The Beatles might have thought that all you need is love, but lucky for teachers, Penny Kittle knows better. She knows that when you want to create lifetime readers, you not only need to fill the room with books, not only need to show your own passion about books, but you also need to help kids develop lifetime reading habits. In this book, Penny shows all of us how to help kids develop those habits as she shares masterful teaching strategies that turn aliterate students who can read into those who want to read.

—Kylene Beers, author of When Kids Can’t Read—What Teachers Can Do and coauthor of Notice and Note

Book Love is nothing short of miraculous. Penny Kittle knows the developmental stage of adolescence like she invented it. This book alone could make me a good teacher. It’s detailed, so incredibly readable, and, I swear, filled with simple miracles.

—Chris Crutcher, author of Period 8

When Penny Kittle says, “We can’t wait for someone else to teach our students to love books,” she understands that raising students who love books is much more important than raising students who become good test takers or who “fake read” their way to good grades. With this in mind, Kittle’s Book Love focuses on a critical question all but forgotten in this age of standards and testing: What can we, as teachers, do to help our students develop a love for reading? Book Love is a breath of fresh air. It challenges many damaging practices that have become norms in our nation’s classrooms, offering insightful, practical ways for teachers to begin instilling a love of reading in our students and showing teachers and administrators how to build reading lives that last. Kittle is right—we cannot wait for someone else to teach our students to love reading. It starts with us, and I am hopeful that for many teachers it will start with this book.

—Kelly Gallagher, author of Readicide

Worried the teenagers you teach will never pick up a book on their own? Let Penny Kittle show you how to kindle a passion for reading with authentic texts and techniques aimed at students’ most vulnerable spot—their hearts.

—Carol Jago, past president, National Council of Teachers of English, and author of With Rigor for All

How many times can you fall in love? By reading, you can fall in love every time you begin a new book or reread a treasured one. In Book Love, Penny Kittle invites us into her high school classroom where many of her students fall in love with reading for the first time. Through reading research, her practical classroom rituals, and the powerful words of her students as they describe years spent not reading much, Penny builds an undeniable case for pleasure reading in the high school English classroom as a path to reading competence, stamina, and engagement.

—Donalyn Miller, author of The Book Whisperer
BOOK LOVE
Developing Depth, Stamina, and Passion in Adolescent Readers

Penny Kittle

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH
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The author and publisher wish to thank those who have generously given permission to reprint borrowed material:


Acknowledgments for borrowed material continue on page xvii.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Kittle, Penny.
Book love : developing depth, stamina, and passion in adolescent readers / Penny Kittle.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN-10: 0-325-04295-0
LB1632.K54 2013
428.4071'2—dc23 2012029994

Editor: Anita Gildea
Consulting editor: Tom Newkirk
Production: Vicki Kasabian
Cover and interior designs: Monica Ann Crigler
Cover and interior photos: Kori Sandman and Samantha Forde
Typesetter: Gina Poirier
Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
16 15 14 13 12 VP 1 2 3 4 5
To my mom, Barbara Ostrem,
who led me to love reading so much,
I had to pass it on.
Contents

Reading should not be presented to a child as a chore, a duty. It should be offered as a gift.

—Kate DiCamillo

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My heartfelt thanks to . . .

Thanks to teachers who believed in my insolent self, the 4:30 alarm even in January, and especially Pat, who said one evening, “Is all of that movie making distracting you from getting your book written?” Yes, I made this face, but I needed to hear it.

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There are so many of you who help me live in joy and wonder . . . First of all, the family at Heinemann. Where would I be without you? Huge thanks for clarity and vision to my editor, mentor, visionary, and friend: Tom Newkirk. Also to Lesa Scott, who holds us together, and to Anita Gildea, who is a compassionate and wise guide. To Sarah Fournier in editorial, Monica Crigler in design, Alan Huisman in editing, Kim Cahill in marketing, and Vicki Kasabian in production: you have made this a better book. I am truly grateful. To former editors Lois Bridges and Lisa Luedeke: you made me believe in one word and then the next. And to Michelle Flynn and Cheryl Savage who keep my traveling life sane: bless you.

To Pat, Cam, and Hannah . . .
I love books, but I love you more.
Now let’s get back to fun!

To Pat, Cam, and Hannah . . .
I love books, but I love you more.
Now let’s get back to fun!

I am continually inspired by the wonder, the magic, and the heart-stopping joy of books!

My life was changed when two men, Don Graves and Don Murray, invited me into a community of writers. I still write beside them.

Thanks to YOU who have listened to me work out my thinking in workshops over the last several years and to those who have written me notes: your belief in the power of teaching is all over my work.
Introduction

This is a love story.

It began on Belmont Street in a small back room painted a spunky pink. My mother held a collection of *Winnie-the-Pooh* stories across her lap as her two daughters eagerly awaited the reading. I was the younger one—blonde pixie haircut, chubby hands clapping gleefully, “Let’s go, Mom!” I can still close my eyes and walk in those imagined woods.

Mom led me through the Laura Ingalls Wilder books until I could navigate them on my own. I read my way through the Montavilla Public Library, challenging myself, rereading favorites, learning to discriminate and refine my tastes. I read everything my favorite authors wrote. (Still do.) I picked strawberries and hosted the neighborhood lemonade stand with my best friend to buy books until the shelf above my bed began to sag with *Encyclopedia Brown*, *Harriet the Spy*, *The Hobbit*, and on to *The Lord of the Rings*. Faithful friends—they carried me joyfully through middle school.

I entered honors English in ninth grade at age thirteen, sure of my success. A serious and soft-spoken man stood behind the wooden lectern he gripped with both hands and told us how good the books were: *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Macbeth*. It was dull and lifeless in that small room on the first floor where I counted the dust-smothered blades of the window blinds to keep awake. I didn’t read more than a few pages each night. I would grab my basketball and play until dark. I was good at half-listening to lectures, so I collected my As each quarter and moved on, but I don’t have a single memory of joy during high school English. Perhaps this book love was only for children. I almost believed it.

