

Winning Back Your Reluctant Readers

by Pat Scales

In 1985, the Commission on Reading (funded by the U.S. Department of Education) issued a report called *Becoming a Nation of Readers*. The purpose of this small book was to address issues related to literacy in the nation's schools. Two decades later, educators and parents are still trying to figure out how to deal with reluctant readers—those who can read but don't. I have worked with a number of reluctant readers over the course of my career, and it is obvious to me that it isn't always books, or even the act of reading, that reluctant readers are rejecting.

The real problem seems to be with the methods we, as educators, use to get our students to read and with the requirements that we place upon them. For example, millions of dollars are spent by school districts each year to purchase computerized reading programs; these programs test students on the novels they have read and reward them with points that ultimately lead to prizes and other incentives. Often, however, there is very little personal attention offered to readers in schools that use such programs. Students who are naturally competitive may thrive when such techniques are used, but for the most part, these programs do little to make students lifelong readers. Computerized reading programs simply turn students into reading robots with one goal—winning points for themselves and for their classes. Winning is not a bad goal, but the question remains: What are we attempting to win?

Almost all of my friends are readers, but in a recent conversation with a college friend, I found that although she is a reader now, she didn't enjoy reading as a child or as a young adult. When I asked her why, she related a dismaying

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story. The librarian at her school laughed at her, in front of her peers, when she chose to read *The Bobbsey Twins* in sixth grade. While my friend's choice may have seemed immature to her librarian, it was still a personal choice, and she shouldn't have received that type of response from a professional whose job it was to inspire. A negative response to a reader is far more damaging than no response at all. My friend was certainly capable of reading a much more challenging novel, but the truth is that no adolescent wants his or her immaturity or reading taste made public to others, especially in a disapproving way. A better conversation might have gone something like this: "I see you like *The Bobbsey Twins*. I would like to suggest a similar book when you finish that one." Approaching young readers in such a way validates their desire to read and often serves to pique their interest in other related titles.

How should teachers and librarians respond to students who have little motivation to read and who therefore do not ask for guidance? The answer is simple: Know the students, know the books, and seek creative ways to connect the two. Some students are more challenging than others, but all students respond when they think an adult knows them well enough to suggest just the right book. Find out what movies the students watch, and lead them to books that deal with similar themes or topics. If they like war movies, give them *The Gift of Valor* by Michael M. Phillips or *Flags of Our Fathers* by James Bradley with Ron Powers. Then lead them to *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien. If they are caught up in fantasy movies, give them Christopher Paolini's *Eragon* or Donita K. Paul's *DragonSpell* and *DragonQuest*. If they like horror movies, give them *The Book of Skulls* by Robert Silverberg. Perhaps they prefer movies and novels that deal with the realities of life—stories to which they may relate in some way. Suggest *The Book of Bright Ideas* by Sandra Kring, *Maybe a Miracle* by Brian Strause, *Prep* by Curtis Sittenfeld., *The Great Santini* by Pat Conroy, or *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier. When a student has a positive response to a book, it is the role of the teacher or librarian to supply another similar title. In this way, we are guiding the reluctant reader on a journey toward success.

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I have spoken with middle and high school students who say that they have never liked a novel that they studied as a class. Sometimes they react to the length of time that a teacher spends on a novel study. At other times it is the actual novel that they don't like. Reluctant readers may respond better to a short book (such as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou or *A Day No Pigs Would Die* by Robert Newton Peck) so that the reading and the literature analysis can be completed in one or two weeks. Allow students the opportunity occasionally to make a personal reading choice for a novel study. Provide them with a list of novels from which they may make their selections. The emphasis should be placed on what we want students to gain from a novel study rather than on what book is read.

Reluctant readers should be turned loose to explore genres until they find just the right book that pulls them into the story.

Some readers will discover historical fiction, such as Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*, which describes the four most important days in the American Civil War. Other readers may seek contemporary young adult fiction: *How I Live Now* by Meg Rosoff is a story of love and hate set during a fictional war in England. *Bucking the Sarge* by Christopher Paul Curtis tells the story of 14-year-old Luther, a boy who seeks to better his life and to escape the corruption of the projects in Flint, Michigan. Sittenfeld's *Prep* is a contemporary novel that will attract girls, whereas boys may migrate toward a book like *My Losing Season* by Pat Conroy.

