for my grandchildren
Andie, Ben, and Will

with great love
and
gratitude

for showing me
the world
through their eyes
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Acknowledgments

I must begin with a sincere thank-you to all the writers whose novels continue to inspire, nourish, and delight us. Educators have rich reading lives to share with their students because of the hard work and brilliance of so many novelists (as well as journalists, poets, playwrights, short story writers, and so on) whose work is stacked high on their night tables. It is my hope that teachers buy multiple copies of the novels noted in this book, form collegial reading groups, and spend hours together rejoicing in the fictional worlds created at the hands of these most talented writers.

Next, I’d like to thank all the friends, colleagues, and family members who emailed titles, clipped book reviews, and telephoned whenever they thought of yet another appropriate novel starring a young child. I am particularly grateful to Hindy List, Maureen Barbieri, and Andrea Lowenkopf, great readers, great teachers of reading, and great teachers of teachers, who seem to have read every great book before most of us have even heard of it. Then, too, I’d like to thank all the conference attendees who handed me titles on little scraps of paper at the end of a workshop. Know that I bought them all.

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To my son, Michael, and his wife, Alison, and to my daughter, J.J., and her husband, David, thank you all for your love, humor, brilliance, and support. And of course, thank you for entrusting me with your children. Being a full-time grandmother began a new chapter in my life, and I take great pride in being part of the lives of Ben Harwayne and Andie and Will Leitner. Young children bring hope to the world and remind educators everywhere that we must continue to close our classroom doors and do what is right for children.
Introduction

Two years ago, on a cross-country flight to Washington state, I filled the hours reading Jodi Picoult’s *My Sister’s Keeper*. The following day, when I arrived at a school in Seattle to talk to students about their writing, I opened the conversation by referring to the book. In fact, I read aloud an excerpt, suggesting to the fifth graders that if the main character, Anna, had been real, I think she would have been a great participant in the writing workshop. At one point in this compelling family story, Anna talks about the language of childhood. Picoult writes,

> When you are a kid you have your own language, and unlike French or Spanish or whatever you start learning in fourth grade, this one you’re born with, and eventually lose. Everyone under the age of seven is fluent in *Ifspeak*; go hang around with someone under three feet tall and you’ll see. What if a giant funnel-web spider crawled out of that hole over your head and bit you on the neck? What if the only antidote for venom was locked up in a vault on the top of a mountain? What if you lived through the bite, but could only move your eyelids and blink out an alphabet? It really doesn’t matter how far you go; the point is that it’s a world of possibility. Kids think with their brains cracked wide open; becoming an adult, I’ve decided, is only a slow sewing shut. (2004, 299)

This excerpt led to a lively conversation about young people’s penchant for “What if . . . ?” questions. (I was quick to point out that their own cracking open of possibilities need not contain venomous insects, violence, or trauma.) The room filled with students’ own “What if . . . ?” inquiries, and we talked about how some of them could lead to important topics for students’ future writing.
This experience of sharing excerpts from novels I had read with students came to be repeated dozens of times over the last two years. Of course, throughout my teaching career, I have always wanted to serve as a literacy mentor for students, letting them know that I read for pleasure outside of school. But this kind of sharing became more targeted, more purposeful, more connected to my assessed needs of the students as writers, not necessarily readers. In fact, that first experience in Seattle began a literary journey for me, one in which I became consciously obsessed with a particular kind of adult novel—the kind in which either the story is told from a young child’s point of view, or the author looks back on the grown character’s childhood, or the author richly details the experiences of the children who live in the novel.

I am referring here, not to coming-of-age stories, like the *Catcher in the Rye* variety, but mainly to stories that explore even younger children’s unique perspectives. Browsing my personal library, I was surprised to discover that I already owned many books that fit this category, although at the time I had not been deliberately collecting them. I then began asking friends, family members, and especially teaching colleagues about the books on their shelves, wondering if teachers are particularly attracted to novels that illuminate the world of the child. This will come as no surprise: they are.

