

“You Mean that Really Happened?!”: Using Nonfiction to Engage Struggling Readers

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Abstract

*Nonfiction texts used in a middle school classroom encouraged struggling readers to explore other nonfiction texts and to write about the world around them. Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reader response posits that an interaction takes place among reader, author, and text during reading. The nonfiction texts *Guts: The True Stories Behind Hatchet* and the *Brian Books* (Paulsen, 2001) and *Night* (Wiesel, 2006) sparked students' interest in real-life stories of survival and prompted struggling readers to read other nonfiction stories and to reflect upon and share text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections through discussion and writing.*

Keywords: nonfiction texts, struggling readers, middle school literacy

Recently, I was fortunate enough to have an opportunity to return to the classroom to teach 6th, 7th, and 8th grade reading classes in a small, rural district. I quickly discovered that my students were fond of series of the *Twilight* variety and naturally gravitated toward fiction books on days that we visited the library. When I began using nonfiction texts in the classroom, I met with resistance from many students who told me that nonfiction is “boring.” Others chimed in that nonfiction passages are only

found on “those tests we take in the spring.” Over the course of a few days, some students conceded that nonfiction may be relevant in their science and social studies classes but that it was not something they would choose to read. My struggling readers, in particular, voiced displeasure for nonfiction. These responses concerned me, not because I wanted to prepare students to ace the nonfiction comprehension questions on standardized tests but because I wanted to help students appreciate nonfiction for what it is – an entrance into other places, historical settings and events, real people's lives – a way to explore the world around us.

At first, I tried to select newspaper or magazine articles that I thought would interest my students. A few articles were popular with some of the students, but I could not seem to move the class toward that “light bulb” moment when nonfiction became relevant and interesting. I focused particularly on my 8th grade class because I wanted to prepare them for the more challenging texts they would encounter in high school. I hoped that my quest would lead to ideas for engaging my 6th and 7th grade students in nonfiction, too. Over the course of several days, I introduced one article after another without finding one that captured the attention of the whole class. As I started to become discour-

aged, I came across the nonfiction text *Guts: The True Stories Behind Hatchet and the Brian Books* by Gary Paulsen. I knew that my 8th grade students had read *Hatchet* the year before and had enjoyed it. I introduced *Guts* by asking the students to tell me what they remembered about *Hatchet*. Although months had passed between the time the students read the text in 7th grade and the day I asked them to retell the story in 8th grade, the students could relay an impressive amount of detail. For the first time in weeks, they were excited to talk about reading, and this encouraged me to move forward with the Gary Paulsen nonfiction text.

I first asked the students to look carefully at the pictures on the front cover of *Guts* and to make predictions about the stories Gary Paulsen might share within the text. The 8th graders quickly pointed to a photograph of sled dogs on the cover and were able to connect the picture to other Paulsen books. Several struggling readers also joined the conversation by making personal connections with the pictures of Paulsen drawing back a bow string and casting a fishing line. I read aloud the first several pages of the book, and then stopped to ask questions about the text. At the end of class, I asked students to complete a quick write reflecting on the day's reading. I was pleasantly surprised to see that each student was able to write something based on the passage from *Guts*. The next several class periods followed a similar pattern – I would read aloud, sometimes pausing to think aloud, other times pausing to ask questions and allow for discussion. Each class ended with a quick write; over time, I noticed that the students had more and more to say in their writing, so quick writes evolved into full-length journal entries.

According to Rosenblatt (1978), readers respond to reading in unique ways because each

individual possesses a unique set of background knowledge and experiences. A central tenet of the transactional theory of reader response is that an interaction takes place among reader, author, and text (Hancock, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1978). Based on this theory, nonfiction texts may represent a way to introduce students to a topic or experience that may lead to different reactions or interpretations that can be shared in class discussions and through writing.

Later in the week, we read a passage in which Paulsen describes himself and his sled dogs being rescued from terrible weather by a pilot flying a small Cessna plane. In the description, Paulsen first explains that he had to pull and throw his entire team of fourteen sled dogs, still harnessed together, into the plane. Once inside, the engine noise frightened the dogs, who attempted to run away from the sound; this movement caused the tail of the plane to tip and required Paulsen to toss the dogs toward the front of the plane to even the weight distribution. Paulsen goes on to explain that each time he threw a dog toward the front of the plane, the dog would go running toward the tail once more. Paulsen “threw another, then another, then another, every time hitting the pilot, who was swearing at me and screaming at the dogs” (2001, p. 25). My students reacted with incredulity and laughter to the seemingly absurd events. Several struggling readers, in particular, came to life while reading this description.

When it was time for students to write about their reading at the end of class, all decided to write about the plane rescue scene. One student asked if it was okay to connect the passage to a movie he saw that depicted a plane crash. The student reasoned that he could only really connect with TV or movies

because the story “wasn’t real.” This comment led to an energetic discussion of Paulsen’s experiences, with others in the classroom reminding one another that nonfiction text describes real events. After several minutes of debate regarding the plane rescue story, the students agreed that it had really happened and were even more intrigued and impressed with Paulsen’s life. As the students returned to their writing, one struggling reader who had been particularly quiet during the class discussions that day blurted, “You mean that *really* happened?!” This student went on to explain that he thought nonfiction was just a more descriptive, less imaginative type of fiction until the class discussion sank in that day. This observation spurred the class into another discussion of what it might have been like to really live through the experiences we read about. Realizing that the nonfiction text was true engaged struggling readers in the story to an even greater extent.

