THOMAS NEWKIRK

Writing Unbound

How Fiction Transforms Student Writers

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

Heinemann
361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801–3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

© 2021 by Thomas R. Newkirk

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

Heinemann's authors have devoted their entire careers to developing the unique content in their works, and their written expression is protected by copyright law. We respectfully ask that you do not adapt, reuse, or copy anything on third-party (whether for-profit or not-for-profit) lesson-sharing websites.

—**Heinemann Publishers**

"Dedicated to Teachers" is a trademark of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

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

Figure 6–1: Image of Thomas R. Newkirk, swimming. Copyright © 2020 by University of New Hampshire. Reprinted with permission.

Acknowledgments for borrowed material continue on p. 150.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Newkirk, Thomas, author.
Title: Writing unbound : how fiction transforms student writers / Thomas Newkirk.
Description: Portsmouth, NH : Heinemann, [2021] | Includes bibliographical references. |
Identifiers: LCCN 2020050248 | ISBN 9780325092157
Subjects: LCSH: English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching (Middle School) | English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching (Secondary) | Fiction—Authorship—Study and teaching (Middle School) | Fiction—Authorship—Study and teaching (Secondary)
Classification: LCC LB1631 .N3785 2021 | DDC 428.0071/2—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020050248

Editor: Margaret LaRaia and Heather Anderson
Production: Vicki Kasabian
Cover and text designs: Suzanne Heiser
Cover photo: © Shutterstock / koya979
Interior photos: © Houlton Archive / Getty Images (*F. Scott Fitzgerald*); © Photodisc / Getty Images / HIP (*clock*); © Shutterstock / intueri (*guitar tattoo*)
Typesetting: Kim Arney
Manufacturing: Valerie Cooper

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
1 2 3 4 5 RWP 26 25 24 23 22 21
February 2021 Printing

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

To Peter Elbow,
mentor and friend

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ix

1 | Writing Unbound
The Missed Opportunity of Fiction Writing 1

2 | Meet Ernest 15

3 | Fiction Versus Nonfiction
Or, Why I'd Rather Not Write About Parking Meters 26

4 | The Writing Zone 40

5 | Going Deep
Fiction and Psychological Insight 56

INTERCHAPTER
Language, Violence, and Distress—Beyond Censorship 75

6 | Going Short
Four Invitations 79

7 | Going Long
Writing the Novel 94

8 | Going Close
What Does It Take to Be a Good Reader of Student Work? 113

9 | Credo
What's the Story? 129

REFERENCES 141

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

1

Writing Unbound

The Missed Opportunity of Fiction Writing

Bastian: How many wishes do I get?

Empress Moonchild: As many as you want. And the more wishes you make, the more magnificent Fantasia will become.

—From *The NeverEnding Story* (1984)

In the summer of 2004, my wife and I attended a Boston Red Sox game, where some filming for the movie *Fever Pitch* was being done. After the singing of the national anthem, the door of the Green Monster—a thirty-five-foot wall and scoreboard in left field—opened, and a man with a Sox shirt and chinos began a slow, labored walk toward the pitcher's mound.

It was Stephen King, the limp caused by a horrific 1999 accident in which he was hit in the breakdown lane—the other driver was travelling, as he often did, in the wrong lane. King remarked that it was as if one of his own demented characters came to life to injure him.

As he walked the three hundred feet to the mound, the crowd rose and applauded him. Soon we were all on our feet in sustained appreciation. I wondered if any other author could receive such a tribute from this crowd. (J. K. Rowling was the only name I could come up with.) Even if those

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

standing had not read *Christine* or *The Shining* or other novels he has produced in his amazing career, they had seen movies and TV series; they may have been aware his stories were the basis for two superb movies, *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Stand by Me*. We may have been cheering his recovery from the accident, and perhaps his legendary generosity in his home state of Maine. Maybe all of that.

Whatever the reason, we knew that here was a man who had created a thrilling vision of horror. Like Rowling he has created a world, a kingdom. I once had a student who claimed that we love horror because it makes us feel fully present—nothing exists outside that moment of terror. We feel fully alive in our bodies—it affects our mind, heart, breathing, and skin. King takes us there. He writes for us.

