Reader’s Theater

Insights with Award-winning Authors Avi, Sharon Creech, Walter Dean Myers and Sarah Weeks

Reader’s Theater offers a powerful literary and educational experience for all involved. TeachingBooks.net filmed and interviewed four extraordinary authors and asked them to share their insights and strategies for incorporating Reader’s Theater into the classroom.

This written interview is edited from discussions with the authors and three professionals on November 6 and 7, 2005 as part of a larger production where Avi, Sharon Creech, Walter Dean Myers and Sarah Weeks performed scripts adapted from one another’s works. All editorial decisions in this interview are the responsibility of TeachingBooks.net.

“Reader’s Theater is the dramatization of written works performed by two or more readers. The intent of Reader’s Theater is to present a written work in such a way that the audience’s attention is directed toward the author’s original creation while experiencing literature in a new and different way. Reader’s Theater differs from conventional plays in that there is no attempt to create a sense of reality on stage. Reader’s Theater is presentational — the images are formed in the minds of the audience and the readers themselves. This way, the audience is involved in the performance as much as the readers are.”

— HarperCollins Reader’s Theater Production program, Naperville, Illinois, November 7, 2005

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TeachingBooks.net provides original, in-studio movies of authors and illustrators and a wealth of multimedia resources on K–12 books that generate enthusiasm for books and reading.

View movies of these performances and a documentary on incorporating Reader’s Theater into the classroom at http://TeachingBooks.net/ReadersTheater.
Avi

Avi is the author of the Newbery Medal book *Crispin: The Cross of Lead* as well as numerous other titles, such as *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, a Newbery Honor book. For this Reader's Theater production, Avi's books *Poppy's Return* and *Don't You Know There's A War On* were scripted and performed.

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**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Are you enjoying creating and performing this all-author production of Reader’s Theater with your colleagues Sharon Creech, Walter Dean Myers and Sarah Weeks?

**AVI:** It’s wonderful; all of these people are friends of mine. I know them through conferences and various gatherings, but it’s rare for us to spend time working and having fun together at the core of our profession. There is something enormously satisfying about working with my colleagues in this way.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please explain why you got involved in creating Reader’s Theater with other authors.

**AVI:** Creating Reader’s Theater comes about through my interest in Charles Dickens. He has been referred to as our first cultural celebrity because he performed his works in really interesting ways. He altered his books; he didn't just stand up and read, but altered the text so as to give it heightened drama. He came from a somewhat theatrical background.

When I was performing my work about 20 years ago, I tried to get other writers to do it with me, but no one would. Then, I met somebody who was interested in the project and told me I could perform at the International Reading Association annual conference. I jumped at the opportunity. That’s where it began, but I’ve been doing this for many years. I now do my own personal show where I edit my pieces, hire a director, and perform some eight segments of my books that last for about an hour.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Do you have a background in theater?

**AVI:** Yes and no. When I made up my mind to be a writer as a high school senior, I wanted to be a playwright. For many years, I wrote bad plays; so, in a sense, my writing origins lie in the theater. A lot of my work reflects that: there’s a lot of dialogue, short scenes and a very theatrical structure to my books. For me, theater and reading just come together.

Not only did I write bad plays, but I was a bad actor, too. I think I construct novels much better. Reader’s Theater is a perfect meeting of writing and acting for me – and I don’t have to memorize lines.
TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you suppose is the power of Reader's Theater?

AVI: I think we sometimes forget that the novel, the short story, and the poem are extensions of people just telling stories. Reader's Theater brings us back to the oral roots of the written word. Literature derives from storytelling and the spoken word. Having said that, think of where kids are today. Most of their narrative experience comes from television and film. So, their sense of narrative is very auditory.

We who write books are preparing students to blend their auditory experience with a written tradition. The students need to reconnect to it. And there's no better way to reintroduce the written word than by re-presenting it in Reader's Theater.

Reader's Theater is enormously powerful when it's done in schools because it enables kids to reenter the books as something experienced on their own terms; they begin to become part of the books.

I believe that one of the great failings of the school systems in America today is predicated on the presumption that people read and that families read. It's not always true. Educators have to find instruments, programs, methods and strategies to reengage children with books. You have to find a way to make reading accessible to this culture, this day, this age. Reader's Theater is a very powerful tool for accomplishing that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you see happening to students when they get involved in a Reader's Theater production?

