

Multiple Voices, Multiple Genres: Fiction for Young Adults

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Stories told by more than one narrator or in multiple genres are not uncommon in literature for young adults. From *The Pigman* to *Give a Boy a Gun*, fiction about adolescents includes many of these nontraditional narratives. If adolescence is all about finding one's way—sorting through cacophony for a sense of meaning, an identity, a truth—perhaps its reality is best represented in multivoice or multigenre styles. Like the New Journalism of the '60s (and books like *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, in which Tom Wolfe slips into the voices of his subjects), fiction with many voices conveys a strong sense of realism.

Readers become immersed in the action; they make inferences, decipher plot, and construct themes from what the voices show and tell. For teens who themselves feel uncertain of the truth of what they see or hear—who are discovering that all stories have more than one side—and for teens who enjoy the realism of young adult fiction, novels with multiple voices are a natural.

He Said, She Said: Adolescent Novels with Multiple Narrators

Cousins of the multigenre novel, books with multiple narrators tell their stories in the voices of two or more central characters. In novels with the more traditional solo narrator-characters, the reader is drawn closer to those people—we identify, sympathize, perhaps empathize, and even agonize as we experience events through their eyes. When more than one character tells the story (or stories), the effect is somewhat different. Our loyalties are not to one but to the whole. And while we become aware of how each character sees and responds to events, we are also aware of how the events affect the characters' relationships. We acquire a kind of intimate omniscience by viewing the world through multiple

lenses. We are able to map the territory in a way no one single traveler can.

Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* is one of the earliest young adult novels to use dual narrators. In alternating chapters, John and Lorraine tell the story of their friendship with Mr. Pignati in order to understand and atone for their role in his death. The larger story revealed in their narratives is of two lonely, alienated teenagers struggling to find purpose in a world that appears repressive and/or indifferent and bridging the transition from irresponsible childhood to an adulthood in which people's actions have consequences. John's and Lorraine's unique voices give us insight into their shifting relationship, as well as into their growth as individuals.

Another pair of boy-girl narrators appears in Lois Ruby's *Miriam's Well*. Adam and Miriam are classmates paired by their English teacher for a poetry project. They are opposites: he is popular, "cool," sarcastic; she is plain, shy, and deeply religious. Despite their differences, they become friends. When Miriam is hospitalized with cancer, Adam is horrified that her church, because of its beliefs about medical healing, wants her released. To Adam, this action is a death sentence. In their respective chapters Adam and Miriam come to understand each

other's perspective. We, too, are able to see beyond our blinders and understand the need for tolerance and respect for difference.

Francesca Lia Block's *Violet & Claire*, a story set in Los Angeles, is told by the two central characters, Violet and Claire. The two girls are described by Claire as "photo negatives of each other, together making the perfect image of a girl" (89). Violet is an angst-ridden, independent seventeen-year-old whose passion is to write a screenplay and have it produced. Claire is fragile, ethereal, and elfin; she writes poetry to escape from "the death of being alive" (111). Both are misfits in a world that does not understand their gifts or dreams. Their individual narratives in the first two chapters reveal from two angles the girls' meeting, their evolving friendship, and their pursuits of fame (Violet) and love (Claire). The last chapter is a past-tense, third-person narrative, presumably in the retrospective voice of Violet and Claire combined. In it we learn the sinister, self-destructive sides of their dreams, and of the transformative power of friendship.

While *The Pigman*, *Miriam's Well*, and *Violet & Claire* are stories told by two characters, *Bat 6* by Virginia Euwer Wolff is a story told by a village. In this unique, multivoice novel, Wolff's narrators are the members of two sixth grade girls' baseball teams in two rural Oregon towns in 1949. There are twenty narrators in all—girls with different backgrounds and educational levels—some poor, some comfortable. Like a Polaroid photograph, the girls' rich and flavorful language gradually reveals the towns' historic rivalry and reconciliation (celebrated in the annual Bat 6 game) and the scars left on the community by the second world war and the internment of Japanese Americans. *Bat 6* is a story about wars on many levels, forgiveness, endurance, respect, and what community and friendship mean.

He Thought, She Thought: Over-the-Shoulder Narratives

Probably one of the most common narrative points of view in young adult fiction is the limited, third-person omniscient—"over the shoulder" of one protagonist. But in some novels, the authors put us behind several shoulders, taking us into the minds of two or more characters in order to create a larger sense of the scene. The effect of these novels is similar to that of stories narrated in the first person by multiple characters: the whole of the story is more

than the sum of its parts. Annette Curtis Klause's *The Silver Kiss* juxtaposes, in alternating chapters, a realistic story of a girl's facing her mother's death with the story of a young vampire. Norma Fox Mazer's *Out of Control* tells a story of sexual harassment from the perspectives of the victim and one of the perpetrators. In both novels the juxtaposed points of view heighten the themes. Readers of *The Silver Kiss* experience a stronger sense of Zoe's isolation and fear of her mother's cancer and impending death because of the parallels in the vampire Simon's story (leukemia, after all, is a kind of vampirism). In *Out of Control*, readers come away with a greater understanding of the complexity of harassment and its effects.

