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#BookJoy: Reading as Community. Reading as Resistance.

by Dr. Leah van Belle

I was in 4th grade. My teacher, Ms. Collins, called us to the big carpet along the classroom windows where we would sit criss-cross applesauce in the splashes of sunshine, eager for what would come next. Leaning back in her big rocking chair facing us, she made magic happen. Every day. As she opened a book and began reading, the room instantly filled with words and images, and the voices and faces she made for different characters invited them to come and sit among us. “Scootch over,” they’d say, “I’m here for the magic, too.” For me, a child growing up in a home with few books, Ms. Collins was the very best kind of enchantress. Every child deserves a book enchantress as a teacher. Especially ones that remember to show the pictures.

All these years later I still remember with clarity what it felt like to be awash in her read aloud. I don’t remember what social studies lessons or math worksheets felt like. I don’t even remember any field trips we took, yet I remember this simple act of coming together as a class to enter the world of books. So I suppose it’s no surprise that when I became a teacher, reading aloud to my students was my absolute favorite part of the day. Laughing, worrying, crying, debating together through books connected us not just as individuals, but as a community. But then this is no surprise, and surely you’ve felt this power, too, because reading is a social act.

When we enter a text, we are always in dialogue with someone else. Even when we read silently, we become, in socio-cultural and linguistic terms, an interlocutor; that is, a participant in a conversation, a back-and-forth to construct, convey, receive, interpret, and rebuild meaning across exchanges. Sometimes it may be only the author and ourselves entering into this conversation. The text may also invite the voices of those we know and love. Other times it evokes the voices of authors and characters from other books we’ve read or multimodal



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texts like songs or movies because it always builds on the narratives and voices of worlds we have experienced. Reading is at its heart dialogic. And as we enter into and extend these textual and interpersonal conversations, we build not only meaning, but also community—with those who are part of the textual conversation and those with whom we are co-constructing its meaning. Surely Ms. Collins knew this—it was never just about having a cozy little part of the day. It was about making time and space for a class community to co-construct text and *feel* what they were reading, think critically about it, debate it, roll around in all the juiciness of the language and the wonder in the learning.

In this column we share reviews of books that we believe will bring readers (and listeners) #BookJoy,

that will call our students into the dialogue with the power of words (and art in the case of picture books). And yet we know that educators are readers, too, and that reading can be a critical act of self-care—an act of resistance to make time and space to experience our own #BookJoy. This column also introduces reviews of books that we are lifting up not for the little humans in our classrooms and lives, but ourselves. Dawn Nacker shares books as a form of educator self-care, restoration, and joy. Nowadays we may sit curled up on the sofa with our book—a cup of coffee in one hand and the dog snuggled next to us as we read—rather than on the big carpet in the classroom, but entering into the conversation, the community with a book is every bit as valuable. We hope you make time for your own #BookJoy. You are worth it.