And for the record, he threw a strike.

While King is a model for a virtual army of young and not-so-young writers, his brand of fiction has little place in the high school English reading curriculum—and no place, that I can see, in the writing curriculum. In fact, fiction writing disappears from our educational system around middle school, if it survives that long. The Common Core standards generally ignore it, along with narrative in general, in the upper grades. At this stage, writing is colonized, controlled, by the literature curriculum, and the focus often contracts to the analysis of literature. Mercifully, there are exceptions—the multigenre paper, and the elective creative writing course, which is often the first course to be cut in a crunch. But the fiction writing that does happen is usually off the formal educational grid.

And this off-grid writing is plentiful. The main FanFiction website contains 817,000 pieces written off the Harry Potter books, and 220,000 off the Twilight series. Over a million fictional pieces from those two series! Percy Jackson spinoffs are near the top of the list (72K) as are those built off *The Hunger Games* (45K) and *The Lord of the Rings* (55K). There are even submissions using the Bible (4.1K) and *Pride and Prejudice* (4.9K) and this is just for books. Two popular TV shows, *Glee* and *Supernatural*, both have more than 100,000 entries. Video games also spawn fiction with over 82K for *Pokémon* and 73K for *Kingdom Hearts*. More recently created sites, Quotev, Wattpad, and Archive of Our Own, have similarly huge numbers, and attract writers from across the globe. We can predict an exponentially greater number of unposted stories created by loyal followers.

Even in those schools that employ writing workshop approaches, fiction writing is marginalized or avoided, with memoir or personal narrative

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

and, later on, the informational report or argument holding center stage.[1] Often this personal nonfiction is perceived as more authentic than fiction—especially high fantasy, which is seen as derivative. In college a student normally has to take at least up to three preliminary nonfiction writing courses before being allowed to elect a fiction writing course, assuming one is available. And even then it is unlikely that they would be able to attempt popular forms like the graphic novel.

All of which leads to a question that has puzzled me my entire career. If reading fiction is beneficial, if, as some research indicates, it builds empathy, reading stamina, vocabulary, and cultural knowledge, if it provides entry into appealing vicarious worlds (e.g., Chiaet 2013)—why can't the same be said for writing fiction? Am I missing something here? Jeff Wilhelm (1997) has shown that readers need to "be the book" to feel present in the book—and writers can also "be the book," as in the case of one young student I interviewed who created JoJo, the junk food ant, a recurring character in his stories:

> **Mike:** Sometimes I feel like I'll write about this little ant named JoJo—a junk food ant—and he goes on these little adventures and usually gets hurt. So sometimes when I write about him, I make him like talking. I feel like I'm him, like when the Red Sox hit a grand slam and he gets caught on the ball, I feel like I'm flying through space like this (*he leans back in his chair and mimes holding on to the baseball*).
>
> **TN:** So when you're writing you feel like you are in the air?
>
> **Mike:** Yeah, when he gets hurt in the air, and I'm kind of like up there. I'm JoJo. (Newkirk 2002, 67)

---

1 In this book I make the claim that opportunities for writing fiction diminish as students move upward in the secondary grades. This view was confirmed by the teachers I interviewed, and it fits my own observations. Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate any recent, comprehensive surveys of the kinds of writing required in middle and high school. The 2011 NAEP Writing Assessment (using data from 2007) does show a shift in the high school years from writing "to convey experience" to writing that explains and argues. The NAEP Reading Assessment similarly shows a shift to "essay" writing in the high school years—though "stories" (likely personal experience narratives) persist as a common assignment (summarized in Applebee and Langer [2009]).

David Coleman, a chief writer of the ELA Common Core standards, has famously stated that the most common types of writing in high school English classes are the reader response and the personal narrative—a focus he is highly critical of (2012). Applebee and Langer's own study of middle and high school writing instruction shows that students are rarely required to write at the length that fiction writers I interview attempt—and that the "essay" writing they do is often formulaic and often shaped by high-stakes test expectation (2011). In sum, I feel confident in my claim that opportunities for fiction writing in the high school ELA curriculum are seriously limited in most schools, except in special electives and writing for school literary magazines. Ultimately, readers will need to assess this claim against their own situations and experiences.