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One of the most well-known writers of over-the-shoulder narratives is Robert Cormier. In several of his YA novels, including *The Chocolate War* and *We All Fall Down*, Cormier uses the omniscient point of view to situate readers inside several characters' thoughts, feelings, responses, and fears. In *The Chocolate War* we are mainly looking over the shoulder of Jerry, a boy new to Trinity School, whose mother has just died and who is searching for his place in the universe. But Cormier shifts us into others' viewpoints as well—Jerry's friend Goober, the antagonists Archie and Brother Leon, and assorted and sundry boys involved in the chocolate sale and power wars at the school. The quick jumps from perspective to perspective are like a cinematic montage, creating atmosphere, revealing relationships, and building tension. In *We All Fall Down*, Cormier focuses on three characters: Buddy, an alcoholic teen whose parents are divorcing; Jane, whose house was violently trashed and whose sister

was put in a coma by a group that included Buddy; and the Avenger, a vaguely identified character who witnessed the trashing and has a crush on Jane. Both books have the feel of novels with multiple first person narrators; we get close enough to characters to care about them, and we know them better than they know themselves.

Another of Cormier's novels, *I Am the Cheese*, is worth noting for its mix of narrative voices: a character in the first person; an over-the-shoulder third person voice; and a tape transcript, which, in some ways, qualifies the book for multigenre status. The first storyteller is Adam Farmer, a boy whose family changed its identity when his father was put in a witness protection program. Adam describes, in chapters separate from the novel's other narratives, his journey on a bicycle to find his father. The second narrator is actually the transcript of a tape recording of Adam's interrogation by a mysterious man named Brint and of Brint's notes following the interrogation. Interspersed in the transcript is the past tense, over-the-shoulder account of Adam's responses to and memories triggered by the interrogation. At the end we are able to connect the seemingly separate stories, voices, and time periods, but along the way, we, like Adam, struggle to sort out fact from appearance.

They Said: Multigenre Novels for Adolescent Readers

Multigenre novels also have multiple voices. In these novels readers hear the voices surrounding a place, an event, and the people involved—voices embedded in genres that naturally belong to those settings, people, and events. Imagine the events of *Bat 6* told not by the girls but by newspaper articles, a sermon, a mother's diary, a teacher's report, a sports commentator. Because multigenre novels put readers even more directly into the scene than do stories with more conventional narrators or even first person, character-narrators, they have a documentary feel. Their fast, dramatic pace captures the rhythm of film and television programs that tell several stories (or pieces of one story) simultaneously with fast-pans and quick cuts (*Traffic* and *NYPD Blue* are good examples).

One of the earliest multigenre novels with adolescent characters is Bel Kaufman's *Up the Down Staircase*, the story of the dedicated, idealistic Sylvia Barrett's first year attempt to teach English in a bureaucratic, underfunded urban high school. Al-

though published in 1964 and not written specifically for younger readers, the book is relevant today and accessible to young adults. Those of us old enough to remember know that the book was among the first to depict a harried, idealistic English teacher struggling to reach a group of poor, largely ethnic, urban teens in an environment of cynicism, incompetence, and indifference. Sylvia Barrett is the female Mr. Dadier of the 1959 film *Blackboard Jungle*, and the precursor of the scatterbrained, idealistic teacher in *Room 222*. The novel is a funny, biting satirical story of poor teaching (a teacher red-pens and returns a student's love letter), ineffectual administrators (the principal is nearly invisible), and inane administrative directives ("AT THE END OF THE HOME-ROOM PERIOD, PLEASE SEND TO ME THOSE STUDENTS WHO HAVE FAILED TO REPORT FOR CHECK-OUT BECAUSE THEY HAVE LEFT THE BUILDING" [37]). At the same time it conveys a wrenchingly sad picture of a system that fails students and thwarts the teachers who care about them.

