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Joel D. Chaston

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THE WRITING TEACHER IN CONTEMPORARY CHILDREN'S FICTION

Joel D. Chaston

"School is a bummer," complains Marcy Lewis of Paula Danzinger's *The Cat Ate My Gynsuit*. "The only creative writing I could do was anonymous letters to the Student Council suggestion box" (3). Marcy's complaint is echoed elsewhere as well. For example, in Daniel Pinkwater's *The Snarkout Boys and The Avocado of Death*, the students at Genghis Khan High School hate the countless notebooks into which they "have to copy out those long, boring things the teacher writes on the blackboard" (7). The reports on animals which the students in Judy Blume's *Blubber* write and then present to class are so boring that the protagonist, Jill Brenner, falls asleep, while her friends play tic-tac-toe or look at naked women in the *National Geographic*.

Marcy Lewis, Jill Brenner, and the students of Genghis Khan High are only a few of many characters in modern children's and adolescent literature who feel that school writing assignments are stifling and whose teachers make them hate writing. With too few exceptions, writing teachers are not well-treated in children's literature. This is a bit unnerving, since it is our own students who read these unflattering portraits and are no doubt somewhat influenced by them. More importantly, though, the views of writing teachers held by popular children's authors can help us take a look at our teaching practices with an eye to seeing how they are affecting our students' attitudes about writing and writing teachers.

In addition to being bored by "typical" writing tasks, a number of characters in children's books are frustrated because of the way their teachers react to their writing. Dicey Tillerman of Cynthia Voigt's Newbery Award-winning *Dacey's Song* is surprised to learn that her English teacher,

Mr. Chapelle, does not believe she could have written her very personal essay about the mother who has abandoned her. Katie Norman of Frank Bonham's *Gimme an H, Gimme an E, Gimme an L, Gimme a P* fares little better with her poem. Her teacher, Mrs. Allen, gives it only a "C" because it deals with suicide, a topic which, though unconventional, is something very much on Katie's mind. In Stanley Kiesel's *The War Between the Pitiful Teachers and The Splendid Kids*, Skinny Malinky and his friends wage an all-out war against the teachers and their Status Quo Solidifier, which transforms normal "Kids" into "Young Persons" who, among other things, write sonnets in perfect iambic pentameter. In Susan Beth Pfeffer's *A Matter of Principle*, another war between teachers and students is waged, this time in the courtroom. The students of Southfield High's newspaper staff, fed up with the mundane topics their advisor gives them, publish an underground newspaper treating relevant topics such as drug abuse, an act which prompts their principal to suspend them.

The weaknesses of elementary and middle school writing teachers and their boring assignments are treated more extensively in Lois Lowry's *Anastasia Krupnik*, Beverly Cleary's Newbery Award-winning *Dear Mr. Henshaw*, and Paula Danzinger's *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*. These books do not, however, attack the value of writing in the public schools, just the value of the kind of writing so adamantly done in the schools they write about. Each of the protagonists in these three stories dreams of becoming a writer when he or she grows up. Unfortunately, in two of the books the students' teachers are depicted as uncaring, humorless, and inflexible, while the "fun" teacher in the third is soon fired. Ultimately, through the way these books depict writing teachers, their methods, and their effects on students, they enter the current debate over how writing should be taught. Despite some negative stereotypes, these books support the kind of school writing programs advocated by Donald Graves, Donald Murray, and Lucy Calkins, arguing for more emphasis on the teaching of writing as a process and limiting the more traditional emphasis on written products per se. Certainly, the experiences of *Anastasia Krupnik*, Leigh Botts, and Marcy Lewis have important implications for those of us who teach writing.

In *Anastasia Krupnik*, ten-year old Anastasia's teacher might seem to be an ideal writing teacher. She is fond of thematic weeks such as "My Neighborhood Week" and "Be Kind to Animals Week." When "Creativity Week" rolls around she asks her students to write poems and invites a poet

to them move smooth in the moistly dark
here in the whisperwarm wet (11-12)

Miss Westvessel is clearly puzzled by Anastasia's poem. "Where are your capital letters, Anastasia?" she asks. "Where is the rhyme? What kind of poem is this, Anastasia? Can you explain it please?" (12).

