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If we are not helping students to become confident,
habitual readers, I don't know what business we are in.



The Book in Question

WHY AND HOW READING IS IN CRISIS

Carol Jago

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

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To my mother, Mary Crosetto, who suggests you read
Wisława Szymborska's *Poems: New and Collected, 1957–1997*



Credits, continued from p. iv

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Introduction

*Books are the quietest and most constant of friends;
they are the most accessible and wisest of counselors,
and the most patient of teachers.*

— Charles William Eliot (1834–1926)

In conversations with colleagues I often hear the same complaint: students don't read anymore. *The Book in Question* is my attempt to address this alarming issue—alarming for teachers and even more terrifying for society.

Why don't teenagers read? It is tempting and fashionable to blame social media, video games, and the ubiquitous smartphone, but maybe we teachers are also at fault. In our urgency to prepare students to be “college and career ready,” too often we turn what should be an intellectually stimulating reading assignment into a pointless chore. While strategy instruction can help make transparent to struggling readers what good readers do instinctively, it can also substitute a series of robotic steps for what reading actually is: an act of discovery.

I don't pick up a book in search of buried treasure, yet often that is what I find: nuggets of gold about what it means to be human, what it has meant to be human in the past, and what it might mean to be human in the future. After fifty years of reading, I'm still astounded by how much I don't know and how much books have to teach me. Though somewhat cowardly when it comes to taking risks in my own life, I'm an intrepid reader. I'll try anything.

Early in my teaching career, Steve Chesne, a seventh grader, challenged me, saying that I was always telling the class what to read but never asking students what I should read. “Fair enough,” I thought. He came to school the next day with Arthur C. Clark's *Childhood's End*. This compelling story about overlords from outer space taking over the earth propelled me into months of reading science fiction, a genre that until that moment had never appealed to me. As middle school students love to do, Steve challenged me, and I thanked him for the challenge. Without his prodding, I might never have explored this genre. Notwithstanding the loss to my own reading life, I would also have been much less adept at recommending science fiction to future students. *Childhood's End*, along with William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, acquired a place of pride in my readers' circle collections.

In his opening essay to the Spring 2017 issue of *Lapham's Quarterly*, Lewis Lapham describes his own voyage of discovery as a reader.

I live in all the pasts present on the page, and I begin to understand what the physicists have in mind when they talk about the continuum of time and space. . . . The stories that bear a second reading are those in which the author manages to get at the truth of what he or she has seen, felt, thought, knows, can find language to express. The task is never easy, but it is the labor of the writer's observation turned by the wheel of the reader's imagination that seeds the fertile ground . . . from which mankind gathers its common stores of energy and hope. (17–18)

I worry that if the next generation fails to acquire the reading habit, mankind's store of energy and hope will diminish and that we will find ourselves increasingly vulnerable. As A. E. Housman warned, in life, "luck's a chance, but trouble's sure" (1896). The truth of this observation was brought home to me while reading Angie Thomas' remarkable young adult novel *The Hate U Give* (2017). The book's sixteen-year-old protagonist, Starr Carter, has lost two friends to gun violence: one to a drive-by shooting, the other at the hands of the police, both in her presence. As Starr grapples with the responsibility of bearing witness—to a grand jury as well as to her own community—she demonstrates how it feels like to come of age in a society where prejudice is entrenched. Thomas' story contributes to our store of energy and hope by insisting on telling truth to power.

Reading books like *The Hate U Give* can change lives. Such books invite naturally solipsistic youth to consider how their own welfare is linked to the welfare of others. Worthwhile books challenge conventional assumptions and offer examples of how individual acts can alter the course of lives and even the course of history.

I want students to feel uneasy if they don't have something in line to read next. I want them to be so hungry for what they find in books that they read long into the night, avoid company, and even at times ignore their teacher.

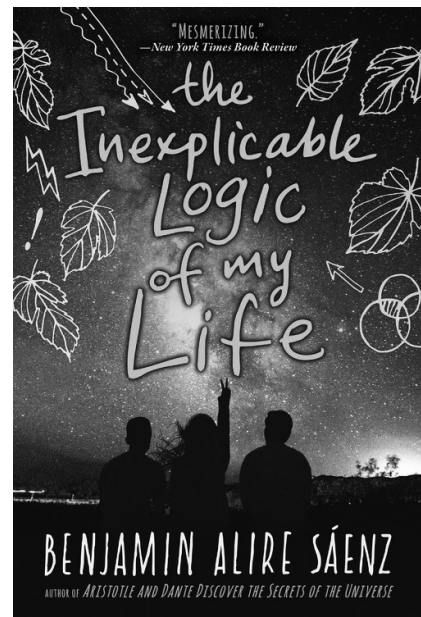
This is not to say that young readers don't need teachers to guide them. Sometimes all they need is an enticing introduction to a story. Sometimes a lurid cover will hook them. At other times I need to accompany students on their journey through a book, helping them situate themselves in time and place and negotiate complicated syntax. It's a delicate balance. I want students to know what to do when their comprehension breaks down.

The most common reading “strategy,” the one you and I use every day of our lives, is rereading. We slow down and read the sentence a second or third time. We pay attention to punctuation; we check if there is a word we misread or don’t know. Making sense of complex text doesn’t require a fancy acronym. All it needs is the desire to understand and the will to persevere.

But how does a teacher inspire students to want to understand *Beowulf* or *Othello*? And why should a student persevere through such unfamiliar textual worlds anyway? Wouldn’t it be easier simply to assign Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s remarkable book *The Inexplicable Logic of My Life*? That course would be easier but also pointless. We can’t afford to waste instructional time teaching books that teenagers can, should, and will read on their own. English teachers frequently ruin such great stories for students by talking about foreshadowing and symbolism or by making students annotate the text and write an essay on character development. Is this what you look forward to doing after finishing a good book? I doubt it.

Only literary snobs read nothing but classics. I want students to range widely, pleasing as well as challenging themselves. My own reading life is wildly eclectic. I love nothing better than a Daniel Silva thriller to make a long airplane ride disappear. I also delight in contemporary classics like Anthony Marra’s *Constellation of Vital Phenomena* and *The Tsar of Love and Techno*, which challenge me as a reader, taking me to places I’ve never been and immersing me in history I never knew, in this case the history of Chechnya. Marra’s novels can be hard to follow. They force me to slow down, reread, and pay attention to every textual clue the author sows in order to keep track of events and characters. After finishing one of his books I long to talk about them with other readers. I know I will understand them better after hearing what others have seen and thought.

Filling in graphic organizers keeps students busy doing something you can observe. Thinking takes place out of sight. Instead of assigning artificial tasks for students to perform as they read, we should model our reading lessons after the way we read. This approach stands a good chance of both fostering a love of reading and building students’ confidence in their own reading skills.



There is urgency to this work. In a world that has become increasingly polarized, stories invite readers to empathize with people who appear at first as The Other. Crossing such borders may entail discomfort and require navigation between the Scylla of unfamiliar settings and the Charybdis of unpronounceable character names. But this is a bridge to somewhere—to a more empathetic world.