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

If we gain insight into the human character by reading fiction, why can't we get similar insight (or more profound insight) by creating characters? Even if our aim is still to make better fiction readers, won't writing fiction attune students to craft, structure, and detail as they learn to read like a writer? If we want to build a love of writing, why in the world would we want to rule out the option to write fiction, emulating the genres and cultural storytelling that is so deeply popular outside school walls? Why do schools so willingly accept these handicaps and limitations?

Here are some possibilities.

Obstacles and Resistance

Teachers Themselves Have Had Little Experience Writing Fiction

This is a variant of a bigger problem—that English teachers are rarely required to take writing courses as part of their preparation. At the University of New Hampshire, where I taught for thirty-seven years, the only required writing course for prospective teachers was first-year writing (and that was required of all students)—an example of the reading–writing imbalance. It is exceedingly rare that a prospective teacher would take the prerequisites that would enable them to register for a fiction-writing course. And it is, as I noted earlier, unlikely that they will be taught versions of fiction that their future students will want to write.

The Fiction Writing That Students Choose to Do Is Often Imitative of Low-Status Forms of Entertainment

Young writers are drawn to plot, to action, to writing versions of movies and video games that appear—to a certain sensibility—as less "authentic" than nonfiction genres like the memoir. Borrowing characters and plot elements (and weapons) from preexisting stories violates an expectation of originality and personal examination of experiences. (As if memoir is not, itself, a preexisting genre.) Popular youth genres, particularly those selected by boys, have traditionally been labeled "escapist."

One of the least attractive traits in adults is the inability—or unwillingness—to imagine literary gratifications that we don't feel (though we perhaps once did). And then to rationalize this inability, this limitation of

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

imagination, as a claim that certain popular genres are incapable of eliciting thoughtful engagement. We fail to decenter, to take an inquiry stance, to learn why someone might enjoy a literary genre that we don't (or won't). Some genres of writing, we come to believe, are capable of eliciting complex responses, and some aren't—by their very nature.

This view has been powerfully challenged by a number of scholars, most notably Janice Radway in her sympathetic investigation of women reading romance novels (1984). My own approach is deeply indebted to the work of Jeffrey Wilhelm and Michael Smith—in fact my own title mirrors theirs, as does my argument. Wilhelm and Smith begin with a set of provocative questions:

> Might kids gravitate to the kinds of texts they need? Might they experience a deep fulfillment that we don't completely understand when they read those books? Might passionate readers of marginalized texts—those books that many parents and teachers disapprove of at some level—be choosing books that help them build on new interests, become competent in new ways, and grow beyond their current selves? (2014, 9)

Yes. Yes. Yes. They found that even genres we might dismiss as superficial and escapist—like vampire stories—could elicit profound reflections on sexual attraction. Texts do not set hard boundaries on what readers can do with them—a fact driven home to me when I listened to literacy expert James Gee spend a brilliant hour on an aspirin bottle label.

An argument for fiction writing can mirror the one Wilhelm and Smith make for the reading of marginalized genres. Young writers who devote themselves to seemingly endless postapocalyptic stories *are gaining something by it*—and to understand that gratification we need to ask them questions. We cannot presume to know their realities.

Inexperienced Writers Have Difficulty Managing Plots, Leading to Unplanned and Excessively Long Stories

True. True. True. But there are ways, including storyboarding, that can help with planning. In addition, there are very popular short forms like flash fiction that can be introduced.

Yet I would like to make the case for this long writing. When I speak with the really fluent and accomplished writers who have taken my first-year writing course, many of them could look back to a time when they wrote

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

at length—maybe a journal they kept up, or a long novel they wrote with a friend, chapter after chapter. Unlike many of their peers, who panicked about meeting a page requirement, these writers had an expansive sense of what writing could be—they had *felt* that openness, that the blank page (or screen) was an invitation and not a threat. That writing could unfold. They have trouble staying within the page limit—a good problem in my view.

