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They Read What They Need

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Lessons from the Secret Reading Lives of Teens

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We're both fathers of two daughters and from the time they were infants we worried about what books might teach them about how to be a woman in the world. Much to our surprise we recently discovered that we both banned Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* from our homes because it tells the story of the sacrifices the female tree makes for a decidedly unworthy man. We didn't read *Cinderella*. We didn't want our daughters waiting for rescue by a handsome prince.

We worried too about the young women that we taught. Lots of young women who balked at doing the reading we assigned were always carrying the latest Sweet Valley High offering, a series, we feared that celebrated unrealistic body images that were, in the words of one blogger, "filled with classist/racist/heterosexist rhetoric" (Kareem, 2008). Our worries aren't unique. Critics have commented on the romance novel's lack of suspense, and have questioned whether it is healthy "for women to be whiling away so many hours reading impossibly glamorized love stories" (Gray, 2000, p. 3).

But at the same time we were aware of Janice Radway's (1984) foundational research reported in *Reading the Romance* in which she argues that "some romance reading at least manages to help women address and even minimally transform the conditions of their daily existence" (p. 8). That is, according to Radway, readers are not passive, but act upon and with texts in ways that are often transformative. Society, she argues further, has "failed to detect the essential complexity that can characterize the interaction between people and mass-produced culture" (p. 9).

We wanted to discover something of that complexity, so as part of our (Wilhelm & Smith, 2014) investigation of the nature and variety of pleasure young people take from their out-of-school reading of texts that are characteristically marginalized in school, we did case studies of Kylie an inveterate reader of romances, a young woman who excelled in English and wanted to major in English in college with the goal of becoming a YA author or romance writer.

What we found is that you can't judge a book by its cover, that in order to really understand a book you have to examine the impact it has on its readers. When we did so, we discovered that Kylie, like the other readers in our study, experienced four distinct kinds of pleasure from their reading. Those pleasures motivated her development as a reader and as a person. What we discovered is that young people read what they need and those needs are not something to be trifled with.

Play Pleasure

One reason our participants read was to experience the pleasure of entering a story world, a vicarious pleasure so intense that it had a sensory dimension. Nell (1988) puts it this way: "These are the paired

wonders of reading: the world creating power of books, and the reader's effortless absorption that allows the book's fragile world" (p. 1). We called this the pleasure of play, following John Dewey (1913), who writes that the essential qualities of play are its immediacy and its physical, sensory nature.

Kylie makes it clear that her reading of romances had these two essential qualities of play. Here's how she put it:

[Reading romances] teaches me not to take people for granted. To see the specialness of people and moments of connection. Feel their specialness. Not taking special moments and events for granted, but really REALLY experiencing it, enjoying it, sensing it.

She makes a similar point in discussing John Green's YA romance *An Abundance of Katherines*, Kylie asserted that:

What was satisfying in his [Colin's] relationship with the new girl, [was that] he became more fully himself, more active, more dominant, and he realizes this new personal growth [is because of] being with her. I didn't like it at the beginning because he was so whiny and wimpy, but by the end I fell in love with him. That's typical. I liked that he realized these new things about himself as he discovered her. I think people need to be more equal in relationships and in the beginning he wasn't carrying his weight in a relationship and he learned to do it. The girl earned his trust and learned to trust. They both passed the tests! Which is a common theme in the romances I like. . . . Plus the boy learns about who she is and then will stand up for her.

There's an important lesson in this romance, but the pleasure Kylie describes comes not so much from learning he lesson herself but rather from experiencing the learning of the characters.

In fact, Her engagement with new characters is what keeps romances fresh for Kylie:

Every romance is different because the people are different. The story is not in the ending, but in the way that they get to that ending . . . where they really know and really love each other. The struggle from attraction through problems to love [is] what makes the story.

She continued:

The [heroine] has to make things clear to her love, and usually has to organize things . . . for them to be together which she has to do one step at a time because usually things are pretty complicated! And then they have to really see and really care about each other—hopefully forever hopefully forever. HEA [Happily Ever

After], baby!

HEA indeed. It seems clear Kylie didn't just read romances, she felt them.

The Pleasure of Work

While Kylie talked at length and eloquently about the pleasure of entering and experiencing the story world, she talked even more movingly about the pleasure she derived from the inner work of reading. According to Jungian scholar Robert Johnson (1988), "Inner work is the effort by which we gain an awareness of the deeper layers of consciousness within us and move to an integration of the total self" (p. 13).