In college I majored in elementary education. I read books like the last deep breath you take before a dive. In philosophy, psychology, political science, Western civilization, and oceanography I found that all I knew was a small part of all I might know if I kept reading. I was invigorated by the challenge. I powered through books for my English minor: poetry, Shakespeare, British literature, American drama, protest essays for the honors program, and, again, stories whose characters walked beside me on my way to class. I loved those books. I will never forget my first Henry James, my first Tolstoy, my first Brontë. And yes, my first Jane Austen. Small wonder I eventually ended up as a high school English teacher.

But suddenly it was all too familiar: the slouching students, the yellowed pages of novels they weren’t reading, the “doing time” feel to the curriculum assigned to me. Surely my ineptitude contributed to the lack of engagement I faced, but my classes were also filled with students I didn’t recognize from high school: students who could barely read, who had no memories of book love to carry them through the dull parts in a play or a line that
confused them in a poem. Students who had never been read to. Students who told me
reading just wasn’t for them. Nice students, not defiant, just not interested. I tried to listen
to my department chair, but she told me students were lazy and I should give them a reading
quiz each day to make them read. Quizzes don’t make people read, and besides, teaching
isn’t police work; I knew this. I wanted to be a master sorcerer and entice all students into
deep reading; she wanted to set traps to catch criminals. She snorted at my literature circles
and my attempts to bring other authors into the room. My throat tightened. I stopped
visiting the department office, secluded myself in a corner of the building, and turned my
attention to my students. Because here’s the other side of this love story: the kids.

I didn’t enter the field of English teaching only because of my passion for words but also
because of my deep belief in the power of an education to transform a life. Mine. Theirs. I
worked with all levels of students but always sought those who struggled, those potential
first-generation-to-go-to-college students I saw almost reaching for what felt beyond them.
I loved the challenge and the joy of leading them. And those kids needed a bridge. Many
had read in elementary school, and a few continued into middle school, but almost none
were reading now. I knew they would never succeed in college without the stamina to read
hundreds of pages a week. More important, they needed to reexperience the power of
books. The books I grew to love in college were not the answer. Not yet. Maybe not ever.
First I had to lead them back to reading. Perhaps then I could entice them into the great,
lasting literature I wanted all kids to know. I knew if I could figure out the pedagogy of
increasing complexity and passion, I would never fall out of love with teaching. So with no
support and without permission but with great determination and a fierce love, I turned my
attention from content to kids and began again.

I asked myself, what if I took my department’s mission seriously—to create readers
and writers for life? Was it even possible with kids today? Could I do it? Could I sustain it?
Could I lead my students to literature?

I could. I did. This book tells that story.

I believe in the rigor of independent reading. I believe in the power of guiding student
choice to increase engagement, skill, and joy. It is a pedagogy well defined by teachers
who’ve written about their work—Nancie Atwell, Linda Rief, Donalyn Miller—but often
dismissed by high school teachers as a pedagogy for middle school, since all the women I
just mentioned teach middle school students. It isn’t. It is for all readers. At its core is the
belief that we are launching readers for life—into life—and that although reading more
will have an important impact on SAT and ACT scores and on preparing students for the
volume of reading in college, it also enlarges their worldview and gives them a greater
understanding of the complexities of arguments so often truncated on the news. Indepen-
dence is indispensable in life, and it is at the center of what the Common Core State Stan-
dards seek for all readers, K–12. Independence—the act of reading deeply and engaging
critically with a text—depends on thinking. Rigorous independent reading will not only
build background knowledge and vocabulary but also provide a fundamental necessity: regular practice. Teachers must create a love for books that will drive students to reach for them every school year.

Allowing students to make choices about what they read has been presented in our profession, especially at the secondary level, as enrichment—something to do once the hard work is over. I believe, instead, that it is at the center of our work. We have to teach some students how to slow down and enjoy the rhythm of story. We invite others into a community of readers who are idiosyncratic but purposeful. Students need a vast knowledge of text types, far more than we teach in the traditional English curriculum, precisely because of the increased complexity of literacy in this age; yet we all know students who shun books and most lengthy texts. They need to read more than ever, yet most secondary students rebel against whole-class reading in English class. What to do? I believe all students need to own their reading in the same way I believe they must own their writing.

Wise teachers can place literature within reach of any student, but without the stamina to read long and well, students will abandon it. Instead of leading students to independence, we make them dependent on us. Or worse, we teach them not to rely on us because we so often pick books they don’t connect with. Without regular practice with whole books and the endurance to read them, students will be unable to overcome the confusion in classic literature that defeats them. They don’t hunger for meaning, so they hunger for shortcuts. I believe in a marriage of two approaches—directly teaching vivid, short texts and a few whole-class novels, coupled with intentionally cultivating a reading life of increased volume, complexity, and pleasure. Whole-class novels are still important but less so. This is an active environment, not an open library for casual reading. There is nothing casual here. Understanding the habits, interests, and challenges of individual readers becomes a central part of teaching. This reading-life pedagogy elevates the role of conferences. We have to pull in close to our readers and listen. This pedagogy requires all we have, but it engages all kids, and that is always worth fighting for.

The thinking here is for your students. Even in schools where test scores are high and funds are plentiful, the hunger to read is too often absent in courses at all levels. I’ve learned this from listening. A friend who has taught English in an exclusive private school for thirty years told me last summer, “I can’t get my students to read novels anymore. I know almost all of them aren’t reading.” At an international school where I spent two inspiring weeks working beside students and teachers this year, a student responded to my question, “Do you think there are kids here fake-reading?” with a laugh. “Of course! People say it all the time: I got an A on that quiz or paper and I didn’t even read the book.”

Where is the hunger? We must cultivate it. I know it when I see it. Matt bursts into my room on a mild May morning shouting, “Mrs. Kittle! There are ‘answers to questions I didn’t even know I was asking’ in here—there are!” His joy at quoting my assurance that all of us can find books just for us is palpable. It has taken until May of senior year, but
he’s found one. We must keep fighting for that moment. We must connect students to books that force them to pay attention, to think and wonder, to imagine and believe, and then to read for the rest of their lives.