I realize that it may seem like I am supporting overwriting, *and I am*. Almost all the good young writers push description and dialogue and plot to the limit, often boring to any outside reader. It's the same with athletes—watch promising middle school athletes. They will often charge into a hopeless layup, dive for a ball clearly out of reach, attempt the impossible pass. Often their bodies are not under full control. Their game is excessive. Yet that daring, that excess, that lack of caution, is a virtue. Good coaches know that. Control will come later. In the same way, the overwriter can be taught to control the gift of excess, but the underwriter has no awareness that this excess is even a possibility.

But even this inevitable difficulty can be helped by instruction and planning tools, as we will see in the interviews with skilled teachers. Concepts like *plot beats*, drawn from screenwriting, can be attractive supports. When students have difficulties inherent in a task, the solution is not to avoid the task, particularly one as appealing as fiction writing. The proper response is to offer support—and we will meet teachers up to that challenge.

Concern About Violence and Other Themes Students Write About

When I was conducting research on young boys writing I had to confront a puzzling double standard. In many schools, there was a "no violence" policy for writing. No fights, killing, stabbing, plane crashes. In one school there was an absurd rule that no character in a fictional piece could do something that wasn't allowed in the school. When I visited schools with such restrictions, I asked, "Does the same rule apply to reading?"

There would be a pause. And then the inevitable, "Well, no." Of course, "no." Without violence, or the threat of violence (physical, psychological), there would be no plots. No literature at all. No Bible. No *Hamlet*. No *BFG*. No *Beowulf* with its tremendous description of Beowulf breaking his sword in Grendel's eye. It was as if literature, with all its violence, was uplifting and humanizing—but a student writing on these themes might need a visit to the guidance counselor. It seemed to me this was just one more example of

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

Deborah Brandt's (2015) claim, that reading and writing have hardly been viewed as parallel systems—writing is somehow more dangerous and in need of suppression.

I wondered if this double standard was not also an inadvertent acknowledgment of the power of writing for the writer, of a deeper and more dangerous engagement that occurs when a writer takes on the same dark themes that animate great literature. To put it yet another way: to read about deviance is a benign experience, yet to inhabit the mind of the deviant or *invent* scenes in which violence occurs exposes a troubling morbidity.

The writer must dwell longer, must work out the visual picture, must create—and it may be that the deeper identification with the violence is what alarms adults. It may seem to reveal a dangerous attraction to violence, an unhealthy obsession, even an unethical acceptance of the inevitability of violence. Yet this danger can be attractive, and hardly a sign of psychological danger. Smith and Wilhelm claim that horror stories provide a "psychological container for examining fears and shadow contents" (2014, 143), a claim that makes sense for writing as well as reading.

Fiction writing allows for a greater psychological range than do most nonfiction forms. The writer can imagine extremes of fear, anger, resentment, and, yes, evil that they don't and wouldn't want to experience in real life. By contrast, the personal essays that students write—for example, stories of growth and surmounting challenges in college application essays—typically operate in a more tightly defined moral or psychological range (Vidali 2007; Wight 2017). Claims for the "authenticity" of the personal essay ignore the guardrails that shape disclosure, often in a safely moralistic way.

Making a place for fiction writing in middle and high schools entails challenges. Teachers are often given (or give themselves) the impossible task of determining if a "dark" story is a precursor to violence or self-harm. Or even that it might be a cause. For some reason this is not a problem with reading. Fiction writing also poses issues concerning limits, appropriate language, sexism, stereotyping, and placing other students in uncomfortable positions. Students will test limits.

True. But in my work with boys and literacy I became convinced that these issues can be talked about: the very genres they want to write impose limits. Plots must unfold, and not simply be just a train wreck of action. Characters must interest the reader and act, even when being deviant, in a plausible way. Violence has its place, but it often works best when something is left to the imagination—and I am convinced that it is not violence but

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

suspense and anticipation (and fear) that is the characteristic writers would want to achieve if they could.