When my first grandson was born, I enrolled in a course in infant CPR that offered suggestions for baby-proofing the child’s home. The nurse leading the class suggested we tour our homes on our knees in order to see the world through a toddler’s eyes. Teachers, too, need to see the world through their students’ eyes, no matter their height. Teachers want so desperately to understand the students in front of them, appreciating their individual ways of viewing the world, acknowledging the very special challenges and problems they face, and admiring their attempts to figure out how this planet and everything on it works.

Novels that focus on the child’s world remind us that children are not miniature adults. These novels push us to wonder, Do my students have similar thoughts, concerns, fears, attitudes, interests, pastimes, or quirky behaviors as the children I have come to know at the hands of such accomplished writers? Do I have a student like Katie (on page 12 in Elizabeth Berg’s *Durable Goods* [1993]), who tries to dig dimples into her own cheeks? Am I teaching a student like Lark (on page 56 in Faith Sullivan’s *The Cape Ann* [1988]), who, while wandering a drugstore, wonders what people do with trusses, sanitary napkins, and enema bags? Is it possible that my students are as curious about language as Evelyn is (on page 2 in Laura Moriarty’s *The
Introduction

*Center of Everything* (2003)? She questions the meaning of *Iron Curtain*, unable to imagine how a curtain can be made of metal.

Then, too, as more and more teachers face one-size-fits-all curriculum mandates and prepackaged units of study, these novels raise the question, What will be appropriate for my students? It is my hope that this book will remind us to approach each group of students with fresh eyes, getting to know them well as individuals and as a group, before we make decisions about which genres, conventions of print, author studies, research topics, or elements of craft to teach.

This book is a compilation of excerpts from some of my favorite novels, all incorporated into minilessons to be shared with young writers when the need arises. Sharing these passages with students can enrich the writing workshop in many ways. First, many students will respond with, “I have ideas like that! I didn’t know I could share those thoughts in writing workshop.” For other students, particularly those students who struggle with generating ideas for their writing, hearing these passages read aloud and being encouraged to respond to them will convince students that their own lives are worth writing about. When the writing workshop fills with rich and resonant conversations, students will appreciate that they each have important stories, ideas, experiences, and opinions to share. Above all, it is my hope that these passages will inspire students to be as curious, observant, and insightful as the children in these novels. If teachers are to have any rule in their writing workshops, let it be, “There is no indifference allowed. This room is a passivity-free zone!”

I have included brief introductory remarks for each lesson, merely as suggestions. Of course, my hope is that teachers will discover their own important reasons for sharing these passages, their own ways of powerfully introducing them, as well as their own stories to tell in response to them.

Or the passages can be used in a totally different way. These short passages can easily be turned into overhead projections or duplicated for distribution and marking up. Teachers can then lead class discussions on the quality of the writing, focusing in on different aspects of each author’s craft.

Additionally, it is my hope that teachers will be inspired to read the novels cited, perhaps using these titles for staff book clubs. These books are not appropriate reads for young children, but they will undoubtedly lead to rich adult conversations. In Jonathan Hull’s novel *Losing Julia* (2000), the main character, an elderly man, is saddened to see the popularity of self-help books that take center stage in most bookstores. He asks, “Doesn’t anyone realize that the best self-help books are in the
Introduction

literature section?” The wonderful writers quoted in this text did not create novels to enrich our writing workshops. They wrote them to enrich our lives.

It is just an added benefit that when we read for nourishment, pleasure, and to satisfy our own curiosities, along the way we sometimes discover gourmet treats that deserve to be shared with our students. In the reading list at the back of this book, I have placed an asterisk next to those books that are particularly studded with passages to share with young writers. Teachers will, no doubt, find in them additional appealing passages and be able to develop their own accompanying teaching points.

There is no better professional preparation for teachers of literacy than to carve out time to take care of their own reading alongside their own writing. Ultimately, my greatest hope is that teachers will use this text to enrich their writing workshops, as they enrich their own reading lives.
PART ONE

On Discovering Topics
Today, I want to talk about the “aha” moments that happen to us all. When I say “aha,” I am referring to those moments when a lightbulb goes off in your mind and you realize that you have figured something out. Sometimes you even realize that what you had been thinking was all wrong, and now you understand. You have it straight. It’s as if the truth has made a visit to your mind.

