

# Nothing Beats a Good Story: Using the Works of Louis L'Amour with Reluctant Readers

by James Blasingame

**I**n the early summer of 1991, I was preparing to teach summer school in Boys Town, Nebraska, the world-famous community for troubled youth (now known as Girls and Boys Town). I found myself in a situation very different situation from that of the college-preparatory school in an affluent suburb where I taught during the regular school year. As I discussed the summer school program with Jim Casey, Boys Town High School assistant principal, he explained what I would be facing and the curriculum they had designed for the summer:

For any number of reasons, most of your students will read below grade level. It could be a reading problem, but it also might be that they have never been in an environment that encouraged reading or even made it available. Before they come to us, many of our kids have been surviving by their wits on the streets for years. For most of them, it's probably a combination of things, but the bottom line is: We need to raise their reading levels, and at the same time, make reading fun for them, and hopefully, even turn it into a lifetime habit. Rather than use the kind of packaged literature anthology most high schools use for a given grade level, and rather than using some kind of "drill-and-kill" remedial worksheet program, we are using high-interest paperback novels, specifically, westerns by Louis L'Amour. They have lots of action, protagonists with strong moral values, and school-appropriate portrayals of sex and violence.

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Dr. Casey went on to explain the philosophy of Bob Vacca, one of their veteran teachers and the chair of Boys Town High School's English Department. Bob believed that reading paperback novels with lots of action, excitement, adventure, and suspense would do far more to pique kids' interest in reading than marching them through the classics (i.e., *Hamlet*, *Moby Dick*, *Antigone*, *The Scarlet Letter*), all the while having to paraphrase the language and explain what was going on in the story and why it was significant. He was right.

I met a lot of wonderful kids at Boys Town that summer. Often they were kids whose life stories would bring a tear to the eye, but just as often they were kids who were determined to make lemonade out of life's lemons. Just as I had been told, these were high school students who not only read below grade level but also had little prior experience with reading, especially reading novels. Their lives included few successful experiences or pleasant memories revolving around reading; in fact, I often gathered that many of them had come to regard reading as a painful reminder of how they were different from other kids or even to view reading as a source of punishment.

When the kids met Louis L'Amour, however, all that changed. Perhaps I should instead say, when the kids met Hondo Lane, Vittorio, Angie Lowe, Conn Conagher, and Tell Sackett (among others), all that changed. Over the course of the summer, we read nothing but Louis L'Amour: *The Cherokee Trail*, *Crossfire Trail*, *Hondo*, *The Proving Trail*, *The Shadow Riders*, *Sackett*, and more. I will admit that we did have a lot of problems as we read these books, very serious problems. We had problems with stagecoach robbers; problems with dishonest Indian agents; problems with professional gunfighters; problems with wild horses and stampeding cattle; problems with cattle rustlers; problems with rattlesnakes, mountain lions, and drunken cowboys. We even had a few problems with unrequited love, BUT — we had very few reading problems. Students ate these books up like candy, spending most of class time engrossed in

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the stories' conflicts and characters while spending very little time expressing frustration over words they didn't know or plot events to which they couldn't connect. We read so many books that some of the students expressed surprise at their own accomplishments. We wrote, discussed, compared and contrasted, and found relevance in the lives lived by L'Amour's characters in the lives of the students. It was a successful summer.

The work of scholars of literacy, reading, and adolescent literature provide explanations for our success, and also give some advice on implementation. The works of Louis L'Amour (and, in general, any carefully selected novel with high-interest content and reading level appropriate to the reader's reading skills) set kids up for success for a number of reasons:

1. They provide a means for teen readers to improve their reading skills/literacy because teens can interact/engage more deeply with them than with other kinds of literature.
2. They complement/intersect with teens' emotional/psychological/moral development as identified by adolescent developmental psychology.
3. They harness teens' needs for excitement, adventure, and entertainment as well as their need for resolution of life's ambiguities and conflicts.
4. They provide entry points for teachers to address critical literacy, literary interpretation, and tangential issues such as the ecology, issues of race and gender, etc.