AVI: In essence, they become the writer. They read and get into the words, and by putting on the costume of “author,” they begin to articulate a kind of language, a kind of structure that is inherent in any writer's work. Suddenly, students have a new voice.

People so often forget that the vocabulary and grammar of writing is different than the vocabulary and grammar of talking. I often feel that writing needs to be taught as a second language. By allowing kids to get into the books, and performing them in Reader's Theater, you're teaching them language.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What advice would you offer on how to script a Reader’s Theater scene?

AVI: Choose a section from the book that has a dramatic arc to it; a sense of beginning and an emotional or active conclusion. In other words, the section should go from here to there in a coherent, logical way. Having said that, the trick is to remember that this is the spoken word and it is different from the written word.

The clue to all this came to me from Charles Dickens. In his reading manuscripts, he altered the original text to intensify the drama, the conviction and the emotionality of the performed work. In understanding what Charles Dickens did, I thought, “I guess that gives me permission to do that to my work, too.”

Teachers should not think of books as sacred text. Add notes to the text to instruct the reader on how to dramatize their lines. That will intensify the dramatic sensibility of the experience.
What could be better than working with a bunch of kids and saying, “Okay, I think this is a good chapter, but now we have to edit it for performance. What’s good here, what’s not good? Dare we say maybe the author wasted words here?” The answer is often, “Yes. Feel free to cut and alter the text for a Reader’s Theater performance.” Writers don’t write perfect books. Make it better in a different context.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How many performers do you feel is most appropriate for a Reader’s Theater production?

AVI: You want to have as many enthusiastic people as possible. In other words, if you can get 20 kids willing to work together and create this kind of experience, then by all means, include 20 kids. But if there are only four who are willing to do it, then use four. It’s energy and enthusiasm that counts.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Is there anything else that you’d like to say to teachers about sharing books with students?

AVI: Teachers often ask what they should read to their students. The first rule is only read what you enjoy reading. When selecting a text to use for Reader’s Theater, use the same guideline: select a text not because it’s on the curriculum or it’s on the state test, but because it would be fun to do.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Is it fair to say that you are, first and foremost, a storyteller?

AVI: Writers differ a great deal in terms of how they tell a story. If you and I were to take a given incident, and we both wrote about it, we would have a different way of telling the same story. Storytelling to me is the underlying energy of a story — the emotional necessity for telling a story. What I mean is, when I’m working on a book, my wife might ask what it’s about. I have learned not to tell her. I don’t tell anyone: I don’t tell my publisher and I don’t tell my friends. I may tell them I’m writing a mystery or work of historical fiction. But, I’ve learned that if I tell the story, then the energy that’s within me to share that story is somewhat diminished, and I believe that I need to keep it in.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What would you like to see happen to Reader’s Theater in the next few years?

AVI: There’s a tendency throughout American culture these days to focus on celebrity, the person. One of the things I love about Reader’s Theater is that it turns that around and refocuses on the text. It’s all about story and making stories vivid, intense and experienced.
Sharon Creech

Sharon Creech is the author of the Newbery Medal book, *Walk Two Moons*, as well as *Heartbeat* and the Newbery Honor book *The Wanderer*, among many others. Her books *Love That Dog* and *Replay* were scripted and performed in this Reader’s Theater production.

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TEACHINGBOOKS: What are you enjoying about this all-author production of Reader’s Theater with Avi, Walter Dean Myers and Sarah Weeks?

SHARON CREECH: It is so much fun to have other authors reading the books — there’s fun in the rehearsal, there’s fun in the performance, and there’s also this whole element of being able to perform other people’s works.

As authors, we are secluded in a room writing our own words all day long, and we become sick of our words and our own voice. So, it is entertaining for us to work with other authors, to see what they have to say, to see what approaches they bring to this, and to also see the response of the kids. It’s fantastic.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What’s an example of a fun moment in this particular Reader’s Theater performance?

SHARON CREECH: We were just starting to rehearse a scene from *Replay*, my most recent book. Walter Dean Myers has the first line. He says something about what Leo’s family calls him, and then Sarah and I come in and say, “Sardine.” Walter just broke up laughing every time we said this, and he couldn’t go on. We thought it would just take him a minute and he would go on, but he didn’t. He just kept laughing and then the rest of us started; it was contagious.

