to school. I said, "Hey—what are you doing home? Didn't you go to UNH last year?"

He smirked. "Yeah, I didn't do that well. It was a lot of work, Mrs. Kittle. A lot of reading." I nodded. "Yeah, well, after I left your class I never read much in high school." Matt's admission stayed with me all that day. I kept thinking that his one year of college (and the nearly $20K in debt that came with it) wasn't going to help him meet any of his aspirations. It was almost worse than never going at all. This bright, capable young man should have succeeded. What had happened?

I emailed four professor friends that night and asked a simple question: *How much does a freshman in college need to read to keep up?* I also asked, *Is there any particular book that you hope all high school students will read before they come to college?*

The long responses (especially from Tom Newkirk at the University of New Hampshire and my brother-in-law Peter Kittle from Chico State University) sent me on a journey. I remember Tom's distinctly. He said he didn't care whether all students read any particular book, only that they read a lot so they would have a variety of experiences to draw on and the ability to handle the volume of reading expected in college. Peter said if students were readers, they were prepared. I started emailing professors I'd never heard of on campuses all over the United States and Canada. Many never responded, but those who did stressed volume. I got a wide range of answers, but 200–600 pages a week was common. I knew most of my students were not prepared for this.

Figure 2.3 *Portrait of a Failing System*



I continue to ask former students how much reading they are doing in college. Henny, currently enrolled at Harvard, said he is assigned 400 pages a week for one class. My daughter, now entering her senior year at Providence College, has had 600 pages a week assigned each week for the last three years. I consistently hear 100–600 pages a week from current college students.

The National Center on Education and the Economy's *Tough Choices or Tough Times* (2007) includes the graph in Figure 2.3. I wonder about the large number of students who do not return to college sophomore year. Economics is a factor, to be sure, but could it also be about reading?

In a book titled *Crossing the Finish Line*, the authors, William Bowen, president of Princeton for eighteen years, and Michael McPherson, former Macalaster College president, studied 200,000 students at 68 colleges. They found that only 33 percent of the freshmen who enter the University of Massachusetts, Boston, graduate within six years. Less than 41 percent graduate from the University of Montana, and 44 percent from the University of New Mexico. It seems obvious to me. If students like Matt enter college as practiced nonreaders, they will likely become part of the large number of students who will not finish. Something has to change in high school to prepare kids better.

It can be hard to discuss this idea with colleagues. I find teachers stridently defend one focus for our teaching or the other in polarizing discussions. Curriculum is presented as either "a rigorous study of the classics" or "free reading of what's easy." There seems little room for complexity in thinking about the balance and about volume. I am suggesting that teaching English can't be one or the other; it has to be both.

Finding Lessons for Life

Most of the literature we study in high school was written by adults for adults, and they're good books—some are great books—but they're just not interesting to almost all teenagers. The casualty of disinterest is not reading. You know it. I know it. Adolescents will use a shortcut like SparkNotes to fake it through class when they don't value the work. Some teachers devise difficult or tricky quizzes ("I only quiz them on the details not listed on SparkNotes," one teacher boasted) to catch the nonreaders and punish them. These quizzes often breed resentment, even from compliant readers. "I did the reading," one tenth-grade honors student shouted at me in the hall, "but he asked these four stupid questions I didn't remember and I got a 50 on the quiz! It's not right!" Forest's teacher assured him there would be lots of quizzes and the lowest grade would be dropped, but for Forest this wasn't worry, it was fury. "Why is school this game?" he challenged me one afternoon. Forest had been a greedy reader in my ninth-grade class, finishing thirty-eight books, but now his rich and varied reading life had been reduced to six books—six!—in sophomore year. Four of those books were "mediocre at best," he said. "Everything is so slow"—I remember the way he glanced up at the clock as he tossed a lacrosse stick back and forth—"the hands stop in English class." His teacher did not expect him to read more than that, so he read little. Eventually he used SparkNotes to pass the quizzes and skipped the reading altogether.