One of the most satisfying pieces of evidence supporting the efficacy of using high-interest novels comes from a study done by Arthur Applebee and his colleagues at the prestigious National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement, a federally funded institution. Although skeptics might like to contend that young readers need challenging reading material to develop high

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literacy competencies, Applebee [Applebee et al. (2003)] found that it is not whether or not students read the literary canon (the “classics”) that determines how literacy skills grow, but what activities accompany their reading. In a 2003 study of “classroom instruction and student performance,” which involved 974 middle and high school students in 19 schools across five states, Applebee and his colleagues found that it was the approach to teaching (and not the genre of literature they used) that made the difference in how students improved from fall to spring in their ability to perform “complex literacy tasks” (Applebee, et al 722). Literary genres most often reflected students’ ages and reading abilities, but the elements Applebee found to be “significantly related to literacy performance” were “high academic demands and discussion-based approaches” (Applebee, et al 722). Students need to be engaged in frequent, challenging, and meaningful thinking, discussion, and writing about their reading.

Are the L’Amour books well suited to this dialogic approach recommended by Applebee’s research? From my experience with my summer-school students at Boys Town, I would have to say, “Absolutely,” and reading/literacy scholars provide ample explanations of why and how this is so. For many years, reading experts have ascribed to what is known as *reader-response theory*. The basic premise of this theory is that readers are not passive vessels into which a text is poured; instead, readers interact with a text as they read it — actively thinking about it, comparing it to their personal experiences, and trying to make sense/meaning of it — as well as using the text to make sense of their own lives. Teachers grounded in reader-response theory ask their students to form their own opinions of what a text means, to trust their own ideas about what is important, and to make meaning for themselves.

Surely, reluctant readers must be reluctant to trust their own ideas and especially to talk about them in public. No! Actually, in their quintessential work on male teen reluctant readers, “*Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*,” Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm (2002) found quite the

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opposite. Reluctant readers did want to talk about what they read; in fact, they were frustrated when they were not given an opportunity to do so. Smith and Wilhelm reported that a repeated complaint in their case studies of 20 reluctant readers who were male teenagers was that school didn't let these students go into any real depth on a topic but just kept "jumping" from one thing to another. The boys wanted to spend enough time on each topic to feel that they had reached a level of competency (Smith and Wilhelm 107). Sharing thoughts and ideas about a book was not anathema to them at all; they wanted to air their opinions about their reading.

Logically, the best books for this kind of activity would be books to which young readers can relate, books with conflicts and characters with which young readers can strongly identify and connect. Such connection is a reflection of young readers' growing relationship with world around them. As Robert Probst puts it, the young reader "wants to understand work, love, hate, war, death, vengeance, responsibility, good, evil— in other words, he is interested in the themes of the literature that has established itself as worth reading and discussing" (Probst 4).

"Worth reading and discussing"? No author ever made the themes mentioned above more lively, appealing, or reader friendly than Louis L'Amour. This brings up another issue of choosing literature for reluctant readers: reading level. The reading has to be accessible; it has to fall somewhere in developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, meaning it needs to be just hard enough so that the student can successfully digest it with a minimum of help. Impenetrable text is actually counterproductive in this regard. Tolstoy surely does great justice to the themes of love and hate, good and evil, war and (you know what goes here, I'll bet) in his 1,400-plus pages of *War and Peace*, but not at a reading level appropriate for reluctant teen readers. Books of inappropriate reading level and subject matter are a train wreck waiting to happen for reluctant readers, as Nicholas Karolides (1992) points out:

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The language of a text, the situation, characters, or the expressed issues can dissuade a reader from comprehension of the text and thus inhibit involvement with it. In effect, if the reader has insufficient linguistic or experiential background to allow participation, the reader cannot relate to the text, and the reading act will be short-circuited (Karolides 23).