This reminds me of the fun of a book. There’s always humor and seriousness in my books and in probably most of the books of the other authors in this production of Reader’s Theater. It is so nice to be able to see it come alive and to actually hear people taking enjoyment from it and then to be able to laugh yourself. This makes the material fresh again.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are you hoping students in the audience or participating in Reader’s Theater will take from the experience?

SHARON CREECH: I think that when students do Reader’s Theater or when we do Reader’s Theater for a group of students, it brings another dimension to the book.

Reading a book is a very private experience. Reader’s Theater is performed with at least one other person, hopefully with an audience of at least one, and there’s a communion there. It’s no longer a book to individual connection. It’s a book to a group of people, and expanding. Maybe a reader imagines a scene a certain way, but through Reader’s Theater, they can see that...
others are emphasizing different words or a different scene and you get a different perspective out of it.

I hope that Reader’s Theater brings an element of fun and introduces the book in a quick, short way. When I give talks at schools and bookstores, I always take scripts from scenes and call students up from the audience. They’ve never seen the script, but they do an amazing job; they love the chance to be a part of the book. I’ve been doing that for more than 15 years.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please give more details about these impromptu Reader’s Theater experiences you create for your audiences.

SHARON CREECH: When I was teaching, I developed a version of Reader’s Theater with students. I was looking for a way to bring the book alive, to introduce a book in a quick, easy way and to make the classroom sessions more lively.

I began typing out scripts — pages of dialogue — and assigning parts. Then, students would take parts and read them. It was fun for them and fun for me, so I took that element with me when I went on the road with my first book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Setting is like a character in many of your novels. How do you reconcile the strong role that setting has in your books and the extracting of just dialogue for use in Reader’s Theater?

SHARON CREECH: I see the book and the Reader’s Theater script from the book as two separate things that play off each other. For instance, when I go to select scenes from a book for Reader’s Theater, I automatically take the pages that have a lot of dialogue, and those are ones you can take out of setting fairly easily.

Reader’s Theater is a different medium, just as a play versus a book is. And that’s how I see this. It provides a taste of the book. But of course, if you really want the whole flavor, read the book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The Reader’s Theater script for Love That Dog is basically the whole book in a sort of synopsis form. It must have been a lot of work to put that together. Is a teacher supposed to do this for their Reader’s Theater? How do you suggest a script be created for your books?

SHARON CREECH: I think using Reader’s Theater in a classroom depends a lot upon the individual teacher and the students, the age of the students and the interests of the students. The easiest way to create a script is to flip through the book and look for pages where there is a lot of dialogue. Almost always, where there is a lot of dialogue, there is some kind of tension or conflict. Tension between two people works well when you present it as Reader’s Theater.

Students are just as capable at creating Reader’s Theater scripts as the teacher is, once they see how it is done. The teacher can break the class into groups of maybe four students, then they can choose their own scene, assign their own parts, type up the script and perform it.
They love something like that, because then they have a sense of the whole process. They can see how to adapt a play form from a novel form, how and why to assign certain parts, how to make it more dramatic than just a reading. And they love that they don’t have to memorize the parts.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How long do you think a Reader’s Theater scene should be?

SHARON CREECH: When I use Reader’s Theater to introduce a book to students, I try to keep it fairly short. For instance, an individual scene might run two to three pages, which is about two to three minutes. If I know that I want to do three scenes from a book, I’ll choose three two-page scenes. I never go over 15 minutes. That’s about the maximum I can keep the attention of an audience.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you see Reader’s Theater as an homage to traditional storytelling, as Avi has talked about?

SHARON CREECH: Yes. If you think of storytelling originating with people sitting around telling a story, then someone decides to write these stories down, and then someone reads the stories and recreates them in others’ minds….

I love that the next leap we’re doing with Reader’s Theater is taking that original story back to the oral tradition. It’s a nice, full circle element.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Is there anything else you’d like to add to help teachers build, use or get excited about Reader’s Theater?

SHARON CREECH: I think the best advice I could offer to a teacher who wants to use Reader’s Theater is to remember to keep it fun, not to over-plan, not to over-schedule or take control of it — really leave a lot of it in the students’ hands. If at all possible, the students should choose the scenes and divide up the parts.

With my book *Heartbeat*, and with Sarah Weeks’ *So Be It*, HarperCollins included sample Reader’s Theater scripts in the back of the paperback editions so students can begin to get an idea of how we put them together. But the scripts don’t have to be so formal.