We need students who evaluate online claims and become critical thinkers of an ever expanding array of texts. We need to measure comprehension and give students tools to understand difficult texts, but they also need sustained engagement with

stories through hundreds of pages of text. Why story? Because, as Dennis Dutton details in *The Art Instinct*, "imagination allows the weighing of indirect evidence, making chains of inference for what might have been or what might come to be. It allows for intellectual simulation and forecasting, the working out of solutions to problems without high-cost experimentation in actual practice" (2009, 105). Students must read literature that names what they themselves struggle to understand. This semester Kyle is reading about the cataclysmic progression of drug abuse and Jonah is reading his third novel about sexual identity. They are finding answers in young adult literature to their own questions. I can't help but remember my own impulsivity as a high school freshman. Had I been reading a book like *She's Got Next* I might have stayed with basketball instead of swapping it for cheerleading. When we enter the sound and images of a story—led by a writer's vision and voice—we live within a blend of our own experiences and those in the book. The novels in my freshman English class were all about adults with adult problems, not kids like me, so I couldn't experiment with solutions through fiction.

Life lessons live in fiction. Reading a book takes us inside a time, a place, or an idea. Show me the grime on the streets of London and let me watch as skeletal children dash after the coal cart in rags in Charles Dickens' *The Tale of Two Cities*. As Dickens reaches deeper into the images, feelings, and sounds of that time, he makes room for ideas: hunger, children, want, excess, waste. When I walk for a few hours beside such brutality, how can I escape being changed by it? I look up from Dickens' words to my living room and see differently—want to live differently perhaps.

This is what books can do, but only if the reader is deeply engaged with the text. It is through the complexity of the story that we can be changed, as Dutton (2009) says, because it provides "a useful set of templates and examples to guide and inspire human action" (111). What we deeply desire for students to know—that art imitates life—their life—can be lost to them. They will solve their life problems through talk, through high-risk experimentation, perhaps, but not through books.

Imagine how this plays out into decisions in our democratic society. Why do so many embrace abbreviated news coverage instead of the in-depth world news in *The New York Times*? Why listen to the thirty-second sound-bite instead of reading the intricacies of a local school budget? We want to understand the choices before us, but have we replaced reading with television to fulfill this instinct? I confess I've never watched more than a few minutes of one of the many *Real Housewives* shows, but surely they represent the fantasy of having limitless funds for beautiful clothes and age-defying cosmetic surgeries. Viewers can watch and judge, imagining their own better choices perhaps, but I would prefer they read *Anna Karenina* when faced with the seduction of a man who seems to offer what is missing in a marriage. Not only because they can live out the cost of following selfish desire without actually

experiencing it and damaging so many innocents, but because of Levin and Kitty, the other story arc in this complex novel, who open up possibility for a life of faith and commitment. And the novel transcends both stories to teach a slice of Russian experience and history seen through the mind of an author in love with words and beautifully constructed sentences. You might laugh at the idea that the average *Real Housewives* viewer might choose Tolstoy, but this is my point. Why are we creating only a very few readers in high school who might choose Tolstoy? I want more of them. Voluminous, voracious readers are our only hope.

I believe Brycen, an eighth grader who has read *War*, *The Good Soldiers*, *Sniper*, *Lost in Kandahar*, and *Task Force Black* this year, could make a more informed decision about the American occupation of Iraq now than most adults who have the power to do so. If he had not been allowed to read those books, had been given only the texts that illustrate the complexity band for grades 6–8 in the Common Core State Standards (a list of literary and informational texts published between 1869 and 1976), he would have missed the blend of informational texts and literature that has become a passion for him. He would also have missed his life as a reader that he now sees evolving with endless possibilities.

Every student needs to know the power of a reading life. Dickens simply won't matter to most twenty-first-century teenagers unless they have developed a love of books first—a trust that even the most difficult ones can be worthwhile. We can and must develop that trust every year in school.

The amount of reading students do matters. To be engaged with the deep reading of literature, you first have to be comfortable with words, lots of them over hundreds of pages. Our students need to read dozens and dozens of books a year. Not all these books will be classic literature, but some will be. I know they'll read more literature in high school with this approach than if we stick to the few books a year we have in place now. As my friend Timothy Pruzinski, an International Baccalaureate (IB) teacher at the International School Bangkok and IB teacher trainer told me, "At the most, in higher-level literature, the IB requires students to read 13 texts over two years. My breakdown is four plays, two novels, two anthologies of short stories, one graphic novel, one poet and one survey of poetry, one book of creative nonfiction, as well as one survey of essays. Other teachers will have a different assortment of texts, but the reality is that students will read on average 6.5 texts a year." Tim realizes this is simply not enough reading and has added a focus on building the reading lives of his students, but he is rare. We all must aim higher. Let's start with at least twenty-five books a year, grades 6–12, so that all students reach for a goal of 175–200 books in adolescence. Many will read many more. Some of those books will be read slowly over time with a teacher, but others will be read at the student's own rate for interest and joy. This is possible.