We need to get beyond a crude "if-you-write-it-you-want-to-do-it" mentality that can censor student writing. Whether we like it or not, we are attracted to deviance, danger, catastrophe, so long as we can experience them at a safe distance. It doesn't mean we, or our students, are warped or deviant. If we see a slowdown for an auto accident, the moral side of our brain hopes that it is a minor fender bender—but there is a side of us that is excited and gratified by a major smashup. To deny that attraction is an act of bad faith.

Lack of Fit with Standards That Focus on Being "College and Career Ready"

On the surface, the very thin surface, this priority makes sense. Few students will go on to be conventionally published novel writers, though they will need to write reports, résumés, letters, evaluations. Therefore it makes sense for the "grand shift" around sixth grade to the more functional types of writing—to be, as the expression goes, "college and career ready."

I call this bias, the *cattle-chute vision of preparation*. If you want someone to end up at point A, you need a narrow and direct pathway to A. All student writing needs to be—so to speak—Type A. To write Type B or C or D is to deviate from the most efficient and direct pathway, to waste time and dissipate effort. This is why a creative writing elective is often viewed as a kind of indulgence, unrelated to the main mission of high school writing. I think of the advice that the young Dav Pilkey received: that he would never make a living drawing silly cartoons about a principal who thinks he is Captain Underpants. That, of course, was several million book sales ago.

The cattle-chute mentality misses the point that (1) there are goals for writing that are not purely pragmatic and career oriented (like poetry writing—virtually ignored in the Common Core standards); and (2) even if we take this extremely pragmatic view, skills can migrate from type to type. Fiction writing entails reflection, analysis, close observation, internal debate—all broadly useful skills that can feed other kinds of writing, even the scientific report. To create characters in conflict, the writer must imagine opposing points of view—a skill needed in argumentation. Fiction writers are typically excellent reviewers, essayists, and nonfiction writers. They don't fall apart when they move outside of fiction—they excel.

The cattle-chute model also misrepresents narrative as a singular type of writing, often part of the triad, narrative/informational/argument. Yet we

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

have abundant evidence from the field of cognition that narrative is not a discrete type of writing—it is our primary mode of understanding, and it underlies all writing (Newkirk 2014). Grant Faulkner, the executive director of NaNoWriMo (the National Novel Writing Month organization, which has brought November novel writing to ten thousand classrooms nationwide), makes the case this way:

> We are meaning-making creatures, and the way we make meaning in the world is through our stories. I happen to believe that all nonfiction has storytelling elements. I fear that that is going to be lost. I think that kids can be more attuned to the storytelling elements that go into nonfiction by doing it directly, through fiction writing. (personal interview)

This storytelling, in his view, is directly applicable to other types of writing "because if you look at any academic paper, any research paper, it has a narrative arc. It has points of narrative tension, it has characters. It's a story in the end."

He added that any student who manages to write a thirty- or forty-thousand-word novel in a month will hardly be intimidated by any future writing assignment.

Fiction writing can also offer an experience that I feel is crucial to enjoying writing: the feeling that writing generates writing—that a word suggests the next word or phrase, that we can listen to writing and sense what it suggests. A verb invites an object; a noun a clarifying clause. A conflict invites dialogue, action invites reflection, a difficulty that a character faces invites planning. A plot unfolds. This is what fluency feels like, looks like. The great dividing line between writers and nonwriters is the capacity to enter this receptive state, to feel and respond to these invitations. As Montaigne wrote centuries ago, he could keep on writing "as long as there was ink and paper in the world."

Fiction writing is not the only avenue for this development of fluency—journals, day books, and other low-threshold writing can do the trick—but writing lengthy stories is ideal for this purpose. Even for young writers, there can always be a sequel, characters who never die.

Time. Time. Time

When I was a graduate student in Texas during the 1970s, I recall the legislature passing a new requirement that students should be taught fire

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

prevention. Who could argue against that? But the question was: Which subject-area teachers should teach this required unit?