I think teachers will find that once they do Reader’s Theater with one book, the students will ask to do it with another book and another book, and pretty soon they may be doing it with all the books they teach as a way either to introduce or build on the enthusiasm for the book.
Walter Dean Myers

Walter Dean Myers is the author of numerous award-winning books, including the inaugural Printz Medal-winning title *Monster* and *Fallen Angels, Harlem, Malcom X* and *Scorpions*. For this production of Reader's Theater, his books *Bad Boy* and *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* were scripted and performed.

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TEACHINGBOOKS: How have you enjoyed being a part of this Reader’s Theater production?

WALTER DEAN MYERS: Reader’s Theater is giving me a different perspective on my work. I’m looking at the Reader’s Theater scripts and thinking that this is how my writing should sound. I often have the characters’ conversations and body attitudes in my mind as I’m writing. Yet, with this Reader’s Theater production, all of a sudden the conversations are being said out loud. Other people are saying the dialogue, and I’m getting colleagues’ take and learning how they understand my words. It’s really cool. I’m thinking, “Wow, I wish I had had the book read aloud before I finalized it.”

TEACHINGBOOKS: The scene adapted for this Reader’s Theater production from *Autobiography of my Dead Brother* gives a little flavor of the book, but it is certainly very different from the book. How would you describe some of the differences between these two versions?

WALTER DEAN MYERS: When I wrote *Autobiography* I focused — as I often do — on internal dialogue and what a character is thinking. When the same scene is performed as Reader’s Theater, it’s all external dialogue and not so much the internal complications of the character — and that is really different.

Sometimes I’m writing internally and I like it very much, but when I hear it done from this other perspective — the outside, performed perspective — I think it would have worked just as well; perhaps even better.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What’s it like for you to pull a scene out of your book for Reader’s Theater?

WALTER DEAN MYERS: When I created the scripts for Reader’s Theater, I chose moments where I thought I’d been most successful at blending the physical surroundings with the internal process of the character.

I have certain strengths and certain weaknesses as a writer. My natural tendency is to have my characters think — and they can think for pages. I always have to go back to those long internal scenes and break them up. In Reader’s Theater, I’ll blend the physical surroundings with the internal process of the character.
TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you choose the performed scenes for *Bad Boy* and *Autobiography of My Dead Brother*?

WALTER DEAN MYERS: *Bad Boy* is about my youth and the state of chaos I was in during my last two years of high school before I dropped out. I was edging toward violence, and I was looking for values. I could not find them within myself, and I didn’t even recognize them within my own community.

In *Autobiography*, when Rise reaches a certain age, he becomes disillusioned because the valuable connections that he was looking forward to are not going to happen. So, he shifts to street values.

I chose those scenes because they each reflected a central point. I believe so many young people seek values wherever they can find them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books try to give people an understanding that they might not have otherwise. Reader’s Theater seems to make that understanding even more accessible.

WALTER DEAN MYERS: One of the major reasons I am interested in participating in Reader’s Theater is its accessibility. We’re taking the cores of these books and making them accessible. I think the idea of it is so seductive.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Reader’s Theater seems to be a way to jumpstart people into reading the book being performed.

WALTER DEAN MYERS: Yes. When an author talks about or reads from a book, you’re going to get a flavor of what’s going on, but there’s no immediacy. There’s still the author between the reader and the book.

But with Reader’s Theater, you are immediately involved. You see the characters. The characters are interacting with each other, and the audience picks up on the subtleties. As one of the performers of Reader’s Theater, I find myself reacting even when I’m not the one speaking. The audience picks this up too, and I think that’s very powerful.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is it like to appear as yourself in Sharon Creech’s fictional book *Love That Dog*?

WALTER DEAN MYERS: It’s one of the funniest experiences I’ve ever had in my life: to find myself in *Love That Dog* as a character and to have my words in there, too. Young kids write to me, wondering whether I’m actually real, or if I’m still alive, because they don’t find characters in books like that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: And now you are playing that part in this Reader’s Theater performance.
WALTER DEAN MYERS: Yes, now I’m playing myself in the Reader’s Theater script of *Love That Dog*, and I’m amused and flattered by it. Sharon Creech thought enough of me and my work to include me in her book. It’s amazing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you suppose there is value in Reader’s Theater for struggling readers?