Attempts to decipher unfamiliar, polysyllabic words; struggles with unwieldy sentences; and other reading troubles quickly bog the reluctant readers down and set them up for failure.

The very first page of L'Amour's *Sackett*, on the other hand, has a Flesch-Kincaid readability grade-level rating of 5.4, or roughly sixth grade (about the same level as that of the majority of popular fiction one would find at a popular bookstore). The Flesch-Kincaid readability rating is not based on the complexity of the ideas or on the literary quality of a piece of writing; rather, it is simply an arithmetical calculation based on statistics, such as the average length of sentences and the average length of words. A bonus here is that reluctant readers engrossed in a Louis L'Amour novel find themselves in the company of millions of adult readers all over the world. The United States Congress awarded Louis L'Amour the National Gold Medal, and President Ronald Reagan presented him with the Medal of Freedom for his work. No stigma here for the kid with *The Cherokee Trail* stuck in a back pocket!

From the point of view of an adolescent psychologist, Louis L'Amour is a healthy dose of just what teen readers need, right when they need it. Erik Erikson, the psychologist famous for his eight stages of human development, has described the growth of the human psyche in terms of steps through which human beings progress. Each step is characterized by tension between two opposite pressures. Erikson characterized the experience of teenagers from ages 12 to 18 (in what he called *Stage Five*) as "Identity vs. Role Confusion" [Robert Myers (2005)]. In this stage, teens separate themselves from their peers and develop a sense of their

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own values and beliefs — not an easy thing to do. In this stage, the adolescent experiments with different roles, trying on various identities and experiencing what has come to be known as an *identity crisis*, a term coined by Erikson [Myers (2005)]. Erikson saw this time in life as one where kids should be able to experiment safely with their identities before arriving at their true selves [Myers (2005)].

Moral development is another aspect of adolescent growth and development, and Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) is well known for his schematic of this development. Kohlberg's ideas about how people develop a sense of right and wrong, or what we would call a conscience, progress through stages much like Erikson's. Kohlberg suggests that as a young person's conscience evolves, decisions will be made independently, fairly and with consideration for others. According to Kohlberg, by the time a person has moved out of childhood (when decisions are based on personal gain or loss) and through adolescence toward adulthood and beyond, the following evolution should occur in the healthy, moral human being:

- Moral choices based on what is best for family, friends, peers, or cultural group in order to improve or maintain standing within these groups
- Moral choices based on maintaining the present social order
- Moral choices based on a democratic view of individual rights and agreed-upon social contracts
- Moral choices based upon the individual's abstract idea of justice and morality, not superseded by established laws and subject to relative situation

[Adapted from Kohlberg (1981)]

Erikson and Kohlberg have identified the important benchmarks for emotional, psychological, and moral development for teenagers, but what does this have to with kids and reading? Good question! Experts in literature for young adults suggest that the best way to experiment with life, trying on identities and

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experiencing the consequences of choices, is vicariously through literature. In literature, young readers experience all the crises of life through characters — characters to whom they have become attached and with whom they identify when the writing is done well. As Chris Crutcher, family therapist and best-selling author of fiction for young adults says: “Stories can help teenagers look at their feelings or come to emotional resolution, from a safe distance [. . .]. I have never met a depressed person, or an anxious person, or a fearful person who was not encouraged by the knowledge that others feel the same way they do. ‘I am not alone’ is powerful medicine.” (Crutcher, *Author’s Insights*, 39).

Louis L’Amour’s characters face all the crises of life — crises teens are facing, some for the first time — as they stand on the fringe of adulthood.

Let’s look at some examples.

*Hondo*: Hondo Lane finds himself caught between the tragedy he sees befalling the Apache Nation, a people he finds to be honest and brave, and his responsibility to the Army. He also struggles with his feelings for Angie, a settler whose immoral husband Hondo will ultimately have to kill. How can Hondo tell Angie’s young son that he, Hondo, is the man who killed the boy’s father?