Our beliefs as teachers impact our practice, as Samantha Bennett and Cris Tovani have wisely noted. Do we believe kids today are too busy to read? It’s simply not true. Have your colleagues told you that kids will cheat, even when given choice? They’re wrong. Kids show me again and again that they’ll find time to read if given books that name what’s in their hearts. But it is also true that given access to a wide variety of books, they will choose challenging ones as they develop confidence and are introduced to the array of truly stunning works of literature produced every year across the world. Spend time with kids and books they want to read and you will be a believer.

The great voices of centuries past are still relevant today, but too often we haven’t convinced most students this is true. We can’t give up and accept so few readers. We also can’t have every student start with Austen, no matter what the Common Core or your department chair says. A book isn’t rigorous if students aren’t reading it. Every student must become a reader who can read Jane Austen. How? We start where they are. We start with an entry to a reading life and engagement with whole books, even if we feel they are less worthy than the classics. Yes, even Twilight, if that’s the book that will get a student reading. Once students are reading regularly, voraciously, we can lead them further. Once students develop a loyalty to books and authors, creating identities as readers, they will move toward challenge. It happens every year in my classroom; as I challenge my students, they read more. They also read more difficult texts. They learn to navigate hundreds of pages independently, and they amaze themselves with their willingness to find time for reading in the rush of life. Student stories, like the ones I’ll share here with you, continue to energize and challenge me.

Driving home from teaching at the University of New Hampshire one day last summer, as I waited at a red light, I noticed a former student perched on the bumper of an old pickup truck parked just off the road. The truck was loaded with fresh corn on the cob, and I grinned at the homemade sign: Six ears = $1. Ah, sweet summer.

Just before the light turned green I glanced again at Cassie, lit by late afternoon sunlight. She was perfectly still, curled around a paperback she cradled in her right hand. Traffic started up again, tourists honked and lunged forward, but Cassie didn’t even glance up. Perhaps she was walking with the Lost Boys of Sudan or spinning across the stage as a ballerina. There are endless possibilities, we know, even for a student not going to college. I want readers seeking them for the rest of their lives. I work every day to make that happen in my classroom, and this book will show you how.
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Faith, Hope, and Love, These Three

In the rock-paper-scissors of life, love is rock.

—Sara Zarr

Faith has kept me teaching for almost thirty years. There’s faith in kids because I know they will delight and amaze me each year. I’m naïve and gullible, it’s true, but my faith in kids is never something I apologize for. There’s faith in many of my colleagues and my school and what it means to be a teacher. And then there’s faith in myself. That last one is the hardest—believing I’ll know the right thing to say or do when I need to. Taking that risk each year keeps me on edge, though, and I like it.

Faith in books comes from the many powerful experiences I’ve had with them, both as a reader and as a teacher. Just when I think there isn’t another book out there that will know my heart like the last one did, I find it. I step back and wonder about the experiences students are having in my room each year and confront a most important question: is reading in my classroom developing faith in books? Faith that books can match who students are and what they are seeking?
I think of three advanced students in first block last year: Nick, Jacob, and Dalton. They were all heading to engineering schools, and they were marking time in English class. They were like me when I’m asked to do something I don’t want to do. Just the idea that I’m supposed to makes me surly.

Nick, Jacob, and Dalton were surly, that’s for sure. There was no whole in the books they talked about reading, only parts. And in fact, once they confessed they only knew SparkNotes parts, the worst kind—SparkNotes can’t convince anyone to value reading. It was trash to be kicked aside as they sprinted to calculus class. They not only didn’t believe books mattered, they dared me to convince them otherwise. I had no faith—not against resistance like that. Throughout that long fall, Nick sneered at my suggestions and read reluctantly, rarely beating his reading rate. Jacob kept insisting, “I will not be one of your success stories.” Dalton read so much I couldn’t keep up, an average of three hundred pages a week through first semester. What I didn’t see coming—what I’d forgotten can happen—is Dalton got the other two reading. He handed off books he loved: Unbroken, Born to Run, and 50/50: Secrets I Learned Running 50 Marathons in 50 Days. The boys were all track devotees, among the hundred or so students who chase after a gifted coach at our high school. If reading could help them run better, they were in. By March Nick was beating his reading goal each week and Jacob had chosen Crime and Punishment for independent reading. I keep forgetting that the only faith I need is in books.

Hope matters, too, of course. When I take the risk to open a new book, I am hoping it might be as good as the last one I closed so reluctantly. I have students who are dead to hope.

Adam, in my ninth-grade class this year, doesn’t even want to talk to me about books. We went to the library on Monday and I walked the stacks with him. His bored eyes scanned the shelves of titles; his to-read-next list remained blank. I kept after him. “Imagine the book that you would read: what would it be about?”

He took a minute to think. “I don’t think there’s even one out there like this, but this is what it would be: it would have a snowmobile and parts and it would be about building the ultimate snowmobile.”

The librarian and I did a search for snowmobile books. Nothing. “See?” he said.

“Do you want to know how they work?” I asked.

“Yeah. I’m interested in engines.”

Perfect. One of my favorite colleagues is our auto technology teacher. He is the master of all things mechanical and he is a reader. He’s saved me with more than one
Faith, Hope, and Love, These Three

student. When the rest of the class went to lunch, I took Adam down to Jim’s room. Jim reached out to shake his hand, and Adam stood taller, that’s for sure. When Jim told him about a series of books that are funny and about building cars, Adam’s eyes sparkled. That sparkle was hope. Adam knew he had to read—but now he imagined it might not be torture.

Jim took him through a worn textbook about cars that he pulled off a shelf, something to read while we try to find the other books. He showed Adam where he might start reading, warned him it was pretty dry stuff, but said it would teach him about brakes and engines. That enormous book was open on Adam’s desk during silent reading yesterday.

Even I have hope now.

Yes, faith and hope matter to readers, but the greatest of these is still love.

It’s hard to write about love. There are a lot of cynics out there. They’ll tell you love is lots of things love isn’t. Not just book love, which really makes the cynics snicker, but any love. You cannot manufacture love. Love is something that does not respond to “must,” or force, but love is deeply rich, hopeful, and lasting. We leap—we follow—we rest in its peace. When we know love, it owns us. I believe once we love books, it lasts. And once we know love, we pass it on.