Perhaps some students will discover that they like reading about other cultures. These readers will look for books like *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (set in 19th century China) by Lisa See; *Funny in Farsi* by Firoozeh Dumas; or *Burnt Bread and Chutney: Growing Up Between Cultures—A Memoir of an Indian Jewish Girl* by Carmit Delman.

Mysteries and crime novels like *Dead Men Rise Up Never* by Ron Faust, *Don't Look Behind You* by Lois Duncan, and *The Face on the Milk Carton* by Caroline B. Cooney are enormously accepted by both avid and reluctant teenage readers.

Nonfiction is especially popular with reluctant readers. Many are drawn to sports books like *Bat Boy: My True Life Adventures Coming of Age with the New York Yankees* by Matthew McGough; to chronicles of science expeditions like *Carnivorous Nights: On the Trail of the Tasmanian Tiger* by Margaret Mittelbach and Michael Crewdson; to technical books like *Electric Universe* by David Bodanis; to tales of personal journeys like Sonia Nazario's Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Enrique's Journey*; to stories of social struggle like *Last Chance in Texas: The Redemption of Criminal Youth* by John Hubner; and to books about war heroes like the aforementioned *Flags of Our Fathers*.

These high-interest books will almost always lure adolescents into reading and will send them to seek similar titles. The key is, give reluctant readers a choice; they will then begin trusting us to help them make book selections.

Reluctant readers want to win. They need us to help them win. They can only win if educators alter the ways in which we guide and teach them. Only then can we expect to become a nation of readers.

Helpful Hints in Winning Reluctant Readers

- * Offer reading choices
- * Refrain from being judgmental of students' reading selections
- * Tap into students' outside interests
- * Use shorter, high-interest books for novel studies
- * Link novels to other types of reading materials, such as newspapers, magazines, and nonfiction books
- * Read aloud the first chapter of a novel to get readers hooked
- * Include a variety of genres in the English curriculum
- * Instruct students to stop reading a book if it doesn't interest them by the second chapter
- * Allow students to help shape a reading list for the class
- * Ask students to suggest books for you to read. Read as many of the books as possible. Let students know when you read their suggestions.

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Teaching Ideas

1 Discuss the following quote by Raymond Chandler: “A good title is the title of a successful book.” Ask students to browse the library or a book store and to write down the ten best titles they see. Have them bring their lists to class and discuss why they chose these particular titles. Then have each student read the book that most appeals to him or her.

2 Ask students to read both *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou and *A Day No Pigs Would Die* by Robert Newton Peck. Then have them write a short essay that compares the voices in the two novels.

3 Everybody has a different sense of humor. Some like sarcasm; others respond to farce. Some like funny characters; others prefer absurd plots. Have students discuss the funniest novel they have ever read. Encourage them to read a novel like *10th Grade* by Joseph Weisberg or *Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer: A Road Trip into the Heart of Fan Mania* by Warren St. John. Prepare an interview with one of the authors that highlights the humor in the novel.

4 Have students try their hands at writing. Ask them to write a description of a funny scene from their own lives or of something they have seen on television. Ask for volunteers to read aloud what they have crafted. How difficult is it to capture humor on the printed page?

5 Engage the class in a discussion of some classic adventure stories, such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain or *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. Then ask the students to read a modern adventure, such as Robert Kurson’s *Shadow Divers: The True Adventure of Two Americans Who Risked Everything to Solve One of the Last Mysteries of World War II*. Have the students write a brief paper that explains why the novel they selected is considered an adventure.

6 Engage students in a discussion about the meaning of courage. Divide the class into small groups, and ask them to read the newspaper and identify articles about a person or a group of people who have shown courage. Share the articles in class.

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Then send the students to the library to find a biography or an autobiography about someone who has demonstrated courage.

