

# “It Doesn’t Take a Miracle. . .”

by Brian Strause

Many teachers think it would take a miracle to get some of the teenaged boys in their classes to read a book for the sheer pleasure of it, and maybe they’re right. After all, today’s young male student is simply overwhelmed by too many distractions to spend time reading. In a fast-paced world featuring the immediate gratification provided by videogames, DVDs, cable television, and the internet, how can reading possibly compete? That’s the conventional wisdom.

I don’t buy it.

I was a teenager in the ’80s, and even in that culturally challenged era, we still had all the same basic distractions. People like to think that each new generation is shockingly unlike their own. The fact is, teenagers are no different today—only the gadgets have changed. Whether we’re talking about a first kiss, a first unchaperoned party, or a first love—it’s still a first. Maybe these milestones happen a little sooner than they did in the past, but the emotions behind them remain the same.

Just as when I was a kid, a certain segment of boys will always be particularly reluctant to read. As I recall, reading for pleasure was an easy way to invite abuse from my male peers. Still, I persevered and became a voracious reader, albeit a stealthy one. We’re often told that girls are more interested in reading, whereas boys are more interested in blowing things up. Surely, I thought, there is some sort of scientific study to support this well-worn assertion. While I searched the internet for some sort of supporting evidence, I found myself sidetracked by that favorite teen online forum, MySpace; as I expected, teenage boys posting there had little regard (to put it lightly) for reading and readers. These boys, I suspect, are “reluctant readers.”

Yes, it is true that many girls also regard books with a mixture of hostility and contempt. As a writer, it hurts me to acknowledge their blasphemy. I can only hope that these girls are aping the offensive language that can be found at MySpace and elsewhere only because certain boys find illiteracy so attractive. I

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*Excerpted from **RHI: Reaching Reluctant Readers**, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email [highschool@randomhouse.com](mailto:highschool@randomhouse.com), subject: “RHI: Reluctant Readers”*

like to think these young ladies are secretly buying armloads of books, which they read clandestinely while their boyfriends are busy playing videogames.

Since the publication of my novel *Maybe a Miracle* last fall, I've been able to test my theory: Kids don't change all that much from generation to generation. My novel is told in the voice of Monroe Anderson, a male high school student, but the truth is, I haven't talked to many high school students since I was one myself. (It's not exactly socially acceptable for men in their mid-30s to hang out with teenagers.) With that gap in mind, I was naturally afraid that I might be exposed as a fraud when I was invited to visit with a group of AP English students from Dublin, Ohio (which happens to be a suburb of Columbus quite similar to the fictional suburb where my story unfolds).

It turned out that the kids bonded with the book to an extent that I never allowed myself to imagine. After the class, several boys came up to me and said, "How did you get inside my head?" and "This is exactly the way I think." and "This is the best book they've ever had us read." (I realize this praise may just have been an overly polite response to the Barry Larkin baseball cards I was handing out.) My favorite comment, though, was a courtesy of a lanky, somewhat nerdy kid; I recognized his look as an echo my younger self. He said, "The thing I like about Monroe is that nobody even notices him, but he's got so many wonderful things going on in his head." I liked that observation more than any other, because this young reader wasn't really talking about the book he was talking about himself. That's what I enjoy so much about reading: Books give us not only a look into worlds we don't know but also the opportunity to take a closer look at ourselves.

Of course, the kids I met on this visit were AP students—hardly reluctant readers. Reluctant readers at Dublin Jerome High School would only be reached later in the year, when I was invited to return and speak with a group of sophomores. Unfortunately, that visit was canceled when the principal banned *Maybe a Miracle*, a decision based on the objection of one parent to what most people consider to be a very benign sex scene between the narrator and a leukemia patient.

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At first it seemed to me that banning my book was a draconian decision, but now I understand how brilliant that principal really was. Reverse psychology has long been an effective method for bending the will of stubborn teenagers. Make it sound as if you don't want impressionable youth to read a book, and it's certain they will read it. In an act of astonishing foresight, this pioneering principal also revealed that if you pull a book from the school bookstore and offer refunds by a fixed deadline, kids can't read the book fast enough; in this way, they get the benefit of indulging in illicit material with the added bonus of not having to pay for it. In one case, I understand, three students read a single copy in the three days before the refund deal expired. So although I initially thought that the principal was a neofascist, the orgy of reading that ensued in the aftermath of his decision revealed what a genius he truly was.

Meanwhile, Valerie Acton, a high school English teacher in Grandview (another suburb of Columbus) took a less diabolical tack to reach a reluctant reader. On Mondays, her freshmen read in class, with the caveat that she gets to approve the books they choose. Ms. Acton described one student as "a typical fourteen-year-old male who doesn't look favorably upon reading as an acceptable pastime"; he even failed to finish reading several books based on movies. Unbowed, Ms. Acton gave him a copy of *Maybe a Miracle* and said, "Try this one. . . Read the first two chapters and then decide. . . ."

For the next seven Mondays, this student, once so disruptive, sat quietly and read. Ms. Acton ventured, "You like that book, don't you?"

"I love it!" he answered.

In an essay he later wrote, this student described how he especially enjoyed all the "cuss words" because "that's how kids really talk when no one else is around." He also appreciated the occasional use of marijuana mentioned in the book; according to Ms. Acton, this "rang true to his picture of a typical teenager pastime." Of course, I like to flatter myself and believe that there is a bit more to the book than cuss words and pot smoking. If, however, those are the hooks that helped one reluctant reader become transported by the rest of the story, I'm not going to complain. In fact, I would venture that any sane parents would be

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overjoyed to have a teenager holed up in a bedroom and reading, even if he or she is reading a banned or purportedly controversial book.

Ms. Acton continued: “Because so few kids read any book beyond what is accepted by the curriculum, and even then they ‘fake read’ to get a decent grade, it is important to guide them in the important task of finding out what turns them on in terms of reading. . . . *Maybe a Miracle* is the latest book I’ve found that more kids than just “Andrew” devour and share with their friends. *Holes* was, years ago, the book I used to get boys to read. Now, it’s *Maybe a Miracle*.”

In short, when it comes to reaching the reluctant reader, it takes a little cunning. These kids who proudly belittle reading are a notoriously inflexible bunch. In many cases, they have dedicated their lives to not reading. Of course, this self-imposed intellectual blind spot makes them susceptible to trickery. I recommend you use it. Who knows? Maybe a miracle will happen, and that ever-reluctant reader will become your star student. After all, stranger things happen all the time. . . or so I’ve read.

### **About the Author**

*Brian Strause was born in Columbus, Ohio and lived there until he was 15. He majored in American Studies at Grinnell College in Iowa. After working as an associate producer for the PBS-TV series “The 90’s”, he moved to Los Angeles and earned an MFA in producing, but decided to pursue screenwriting.*

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