WALTER DEAN MYERS: Nothing is better than accessibility, and Reader’s Theater brings that accessibility to an audience. For kids who cannot read very well, if they can have an understanding of what’s going on in the book, they will come to it and will feel more comfortable with the book. This is what they need.

Literature for inner-city children in particular can be merely an opportunity to fail. You read and you fail, or you take a test and you fail. But with Reader’s Theater, here is an opportunity to help all children succeed.

Teachers have asked kids if they want to perform my books, and they have said, “Yes,” over and over again, because kids like to perform.

Kids can be taught character studies, and that is just wonderful. I believe that if they’re listening or performing, as happens with Reader’s Theater, it will make a huge difference.
Sarah Weeks

Sarah Weeks is the author of numerous books for children, including the young adult novels, Jumping the Scratch and So B. It, which were scripted and performed for this production of Reader’s Theater.

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TEACHINGBOOKS: Are you enjoying this Reader’s Theater experience?

SARAH WEEKS: Totally. I do a lot of book tours and school visits, but it’s really different to be with other authors, reading one another’s work rather than standing up there talking about myself and my own books. There’s a feeling of camaraderie which adds immensely to the pleasure of the experience.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How do you think the energy of you four authors plays out for the audience?

SARAH WEEKS: The audience is very vocal. During our performances, they say at different points, “Oh no!” or “Ooh!” and laugh — and sometimes even cry. When an audience expresses emotion during a performance, that emotion becomes a part of the performance, and it actually changes what we do sometimes. It’s really a give-and-take thing between the audience and the authors, and between the authors themselves, too.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you think the value of Reader’s Theater is?

SARAH WEEKS: It is a new way to experience a book — a way to bring the characters to life. I had no idea what Reader’s Theater was until I was asked to participate in a performance at the International Reading Association (IRA) annual conference in 2005. Even during the process of the rehearsal, I wasn’t completely aware of what a powerful tool it was. But when we got in front of an audience of teachers and librarians I knew right away something special was happening. I travel all over the country reading from my books myself, but it’s very different when you hear the characters you’ve created become real in someone else’s voice.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you think is the challenge for an educator who wants to create a Reader’s Theater script?

SARAH WEEKS: I got such a strong positive reaction from teachers at the IRA conference about Reader’s Theater that I decided to put some scripts for my books on my website. Many of the teachers who came to buy the books after the presentation asked me for advice about how to make a script. There are a lot of places on the Internet where you can find instructions for how to do that, but my sense was that these people were concerned that they wouldn’t be able to put a
Together, I didn’t want that fear to stop teachers from introducing their students to Reader’s Theater, so I decided to make my scripts available on my site. I’m hoping that people will look at those scripts, come to understand what makes them work and then feel comfortable enough to create their own scripts. Anybody can do a Reader’s Theater script, but it does take a little bit of practice. When I first put together my pieces, I needed some advice about how to do it. Even with that advice, the first time I tried, I made some mistakes — the scenes felt choppy and some of them weren’t dramatic enough. Then I got feedback and began to understand what makes a good Reader’s Theater script. Dialogue is key — and emotional and dramatic content. It’s always good if there’s a funny moment, too — even in the serious pieces.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It could be intimidating for a teacher who has no time, and she’s just seen a professional performance of the likes of you, Avi, Sharon Creech and Walter Dean Myers, and now she’s going to take her fifth-graders and have them perform Reader’s Theater. What specific advice do you have for her in pulling together a script?

SARAH WEEKS: The process for creating a script for Reader’s Theater really varies from book to book. With some of my books, I deleted whole sections. Someone else might feel a little nervous about it, but I encourage people to do that — take the book and look for what works.

If you’re introducing a character in a scene, but then someone else comes in who isn’t really relevant to that scene, cut that character out so that the performed scene is tight and fits together.

I look for where there is conflict or some emotion between characters. I look for where they yell at each other or make each other laugh. Look for action and dialogue. If you have a good piece of dialogue, it’s going to click.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How does it impact you as a writer to hear your work being read by colleagues?

SARAH WEEKS: When you hear somebody else read your work, you hear it in a whole new way. I read everything I write out loud as I work on it, but when you hear your words coming out of someone else’s mouth it’s a completely different experience. Sometimes I find myself thinking, “Wow. I wrote that!” and sometimes, I might think, “Gee, I wish I’d written that differently.”