7 C. S. Lewis once said, “We read to know we are not alone.” Ask students how this is especially true when we read realistic novels and memoirs. Discuss how a memoir is similar to realistic fiction. What are the differences? Introduce students to books like *Love in the Driest Season: A Family Memoir* by Neely Tucker or *Polite Lies: Memoir of an Unwanted Chinese Daughter* by Kyoko Mori. Ask students to write a brief paper that discusses how the emotions in these memoirs are similar to emotions expressed in realistic novels they have read.

8 Encourage students to keep a year-long reading journal in which they can record the names of the books that they have read for recreation; have them comment on the books that they have abandoned and on the books that they have enjoyed. Once a month, give them a chance to share some of their journal entries.

9 Ask students to think about all the novels that they have read in school. What character would they most want to engage in conversation? Have students write a brief essay called “A Conversation with. . . .”

10 Introduce students to the genre of graphic novels, then ask them to take a favorite short story and develop it as a graphic novel. Bind the book and place it in the classroom so that other students will be able to read it.

11 Ask students to share the names of books that were their favorites when they were young children, then have them find those books and bring them to class. Invite each student to read his or her book aloud and to discuss why it was a childhood favorite. Have them read the book to a young child (perhaps to a family member or a neighbor). Ask them to write a very brief account of how the child responded to the book.

12 Share six or eight books with the class. Divide students into small groups and ask them to select one of the books for the group to read. For example, one group might read *Miss Black America* by Veronica Chambers, and another might read *Donorboy* by Brendan Halpin. After reading the books, each group should be

given three minutes to sell the book to the class. The sales pitch must include every member of the group.

13 Bring sample book reviews to class and discuss the elements of a good book review. Encourage students to write book reviews for the school newspaper or simply for the classroom bulletin board.

14 Engage the class in a discussion about how much fact is in fiction. Introduce students to good historical fiction. Have them record the facts that they learn from reading the novel, then send them to the library to verify the facts. Ask them to cite their sources.

15 Most schools require middle and high school students to read during the summer months. Invite young readers to participate in shaping a summer reading list for their school. Make sure that the list includes different genres to accommodate the varied reading tastes of students. Ask students to develop writing prompts for responding to summer reading. n

About the Writer

Pat Scales is an independent consultant and freelance writer who has recently retired as Director of Library Services at the South Carolina Governor's School for Arts and Humanities, Greenville.

Suggested Reading... **Books cited in this article include:**

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

by Maya Angelou

Bantam, TR, 978-0-553-38001-9, 304 pp., \$15.00/\$21.00 Can.

Bantam, MM, 978-0-553-27937-5, 304 pp., \$5.99/\$8.99 Can.

Also available in Audio:

Read by Maya Angelou

Random House Audio, Abridged CD,

978-0-679-45173-0, \$22.95/\$32.95 Can.

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Electric Universe: How Electricity Switched on the Modern World

by David Bodanis

WINNER 2006 - New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age

Three Rivers Press, TR, 978-0-307-33598-2, 320 pp., \$13.95/\$21.00 Can.

Flags Our Fathers

by James Bradley with Ron Powers

WINNER - ALA Alex Award

Bantam, TR, 978-0-553-38029-3, 400 pp., \$14.00/\$18.95 Can.

Bantam, MM, 978-0-553-58908-5, 576 pp., \$7.99/\$10.99 Can.

Flags of Our Fathers: Movie Tie-In Edition

by James Bradley with Ron Powers

Bantam, TR, 978-0-553-38415-4, 400 pp., \$14.00/\$18.95 Can.

Miss Black America: A Novel

by Veronica Chambers

Harlem Moon, TR, 978-0-7679-1467-3,

224 pp., \$12.95/\$17.95 Can.

The Great Santini

by Pat Conroy

Dial Press, TR, 978-0-553-38155-9, 480 pp., \$15.00/\$21.00 Can.

Bantam, MM, 978-0-553-26892-8, 448 pp., \$7.99/\$10.99 Can.

My Losing Season

by Pat Conroy

WINNER: ALA Alex Award

Dial Press, TR, 978-0-553-38190-0, 416 pp., \$14.95/\$22.95 Can.

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The Face on the Milk Carton

by Caroline B. Cooney

Laurel Leaf, MM, 978-0-440-22065-7, 208 pp., \$6.50/\$9.99 Can.