I am reading an adult book titled *Unless*, written by Carol Shields, and I am going to read an excerpt from it aloud to you. In it, the main character is thinking back to when she was a child.

The moon followed me. When I staggered, seven years old, across the grass in the backyard, my head thrown back, willing myself to be dizzy, I could see how the moon lurched along with my every step, keeping me company as I advanced toward the peony bed. Why, out of all the people in the world, had I been chosen as the moon’s companion? What did this mean? Honour, responsibility, blame, which?

I confided to my friend Charlotte this curious business about the moon. But she insisted that, on the contrary, the moon followed her. So back to back, at the end of the lane we paced off steps, she one way, I the other. Immediately I grasped the fact that the moon followed everyone. This insight came mostly as a relief, only slightly tarnished with disappointment. (2002, 100)
Isn’t that amazing? She thought when she was seven years old that she had been chosen especially as the moon’s friend. Now she realizes that all of us feel like the moon follows us.

In another favorite book of mine, *Durable Goods* (1993), by Elizabeth Berg, the main character, a young girl named Katie, reveals what she used to believe about how radios worked.

Once, when I was listening to his radio, my father came home. I sat up fast. You weren’t supposed to play his radio without asking. But he wasn’t mad. He sat down and asked me did I know how a radio worked. I told him that when I was little I thought there were real people in there, swaying before their microphones. There were tiny girls singing in formals, little men in tuxedos, their eyebrows wrinkled from singing like Eddie Fisher. And there were little instruments: saxophones you could fit into matchboxes, pianos no wider than a quarter.

He interrupted me. “You know better than that now, though, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes,” I said.

“So how do radios work?”

“Well, I . . . I think there are tubes.”

“Yes?”

“And some electricity.”

“Yes?”

“You have to plug it in.”

He laughed. And then he told me how radios worked . . . (See complete passage on page 100.)

Have you ever stopped to think about how some invention or gadget works? Were you surprised when you discovered how it really worked?

In yet another novel, *The Butcher Boy*, by Patrick McCabe, Francie, the main character, is talking with a young friend named Joe. The author writes,

I could hear a plane droning far away. One time we were standing in the lane behind the houses shading our eyes from the sun and Joe says: Did you see that plane Francie? I said I did. It was a tiny silver bird in the distance. What I want to know is, he said, how do they manage to get a man small enough to fit in? I said I didn’t know. I didn’t know much about planes in them days. (1993, 2)
Imagine thinking that a very small person had to be the pilot because from far away the plane appeared to be so small!

In *The Secret Life of Bees*, by Sue Monk Kidd, the main character, a young girl named Lily, also admits to a youthful misunderstanding:

I had the same birthday as the country, which made it even harder to get noticed. When I was little, I thought people were sending up rockets and cherry bombs because of me—hurray, Lily was born! Then reality set in, like it always did. (2002, 21)

(See also Ursula Hegi’s *Stones from the River* [1994], page 36, for Trudi’s belief that storks bring babies and Leif Enger’s *Peace Like a River* [2001], page 182, for Reuben’s revelation that film actors speak from a script instead of just talking to each other.)

Have any of you had any experiences in which you thought one thing when you were younger and then began to understand how things really worked? Recording these thoughts, saving your writing, and rereading these pages will, one day in the future, help you remember what you were like when you were a child.

**Books Noted in this Lesson**

| **Unless** | Carol Shields |
| **Durable Goods** | Elizabeth Berg |
| **The Butcher Boy** | Patrick McCabe |
| **The Secret Life of Bees** | Sue Monk Kidd |
| **Stones from the River** | Ursula Hegi |
| **Peace Like a River** | Leif Enger |
PART THREE

On Revising Writing
I think we don’t talk enough about how important it is to try to think new thoughts when we write. Writers don’t want to say the same things that other people have already said. They want to share original thinking and they also work hard to choose just the right words and arrangements of words so that their thoughts are conveyed in fresh and surprising ways.