Taylor, a student I had as a senior last year, told me she skim-read all the things assigned her. She said, “It’s easy, but I just don’t like it.” I want every student to sit with a book and expect good things, yet Taylor didn’t believe it was possible. She was going to miss more than she knew. As Nancie Atwell (2009) said, “It is the lifelong reader who is going to find his or her way to good literature. Frequent, voluminous reading builds fluency, stamina, vocabulary, confidence, tastes and preferences, loyalty to authors, and even that cultural knowledge that Diane Ravitch advocates. Students leave our tiny school in rural Maine as skilled, literary readers. They also leave smarter about words, ideas, history, people, places they’ve encountered only in the pages of the rich stories they have read.”

Taylor began by reading young adult literature, particularly the novels of Laurie Halse Anderson. She moved toward a complex reading life once she read The White Tiger, a Booker Prize winner that stretched her. She walked into my room the following Monday and said, “Mrs. Kittle, I need more books like this one.” She chose Columbine, by Dave Cullen, and Say You’re One of Them, by Uwem Akpan, and Lolita, by Vladimir Nabokov, and Slumdog Millionaire, by Vikas Swarup, before we parted that June. She read twenty-four books her senior year. She not only grew to love reading, she owned
the distinction between skim-reading to pretend an understanding and immersing herself in deep reading that leads to thinking about life and ideas. She owned it in a way many adults never have. She found books that spoke to something inside her, something that needed to be answered.

For Taylor (and too many of my students), that door into a reading life had been closed and abandoned by senior year. In our workshop she was not coerced into difficult reading; she chose it. The result? She said she read faster by the end of the year, but she also “got more out of it and enjoyed it more.” That was still not enough for me. Home this week for the holiday break, she told me she is continuing to read in her first year in college. She expects to find good books. She seeks them. That’s what I was waiting for.

On final exams at the end of each school year I ask students to talk about their lives as readers.

Ryan said he remembers a Friday when he cut science to get to the library to finish his book. He said his mother had yelled at him the day before, “Ryan, put that book
down and take out the garbage!” and then they both burst out laughing. Ryan had never been a reader.

Chris faked it through three years of honors classes in high school but was intrigued by *Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* when I talked about it on the first day of school. He said, “The first night of reading that book, I read a hundred pages, something unheard of in my life. I woke up at midnight that night with the light on and a book on my chest. From that point on, I made reading each night a hobby. I finished the book in three days, and from then on I was angry if I didn’t have a book to read when I got home.”

Habits change when students fall in love with books. Cam said, “I began reading every night before bed instead of watching television or playing video games. I would even come home from school and read before football practice. Every spare second I had I was in a book.” Nik agreed, saying, “We had a goal to read at least eight books in one semester. That was kind of a shock, and I realized that I might be doing a lot of SparkNoting or lying. But then you said we had the option of reading any book we wanted with almost no exceptions. I picked up *Tuesdays with Morrie*. I made it my goal to read every night before bed, and after awhile I was reading when I got home from school. Books like this caught my attention and this is when I realized that I had finally developed a good reading habit for the first time in my life.”

Liam said, “There have been many times this year when after I am settled in and ready to go to sleep, I have bounced back up, flicked on the light, and grabbed a book. Though my eyes sting from a late night of reading the next morning, I like it.” Later when he analyzed his reading rate, he said, “The more you read, the better and faster you read. Going from 72 pages every two hours to 120 pages astounds me. I know I would easily be able to bust out a good 100 pages in the same-style novel that I previously recorded 72 in. I never really noticed my hastened pace, because I didn’t feel like I was reading faster. I comprehend books fully, but I no longer have to read over things twice to understand.”

I will be seeking that first-love experience for some of the students I’ll meet this fall; they don’t know yet what books can do. I’ll be trying to charm others back to books that once captivated them. And I’ll work to keep others burning with passion and interest—across genre, over time, from what is easy to what will compel them to struggle and grow.

But with every one of them, it is love that I’m after.

Book love is what we need.
Nurturing Interdependent Readers in a Classroom Community

“Synthesis is about organizing the different pieces to create a beautiful mosaic, a meaning, a beauty, greater than the sum of each shiny piece.”
—Ellin Keene

Big Idea Books

I see possibility humming beneath reading workshop. My students make choices and read alone, but are connected within the classroom and throughout time to central themes in literature. The books they are reading cover a wide range of subjects and purposes but share common qualities. I created something I call “big idea books” to make those connections more obvious to my students. Here’s how it works.

I buy cheap notebooks at an office supply store and label them with common themes in literature, one per notebook: guilt; hope; fate; cruelty; isolation; justice; gender; freedom; coming of age; ambition; alienation; abandonment; conflict; suffering; yin & yang; the bonds of family; sacrifice; friendship; man struggling against nature/man/societal pressure to understand God; overcoming adversity; life lessons; empathy; change; courage; acceptance; love; death and dying; decisions; discipline; oppression; forgiveness; and belief. I paste the following explanation on the inside cover of each notebook:
**Big Idea Books**

These notebooks are for us to share. I write in them; you write in them. A big idea book is a multiyear conversation, because I use them year after year. You’re talking across time to students who are stumbling along through elementary or middle school right now but will one day sit where you are.

The meat of a big idea book is your thinking. I want you digging for what is beneath the story you’re reading. You chose this book (this theme) for a reason. You can see how it connects to what is happening or what is explored in the book you’re reading. You might connect the ideas or situations in the book to something in yourself or another book you’ve read. You might take the ideas in the book and go farther with them . . . thinking as you write.

You are doing a mini–book talk for someone who comes upon your words later. Try not to give away anything important that readers would rather discover on their own: you know how you hate that. You can skim a big idea book and find a dozen book talks from students like you. Add the titles to your to-read-next list, and you’ll have a range of possibilities when you’ve finished one book and can’t decide what to read next.

**Rules for Civil Discourse in Community Writing**

1. Be respectful. Do not use profanity. Do not use someone else’s name without permission.

2. You only need to sign your entry if you want to. Sometimes we send words out into the world as a gift without attribution.