Anastasia tries to explain that she has written a poem of sounds and that she doesn't use sentences or capital letters because she wants it to "look on the page like small creatures moving in the dark" (12). Miss Westvessel counters that Anastasia didn't follow instructions and gives her an "F". That night Anastasia takes out her green notebook and under "These are the most important things that happened the year I was ten," she crosses out "I wrote a wonderful poem," changing it to "I wrote a terrible poem" (14). Anastasia's father, however, reads her poem aloud, smiles and explains that a lot of people don't understand poetry, then adds some letters to the "F" so that it spells "fabulous," thus convincing Anastasia that she is a poet after all.

Anastasia's experience never suggests that writing is not important or that students shouldn't be asked to write poetry. She gets great pleasure from writing her poem, feels like she has accomplished something important, and, along the way, creates a "fabulous" poem. For Anastasia, writing is something natural, important, fun, and yet a lot of hard work. Through Miss Westvessel's assignment, and despite Miss Westvessel's lack of assistance in the process and support for the product, she learns a great deal about the writing process, particularly the importance of revision and the effort writing often requires. Unfortunately, all of this is almost negated by a teacher who does not care about what Anastasia has learned or who cares only how well the product adheres to some fairly rigid rules. In doing so, she temporarily convinces Anastasia that she has written a terrible poem.

Miss Westvessel, like many well-meaning teachers, is concerned primarily with the products her students produce. Basically, she is trapped by her own pedagogy: since she has not scheduled time for intervention in the actual writing processes her students go through, she really has little choice but to overemphasize their products and to use limited criteria for judging those products. Unfortunately, she does not realize that she is sending signals to Anastasia that capital letters and rhymes are more important than what she actually says. She has, as Donald Graves and other

process-oriented writing teachers suggest, wrested control of the writing from the writer. Graves argues,

Children want to write. For years we have underestimated their urge to make marks on paper. We have underestimated that urge because of a lack of understanding of the writing process, and what children do in order to control it. Without realizing it we wrest control away from children and place road blocks that thwart their intentions. Then we say, "They don't want to write. What is a good way to motivate them?" (17)

Fortunately, Anastasia has another writing teacher, her father, a man who helps undo the damage Miss Westvessel has done. He rewards Anastasia at least as much for the emotion and work invested in the poem as for the work itself, reading it to his daughter with feeling, showing that what she has to say is important, and in this way telling her that she is also a writer. He also teaches her that writing poems is often a long process, that his books usually take months to write. As we later learn, Miss Westvessel is not a malicious, uncaring person, nor a really bad teacher. She just does not know a great deal about poetry or the writing process.

Unlike Anastasia, Leigh Botts of Beverly Cleary's *Dear Mr. Henshaw* is not even initially excited about the writing he is asked to do in school, despite the fact that he some day plans to be a writer. Once a year, from second grade through sixth grade, he and his classmates are forced to write letters to their favorite authors. This particular assignment seems little more than busywork for Leigh, partly because his teachers are generally more interested in teaching the format of business letters, spelling rules, and good posture when delivering oral reports. Each year, Leigh seems even less excited about the assignment; each time he writes to the same author, Boyd Henshaw, often reporting on the same book, Henshaw's *Ways to Amuse a Dog*.

Despite the fact that he tells Mr. Henshaw he wants to be an author, Leigh is very upset when his favorite author sends him a list of questions just as long as the one he sent himself. Unfortunately, Leigh's mother discovers the list of questions and forces Leigh to begin answering them. Mr Henshaw doesn't really seem to like receiving these letters and suggests that Leigh begin keeping a journal. Leigh does so, christening the journal "Mr. Henshaw." Through his correspondence with Mr. Henshaw and subsequent journal writing, Leigh begins to learn what it really means to be a writer. After his first few letters answering Henshaw's questions, Leigh writes, "Well, I

sure did a lot of writing, and you know what? Now that I think about it, it wasn't so bad when it wasn't for a book report or a report on some country in South America or anything where I have to look things up in the library. I even sort of miss writing now that I've finished your questions" (31-32).

As Leigh continues to write, he becomes increasingly introspective, choosing for topics things that matter, such as his parents' divorce. Henshaw's non-directive "teaching," so different from what he has experienced in the classroom, has had its effect. In the end, when Leigh writes a story for the Young Authors' contest, he does not manufacture something about monsters, lasers, aliens, or horses, like the other kids in his class. Instead, he chooses to write about something important to him, a day he spent riding with his father in his truck. His story does not win first place, only an honorable mention, but impresses a children's author who has lunch with the winners. This woman calls Leigh a real author, praising him for writing like himself and not trying to imitate others.