I am reading a book called *The Center of Everything* by Laura Moriarty. The main character, Evelyn, talks about what she is learning from her teacher at school. The author writes,

Ms. Fairchild says people used to think the Earth was flat, with an edge you could fall off of. They thought the sky was just a big dome, and that the sun moved across it every day, pulled by a man with a chariot. It’s easy to look back now and say, “Oh, you dummies,” but when I’m up on the roof, watching the sun disappear behind the fields on the other side of the highway, I can see how they would think of that. If everybody I ever met told me that the Earth was flat and that somebody pulled the sun across the sky with a chariot and nobody told me anything else, I would have believed them. Or, if no one would have told me anything and I had to come up with an idea myself, I would have thought that the sun went into a giant slot in the Earth at night, like bread into a toaster. (2003, 11)

Isn’t that a striking way to explain how the Sun goes down at night if you had never been taught about Earth’s rotation? How clever to imagine the Sun going into a slot in Earth, like bread into a toaster.

(It’s possible that some children have only had experience with toaster ovens and have never seen an “old-fashioned” toaster that pops up slices of bread. This
description, therefore, may need clarification. You might also want to talk about why “Oh, you dummies” is not an acceptable way to talk and also warn children about the dangers of sitting on rooftops.)

At another point in the story, Evelyn is commenting on a difficult neighbor, Mrs. Rowley, who has a pet poodle named Jackie O. Listen to this passage:

. . . she does not say hello, but just stands there, watching me like she is a frog and I am a fly and if I get too close to her, that's it. She will not let me pet Jackie O because she says Jackie has a nervous condition that I will only aggravate. But I think Mrs. Rowley is the one with the nervous condition. She leans her head over their balcony sometimes and says, “Please don't jump rope on the pavement because I can hear the skip, skip, skip, and it's very annoying.”

I tell my mother when Mrs. Rowley was little, someone must have told her if you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything at all, only she got confused, got it backwards. Only talk if you are going to say something mean. (See complete passage on page 15.)

Evelyn is a great observer of people and she has quite a way with words. That frog-and-fly image really helps me understand how Mrs. Rowley looks at Evelyn. Most of all, I appreciate Evelyn's original thinking. She thought of that old saying, “If you can't say anything nice, don’t say anything at all,” and decided that her neighbor learned it in reverse. How clever! She really makes the point of how distasteful she thinks Mrs. Rowley is.

Ginny, the main character in Elizabeth Berg’s *What We Keep* (1998), sneaks into the house next door on the night that her neighbor has moved away. As she tours the house, she sensitively describes the loneliness that she feels. The author writes:

The dining room missed its lace tablecloth and the turkey dinners Mrs. O'Donnell had served when her husband was alive. The kitchen tap dripped, looking for macaroni to rinse . . . (See complete passage on page 35.)

I love that she thought about the things that remained and imagined that they had feelings. I don't know if anyone else has ever had a similar way of thinking about an empty house.

In Sue Monk Kidd's book *The Secret Life of Bees*, a young girl named Lily is interested in the names of a group of sisters she moves in with. They are named
May, June, April, and August. August explains that when she and her sisters were children, they each were given special privileges during the month they were named after. Fewer chores, more favorite foods, more staying up late. Lily is fascinated with this concept, as this passage shows:

After hearing this, I’d spent a good amount of time trying to think up which month I would have liked to have been named after. I picked October, as it is a golden month with better-than-average weather, and my initials would be O. O. for October Owens, which would make an interesting monogram. I pictured myself eating three-tiered chocolate cake for breakfast throughout the entire month, staying up an hour after bedtime writing high-caliber stories and poems. (2002, 137)

Lily certainly offers surprising reasons for selecting October. She also helps us picture her special treat by including such specific details as “three-tiered chocolate cake for breakfast.” And of course I just love that she would stay up late writing high-quality stories and poems.

I wonder how many of you have examples in your writing folders or notebooks in which you have recorded some original thinking. If you do, please mark those pages and bring them to our share time.

And if you don’t think you have ever done any original thinking in your writing, perhaps this is the right time to challenge yourself. Why not begin your writing time by rereading your old writing to see if you have some fresh thinking to add to previous work? Or, if you are about to begin some new writing, try to do some fresh thinking as you write.

(See also Katie’s thoughts about time on pages 41 and 75 in Elizabeth Berg’s *Durable Goods* [1993].)
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