It was decided that since it would involve reading and writing, the best place for it would be in the English classroom. This was one maybe outlandish example of a chronic problem, the proliferation of expectations, standards, competencies—to the point where English Language Arts (ELA) teachers are haunted by the feeling that they can't do anything thoroughly or well. While it has been argued for decades that writing should take place "across the curriculum," the major, sometimes exclusive, responsibility ends up on our shoulders. And even for teachers committed to fiction writing, it's a tough fit in the curriculum. Stories take time and are often far longer than more contained forms of writing—an editorial, for example, which can be held to a few paragraphs.

Still, there are things we can do to create space for writing, including fiction writing—things under our control. The great Shaker song has the repeating line, "it's a gift to be simple." It's also hard work—the spare lines of Shaker furniture, the appealing lack of adornment, take exquisite skill to perfect. Looking at the clutter, the crowding, of the ELA curriculum, I'd like to propose two ways of opening up space for writing, including fiction writing.

Don't Let Writing-Like Activities Substitute for Writing

In my day it was grammar instruction that crowded out writing. Now, it might be a spelling program, or a vocabulary program—complete with worksheets, exercises, quizzes. These "peripherals" make money for publishers, they conform well to objective grading. They fill the grade book, and they may have some marginal benefit to learning to write. But we need to fight to make writing (and not writing-like activities) the center of our work, we need to learn to say no and teach these features of writing in context.

Don't Talk So Much

Sorry to be so rude. But deep in our DNA there must be some image of teaching where we are talking—instructing, giving directions, up front. Just walk past about any class. Studies of teacher lessons affirm that there is a deeply ingrained recitation script where the teacher takes two out of every three turns (Mehan 1979). Teacher asks question–student answers–teacher responds to answer. But if we see writing (and reading) as studio subjects,

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

similar to art class, the time focus is on producing—with the teacher commenting, encouraging.

Often when I share research interest with my university colleagues, I feel like a total fraud. One of the faculty members I swim with is doing work on subatomic particles—quarks, antiquarks, gluons, hadrons—with non–integer multiples of electric charges. And all I was doing was saying, "Keep it simple." We don't need all this stuff. I felt like the frustrated coach in *Bull Durham*, "This is a simple game—ya throw the ball, ya hit the ball, ya catch the ball."

There are to be sure other major barriers, including the time to read, respond, and grade, that will be addressed later. It's not really simple—neither is baseball.

Bad Fiction

I was speaking to a very gifted writing teacher whose students *did* have the chance to write fiction. He was discussing some of the challenges he faced, and he paused, looked me in the eye, and said, "I'll be truthful, Tom, it pains me to read bad fiction. And that's what most students write."

It was my turn to pause, a bit surprised, and I asked him, "Don't all beginning writers write badly in some way? Is there something about 'bad fiction writing' that makes it more painful to read than a bad argument?" We both puzzled about this. It may be that we are so used to reading fiction—but not arguments—for a kind of literary pleasure, that we are bothered when we don't get it, or when we only get it in momentary flashes. Even a rudimentary, predictable argument can be functional: in fact, we get them all the time on cable news. But—and I'm speculating—amateur fiction can be a more irritating form of shortfall.

If that is the case, this "irritability" can get in the way of effective teaching. It can make us less forgiving of the approximations and imitations of beginning writers. I remember reading W. Jackson Bates' biography of John Keats (1963), and I was struck by how bad his early poetry was. This bias can close us off from the sense of achievement (and pleasure) that the writers take in their own work and cause us to miss those flashes of skill.

• •

A confession. I am not the ideal person to explore adolescent fiction writing. In fact, for years I shared the prejudices and reluctances that I have identified. To put it more bluntly I was a literary snob, priding myself on reading

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

"good literature" and being able to distinguish it from beach books and other "trash." I winced at reading the long fictional stories students wrote and agreed with many of my colleagues that students just wrote "bad fiction." I was never a fiction writer myself, in school or after. I never immersed myself in fandom, never devoted myself that way, not even during the Harry Potter phenomenon. I would flunk any quiz on popular culture.

