Motivating Students to Read Whole Novels Before Studying Them

by Anthony Petrosky

Over the last year we’ve been collaborating with teachers in several districts around novel studies and incorporating young adult literature into their curriculum. We’ve been helping to identify readings for students that provide a steady diet of both windows—texts that allow students to see into events and lives different from theirs—and mirrors—texts that reflect students’ cultures and personal experiences.

When my son was in eighth grade, he came home one fall day to announce that he hated reading. He especially hated novels. "They’re killing me," he said. "This book is never going to end."

He was talking about To Kill a Mockingbird. He was on his fourth week with it and they still weren’t pages away from the end. You see, his teacher broke the novels into chunks. During class she read aloud or the students took turns reading aloud. Then they answered her questions one after another after another. Sometimes she asked her questions orally and other times she presented her questions in packets that were almost as thick as the chapters themselves.

Later that week he was sent to detention for telling the class in his loud voice that the book sucked. I didn’t bail him out, but I should have. I should have because I knew then, along with many others, that this type of teaching kills reading for many students. But it was what English teachers did because they feared that students wouldn’t or couldn’t read outside of class, especially not a whole book.

Twenty years later the way we teach novels appears unchanged. Over the years, we have constructed iron clad rationales for spending four to six weeks on a book. The rationales can be neatly divided into two categories—those that feature the deficit-ridden students and those that feature the glorious you-must-admires in that book, in any book.
We have lost our way. We are deep in the weeds because we've forgotten the purpose of reading novels in school. I want to put it as bluntly as possible. The purpose for reading novels in school is to convince students that they should leave high school wanting to read novels. No matter what kinds of novels we read, the reading tunes our cognition, it expands our language repertoires, it engages imagination, and it pushes us to want to talk about what we read.

If you spent every year of your schooling in six-week chunks of time on a single book, do you think you'd want to read after you got out?

**One Example of Reading a Whole Novel and Its Instruction**

In the situation that I imagine, students come to class on Monday having read *To Kill a Mockingbird* on their own time. They've taken notes on a handful of questions the teacher, Mrs. Jones, gave them to guide their reading. On the Wednesday and Friday before this day, Mrs. Jones gave students 30 minutes to read their novel silently in class, while she walked around quietly checking in with each student. How is it going? What do you think so far? Need any help?

Mrs. Jones marked each student's progress, taking notes on their difficulties, insights, and questions.

On Monday, Mrs. Jones breaks students into trios. She hands each student a sheet with a handful of questions about big ideas in the book.

- Who do you think is the mockingbird? What's your evidence?
- Which women does Scout connect to? How does she connect to them? Which ones doesn't she connect to? Why not? Which woman has the greatest influence on Scout's growing understanding of what it means to be a woman?
- Finally, what would you say are the big messages or arguments that this novel creates? What's your evidence?

The students work in their trios, accustomed to this approach, talking amongst themselves, taking notes on their talk. They take two days to work their way through the discussion questions. On Wednesday each trio creates a poster size wall chart on which they present their responses and evidence to the questions. On Thursday, they read each other's charts, which takes a noisy 15 minutes. Then Mrs. Jones calls everyone together. She's arranged the desks in a horseshoe so everyone can see each other. She joins the horseshoe and
opens the discussion by asking, so what do you think are the big messages or arguments this novel creates? Be sure to cite your evidence when you talk with each other.

Of course this is only one possible approach to teaching this or any other novel. Students could have composed quick writes for a particular question or two, discussed their responses in pairs or trios, and then chart their discussion. They could have begun with a whole class discussion of one of the questions. The approach matters, to be sure, since the work of thinking through a novel should be the students' and not the teacher's. That means students should do the talking with each other and the writing. The teacher is the maestro, the conductor.

It also matters that the class isn't beating this novel to death. Mrs. Jones isn't using it as an occasion to cover every standard. Sure, Mrs. Jones could direct them to some of the beautifully written passages, maybe to some of the great dialogue as well, but if she did, she'd be helping them by being certain that they do the work of talking and writing about them, about, perhaps, the ways the sentences build or follow one from another to create unfolding scenes. But if they do such an exercise, it's not another day of instruction; it's not another whiplash beating the old novel horse. It happens quickly, almost as an aside, as an "oh by the way, let's take a quick look at the way Lee describes the town."

Three or four days are plenty of time to spend on a novel. This approach to working with novels is a big shift for everyone—students, parents, teachers, and administrators. For that reason, Mrs. Jones has sent letters home to the parents to explain why their children need to read on their own and, perhaps, ask for help if they get hung up or stuck on something. Mrs. Jones has handed off the responsibility for reading ahead of the study to her students. She expects and has taught them to do it. She's showed them, for example, how to read in big chunks, how to take notes, how to mark passages that puzzle them, and how to bring those to the attention of some other—a parent, perhaps, or her during one of their in-class reading sessions. She has high expectations and her students rise to them.

Still not convinced? Read and listen to a teacher, Ariel Sacks, and her students who have been using this approach to teaching novels.

Plodding through novels kills the desire to read. It turns students like my son into reading haters. My son is in his 30s now. He's still recovering.