Following that day’s discussion, the students began searching on their own for nonfiction texts related to the Iditarod and wilderness survival tales; several began reading about planes and helicopters. The use of the nonfiction text *Guts* provided an entryway for me to bring nonfiction articles into the classroom once more; this time, the articles were met with a warm reception because the students were motivated to read more about sled dogs, snow storms, surviving in the wild, and other nonfiction topics related to the true tales told in *Guts*. Students then were interested in moving beyond quick writes and journal entries, asking if they could write “reports” based on articles and other nonfiction text they read related to wilderness survival and the topics included in Paulsen’s text. As we continued to read *Guts* in class, students began reading more nonfiction on their own outside of class and chose to write about

their reading using a variety of genres. At one point, the students asked if our class could create a survival newsletter that presented overviews of real-life wilderness survival stories, along with tips for living in the wild. The use of nonfiction text encouraged students not only to read nonfiction but to write about the world around them.

Our reading of *Guts* also guided the class to another nonfiction text on a different topic. In one particularly poignant passage of *Guts*, Paulsen talks about his time as an emergency medical technician in a rural area and recounts the experience of arriving too late to save a heart attack victim. In the passage, Paulsen mentions the “thousand-yard stare” visible in the patient’s eyes (2001, p. 4). My students were initially puzzled by the expression, so we paused to think about the phrase. Several students made a connection with the length of a football field and calculated that it would take ten fields to make a thousand yards. One student asked if it was possible to really see anything that far away. The conversation moved back to the passage, and another student mentioned that the patient was probably staring at the ceiling, which would have been much closer than a thousand yards. Over the course of several minutes of thoughtful consideration and discussion, the students came to understand that this expression related to the look of a person who had experienced severe trauma; in this case, a person who was near death. The class ended on a somber note that day, but the next day students came in buzzing about the expression. Several students had searched online for more information about the thousand-yard stare and had asked parents and grandparents about the phrase the evening before. One student brought in a copy of the

book *The Two Thousand Yard Stare: Tom Lea's World War II* (Lea, 2008) and shared with the class pictures of the USS *Gleaves* and the USS *Zircon* contained in the book. Finally my students, including struggling readers, were not only making text-to-self connections but also making text-to-text and text-to-world connections.

My class finished reading *Guts*, not with relief to have finished a nonfiction text but with regret that the stories had ended. The students asked to read more nonfiction and returned again to the thousand-yard stare phrase, asking to read something that connected with the expression. I had planned to move on to the topic of the Holocaust later that year, but encouraged by my struggling readers' interest in nonfiction text, I decided it was time for the class to surge forward and read *Night* (Wiesel, 2006). I used the picture book *Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust* (Bunting, 1989) to spark discussion before beginning *Night*. The fictional picture book *Terrible Things* relates to the events of the Holocaust and prepared students for reading *Night*. The use of a picture book surprised my students, with several commenting that they had not read a picture book, or had one read to them, since early elementary school. However, the picture book provided a way for me to introduce a complex topic by using a text that was accessible to all of my students. Throughout the next several weeks of reading, *Night* sparked students' interest in reading more about World War II in general and the Holocaust in particular. Students searched for information online and looked for nonfiction books during library visits to learn more about this time in history. They also made connections with their history class and started to see the ways in which nonfiction can be more than a textbook chapter or a standardized test passage.

Together, we viewed pictures of concentration camps, maps of 1940s Europe, and read passages written by Anne Frank. The content of *Night* encouraged my 8th graders to explore more about this time in history and the people who were part of it. Throughout the rest of the school year, students would bring to class books that they found or articles they came across related to World War II. Through their own reading, students explored topics such as the Danish Resistance and shared their new knowledge with the class. One student came across an article about Simon Wiesenthal and Adolf Eichmann and read more information on the website for the Simon Wiesenthal Center. In response, I incorporated the picture book *The Anne Frank Case: Simon Wiesenthal's Search for the Truth* (Rubin, 2010). After reading the book to my 8th grade class, I used the text with my 6th graders and found it to be a dynamic way to engage them in nonfiction, too.

Night provided content that led my students to create character mind maps and to write diary entries from the point of view of a Holocaust survivor. Students also wrote letters to Elie Wiesel, as well as to other historical figures from the era, such as Anne Frank; although the recipients could not write back, my students were able to communicate their questions through a letter-writing variety of Question the Author (QtA). Through reading both *Guts* and *Night*, students became interested in reading more nonfiction and also in writing about these texts. From brief quick writes to more in-depth journal responses, letters, reports, and newsletters, students explored their text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections stemming from nonfiction texts. Through thought-provoking nonfiction stories, my middle school students

were able to think about their world and to write about the world around them. These nonfiction texts and the associated writing activities engaged my struggling readers in ways that were meaningful and that extended far beyond the traditional nonfiction text associated with standardized testing.

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