*Kiowa Trail*: Kate Lundy seeks revenge on the cowtown she holds responsible for the death of Tom, her younger brother. The inhabitants of these towns liked the money the cattle drives brought them but didn’t accept the cowboys as human beings.

*Kilkenny*: Lance Kilkenny would rather not fight, but his reputation with a gun and his conflict with a greedy rancher may make it inevitable.

*Bowdrie*: Chick Bowdrie is a young man torn between two fates. He must choose between the right side and the wrong side of the law.

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*Crossfire Trail:* A less-than-moral protagonist honors his oath to a dying man to protect the man's family and ranch from those who would steal it. This is an ironic story about finding the best in oneself.

*Sackett:* A series book about the Sackett brothers. William Tell Sackett (his real name) cannot escape his past actions, no matter what good luck befalls him.

*The Cherokee Trail:* After the Civil War leaves them destitute, the Breydon family heads for Colorado to manage a stagecoach station. When her husband is murdered along the way, Mary Breydon decides that she and her daughter, Peg, will take on a task deemed inappropriate for women and will run the station anyway. Her husband's murderer soon appears, but so does a mysterious gunman.

*The Daybreakers:* This work is held by many readers to be the best of the Sackett series. Brothers Tyrel and Orrin are at the center of the novel. Even when the brothers don't look for trouble, it always seems to find them. Largely a story of people trying to find a new life in the West, this book concerns the decisions Orrin must make as he enforces the law in a lawless land. This book has multiple plot lines and tons of action.

*End of the Drive:* In this collection of short stories, L'Amour touches upon every aspect of life from romance to death. Most often, however, he shows how people under pressure generally find the best in themselves. Humor and ecological themes are also present in this volume.

A note about series books is appropriate here. *The Sacketts*, for example, is a L'Amour series, and many of the L'Amour books are very similar in plot, characters, and setting. Series books are often appealing to reluctant readers. Although appealing openings are hardly a problem for Louis L'Amour (bullets and Cupid's arrows are often in full flight before the reader turns the first page),

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openings are often hard for reluctant readers; understanding the mindset of a new group of characters, picturing a new setting, and so on can be a challenge for them. For this reason, being able to take advantage of their previous successes in getting to know what Will Sackett is like as the oldest brother, how Orrin Sackett is different, how Ty Sackett is likely to react in a given situation, and so on will put the reluctant reader in an expert position as he or she begins a new novel in the Sackett series. Readers turn to Louis L'Amour series books (and probably to all his westerns) like old friends. Finding an enjoyable genre and a favorite author within that genre also goes miles toward establishing reading as a lifelong habit.

In my experience, the fiction of Louis L'Amour has proven successful with reluctant readers, especially when it is used thoughtfully and with a carefully conceived curriculum that includes rigorous discussion and writing, thus placing demands on students to think critically and to examine their own thinking. L'Amour's ability to spin an exciting tale does wonders for the reluctant reader, and the life themes on which he focuses are just right for teenagers. In the final analysis, it's as sure as a bullet from Will Sackett's rifle.

### About the Writer

James Blasingame, Jr., is an associate professor of English at Arizona State University (ASU) in Tempe, Arizona. Dr. Blasingame works in the teacher-preparation program at ASU, where he teaches methods classes and supervises student teachers. He is the coauthor of *Teaching Writing in the Middle and Secondary Schools* (Pearson Prentice Hall) and the author of *They Rhymed with Their Boots On: A Teacher's Guide to Cowboy Poetry* (The Writing Conference, Inc.). He is coeditor of *The ALAN Review* and creates the "Books for Adolescents" section of the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. Dr. Blasingame was a high school English teacher for 18 years before joining higher education. In his spare time, he frequents the historic Apache Trail near his home in Arizona.

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