Kylie explained the interplay of the pleasures of play and inner work:

I love that moment when they [the hero and heroine] did something to progress the relationship along—that is the plot of a romance! It is so 'cutesy' to me, such a jolt! There is no map provided – I don't mean a strict progression but there has to be a progression, development. And the development is the people getting to know each other and drawing out the best in each other. . . . The progression is getting to know each other, further deep understandings that go beyond what a friend would know—it is a best friend kind of knowledge. There are layers of acquaintances, friends, best friends and then your partner and there are things only your partner knows – and you love each other despite the fact that you know everything about each other, including things others wouldn't know. . . . It's a lot about becoming good, becoming better because of each other and for each other.

The jolt Kylie experiences provides the impetus for a consideration about what becoming better entails. As she explains again:

[Reading romances] is like thinking about how you want to be loved, but also how you want to love. And seeing that it [loving relationships] will have its challenges but that you can get it. It's . . . luxurious to think about really. . . . You see yourself in the heroine, so you see your best possible self or some version of it. And you see the good but also the possibilities in others, despite their shortcomings, because the hero has to be helped, transformed in some way. And you do too, really, so the book helps you think about this and consider it.

Kylie provided a specific example from her favorite author, John Green:

In *Paper Towns* by John Green, one of my favorites, the major character is pining after this girl Margot who disappears and he has to deal with it. I felt like a better person for having read it. I felt tingly. I picked up

another book and I wasn't ready. I had to wait and mourn longer. Digest it for a couple days.

For this one, it wasn't the romance that stayed with me. It was that Margot felt trapped in this place. And angsty and stir crazy and I could relate to that. And it stuck with me that she just left. And it helped me to see how this affected the people she left. And I felt less like I have to go now and more appreciative of the people around me and how we affect each other. And that it is not the place that makes something tolerable but you and how you choose to be. I guess this [book] was a kind of anti-romance but I really liked it.

What she liked was the personal psychological work, the inner work, that it allowed her to do.

Intellectual Pleasure

Another kind of pleasure, according to Dewey (1913), is intellectual pleasure. He notes: "When any one becomes interested in a problem as a problem, and in inquiry and learning for the sake of solving the problem, interest is distinctively intellectual" (pp. 83-84). If truth be told, Kylie didn't talk much about the intellectual pleasure they took from reading romances. But Kylie argued for including romances in school curricula precisely because they have the capacity to provide that kind of pleasure.

She began by addressing the tendency to dismiss romances:

Why do teachers stigmatize certain kinds of texts? I know there is a lot of crap. There is a lot of crap romance. But this disregards that there is crap of every genre. On every shelf. Teachers, if they take these not so great books and stigmatize the whole genre, that is a problem. But even if it is bad—like *Twilight*—there is so much that could be discussed and critiqued. Like why kids like it. That could be discussed and critiqued. And here's another thing: I think reading badly written books can help you be a better writer because you can look at the writing. You can have points of comparison. I really hate Nicholas Sparks but I read his books and all his awkward dialogue so I can see what not to do.

We've argued elsewhere (Smith, Wilhelm, & Fredrickson, 2012) that evaluative arguments are an important kind of literary argument. According to Kylie, romances are the perfect vehicle for encouraging that kind of argumentation. But that's not all. She continued:

John Green novels would be great in school. Girls like them but they are more than YA, more than romance. Those labels have stigmas behind them for teachers and for boys. But boys would read John Green. Or maybe you can say: you read one of ours and see what you think—talk to the girls about romance—and we'll read one of yours and say what we think. But make it a John Green kind of romance. That would be cool and

enlightening and different.

We've seen how Kylie uses romances to enlighten her life. But she also explains how they can be used for a less personal, more intellectual kind of enlightenment.

Social Pleasures

The final kind of pleasure we identified is social pleasure. We found that pleasure had two distinct dimensions: the pleasure derived from using reading to understand and affiliate with others and the pleasure of using reading to make a place for ourselves in our social worlds. Kylie experienced both types of social pleasure through her reading of romances.

Far from being a solitary activity, her reading provided the opportunity to connect with other readers: "I do like to read what others read so I can talk with them about it." She gave a specific example by explaining her experience reading *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephan Chbosky:

I heard favorable reviews--my friends liked it and I wanted to talk to them about it. I have a book box of stuff I've picked up or people have given to me. Before I start [reading] I think about what is going on in my life right then and whether the pre-reading and thumbing through strikes me that [this particular book] is going to be helpful. I'm usually pretty picky and I won't read something unless it is really coming at me. I mean, there are enough books out there.

She spoke at length and with passion about the importance of sharing her reading with others:

Sharing. I do it in person, for sure. And blogs. I read in public places and will read out loud to people around me. I sit with friends and read. I sit in the [school] lounge and read. I mostly read and sleep – my two biggest activities. I talk with friends about reading. I don't like book clubs – too much like school – YOU HAVE TO READ THIS BOOK TO PARTICIPATE. I have met with friends every Friday afternoon and we just talked about whatever we were reading. We helped each other find new books and read in deeper ways more than school ever did.

