



RECONSIDERING THE WHOLE-CLASS NOVEL

by Gregory Bryan

Although the world is full of wonderful books for children and adolescents, I believe that no book can be guaranteed to be of interest to all children. Despite this, it is common practice in Canadian classrooms for teachers to select a novel, purchase thirty copies of that novel, and then assign it as required reading for all students in the class.

Most classes consist of a mix of both boys and girls, with a liberal sprinkling of stronger readers and less capable readers. Additionally, classrooms are comprised of children with interests ranging from ballet to battleships, animals to Anime, and machines to malls. How is it, then, that educators so often expect that one book—any book—can suit the needs and desires of a classroom full of different people?

In any classroom of approximately thirty students, it seems unlikely that any one book is going to satisfy the interests of more than, say, half of the children. It is even more unlikely that a given book is going to be at an appropriate level of difficulty for most of the children assigned to read it. For some children, given their interests and abilities, the assigned book is going to be much too difficult. For others, perhaps with a well-developed interest and background in the topic of the book, an assigned novel can be too simple.

The Importance of Choice

The problem of assigned whole-class novels is further exacerbated when one considers the importance of choice in reading motivation. As one whose research focus is reading engagement, I believe that choice is the single most important factor in reading motivation. Like many people, when I was in school,

I disliked some of the books I was forced to read. Yet, I have returned to many of those same books as an adult, reading and loving them when I enjoyed the luxury of choosing to read them. With children, the important thing is not so much *what* they read, but *that* they read and I believe that allowing choices increases the likelihood that children will read.

Because teachers want children to have opportunities to discuss books in class and because there are often specific things that teachers want students to read and learn about, it is perhaps not the best situation to have all students self-selecting different texts. Rather, for activities like novel studies and literature circles, teachers can provide choices while still imposing some limits. For instance, as wonderful a book as is Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (1988), it might not be suitable for all grade four students. For some, it will be too hard, for others, too simple. For some, it might be just plain boring. A teacher increases her/his chances of successful classroom reading experiences by providing options for the children. Rather than thirty copies of *Matilda*, perhaps the teacher could offer six copies of *Matilda*, and six copies each of other Dahl books such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), *The Witches* (1983), and *Danny: The Champion of the World* (1975). Students can select from five options, thus increasing the likelihood that they will find a book that appeals to them, while also endowing them with the motivating sense of ownership that comes from having chosen the book they are reading. Some boys who might balk at reading about the female protagonist in *Matilda* will be enthusiastic in choosing to read about the boy in *Danny: The Champion of the World*.

"It's Good For Them"

When I think back on some of my worst reading experiences from school, those experiences were often ones in which I was forced to read a book in which I had little interest. Assigning a specific title is often justified on the basis that the book will be "good for them." I recall being forced to eat boiled pumpkin when I was a child, presumably because my parents considered it would be "good for me." If you will excuse my lack of humility, I claim to be "doing quite well, thank you very much," despite completely eliminating boiled pumpkins from my diet as soon as I left home. I do, however, rather suspect that I would be doing considerably less well if being forced to read certain books at school had turned me from reading forever. In forcing children to read a specific book, that is a risk we take.

Theme Sets

As with the selection of Roald Dahl books mentioned above, teachers might provide students with choices around a certain theme. In the above example, the theme was simply a study of works by Roald Dahl. For older, middle school students, another theme that works well is problems at school. A theme about problems in school might include *Stargirl* (Spinelli, 2000), *Leaving Fletchville* (Schmidt, 2008), *Schooled* (Korman, 2007), *The 6th Grade Nickname Game* (Korman, 1998), and *Loser* (Spinelli, 2002). All of these books have enough "big theme" ideas in common that their use need not be limited only to small group discussion among those who have read a specific title. Rather, whole-class discussions can revolve around the similarities contained in each book—issues such as bullying, teasing and ostracizing school mates.

Middle Years and High School history classes can learn a great deal about historical events through reading a range of young adult historical fiction novels. For instance, there are several powerful books about the Irish Famine of the 1840s, including *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (Conlon-McKenna, 1990) and *Nory Ryan's Song* (Giff, 2000), and three novels by Canadian authors, *Bridget's Black '47* (Perkyns, 2009), *The Grave* (Heneghan, 2000), and the most recent Governor General's Award-winner, *Greener Grass* (Pignat, 2008). There are many good book sets through which classes might explore topics as diverse as wilderness survival, families, war or birds. Librarians will be more than willing to talk to teachers about book sets that revolve around a certain theme. Other than that, all the teacher needs is a willingness to empower the students by granting them the freedom to participate in selecting their own novels.

Allowing choices around a theme will provide students with exposure to many books. As students hear their peers talking about their book choices, it is likely to generate reading enthusiasm and many students will want to read some of the other books in addition to their own. Students will be eager to finish one book in order to then turn to another. What a different reading atmosphere this will engender to that in classrooms where children cannot wait to finish their book just so that they can forget about reading for a time—until the next dreaded moment when another unappealing book is forced upon them.