3. Trust the writer inside of you. Just write.

I cover the tables in my classroom with these books and watch students notice them as they settle into their seats. “Choose one,” I say, “that connects somehow to the book you’re reading right now.” I pick up the notebook labeled courage and show them the book I finished the weekend before, *The Last True Story I’ll Ever Tell: An Accidental Soldier’s Account of the War in Iraq*, by John Crawford. “This memoir is all about courage. I want to think about the way courage resonates in this book. It’s more than the courage of the soldiers, there are other ways to think about courage that I want to explore in freewriting.”
As students browse the tables, I talk about themes with them and make superficial connections to the books they are reading, encouraging them to select a notebook, even if a theme/book relationship isn’t yet clear to them. Within minutes all the students have a notebook and are back in their seats. We write for about ten minutes. The last class of the day has the best experience. They often find one or two entries from other students (see the examples in Figures 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, and 8.4); reading them helps them think and their writing comes easier.

My intention is not to burden reading with activity. The purpose of personal reading is joy, curiosity, and interest—the kinds of things that are the foundation of my own reading life. But I also want students to stop once in awhile, step back from the story, and dig into what is happening underneath. I believe this will bring them more pleasure in the book and in the act of reading. Big idea books help my students do this, and they help me understand what I might teach next.

Figure 8.1 Suffering/Columbine

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Columbine  Dave Cullen

This book is about what occurred in the Columbine shooting. It talks about those who suffered as they died, as they killed, and as they attempted to heal. It is very interesting to read about how the survivors deal with the tragedy, and also what types of suffering drove Dylan and Eric to carry out their plan. Everyone thinking of such an event automatically empathizes for the families and friends of those who died, but Columbine also addresses the families and friends of the murderers. The community surrounding Columbine was completely caught off guard by this afternoon event. I cannot imagine experiencing this type of event, but as I read about some of the causes, it seems almost plausible and even more frightening. I have seen...
An “Order” for Literature

By conferring with individual readers and reading their notebook entries we begin to see where they are as readers. But we want more than just a collection of individual satellites. We want a solar system, a community of readers working together to understand the entire field of literature better. Can we connect readers to a greater understanding of purposes and passions in books throughout history, as well as to one another? This expansive thinking can only be accomplished when students are engaged in a reading journey, not just a particular book.

I want my students’ personal reading to have a purpose. I expect all my students to craft a reading life through their individual choices over time (the school year and beyond). My goal is for every reader to understand the limitless possibilities of literature.

Figure 8.2 Oppression/Unbroken

After crashing in the ocean the three men survived for over a month just floating in the raft. Eventually when they were picked up by the Japanese they were taken to POW camps where they lost everything they were forced to live in a small room which was against the Geneva Convention. The men along with hundreds of other POWs, were kept and forced to work for 2 years. The guards left them with less than their dignity. In the situation there was no way the story of and a POW’s could stop the oppression that was happening to them.

-Nick

Figure 8.3 Freedom/The White Tiger

The White Tiger by Aravind Adiga
This whole book is centered around a driver. Although his job is to cart around his master, the job came with other duties. He is technically a servant in their house, doing anything they need to be done. So far, the author tells you that he has killed his master and went on to bigger and better things. You could say he achieved freedom. The author describes that in India, everyone is, in some way, a servant to someone else. A driver is considered very well off, but is still considered a servant. The masters of all these servants are the “landlords” that control different parts of India. Everyone serves them, all the time. Anyway, the driver in the story tells about the landlord’s death and his newfound freedom.
This approach to teaching literature requires a shift in thinking about teaching reading in general. Teaching reading is not imparting knowledge to a reader about a particular book; rather, it is using a deep understanding of ways of knowing many books to nudge a reader to another place in his or her thinking about, first, an individual book and then about literature as a whole.

This requires a classification of sorts, an order of books that helps students see connections. Prompting students’ thinking by way of inquiry, not direct teaching, is the essence of education. Students remember what they do and what they discover, not what they are told.

Let me show you what I mean using my own experience with science. I was studying astronomy one night with three best friends, all engineering majors, during sophomore year at Oregon State. I was memorizing notes, but I still couldn’t see how the universe worked. Finally Bob stood up (6′2″ legs in Levis and a killer...
smile—believe me, he had my full attention) and said, “Paul, you be the sun,” and
started spinning—orbiting—around him. “I’m the Earth,” he grinned at me, as Chris
jumped up to orbit him.

“And Chris is the moon—oh, my god, I get it.” I dropped my head in my hands.
It was obvious, but it had never been clear to me. Although this moment was endlessly
entertaining to my friends, I didn’t mind that much because it launched me from one
place to another as a science student.

Senior year I needed one more elective. I chose Oceanography because of my
love of fishing, but during the first class I realized the content, the professor and his
impossible expectations, and a room of Ocean Science majors would be hazardous
to my GPA. I don’t like to fail, but I don’t like to back down, either. I didn’t drop
Oceanography. I created three thousand flash cards to help me learn the required
terms and classifications and the order of the species, studying hours and hours until
I passed the course. By midsummer I’d forgotten almost all those memorized terms.
Of course I did. In fact, I never used 90 percent of that learning again. But I sit here
decades later thinking about how that deep study changed the way I think; now I
don’t see things as individual parts as much as I seek connections between them.
What I learned in Oceanography is that all species are connected through a complex
order and classification. I seek that thinking in all things now, even in literature.

I create an “order” for literature across the back wall of my classroom that
shows how all the books we’re reading connect to one another across time, space,
and genre—almost like a map of book talks but one in which my students name and
order the connections. “Here’s Shakespeare and over there are the Transcendental-
ists and there are the Romantics. Here we might put Falling for Hamlet and other
modern adaptations of Will’s work but also Ellen Hopkins’ books, perhaps, because
they tell stories in verse—can you name how they might be connected? Here are the
Brontës and their brave voices in an age of censure. Who are their modern equiva-
lents? Who writes what cannot be said today? I’d add Julie Anne Peters, author of
By the Time You Read This I’ll Be Dead and Keeping You a Secret. Who are some
others?” Suddenly we’re talking about ideas and authors’ intentions. My students’
thinking expands to meet the thinking of others in the room.

This map changes shape during the year as students learn more and think differ-
ently. I lead students to see their reading choices as worthy of study, yes, and as a part
of something larger—a world of literature they don’t yet know. I want to empower
them to discern how ideas have been explored in books for centuries.