It is really fun when we begin to toss around the scripts and I hear how other people make my characters speak. Walter Dean Myers was Jamie and I was Audrey in Jumping the Scratch and it was so much fun to read those scenes with him. He’s got such a wonderful voice, and he climbed right inside my character and brought him to life. That was pretty great.

I do the scene from So B. It with Sharon Creech, whom I adore; she’s just a lovely person. In the scene, she plays Bernie, my character’s mother figure, and I had a very hard time not crying in rehearsal, because I have to yell at her. Sharon Creech is like Bernie; she’s nurturing and gentle. So there she is, my friend, this wonderful author, and she’s being my Bernie and I’m yelling at her and having my adolescent rebellion with her.
That scene is moving to both of us, and it’s moving for the audience. It makes me feel very proud of the writing, because I know that it works. I feel I must have captured something real there, and that feels great.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Are you concerned that you’re decontextualizing a book by pulling out dialogue, for example, so Jumping the Scratch becomes one little scene instead of the whole book?

SARAH WEEKS: I would be really disappointed if people went on my website, downloaded the scripts, performed them, and never read the book, because they wouldn’t understand those scenes in context. Especially since the scenes are pieced together — they’re taken from different parts of the book. Reader’s Theater isn’t just about entertaining. It’s also about introducing readers to the books and inspiring them to want to read them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Why did you want to participate in this Reader’s Theater?

SARAH WEEKS: I didn’t hesitate for a second about doing this Reader’s Theater presentation. I knew what to expect, having done it at IRA, but what makes Reader’s Theater particularly gratifying is all of the unexpected moments — with the other authors, and with the audience. We’re having fun, but we’re also exploring dialogue and characters from the inside out. I’m learning a huge amount about storytelling and at the same time, having a ball.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you want the teachers and students in the audience to take away from this experience?

SARAH WEEKS: I hope that people will find this presentation very accessible on a lot of different levels. I hope that they will laugh and be moved and want to read the books. But I also hope they’ll think, “Ooh, I could do that. I’d like to do that.” Most of all, I hope they will bring Reader’s Theater into their classrooms so that their students can have as much fun doing it as we are.
Jill Santopolo

Jill Santopolo is Senior Editor of Laura Geringer Books, an imprint of HarperCollins Children’s Books. For this performance of Reader’s Theater, she worked with the authors to finalize the scripts and directed the performances.

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TEACHINGBOOKS: You are the producer for this Reader’s Theater production. How did you choose the scenes for this event?

JILL SANTOPOLO: The authors actually chose all the scenes for this Reader’s Theater production. They decided they wanted to do one from their newer books and one from an older book. Some authors sent me the page numbers for the passages in their books and asked me to turn the scene into dialogue. Others actually turned the scenes into dialogue themselves, and then I tweaked them and assigned all the parts.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you design the staging for the performance?

JILL SANTOPOLO: In the selected passages, there tended to be either two protagonists who spoke more than the others, or there was a dialogue between two people with narration on either side. So, when I chose the positions for the performers to stand in, I put the two bigger parts in the center and put the two smaller parts on the sides. That way, the audience and the action were focused toward the middle.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you think there is an optimal number of Reader’s Theater performers?

JILL SANTOPOLO: I’ve only seen Reader’s Theater done with four people, and I’ve heard that is the optimal number. But, I imagine that you could do it with as few as two to as many as ten and still have it work well.

TEACHINGBOOKS: As an editor, are you concerned that Reader’s Theater is taking from what makes a book a book?

JILL SANTOPOLO: As an editor, I don’t think Reader’s Theater takes anything away from the book. In fact, I think it brings a lot to it. One of the tenets of Reader’s Theater is that you’re supposed to create a situation in which the audience is as active a participant as the performers. The audience has to picture the scenes themselves, which is why there are no costumes and no set in Reader’s Theater.
TEACHINGBOOKS: How do you feel about what Reader’s Theater does to the rest of the book: the setting, the whole plot, and so forth.

JILL SANTOPOLO: I think Reader’s Theater is wonderful, because it’s a new way for readers to access the books. It’s a new way for readers to get inside the book and see what’s going on and to understand the dialogue and the story more.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you suppose are some of the values for both the audience and the participants in Reader’s Theater?

JILL SANTOPOLO: I think the value for the participants in Reader’s Theater is a way to get into the characters. Often, the performers bring something extra to the characters that the author never even imagined.