NOVEL SETS CITED

Roald Dahl

Dahl, R. (1961). *James and the Giant Peach*. New York: Knopf.
 Dahl, R. (1964). *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. New York: Knopf.
 Dahl, R. (1975). *Danny: The Champion of the World*. New York: Knopf.
 Dahl, R. (1983). *The Witches*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
 Dahl, R. (1988). *Matilda*. New York: Viking.

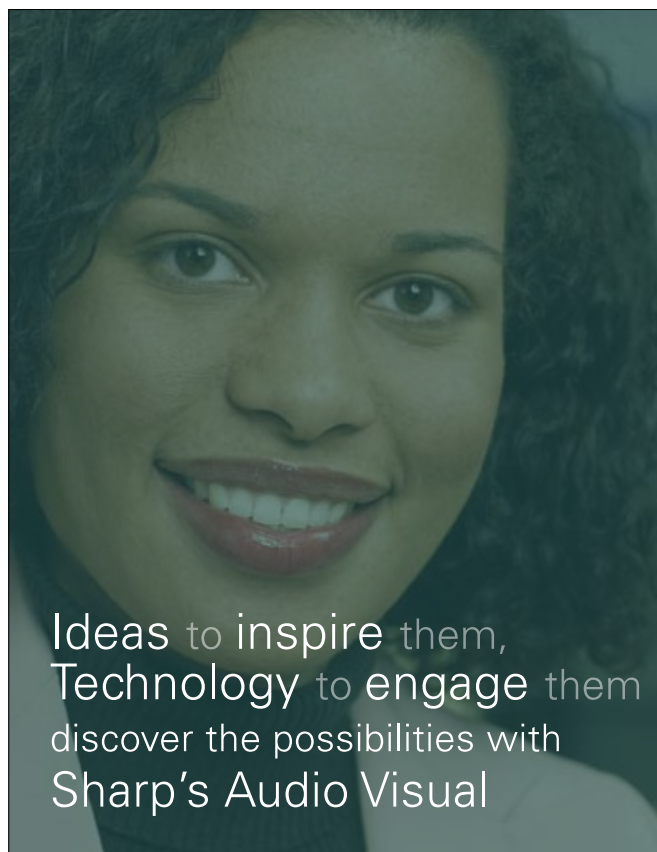
Problems at School

Korman, G. (1998). *The 6th Grade Nickname Game*. New York: Scholastic.
 Korman, G. (2007). *Schooled*. New York: Hyperion.
 Schmidt, R. (2008). *Leaving Fletchville*. Victoria, BC: Orca.
 Spinelli, J. (2000). *Stargirl*. New York: Knopf.
 Spinelli, J. (2002). *Loser*. New York: Scholastic.

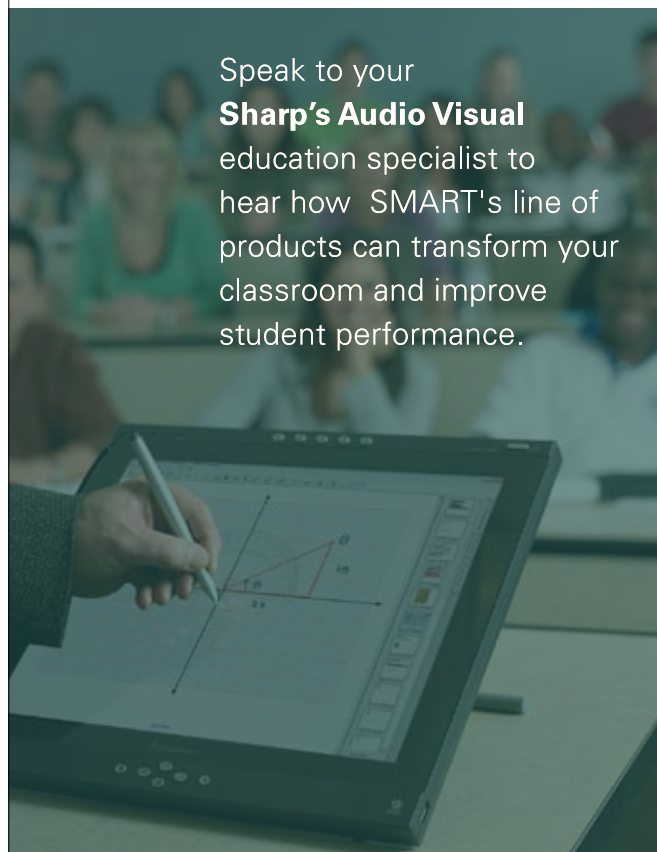
The Irish Famine

Conlon-McKenna, M. (1990). *Under the Hawthorn Tree*. New York: Holiday House.
 Giff, P. R. (2000). *Nory Ryan's Song*. New York: Yearling.
 Heneghan, J. (2000). *The Grave*. Vancouver: Groundwood.
 Perkyns, D. (2009). *Bridget's Black '47*. Toronto: Dundurn.
 Pignat, C. (2008). *Greener Grass*. Markham ON: Red Deer.

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