The Chocolate War

by Robert Cormier

WINNER 1974: School Library Journal Best Books of the Year; ALA Best Books for Young Adults; ALA the Best of the Best Books for Young Adults Laurel Leaf, MM, 978-0-440-94459-1, 272 pp., \$6.50/\$9.99 Can.

Bucking the Sarge

by Christopher Paul Curtis

WINNER 2005: ALA Best Books for Young Adults; ALA Notable Children's Book; Texas TAYSHAS High School Reading List; School Library Journal Best Book of the Year

Laurel Leaf, MM, 978-0-440-41331-8, 288 pp., \$6.50/\$8.99 Can.

Burnt Bread and Chutney: Growing Up Between Cultures—A Memoir of an Indian Jewish Childhood

by Carmit Delman

WINNER: School Library Journal Adult Books for Young Adults
One World, TR, 978-0-345-44594-0, 304 pp., \$13.95/\$21.00 Can.

Funny in Farsi

A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America

by Firoozeh Dumas

WINNER: School Library Journal Adult Books for Young Adults
Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-6837-8,
224 pp., \$12.95/\$16.95 Can.

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Don't Look Behind You

by Lois Duncan

Laurel Leaf, MM, 978-0-440-20729-0, 192 pp., \$5.99/\$7.99 Can.

Dead Men Rise Up Never

by Ron Faust

2005 Edgar Award Nominee

Dell, MM, 978-0-553-58655-8, 352 pp., \$6.99/\$10.99 Can.

Donorboy: A Novel by Brendan Halpin

WINNER - ALA Alex Award

Villard, TR, 978-1-4000-6277-5, 224 pp., \$12.95/\$17.95 Can.

Last Chance in Texas

The Redemption of Criminal Youth

by John Hubner

WINNER 2006: New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age

Random House, HC, 978-0-375-50809-7, 304 pp., \$25.95/\$35.95 Can.

The Book of Bright Ideas by Sandra Kring

Delta, TR, 978-0-385-33814-1, 320 pp., \$13.00/\$17.00 Can.

ShadowDivers

The True Adventure of Two Americans Who Risked Everything to Solve One of the Last Mysteries of World War II

by Robert Kurson

WINNER: ALA Alex Award; 2005 Book Sense Book of the Year Award, Non-Fiction

Ballantine, MM, 978-0-345-48247-1, 416 pp., \$7.50/\$10.99 Can.

Random House, TR, 978-0-375-76098-3,

416 pp., \$14.95/\$21.00 Can.

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Read by Campbell Scott

Random House Audio, Abridged CD, 978-0-7393-2083-9 (0-7393-2083-1),
\$14.99/\$21.00 Can.

Bat Boy: My True Life Adventures Coming of Age with the New York Yankees

by Matthew McGough

Doubleday, HC, 978-0-385-51020-2, 288 pp., \$22.95/\$32.95 Can.

Coming in Anchor Trade Paperback, March 2007.

Moby-Dick by Herman Melville

Edited and with an Introduction by Charles Child Walcutt

Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21311-9, 608 pp., \$4.95/\$7.50 Can.

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Moby-Dick, or The Whale

Introduction by Elizabeth Hardwick

Illustrated by Rockwell Kent

Modern Library Classics, TR, 978-0-679-78327-5, 896 pp.,

\$11.95/\$17.95 Can.

Carnivorous Nights

On the Trail of the Tasmanian Tiger

by Margaret Mittelbach and Michael Crewdson

Illustrated by Alexis Rockman

One of the New York Public Library's "25 Books to Remember from 2005"

WINNER 2006: New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age

Villard, TR, 978-0-8129-6769-2, 336 pp., \$14.95/\$21.00 Can.

Polite Lies

On Being a Woman Caught Between Cultures

by Kyoko Mori

Ballantine, TR, 978-0-449-00428-9, 272 pp., \$13.95/\$18.95 Can.

Enrique's Journey by Sonia Nazario

Soon-to-be an HBO mini-series

WINNER 2006: New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age

Random House, HC, 978-1-4000-6205-8,

320 pp., \$26.95/\$37.95 Can.

Coming in Trade Paperback, February 2007.

Do not order before 2/1/2007.

