



Reading for Themselves

Deborah Appleman

How to Transform Adolescents
into Lifelong Readers Through
Out-of-Class Book Clubs

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FOREWORD

In this era of full disclosure, I have a heartfelt confession to make: I *really* like Deborah Appleman, and I *really* like her work, which in her case is one and the same thing. Her personality and her passion for literacy teaching infuse everything she does. Truly, she is one of the gems of the English education profession. In this foreword, I would like to introduce you both to Deborah and to this latest book of hers.

There are a lot of people who write about teaching. But very few of them actually push the profession in new directions. Deborah Appleman is one of these few. She helps us all to see what can be different for us and for our students when we have the courage and determination to move outside our comfort zones for the purpose of helping our students.

Throughout her career, Deborah has tackled some of the toughest and most intractable teaching issues. She has challenged and assisted us through her tenacious teaching, thoughtful writing, and stellar presentations to consider how to tackle issues of multiculturalism and diversity (see her 1991 book *Braided Lives*), how to use critical theories and lenses in the classroom (see *Critical Encounters in High School English* [2000]), and now, with this book, how to help students love literature. This is a particular problem in American schools: so many of our traditional practices actually undermine this goal and cause students to loathe instead of love literature, and to find it an onerous pursuit to be avoided in adult life. One of the most interesting findings of the recent NEA report *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (2004) is the description of how the rate of literary reading has fallen steadily over the last twenty years and has dropped most precipitously for the youngest populations. The three youngest groups studied represented a 28 percent decline in literary reading since the 1992 survey. The youngest group studied, ages eighteen through twenty-four, saw their literary reading decline at a rate 55 percent greater than that of the total adult population. *The implication? Kids coming out of school are less likely to be literary readers—or readers of any other kind of text—than ever before.* But teachers will not need the NEA report to confirm what they already know, viz. that many of our students fail to see

how literature can provide a unique and powerful way of knowing. The exploration in this wonderful book of how to meet this challenge is important and timely.

But this book does so much more than that: it helps us to consider how to engage students who are disaffected or unmotivated readers, how to create dialogue among students and among different school communities, and how to negotiate various intersections between school and home literacy, adolescence and adulthood, gendered ways of knowing and staking identity, and much more. One of the most interesting and edgy aspects of the book is its exploration of how to build bridges between urban and suburban adolescents by using contemporary literature to provide a site for discussion of issues of race, class, and culture. But most importantly, this book explores how to encourage students to embrace literacy as a meaningful, enjoyable, powerful, life-shaping, and lifelong pursuit.

All that being said, if I had to boil down the theme of this book to one statement, I would say that it is about the courage and creativity to challenge the status quo. Continual exploration and improvement, innovation and improvisation, the use of new approaches are habits of mind that should be the special province of teachers. But this turn of mind seems to be more and more discouraged by the current political climate and the stress on standardized test scores. In this way, I found the central challenge of Deborah's book to be both exigent and inspirational.

But let's return to the author of this impressive book. Deborah is truly unique in many ways. She is an extraordinary teacher and an inspired researcher. Her work is marked with the authority of teaching practice and with the insight of a careful and thoughtful classroom researcher. Deb is one of the few full professors I know who continually get into high school classrooms and work with students as a teacher or coteacher. This book will give the reader a taste of one flavor of the kind of work Deb does in schools.

As a teacher and researcher, Deb is innovative, reflective, and courageous. She is an inspiration who talks the talk *and* walks the walk. She shows us what it is like to surf on the crest of the future's breaking wave, to try innovative approaches, and how to adapt in wide-awake ways to the changing landscape of educating the adolescent.

This blend of being a teacher and thinking like a researcher gives Deborah a special place in the profession and a unique educational vision. It means that all her work is grounded in practice and the real problems of day-to-day teach-

ing. But it is also theoretically framed and situated, which means that the helpfulness of her work goes well beyond the particular practices and findings she describes. Deb always looks for possibilities and potentials, and that is one of the many strengths of this book. Though her findings call into question many traditional school practices, she offers many alternatives and ways to implement these alternatives both inside and outside of school. She tells why the Breakfast Book Club was such a success in ways that are explanatory and suggestive of a variety of other possible innovations.

Deborah Appleman is a dynamo. She has a unique and radiant energy that is obvious to all who know her. This positive energy of possibility is reflected in all of her work, including the book you hold in your hands now. Personally, she is kind, gracious, and a true friend to those lucky enough to be her friend. But more than that, she is a friend to English teachers everywhere. This book will give you another chance to renew or undertake that friendship with a truly greathearted educator and person.

—Jeffrey D. Wilhelm
Professor of English Education, Boise State University

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PROLOGUE



It's a bleak winter morning in the Midwest. The earth and the sky are exactly the same color: steel gray. It's zero hour, the time when nothing important could possibly happen in school.

In raggedy procession, bleary-eyed adolescents stumble into their English classroom. Personal artifacts are pinned to a billboard with squiggly cutout letters that claim, “We Are a Community of Readers.” A table in front of the room is littered with bags of bagels, cream cheese containers, and plastic knives. The students stumble to the bagel table, help themselves, and then sit at desks forming a misshapen circle. Each of them reaches into an impossibly huge backpack and pulls out a slender, unassuming volume, *The Tao of Pooh*. A quick glance around the room reveals there are two teacher-looking women in the room, but they are not doing much of anything except smiling broadly and nodding. One of the teacher-looking women says, “So, *The Tao of Pooh*?”

A very long pause follows. No teacher has wait time like this!

“OK, I’ll start,” says a voice beneath a backward baseball cap. He says something about being skeptical at first that the book would be babyish—after all, it’s about Winnie the Pooh, the silly little bear from childhood. But he thought the book was cool.

“What I thought was cool,” says a sixteen-year-old girl, “was that the book made me reexamine why I do anything. Why are we in school? What does it

matter? We always seem to be doing things for a future goal—like studying so we can get into a good college. What about right now, though? What about this moment when we are here together? Isn't the present important for its own sake?"

There is another pause. The teacher-looking women look down. The students look at each other.

"Katrina's got something there," says another boy. "In fact, this book made me think about my Western values and lifestyle in light of Taoism. Did that happen to anyone else?"

Heads nod, hands wave, pages turn.

The teacher-women smile silently, thrilled by the proof of their own irrelevance. Welcome to the Breakfast Book Club.