Drawing connections between ways of knowing the world and the thinking
kids are doing about individual books is powerful teaching. It is so much deeper
than studying one book in isolation. Listening to other readers, we see how their
intentions in reading (and writing) are mostly about self-discovery, that the map
of one person’s reading life can’t be traced over another’s. Yet we are connected. Seeing their reading as part of a larger whole helps students make informed choices and deepen their understanding of and respect for things they may have dismissed in the past.

Literature allows a flexibility in thinking that just isn’t possible in science. No scientist would accept my reordering of the species. He would scoff at my categories—Fish I Like to Catch (perch, casting from shore; steelhead; spring Chinook salmon; rainbow trout), Fish That Scare Me (sturgeon, all sizes; the 52-pound salmon my dad hauled in one fall; nasty-looking bottom-feeders)—you get the idea. My categories would be personal, not scientific, and that would bother a Serious Scientist. My students, likewise, connect books in ways that bother this British Literature Major: I cringe at what they’re missing that I think is important, perhaps, but it is more important that they think in terms of their own connections triggered by their own understandings, not mine. When they argue about where a book fits in the order, they’re using evidence from their thinking to make their point. I can then teach into their intentions as readers, adding what they don’t know about the expansive field of literature.

I tread carefully. Students need to be the ones doing the thinking. As students analyze their reading choices by adding them to our classification, they’ll see big ideas, or themes, in books and they’ll see times when they read to follow one passion or one author (like Ethan through Kerouac and then Faulkner). I hope they’ll see gaps, because they may not be aware of how narrow their choices are until they see expansiveness and possibility.

“Mind the gap” is not just a phrase I stole from the London Underground but a way to consider complexity that is different from simply increasing difficulty. I want students to analyze the gaps in the genres they read—to consider what they haven’t read and why: “You’ve read from the life-in-high-school section of our classroom library for months, isn’t it time to consider biography or poetry or the classics?” I can’t get many students to read Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* through a book talk, but if a collection of poetry from Iraq War veterans is the gateway to a poetry classification that includes Whitman, sometimes a poem like “Haddock of Mass Destruction” can lead a student to “Song of Myself.” They see Walt on the map and ask, “Who is that again?” If students are willing to look at their reading gaps and consider why they are there, perhaps they’ll work to bridge them, deepen their experience with a different period of literature or author, or simply see books as vast and worthy of exploration.

*Perhaps* is critical. I resist the temptation to determine what is next for my students, because my focus is on readers’ forging a path toward deeper understanding. It is the journey that lasts, not necessarily the particular books.
Quarterly Reading Reflections

My school year is divided into quarters. At the end of each marking period, I ask my students to look back over their work as readers and analyze what they’ve done and what they can challenge themselves to do next. This quarterly reflection includes a reading-rate calculation as impacted by difficulty, interest, and genre. Students evaluate where they are and what they need to do to meet their target number of books, both fiction and nonfiction, for the year.

I believe in the power of setting goals and making them public. Don Murray used to send me his daily word counts; Don Graves forwarded me his daybook notes. It was inherently frustrating: I could never keep up. Those emails weren’t for me, though; they kept the two of them accountable to themselves by making their personal goals public. My students need to understand why and how to challenge themselves as readers, to set goals, and then be nudged to commit to them.

Goals are more than just setting a target number of books to read during the year. I use Teri Lesesne’s (2010) *Reading Ladders* to clarify increasing text complexity with my students. I put this problem on the board: how can a reader move from *Twilight* to *Dracula*? Right now that student is stuck on vampire fiction, I tell them, but let’s imagine she wants to be a stronger reader. And frankly, who doesn’t want to be? Really? Even my most reluctant students would like to be better readers. I think all people seek greater competence unless we don’t believe we can get there and give up.

Take curling. You probably caught a few hours of the coverage during the most recent winter Olympics. You saw people with brooms chasing big rocks to the shouts of “Sweep!” Curious, to be sure; ridiculous, really—but stop by North Conway on a Saturday night and I’m out there with my fellow curlers sending stones into the “house.” Well, I’m trying to anyway. I’m working to get better at it. Like any sport, curling is a combination of finesse and discipline. You have to learn the basics and work at them and then challenge yourself to learn more. I don’t want to be bad at this. I want to be dazzling.

But learning is slow. Last week when I sent a stone down the ice, my husband—our skip (leader)—was standing in one place and my stone went somewhere else. When I lined up for the next throw he called down the ice, “Aim!”

My response was fiery. Why? Because I was *trying* to aim. I didn’t know what to do to get better. I needed coaching, not just demands that I improve. I think of Keith. He said about his reading in ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades, “I tried to read [the assigned books] all the time. But I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t like interpret what the words were saying.” Telling Keith he isn’t trying hard enough, as some have done, doesn’t help him understand.
If you made me compete week after week against the best curlers in our league, I would soon tire of being the worst one. My ego couldn’t take it. I’m good at other things, so I’d stop trying to keep up with those curlers. I’d make derisive comments about them on the sidelines. If I don’t believe I can get better, practicing my throwing is a waste of time. Many students who hate reading have given up believing they can improve, partly because they are always in competition with stronger readers in the room, all using the same text, and partly because there is little teaching of reading strategies in high school. Reading ladders help students imagine a path that can lead to understanding more difficult texts independently. To get them there I use conferences and whole-class teaching of mentor texts to improve skills.

I require my students to consider these questions each quarter: **What makes reading difficult for you right now? How will you work to improve?** They prepare their reviews following a specified series of steps.