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7178-1,

336 pp., \$14.95/\$19.95 Can.

Free Teacher's Guide Available

The Things They Carried

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by Tim O'Brien

WINNER: YALSA Best Books for Young Adults; New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age; A Booklist Best of the Best; Winner of France's Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger; Finalist, Pulitzer Prize; Finalist, National Book Critics Circle Award

Broadway, TR, 978-0-7679-0289-2, 272 pp., \$14.95/\$22.95 Can.

Eragon by Christopher Paolini

WINNER 2005: Colorado Blue Spruce Young Adult Book Award

WINNER 2004: Texas Lone Star Reading List; Texas TAYSHAS High School Reading List

Knopf Books for Young Readers, TR, 978-0-375-82669-6, 528 pp., \$9.95/\$13.95 Can.

DragonSpell

by Donita K. Paul

WaterBrook Press, TR, 978-1-57856-823-9, 352 pp., \$12.99/\$19.99 Can.

A Day No Pigs Would Die

by Robert Newton Peck

WINNER 1973: School Library Journal Best Book of the Year; Library of Congress Children's Books of the Year; ALA Best Books for Young Adults.

WINNER 1972: Colorado Children's Book Award

Laurel Leaf, MM, 978-0-679-85306-0,
176 pp., \$6.50/\$8.99 Can.

The Gift of Valor: A War Story

by Michael M. Phillips

WINNER 2006: New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age
Broadway, TR, 978-0-7679-2038-4, 256 pp., \$12.95/\$16.95 Can.

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How I Live Now

by Meg Rosoff

WINNER 2005: Michael L. Printz Award Winner; ALA Best Books for Young Adults

Wendy Lamb Books, TR, 978-0-553-37605-0, 224 pp., \$7.99/\$10.99 Can.

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan: A Novel

by Lisa See

WINNER 2006: New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-6806-4,

288 pp., \$13.95/\$21.00 Can.

Also available in Audio: Read by Jodi Long

RH Audio, Abridged CD, 978-0-7393-3467-6, \$14.99/\$21.00 Can.

The Killer Angels by Michael Shaara

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

Ballantine, TR, 978-0-345-40727-6, 400 pp., \$13.95/\$21.00 Can.

The Book Skulls by Robert Silverberg

Del Rey, TR, J978-0-345-47138-3, 240 pp., \$12.95/\$17.95 Can.

Prep: A Novel by Curtis Sittenfeld

WINNER 2006: New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7235-1,

448 pp., \$13.95/\$21.00 Can.

Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer

A Road Trip into the Heart of Fan Mania

by Warren St. John

A Chronicle of Higher Education Top 10 Best College-Sports Books Ever

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Three Rivers Press, TR, 978-0-609-80713-2, 288 pp., \$12.95/\$17.95 Can.

Also available in Audio:

Read by Warren St. John

Random House Audio, Abridged CD,

978-0-7393-1576-7, \$27.50/\$39.95 Can.

Maybe a Miracle: A Novel by Brian Strause

WINNER 2006: New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age

Ballantine, TR, 978-0-8129-7519-2, 384 pp., \$12.95/\$16.95 Can.

Love in the Driest Season : A Family Memoir

by Neely Tucker

Three Rivers Press, TR, 978-1-4000-8160-8, 288 pp., \$14.00/\$21.00 Can.

Also available in Audio:

Read by Neely Tucker

RH Audio Voices, Abridged CD,

978-0-7393-1071-7, \$29.95/\$44.95 Can.

The Adventures Huckleberry Finn

by Mark Twain Afterword by Alfred Kazin

Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21079-8, 304 pp., \$4.95/\$7.50 Can.

Ivy, MM, 978-0-8041-1571-1, 384 pp., \$4.99/\$5.99 Can.

Fawcett, TR, 978-0-449-91272-0, 384 pp., \$14.00/\$22.95 Can.

Introduction by George Saunders

Modern Library Classics, TR, 978-0-375-75737-2, 304 pp., \$6.95/\$9.95 Can.

10th Grade: A Novel by Joe Weisberg

NOMINEE: ALA Alex Award

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-6662-6,

272 pp., \$12.95/\$19.95 Can.

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