Leigh's development as a writer does not, unfortunately, come from anything he learns in school (though his teacher eventually acknowledges that Leigh's writing skills are improving.) As in *Anastasia Krupnik*, Leigh learns from a real writer, Mr. Henshaw, who helps him develop a way of writing, one which involves a series of steps which Henshaw explains as "read, look, listen, think and write" (14). Unlike Miss Martinez, Leigh's teacher, Mr. Henshaw says nothing about indenting new paragraphs, does not care about answering questions in complete sentences, and believes that writing should sometimes be funny. This is in contrast to Miss Martinez, who is not very pleased with the silly things Henshaw writes in his letter to Leigh, particularly his statement that his favorite animal is "a purple monster" who eats "children who sent authors long lists of questions for reports instead of learning to use the library" (9).

Unlike the teachers in *Anastasia Krupnik* and *Dear Mr. Henshaw*, Ms. Finney of *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* manages to make writing exciting for her students. Marcy Lewis finally discovers that she can do "creative" writing in her school; in fact, Ms. Finney's students are always writing. According to Marcy, "We wrote more for her than we had ever written before. She never gave true-false or multiple guess tests. I think most teachers like them because they're easier to correct. Instead, she made us write our own interpretation of what we read" (15). What especially interests Marcy is that Ms. Finney models the kind of writing she wants her students to complete.

writing which is largely personal. Because Ms. Finney shares her own experiences, Marcy explains, it is easier for her students to write. Because of Ms. Finney's enthusiasm, her emphasis on the relevance of writing assignments, and her innovative teaching methods, we are told that her students "all really dug her" (15). In "Smedly," the after-school club which Ms. Finney sponsors, the students create television commercials to promote the books they read as well as write their own stories for sick children at the town hospital. Later they also write their own television script as a means of exploring satire. Marcy concludes her description of Ms. Finney and her writing activities simply by writing, "It was fun" (35).

In many respects, Ms. Finney's class resembles the one described in Lucy Calkins' *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Her students are made to feel they are real writers, writing frequently, conferencing with their peers, and observing a teacher who models the writing process and shares her own work. Most importantly, Ms. Finney helps her students transform assigned tasks into something personal. She has discovered that, as Calkins explains, when "writing becomes a personal project for children, teachers are freed from cajoling, pushing, pulling, and motivating. The teaching act changes...our writing becomes more personal, and this makes all the difference in the world" (6).

Unfortunately, Ms. Finney does not last long at Eisenhower Junior High School. She is suddenly fired, an incident which disturbs most of her students. As soon as Ms. Finney leaves, however, her class loses all of its creativity and personal atmosphere. The substitute who takes her place makes her students diagram sentences on the blackboard while the principal instructs them to forget everything that Ms. Finney has taught them. Ostensibly, Ms. Finney is fired for refusing to say the Pledge of Allegiance, but in reality she is removed because she does not fit into the system. Once again, public schools are represented as interested only in the product their students turn out, not the writers themselves. Only a "rebel" like Ms. Finney is interested in what she describes as the communication process, in getting her students excited about writing.

Certainly each of these novels might be accused of stereotyping, and each reinforces the notion that students abhor the types of writing assignments they sometimes receive in school. The negative depictions of public school writing are, however, countered by portrayals of students who like to write and are deeply committed to it. In each novel, students succeed

in writing when they are taught the process of writing, when what they do is meaningful and relevant, and when they are treated as writers themselves. What might be perceived as an attack on writing teachers in general is really only an attack on certain attitudes towards teaching writing, an emphasis on rules and mechanics and form.

Of course, the experiences of Anastasia Krupnik, Leigh Botts, and Marcy Lewis are not proof of how writing should be approached in schools. They are, after all, fictional characters. They do, however, represent the attitudes towards teaching writing of the writers in whose works they appear. Furthermore, in each novel the successful authors, Myron Krupnik and Boyd Henshaw, and the effective teacher, Barbara Finney, are more concerned with how one becomes a writer than in mechanics or grammar. In this respect, these works support current ideas about the teaching of writing in the elementary and middle school. They also provide us with some troubling dramatizations of what can happen when these ideas are ignored.

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Joel Chaston teaches English at Southwest Missouri State University.