**Step 1: Determine Difficulty**

It starts with books. I ask students to work in small groups to answer this question, “How can you measure the difficulty of the books you’ve read this quarter?” I put a pile of books on the table. Their task is to order them from least to most difficult using whatever criteria makes sense to them. I listen in. Many start with the total number of pages, but quickly adjust that: the 550 pages in *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* require less of a reader per page than the 180 pages in *The Great Gatsby* do. They know books differ in sentence length and vocabulary from my minilessons on how to work through reading challenges, but they also know their interest in the book, often based on their own background knowledge of the subject, is a very important factor. The reading seems easier if the book captivates them. (The hockey memoir *Eleven Seconds* was hard for Abby and easy for Matt, but Matt couldn’t imagine getting through Abby’s favorite *Crazy in Love: The Beyoncé Knowles Biography*.) When we gather back as a class, we make a list of criteria, and students apply them to their own reading during the first quarter of the year. A recent class’ criteria are shown in Figure 8.5.
My first attempt to teach this ranking procedure didn’t go well. (Too often I’m in a rush to save time and I miss the learning and processing that students need to do in order to own the thinking of a concept.) I walked in with a list of qualities that make books difficult and asked my students to order the books they had read from most to least difficult. This is assignment-driven, helicopter teaching. I was a master of hovering that day. I rushed around the room reexplaining directions and answering questions. Frustration mounted. Why didn’t they get this? A concept doesn’t live in us because we’ve read its definition. We must own the thinking behind it. When I put piles of books on desks and ask students to define the differences, they have time to work through their thinking and understand complexity in reading before they have to apply that thinking to the books they have read this quarter. (This same analysis is effective for determining the qualities of skillful writing as Nancie Atwell [1988] and Linda Rief [1991] have shown.)

Students reshuffle the criteria in the second, third, and fourth quarters. As they compile these lists I confer with them individually, puzzling over questions. What have you read that has challenged you as a reader this quarter? How have you improved this quarter? What will you reach for next? Figure 8.6 is Dalton’s fourth-quarter list incorporating the previous three quarters.

**Step 2: Determine Reading Rate**

Students calculate the pages they read each week for the quarter based on the total number of pages they’ve read in nine weeks. This helps them pay attention to the reading they’ve done outside class, identify areas of needed improvement, and celebrate gains.

Here’s Brittany’s reflection on her first-quarter reading rate:

> My reading rate is very low (674 pages in 9 weeks) because, well, the two books I finished this quarter are probably the first full books I have read in three or five years. I never read much to begin with so this rate for me is very surprising and great and I am proud to see I am actually reading. I really want to increase my stamina and start to read a whole lot more because I find it to be a good time passer or just something to relax with. For right now this is already a big difference for me, but I would like to increase reading a lot more.

I expect more than two romance novels in a quarter from Brittney as a reader, but during this time she has read a lot of poetry and literature in class as well. Although it’s vital that I increase Brittney’s reading independence, students teach me again
Chapter 8: Nurturing Interdependent Readers in a Classroom Community

Figure 8.6 Dalton’s reading ladder

**DALTON L’HEUREUX’S READING LADDER: QUARTERS 1–4**

Books Read (Most Difficult to Least Difficult)

* = Quarter 2 Additions
** = Quarter 3 Additions
*** = Quarter 4 Additions

2. ** The Pacific by Hugh Ambrose, 449 pp. (actually read 30)
6. ** A Briefer History of Time by Steven Hawking, Kindle (386 pp.)
8. *** 50/50 by Dean Karnazes, 279 pp.
9. *** The Good Soldiers by David Finkel, 304 pp. (currently reading 25 pp.)
16. *** Ranger’s Apprentice: #10 by John Flanagan, ? pp. (next read)
17. Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Last Olympian by Riordan, 394 pp.
20. *** The Scorch Trials by James Dashner, Kindle (380 pp.)
22. ** Boot Camp by Todd Strasser, 314 pp.

*Why this order?* Bill Bryson’s *A Walk in the Woods* was the most challenging book I read. The font was small and a lot was crammed into a page; you really had to pay attention to him when he was explaining historical sites or facts about how the world is deteriorating. *Born to Run* was my second hardest read; I often lost track of what was going on much in the same way as I did with *A Walk in the Woods*. *The Hunger Games* comes next in line, not because it’s challenging, but because it took me a few chapters to get used to Collins’ writing and how she words phrases. The Ranger’s Apprentice books and *Percy Jackson* came next. The reading was easy and I flew through the books. However I find more of our vocab words within Ranger’s Apprentice books than in any other piece of writing. The first book I read this year was also the easiest, seems reasonable enough.
and again to start where they are and nudge them forward. What’s important is that Brittney is reading regularly and wants “to increase her stamina and start to read a whole lot more.” If she wants it, my work is possible.

Getting to slow, deep, and still pleasurable reading is not going to happen quickly for students who have been faking it for years. Some spend weeks finding books that interest them enough for that kind of investment. Some spend weeks trying to figure out whether I’m serious about turning them into habitual readers. Will I notice? Will I keep pressuring them? Until they’re into crafting their own reading lives, they won’t be looking for challenges. Sometimes this takes so long, I despair that they ever will. And sometimes they don’t—and that breaks my book-loving heart. However, when students are surrounded by peers who are chasing challenges, it starts to infect them. Monique picked up *The Kite Runner* partly because she noticed what other advanced kids were reading and partly because she was finally ready to challenge herself.

### Step 3: Write Minireviews of Favorite Books

I ask students to summarize a few books they loved, not only because summarization is an essential writing skill (Graham and Perin 2007), but because when they’re finished I’ll have oodles of book talks for student to share with one another. Tristin wrote:

> Of all the books I have read this quarter, *The Places in Between* has been the most difficult, at least based on language and content. Fortunately, I enjoyed reading it and found the story he told intriguing. Unlike *Water for Elephants*, whose plot really didn’t interest me very much, *The Places in Between* was able to keep me reading because I like the idea he had and wanted to learn more about the culture. I was distraught when his dog died and indeed I feared for his life at times, though clearly he had to survive. While this book was one of my slowest reads, it was also one of my most rewarding.

He has compared the two books, but he hasn’t summarized either one. I had assumed he knew what I expected in a summary, but after reading a pile of reading ladders I realize he is not alone. I bring several student summaries to class the next day and we analyze them together to identify the elements of an effective summary. Here’s one of the samples we studied:

> The world we know it has been destroyed, and a central government, known as the Capitol, has risen to power as a dictator over the remaining districts in North America in Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games*. As a
punishment for the districts’ rebellion years back against the Capitol, the Capitol holds the annual Hunger Games. The Hunger Games is a competition when a boy and a girl from each of the 12 districts between the ages of 12 and 18 compete in an arena set up by the Capitol, where winning means fame and food, and losing means death.

