Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 13
Issue 1 *Reaching the Hard to Reach*

Article 11

1997

"Gimme a Thin One"

Peter Butts

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Butts, Peter (1997) "'Gimme a Thin One'", *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 11.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1468>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

From the Stacks

Peter Butts

"Gimme a Thin One"

I have a gripe I need to air: assignments that claim to be "free choice" but that require books that are longer than a certain number of pages are stupid. It doesn't matter if the magic number is 120, 150, 180, or 200; the practice defeats the purpose of free reading and flies in the face of every goal or outcome in the curriculum. The recently released *National Assessment of Educational Progress* clearly demonstrates that the real enemy is not illiteracy but aliteracy. While fourth and eighth grade performance

remains steady, the *NAEP* shows a slight, but disturbing decline at twelfth grade. Why? Where "reading" is taught as a skill through the intermediate grades, at some point around seventh or eighth grade the skill is taken for granted and reading becomes a means to either an informational or aesthetic end. Avid readers continue to enhance their skills, apathetic readers let their skills languish and potentially deteriorate.

For a great discussion of the dynamics of aliteracy, check out Dr. G. Kylen Beers' article "No Time, No Interest, No Way!" Beers identifies five distinct types of readers ranging from the avid reader to the illiterate non-reader. The two defining characteristics that separate the avid reader from the dormant, uncommitted, and unmotivated readers are time commitment and cognitive response to books. Both avid readers and dormant readers see reading as an enjoyable, aesthetic experience while uncommitted readers and unmotivated readers still view reading as a decoding exercise.

Making the jump from exercise to aesthetic experience requires practice. That practice should be measured by the totality of the experience, not the number of pages turned. To give readers practice, I've selected some sure-fire quick picks, tiny gems, all under 120 pages in length, that demand emotional and imaginative commitment. Like a good computer game, to borrow a metaphor from a competing recreational option, these books

create virtual worlds that suck readers in and make them work.

Arnold is the kind of squirrely prankster teachers love to hate. In *Gruel and Unusual Punishment*, Jim Arter pits Arnold against the sadistic master of the detention room (or "Gulag" as the master fondly calls it, whether his charges get the reference or not). But Arnold's behavior is cleverly crafted to protect both himself and his slightly batty mother. *Gruel and Unusual Punishment* lets the reader laugh along with Arnold, but gently nudges awareness of the warts in Arnold's relationship with his disturbed mother and his need to look out for himself.

Caitlin and her college-aged sister Pam have continued the family camping tradition. But this year everything is different, from the not-so-chance encounter with Pam's boyfriend to the sudden appearance of the mysteriously out of place Frank. Marion Dane Bauer's *A Taste of Smoke* turns quickly from a story of the younger sister's frustration to a mystery and ghostly romance as Caitlin realizes that the oh-so-attentive Frank is the ghost of a boy lost a hundred years ago in a frontier settlement fire. Reaching across time, both Caitlin and Frank have something to give to each other.

For bleach-blond flat-top, pink-Harlequin-sunglasses Weetzie Bat the problem with high

school was that no one appreciated that they were living in the coolest place in the world: LA where

you could buy tomahawks and plastic palm tree wallets....the wildest, cheapest cheese and bean and hot dog pastrami burritos at Oki Dogs; that the waitresses wore skates at the Jetson-style Tiny Naylor's; that there was a fountain that turned tropical soda-pop colors, and a canyon where Jim Morrison and Houdini used to live....(4)

In LA you can meet the coolest dudes like Dirk, together go cruising for "ducks," and both (Dirk and Weetzie Bat) find the men of their dreams, make movies, meet a three-wishes (but not the world peace thing, pul-eeze) real-live genie in a bottle, and live happily ever-after. "I don't know about happily ever after...but I know about happily, Weetzie Bat thought." So, when *Weetzie Bat* comes to an end, Francesca Lia Block has more of the same wacky, avant garde, wonderful adventures awaiting readers in a trilogy about *Witch Baby*, the magic adopted love child of Weetzie and her Secret Agent Lover Man.

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing. (10)

In Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza Cordero rises above the bleak despair around her to build a house of short vignettes full of humor and hope. Like poems, each prose artifact is greater than the sum of its parts. Taken together, Esperanza's observations of family and friends, work and play, build a rich narrative that goes deeper than its 100+ pages would suggest.