I’ve had some authors say that they wished they had done Reader’s Theater before they sent in their final manuscript because having heard the way other people interpret their work, they may have changed some things in their writing. I think this is another wonderful aspect of Reader’s Theater.

The Reader’s Theater audience gets a new way to look at a book and to see how much more there is to a book than just the words on the page. Watching these presentations provides insight into the way a book is crafted, into the fact that there are dialogues that are going back and forth between many different characters and that there is narration. When you separate it out, you can highlight the narration and the dialogue and the way the characters interact.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Having organized Reader’s Theater performances yourself, what advice would you give others who want to put together a Reader’s Theater production?

JILL SANTOPOLO: For a teacher who’s trying to put together Reader’s Theater, the biggest piece of advice I would give is don’t be afraid to cut passages of text. I know these authors are incredibly talented, brilliant, award-winning writers, but what’s written on the page doesn’t always work in dialogue. Sometimes you have to cut a lot of narration to make it sound right as a spoken piece — don’t be afraid to cut what doesn’t sound right to you.

Additionally, don’t be afraid to break things up. You don’t have to have a chunk of narration. You can have two narrators coming back and forth from different sides. The performance piece is supposed to be interesting and if one person is talking for too long, it becomes monotonous.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Any other advice you would give someone who is organizing Reader’s Theater?

JILL SANTOPOLO: The person creating the script should try to create a balance of funny and serious parts so that you don’t have an entire piece of very sad scenes in a row or an entire piece of very funny scenes in a row. Whether it’s scenes from the same book or scenes from different books, I think it is important to have a balance just the way you would in any piece of theater.
Joanna Cotler

Joanna Cotler is Senior Vice President, Publisher, Joanna Cotler Books, HarperCollins Children’s Books. For this Reader’s Theater production, she oversaw HarperCollins’s participation.

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TEACHINGBOOKS: As an editor of some of the books being performed in this Reader’s Theater production, is it hard to see complete books broken down into just a few scenes?

JOANNA COTLER: This has been one of the great experiences for me as an editor and publisher. As an editor, it’s really interesting to see a book pulled apart and put together in a new form. You’d think it would be very challenging, because I’m used to the book form and I’ve helped make it really work, and suddenly the authors come in and they rearrange the book in order for it to work as a Reader’s Theater piece.

I find this thrilling, because as an editor, that’s how I look at a book — I have to imagine what all the pieces are that make it a whole. I love seeing this Reader’s Theater production, because it makes me understand some aspect of the writer’s process. They have to look at the characters in a slightly different way, and they have to think about it as dialogue.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How does it work to pull scenes out of a book and its original setting to perform effectively in Reader’s Theater?

JOANNA COTLER: I think that’s really the challenge in writing a Reader’s Theater piece. What I found interesting, as an observer, is sometimes you enter a scene and you don’t really know where you are. You don’t know the other scenes, and you’re not quite sure who the characters are. Yet somehow, when the script works, you understand the emotional impact of the scene; you understand enough to be engaged and want to get the book and read further.

For me, part of the purpose of Reader’s Theater is to bring people back to the books, to give teachers and students a tool to actually get inside a book and maybe perform it and understand the material better. Also, I like Reader’s Theater’s ability to bring participants to the original material itself and help readers understand and enjoy the book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In your opinion, what is the value of Reader’s Theater for the participants?

JOANNA COTLER: Students understand books in very different ways. A child can read a book when they are seven and come back to it when they are ten and they gain another level of understanding.

Reader’s Theater allows students to understand books in a way they might not get just from reading the books themselves. It allows those who are engaged in the performance to ask questions to get underneath the material, such as, “What was it really about? What were you
trying to say there? What did you mean when he says that?” And, that kind of deep probing doesn’t happen quite on the same level when you’re sitting alone reading a book.

Teachers can use Reader’s Theater to really get in under the fabric of a book and teach it in a whole new way.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How do you suggest scenes be selected from books to make into a piece of Reader’s Theater?

JOANNA COTLER: My feeling is you should try as hard as possible to make everything dialogue-based. It’s all about the dialogue when you’re performing a piece of Reader’s Theater.

When you read a book, you know what the pivotal scenes are — what the emotionally rich, core scenes are. So, I suggest you use your instincts as a reader to select a piece, and go to the material that moves you the most.