Although her reading allowed her to forge social connections, in so doing it also allowed her to name herself, to distinguish herself from others. As she explains:

All around me, I hang out with bookish people and we are always trading books and we ask how we are feeling and what we are going through and we suggest books based on current needs as well as preferences like not liking vulgarity. My friends, my mom, online forums like TUMBLR where I run a book appreciation blog and people share books. People say what they liked, what

they are feeling or going through right now, and we suggest books. It seems to me school could be more like this.

Indeed.

What Kylie Makes Us Think About as Teachers

Remember when Kylie asked why teachers stigmatize certain kinds of texts? We have to admit that when it came to romances, we were among those stigmatizing teachers. But Kylie has helped us come around. Our research helped us understand and appreciate the nature and variety of pleasure she experienced while she read.

We're not saying that we should let students read only what they want. After all, if we make cultivating pleasure central to our practice, part of our job would be to expand the range of texts from which kids can take pleasure. But why couldn't we allow students to read and share one of theirs for every book they read of ours? That doesn't seem like too much to ask. If we did so, everyone in the classroom could learn from each other and we would certainly expand both our and our students' reading horizons. As we found out in *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys* (2002), one of the particular challenges teachers faced was that so many kids didn't see themselves as readers because they did not read and enjoy what was assigned in school, even if they were avid readers of other kinds of texts. If we want our students to identify as readers and become lifelong readers, and read a variety of texts for different purposes, then we must do something to challenge the *status quo*.

It shouldn't be hard to include what kids are reading in our curricula. Kylie explained:

Teachers should think of how these books could be on-topic instead of off-topic of what they are teaching. Love is part of the human experience and these books can teach how relationships work and should work and can go wrong. This is a conversation teachers should be having [with students]! There is like a divide between schools and life. It's like teachers don't want to do the things that are most interesting. [They] see it as inappropriate. They teach to the test and not what is necessary to life. Parents might not want their kids to read certain things. Because they have gay people in them, or have magic. I've smuggled lots of books to my friends. Teachers and parents get in the way when they try to control their kids. But the effect is for kids not to read at all, or to rebel and read what the parent disapproves of. There is no conversation this way—no give and take.

Kylie also offered powerful advice to parents:

Parents, the books might not be conventional but there are underlying themes and questions your kids need to deal with, and are important to talk about, and a lot of

the messages in these books are really good.

Kylie made us think that maybe we should give students the same privilege we have as adult readers. We know that in our own out-of-school reading, we read what we need to, not what we're told to. Kylie made us think that maybe we shouldn't worry do much about what our kids choose, because, after all, they choose what they choose for a reason:

There are times when books speak to me, times in my life when I need particular books. *Twilight* spoke to me when I read it. I needed it right then. *Paper Towns* was exactly what I needed at that time. *Twilight* was a quick read, very drawing. I read it in two days. At that point I was a freshman in high school and I felt unloved and alone. And if Edward loved Bella he could love me too. I think the Oatmeal (a fan website) was right – she is nondescript so the reader can imagine she is her – not too skinny, not too fat – she could be a million different people. They filmed the movie near my town and my friend and I went to be extras. They said we looked like Bella. But everyone looks like Bella! Bella is not described in an advanced way. She was me. The book made me feel the possibility of love, despite challenges. My mom really critiqued the book – I forced her to read it – and she said this is not what romance is like – which is how I feel now – but when I read it I liked it. She [Bella] is just a plot device, not a deep person.

A fundamental precept we try to meet in our teaching is what cognitive science calls “the correspondence concept” (Bereiter, 2004) – that is, that everything that is learned should result in learner’s developing attitudes and strategies that correspond to those of experts. If expert adult readers exercise choice and pursue the reading they feel that they need and that can help them at a particular moment, and if experts evaluate and compare the meaning, effects and value of different texts, then why shouldn’t students?

The role of this kind of choice was central to Kylie:

School tells us to read books, because “everyone” has read them. Because you are expected to know them. I much prefer book lists where you make a choice. Not everyone likes the same books. I can take a list to [my] librarian and discuss what would be the best match for me. And my librarian knew me and helped me find the books I needed.

The reading of romances worries us considerably less now than before the study.

The books themselves seem to provide what depth psychologists call containers for strong feelings and desires; that is, they provide a way to contain, study and reflect upon something that provides so much emotion and energy that it is otherwise dangerous to experiment with and consider in real-life contexts. Containers offer a safe way to bring the unconscious into consciousness.

We have long argued that motivation is a primary challenge facing

teachers, if not the primary one. And we have also argued for “going with the flow” (2002; 2006) by following our students’ interests and energies and bridging from these to more sophisticated texts and complex thinking. So why not go with our student readers’ passions? Why not let them read what they need, at least some of the time.

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