It’s not perfect, but it models elements I’m looking for. When I combine this example with a few others, students are able to identify the qualities of an effective summary and then revise their own.

**Step 4: Set Goals**

Many educators have emphasized the need for students to set personal goals and work toward them, monitoring their own progress (see Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock 2001). This investment in learning is critical. Each quarter each student sets goals in reading, both volume and complexity. Students’ goals are as individual as they are. Some make a list of books they want to read. Others challenge themselves to increase the difficulty of their reading. At the end of the second quarter Dalton wrote:

> All goals for quarter 2 completed. This is more reading than I’ve done in my entire life combined. I am not struggling with the amount, but I do not plan on turning it into a struggle. I’ve read a good number of pages, and I’m content with where I am. I don’t read a wide variety of books so maybe I can try out different genres, but probably not. I hope to start reading things a little more challenging, just not so challenging that it’s no longer fun.

> I read two challenging books that took me a while to get through. I did a good job widening my reading selection; I’m now enjoying informative books and true stories instead of just fiction. The amount of reading I’m doing is not coming from force, so that’s good and I plan on just continuing to read.

At the end of the third quarter he wrote:

> I have blown my reading rate to smithereens this quarter and I intend to do the same next quarter. I want to read some harder books that will challenge me to think more when I read.

I sent Dalton back to specify titles he would commit to reading that would challenge him.
Step 5: Reflect on Your Reading in a Short Essay

I revise what I ask for in this reflection each time I use it, and I post the current questions on my website (pennykittle.net) each quarter. Here are excerpts from three student reflections:

Student 1

Reading is not really easy. This is so true and is an idea that statistics do not take into account. Statistics don’t counter for the fact that about nine out of ten books are really, really bad. Of course, this is just one opinion, but as a senior, I watch every day as my classmates give up on their books and get frustrated with reading because there are so many books out there to choose from, and it’s always a gamble to pick a good one. I think a lot more people would read if they had books that related to them and interested them. I’ve been shocked at the rate that fellow classmates, typically nonreaders, fly through certain books when they find one they like, and often times during other classes I look up to see them not paying attention to the teacher, but READING. How exciting!

Student 2

Choice is a very important aspect in life. Choosing to work and save money or to spend everything you make. Or choosing to devote yourself to school or to party and slack off. Choice is how we live our lives, so why should we be given choice in the books we read? Being given choice in what we read is highly beneficial to students.

Take me for example. Before this year I was always assigned books to read by my teachers. The library I was assigned, with a few exceptions, was extremely boring; therefore I rarely divulged in reading. Then this year rolled around, and I was given choice. At first I was a little intimidated by the choice, but then I started thinking this could be a good challenge. I started this year off with Hunger Games, which I thoroughly enjoyed. I then continued on to read another nine books in three quarters. Wow, ten books. Ten books were more than I had fully read in the three years prior. I would not have read even close to that had I been assigned more boring books to read. Choice was a helpful aspect in making me a more frequent reader.
Those who are against choice would argue that students may simply read “low-level” books the entire year and never challenge themselves. This would fail to prepare students adequately for college reading. Well, let us look at my reading list once again. Yes, the first few books I read were not too challenging; I just needed to start reading. After these few books, however, I read *Slaughterhouse Five* by choice. This novel was actually one assigned by some teachers in the building. After *Slaughterhouse Five* I took on a huge challenge. I began to read *Crime and Punishment*, again, by choice. Other students in my class have also challenged themselves with other novels like *Lolita* and *Unbroken*. So to all the naysayers, even with choice, students will challenge themselves and prepare themselves for college.

When it comes to reading, choice is critical. It will get those students who don’t read to start reading and will keep the students who read, reading. In my case, choice has been extremely helpful in getting me to start reading, as well as begin to challenge myself in my reading. Without choice I would be continuing my trend from years past and not reading at all.

**Student 3**

Can you imagine being *A Long Way Gone* from home, having *Tuesdays with Morrie*, getting *Water for Elephants* at the circus, being a bike racer and being told *It’s Not About the Bike*, being the greatest *Kite Runner* in your town or perhaps *Sold* into child prostitution? I couldn’t or at least not until I read these books. Book after book, page after page, my journey through life gained depth. I started this semester as a woman growing up in the early 30s and quickly realized I just wasn’t getting what I needed from that, and so I began having *Tuesdays with Morrie*, learning the most about something feared by everyone: death. I then became an autistic child reading *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nightime*. I was a little boy, trying to uncover a murder while I lived with this uncontrolable condition. I then stepped into the center ring and became a veterinarian in charge of getting *Water for Elephants*. I was caught in a love triangle aboard a moving train, wishing that it would just stop. This book was brilliant and is now at the top of my favorites list. I learned about Lance Armstrong’s battle with cancer and chemotherapy, continuing on in his dream to win the Tour de France. I climbed hills and passed through
small villages with crowds cheering me on. I wore the yellow jersey of a winner. From there I became a child soldier, and a boy growing up in a third world country trying to please his father, ending my semester in child prostitution.

I took the place of every main character. I lived the lives of other people, opening my mind more and more to the world around me. I am enjoying reading more than ever and I’ve adopted the habit of dropping books I’m not enjoying. I disliked reading about *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* or how *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. I could never take the place of the main character in those books. I have, however, realized that sometimes you just have to grab a book and start reading. The title might not be catchy, and the cover might not be too splashy, but sometimes that’s when you find the words the most entralling. I love page turners and “unputdownables” and I knew that if I wasn’t reading one of those, I probably wouldn’t get as much out of it.

Not only have I lived the lives of a dozen or so different people, I have opened the door to a great reading habit, enabling me to become hundreds of more people with the turn of a page. I have learned about styles of writing used, especially the ones that I enjoy reading, and that has shown up in my writing. I have been able to take steps in my writing that I normally wouldn’t have.

Reading nearly 2,483 pages this semester, I feel as if I have gained more knowledge about the world than I have just about writing. I have officially become a reader, not just a “this is my assigned book this month, what chapters am I reading tonight” reader.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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