Like Thomas Hardy, Robert Cormier always finds the elements of fate and the roots of evil in his characters and situations. In a post-war small town, 12-year-old Henry tries to contribute to his crumbling family, working after school in humorless Mr. Hairston's grocery. But Mr. Hairston is worse than foul-tempered, as Henry finds out. Henry has befriended an elderly Holocaust survivor who spends his days at a community center carving an elaborate replica of his long since

destroyed village. When Mr. Hairston learns of this friendship, he offers Henry a terrible bargain: destroy the village and his mother will get a big promotion. But what will actually happen when Henry raises the sledge hammer in *Tunes for Bears To Dance To*?

For years Mel Glenn has been building imaginary classrooms with poetry. In *Who Killed Mr. Chippendale?* he creates a full-length murder mystery from the verse voices and thoughts of the staff and students of Tower High School where veteran English teacher Robert Chippendale has been shot jogging around the school track. Chippendale raised strong emotions in his students and colleagues: some resented his no-nonsense style, others credit him with turning their lives around. One teacher and one student may or may not have been his lover. Like a good who-done-it, there are lots of suspects, red herrings, and surprising motives.

Margaret Peterson Haddix' heroine Tish Bonner is one of those girls in the back row with big hair and lots of gum. But Tish isn't preoccupied with boys and fashion, Tish is working all the hours she can to keep her family off the street. She worries about the advances of her creepy boss and what will happen if her negligent father decides to come back and win over her younger brother. Then her mom disappears and Tish gets fired. Although each entry in her class journal is headed *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey*, Tish finally realizes her only choice is to open up to her slightly naive, but well-meaning English teacher and let her read this journal in which she's told it like it really is.

Women don't account for much in sixteenth century France. In Carol Matas' dynamite historical novel, *The Burning Time*, Rose Rives helplessly watches her mother change from a respected midwife to a reviled witch after her father's mysterious death and her mother's scorning of an unscrupulous relative's advances. Jealous relatives and incompetent doctors conspire to bring Rose's once proud mother down. Rose herself must make the impossible choice between staying to help her mother or fleeing before she too is accused of witchcraft. For reluctant readers who

need a historical novel, any of Carol Matas' works are highly recommended.

Hounded and harassed above ground, 13-year-old Aremis Slake goes underground to create a world of his own in a crevice of the New York City Subway. In *Slake's Limbo* Felice Holman creates an urban survival story that is unique in its use of the "limbo" device, so appropriate for adolescence. Slake finds that what he was trying to escape was actually the fear and uncertainty in himself. Stylistically *Slake's Limbo* treats readers to the kind of intimacy normally found in the more complex internal monologue, using a very detached, but simpler, third-person omniscient narrative.

A chance meeting with the photographer of a famous World War Two photograph from the surrender of Okinawa brings to us the touching autobiography of Tomika Higa, known to the world through the defiant photo as *The Girl with the White Flag*. As a young girl she fled the bombing of her family farm and managed to survive for several days on her own and with others in the caves around the shores of the Japanese island.

"Death is silence. Death is lonely. Death is loss." YAs love tragedies, epistolary novels, and true stories; in some measure, *Just One Tear* by Australian teen K.I. Mahon is all three. Based on the life of a friend, Mahon's slim diary is the story of a shell-shocked teenage boy who has witnessed his father's murder, watched the killer go free, and seen his mother fall apart. Perhaps the worst part is his own inability to grieve as his mother has, and while the diary bleeds from every page, all he wants is "just one tear." Naive and honest, this book is both wildly popular and pretty good writing.

Gary Paulsen has given us many short masterpieces. For sheer impact, you can't beat *Nightjohn*, the heroic tale of a runaway slave who returns to the hedgerows at night to give plantation children a gift possibly more powerful and dangerous than freedom: he teaches them to read. But *Nightjohn* isn't great because of its subject matter; what makes *Nightjohn* compel-

ling is Paulsen's narrator, Sarny, a 12-year-old slave girl who is smart enough to act ignorant when her master is watching. Through her eyes, words becomes magic.

There's some to say I brought him with witchin', brought Nightjohn because he came to be talking to me alone but it ain't so. I knew he was coming but it wasn't witchin', just listening. (13)

Paulsen challenges the readers to both embrace the power and magic of the written word and keep their modern eyes on the unreal cruelty of the plantation system. "Late he come walking and it be Nightjohn and he bringing us the way to know (92)." And in just 92 pages Gary Paulsen brings the reader to know something only a few of the slave narratives can.