I am writing this book as an outsider—which, after all, is not a bad starting point, to begin in acknowledged ignorance. But I needed insiders, tour guides, to point the way—to explain the sources of their fiction writing, to describe the gratifications of this work. So I located young writers and writing teachers willing to talk to me. In some cases these writers attended the summer Writers Academy in Durham, New Hampshire. Others were recommended to me by teachers I had worked with. These students, let me emphasize, are *not* representative of all students; they are a subculture in schools, often feeling somewhat alone in their passion. But I believe that, as they make their case for fiction writing in this book, readers will sense the missed opportunity in schools where writing is tightly controlled. My interviewees had a lot to say about that!

These writers sent me samples of their fiction, in some cases whole novels, which I read before interviewing them, some in-person at school and public libraries, others through the miracle of Zoom. In all I conducted approximately forty student interviews and fifteen teacher interviews, which form the core of this book. The student interviews vary in length from twenty to fifty-eight minutes, and they are built around several questions or invitations that were consistent:

1. Tell me about your history as a fiction reader or writer.
2. What is the attraction of fiction?
3. How is writing fiction different for you than nonfiction?
4. If you were to take me inside your head while writing fiction, what would I see?
5. Do you have the opportunity to write fiction in school? If not, why do you think that is?
6. What is the best help you received from a teacher about writing fiction?
7. Do you have readers? What do you find helpful in their response?

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

8. What advice would you give to students who want to write fiction?
9. What advice would you give to teachers to be good teachers of fiction writing?

I also posed questions related to the particular piece of fiction they shared with me. As much as possible, I wanted the feeling of an author interview that you might hear on public radio.

In my interviews with teachers, I was interested in the place of fiction writing in their schools, particularly how they justified it, how they framed assignments, their role as reader and evaluator. I was interested in how they managed plot and length, which to me would be mind-boggling when students wrote novels, as they did in one classroom.

I listened to the interviews multiple times, noting recurring themes or similar points that students and teachers brought up. Like any qualitative researcher I was looking for patterns. For example, I found that students often spontaneously brought up their dislike of the ways in which rubrics are used, and I began to pay special attention to the reasons why. I try to bring in these comments using a "theme and variation" method, showing multiple instances of student comment on a topic. This is, in a way, a check against highlighting the interesting but outlier response of a single student. I also tried to link individual students' comments to their own fictional work. As an example, I came to see the deep pleasure many of them had in depicting "action" and I would make note of where they did that in their writing. I came to deeply appreciate my tour guides in this project, and I hope that I do justice to their insights and creative work.

• •

One day during my high school years, say 1962, I was home sick, and my dad passed on to me a Signet paperback with a picture of a young man wearing an odd red hat and with a similarly odd title, *The Catcher in the Rye*. I'd never heard of the book. I recall reading aloud the opening and coming to "all that David Copperfield kind of crap," thinking this is a book written for me, in my language—the first time I ever felt that way.

Now, of course, the book is standard school reading, rarely challenged anymore, and I suppose students are writing the same "essays" about it that Salinger mocks in the novel. All of which raises the question of what happens when any art form or media becomes part of school. Does it lose its edge,

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx

become domesticated? Is it converted into a moral tract with "themes"? Is rap in the classroom really rap?

This is a question for fiction writing—does it lose its edge, the personal ownership and freedom that writers feel as they compose for no grade, no teacher? While I recognize that this is a danger, the history of the English curriculum deals with the shifting boundary between the popular and the academic. Anne Gere (1994) has written extensively of the "extracurriculum"—informal reading and writing groups—that have progressively become part of the curriculum (for a long time American literature was not taught—and up until the 1960s it couldn't count for the major at my own university!). Women's studies, film studies, courses in graphic novel, multimodal composing, even creative writing—all began outside the established curricular grid. Schools and universities gradually—and sometimes grudgingly—brought them in, to maintain relevancy and attract students.

It simply makes no sense to deny students the opportunity to write in the genres they choose to read. Why in the world should we undermine our efforts to engage students with writing? If reading fiction is humanizing and valuable—the same (and perhaps a stronger) case can be made for writing.

Enough. Time to dive in.

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E09215.aspx