If these passages aren’t obvious to you, then pick from a favorite spot in the book and start from there. Or if you feel more comfortable, pick a chapter. Maybe start with the beginning of the book — that can be really fun because beginnings often have a lot of punch and a lot of mystery.

Finally, if there is a poem or a little section that stands out as being written in a different way, I would go to that section.

Do some reading out loud yourself and see what reads really well.
Sharon L. Comstock

Sharon Comstock, M.A., M.L.S. is a doctoral candidate and an instructor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois. For this production of Reader’s Theater, she attended with 30 of her library students.

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TEACHINGBOOKS: As a professor of library science, attending this production of Reader’s Theater with your students, what are you hoping they will take from it?

SHARON COMSTOCK: First, Reader’s Theater can model for my students how literature can live and breathe. A lot of times, we see books as static entities, and here we see a vibrancy.

Secondly, I want them to see this as an opportunity to create programming in their own classes. Many of my students work in school libraries or public libraries, and they’re going to be required to facilitate and organize these kinds of events. Therefore, I want them to see what Reader’s Theater looks like and feels like — the texture of it all.

On the other side of it, I think Reader’s Theater gives life and meaning. In transactional theory, we see the book as a physical object and the reader as engaging with it and creating a third space. With Reader’s Theater, we’re seeing that third space come to life, and that’s another aspect that I want them to see — that theory breathes.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What else are you seeing in Reader’s Theater that’s important to note?

SHARON COMSTOCK: Another aspect is that the dynamic element of Reader’s Theater reflects back to oral storytelling cultures. It’s multi-literacy — the physical item and the oral reading.

I think all of us can remember having to read Shakespeare and it meant nothing. We stumbled on it as students. But when we see Shakespeare performed, we feel it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you suppose is the value of Reader’s Theater for student participants?

SHARON COMSTOCK: Kindergarten through third grade students can actually extend the literary experience beyond perhaps their reading ability. They can engage with literature in a way that they wouldn’t necessarily do.

As children get stronger in reading, say in grades three, four and five, Reader’s Theater can engage them with literature at a higher level than perhaps their skills can offer.

For older students, Reader’s Theater can expose them to ideas and facilitate dialogue on topics that they wouldn’t ordinarily address. And then for graduate students in library science, it provides them with a suite of professional tools that they wouldn’t necessarily otherwise consider.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is your opinion about who should create Reader’s Theater scripts?
SHARON COMSTOCK: I think it’s important for children to take ownership of the whole process, from scripting to creating to performance. I’ve seen this in youth libraries with third and fourth graders, creating poetry performances with their peers — all the way from writing and reviewing initial drafts to performing them.

I’ve also seen an intellectual and emotional growth in these children over a three-, four-month period because they are owning the process. They don’t even know that they’re learning, and that’s the exciting part.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you believe needs to happen in schools so that Reader’s Theater can have an impact on reading skills?

SHARON COMSTOCK: Teachers need to make this project-based learning activity an aspect throughout the curriculum — in social studies, in language arts, in their school libraries, in the theater departments — so that it has sustainability.

If we can see a collaboration from each of these departments — so that Reader’s Theater is not just happening in language arts class — the children will be enriched and the one department won’t carry the whole burden to make it work.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are your thoughts on accessibility in Reader’s Theater?

SHARON COMSTOCK: When we use the word “accessibility” in library science, our goal is to train future leaders so that we bring books to every child, and bridge the digital divide as more and more content goes online.

I think Reader’s Theater is an opportunity to make books more accessible, particularly to students who might not sit down with a book. We can build on the initial excitement gained from seeing or participating in Reader’s Theater.

As a school librarian and a youth services librarian, I’ve seen how taking something off the page and bringing it to life can change how children see literature forever. There’s something about that relationship with the students’ own creativity and their own imagination that makes Reader’s Theater incredibly valuable.
Books Performed at the November 7, 2005 Reader’s Theater Event

- AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY DEAD BROTHER, written by Walter Dean Myers, illustrated by Christopher Myers, Amistad / HarperCollins Children’s Books, 2005
- POPPY’S RETURN, written by Avi, illustrated by Brian Floca, HarperCollins Children’s Books, 2005
- REPLAY, written by Sharon Creech, Joanna Cotler Books / HarperCollins Children’s Books, 2005
- SO B. IT, written by Sarah Weeks, Laura Geringer Books / HarperCollins Children’s Books, 2004

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