For years I've been collecting coming-of-age stories for boys; I've finally found an equally powerful one for girls. Needless to say, I can't go into any great detail about Hendle Rumbaut's marvelous *Dove Dream* with middle school girls, but I can make sure my female colleagues know it's here. "Dove" Derrysaw spends a magical summer of physical and emotional changes with her free-spirited aunt in the late '50s on the Kansas plains. Part Chickasaw Indian, Dove goes on a vision quest of sorts and comes to realize there are many paths open to women.

In Tres Seymour's *Life in the Desert* Rebecca is drawn to the strange thin boy in her class who calls himself O.Z. O.Z. stares, not a clock-watching, thinking-about-Friday-night kind of stare, but a stare like something magical is out there just beyond the classroom. Rebecca begins sending him notes:

EARTH CALLING! EARTH CALLING!
COME IN PLEASE! WHAT ARE YOU
LOOKING AT? —REBECCA

Looking over his shoulder at the notebook he carries everywhere, she sees cryptic journal entries like "MARCH 8. CLOUDS IN THE DESERT." She finally breaks him down and a friendship of sorts begins. O.Z. is an emotionally disturbed genius, and when he finally lowers his guard to share his journal and his private desert—a small secluded strip of beach—tragedy ensues. By the

way, O.Z. is short for Ozymandias; his real name is Joseph.

Nancy Springer has written one of the all-time great first pages in YA literature. *Toughing It* begins with Tuff and brother Dillon blazing up a mountain track on a mini-bike. A shot rings out, the bike goes flying, and when he reaches out to his brother, Tuff's hand comes away warm and sticky with blood. A gun has been set with a wire and the cops don't care. Neither does the boys' drunk and haggard mother, who simply suggests Tuff visit a man named Penrose Leppo: "He's your father." Well, maybe, maybe not, but along with finding out who killed Dillon, finding this mysterious man gives Tuff a mission.

The bomb dropped, destruction blazed across the land, and nuclear winter descends. An out-cast wolf, a mother, and her daughter together make their way through the destruction. Whitley Strieber's *Wolf of Shadows* brings together the best instincts of both humans and wolf in the face of the worst evil imaginable.

In the *Stones of Muncaster Cathedral*, master storyteller Robert Westall tells one of his most compelling and most accessible tales. Joe Clarke is an English steeplejack who has landed a prime job resetting the weathercock and some stonework at Muncaster Cathedral. But the job isn't lucky at all because Muncaster Cathedral is cursed and the evil seems to be sealed beneath one of the ugliest gargoyles Joe's ever seen. One accident after another seems linked to the cathedral; can Joe seal the creature before he becomes its victim?

Like computer games, exploring good books can become addictive. As with computer games, practice and experience make the really challenging games that much richer.

Works Cited

- Arter, Jim. *Gruel and Unusual Punishment*. New York: Delacorte, 1991.
- Beers, G. Kylene. "No Time, No Interest, No Way!" *School Library Journal* February 1996: 30-32.

- Block, Francesca Lia. *Weetzie Bat*. New York: HarperCollins, 1989.
- Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Cormier, Robert. *Tunes For Bears To Dance To*. New York: Delacorte, 1992.
- Glenn, Mel. *Who Killed Mr. Chippendale?* New York: Lodestar, 1996.
- Haddix, Margaret. *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- Higa, Tomika. *The Girl With the White Flag*. Kodansha, 1991.
- Holman, Felice. *Slake's Limbo*. New York: Scribner's, 1974.
- Mahon, K.I. *Just One Tear*. New York: Lothrop, 1994.
- Matas, Carol. *The Burning Time*. New York: Delacorte, 1994.
- Paulsen, Gary. *Nightjohn*. New York: Delacorte, 1993.
- Rumbaut, Hendle. *Dove Dream*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994.
- Seymour, Tres. *Life in the Desert*. New York: Orchard, 1992.
- Springer, Nancy. *Toughing It*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1994.
- Strieber, Whitley. *Wolf of Shadows*. New York: Knopf, 1985.
- U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. *National Assessment of Educational Progress*. 1996. (<http://www.ed.gov/NCES/naep/>)
- Westall, Robert. *The Stones of Muncaster Cathedral*. New York: Farrar, 1993.

About the Author

Peter Butts, Chair, Recommended Books for the Reluctant Young Adult Reader Committee of the American Library Association, is Media Specialist at East Middle School in Holland.