Up the Down Staircase would be an excellent introduction to multigenre writing style. The story is told through memos, letters, dialogues, students' writing (with illustrations), intercom announcements, bits from a school newspaper, and other genres familiar in a school setting. And it conveys the realism, drama, and immediacy characteristic of multigenre fiction for teens. Kaufman describes the format in her introduction to the 1991 edition:

Some reviewers paid me the ultimate compliment: They thought I had merely collected and arranged the material in the book. But everything in the novel is invented, except a few directives from the Board of Education, which I had to tone down for credibility. I made up reports, memos, notes, records, forms, announcements, confidential files of the school nurse and the school psychologist, class minutes, lesson plans, administrative circulars, and comments from the kids themselves. All of it sounded so authentic that I was delighted to learn that when the assistant principal of my former school sent directives to his teachers, he would add in red pencil: "Do not show this to Bel Kaufman." (xvi)

Several multigenre novels written specifically for young adults also capture the feeling of authenticity. Avi's *Nothing but the Truth* is a full-blown multigenre novel in the vein of *Up the Down Staircase*, complete with a long-suffering English teacher,

a recalcitrant student, and a less-than-perfect educational system. Also like *Up the Down Staircase*, the story is told through many genres (unlike *I Am the Cheese*, which includes only the tape transcript). In this novel, Philip, angry because Miss Narwin has given him (rightfully) a poor grade and thus made him ineligible for the track team, sets out to aggravate her by humming during the playing of the national anthem. When Narwin sends Philip to the office, she sets in motion a chain of misunderstandings and miscommunication that turns the issue from a simple case of disruptive behavior into one of patriotism—an issue that consumes the school, community, and, eventually, the national media. Like Kaufman's, Avi's novel includes administrators' memos and letters, dialogues, personal letters (Narwin's letters to her sister are much like Sylvia Barrett's to her friend), informal notes, and media clips. Through these genres emerge stories of a teacher's disillusionment, parental pressure and hypocrisy, unprincipled administrators, and students who genuinely care about teachers and learning.

The reader of *Nothing but the Truth* follows the drama of Philip and Miss Narwin by sorting through genres that reveal misinformation, watching "truth" become more and more elusive, while hoping for Philip's comeuppance. But in two recent young adult novels about gun violence, Walter's *Making Up Megaboy* and Strasser's *Give a Boy a Gun*, the reader knows the outcome and reads to fill in the blanks—the who and why. *Making Up Megaboy* is the story of Robbie Jones, a withdrawn thirteen-year-old who, for no apparent reason, takes his father's gun and kills an elderly shop owner. Author Virginia Walter and graphic designer Katrina Roecklein give us short clips from what appear to be interviews with Robbie's family, a friend, classmates, the victim's family, a minister, corrections and police officers, and Robbie's attorney, in addition to pieces of news reports and Robbie's own writing. The genres are presented with graphics: each speaker has a different font; photographs and graphic art (including Robbie's drawings of his alter-ego creation, the superhero Megaboy) enhance the text and set the tone. Although we never learn why Robbie committed the crime (nor, in the scope of the book, does Robbie), we feel Robbie's loneliness, the callousness of his classmates, and the senselessness of the crime.

Todd Strasser's *Give a Boy a Gun* is similar in theme but somewhat different in presentation. This chilling novel is a pseudo-documentary about

two angry, troubled high school boys whose fantasies of violent revenge on their classmates' social elitism (and their teachers' compliance) culminate in a night of violence at a school dance. The story is told largely in excerpts from interviews with students, teachers, friends, and family but includes the boys' suicide notes, e-mails, and instant messaging conversations. Also included, in footnotes throughout, are statistics about guns in America. Strasser uses a clever unifying device: a fictional Denise Shipley, journalism student at a nearby university and former student at the high school (according to "her" introduction), is the presenter of the materials—the author. It is Denise who leads us to the conclusion that "Unless we change the way we treat others in school and out, there will only be more—and more horrible—tragedies" (5). By placing the genres in this framework, Strasser achieves two effects. First, because Denise is present only in the introduction and for the remainder is a silent guide, we readers adopt her persona and become the dutiful reporter sifting through the collected data. We identify with her cause and have a purpose for reading. Second, the framework adds to the novel's believability and makes it more grim. These are real kids talking, real statistics, real guns, real anger. The authenticity of the genres makes the book profound and dramatic.

Teaching Multivoice Novels

Although the language and content of some of the novels described here are controversial (*Violet & Claire*, *Give a Boy a Gun*), novels with multiple voices may be used in a classroom in concert with or to introduce the study of multigenre writing, with other literature, or simply by themselves. But they should be approached with care. In my teaching experience I have found that many students (even of college age) find some multigenre or multivoice novels a difficult read. *I Am the Cheese* is tough for some because the reader does not initially know what is going on in the three narratives; even a novel such as *Nothing but the Truth* that contains short genres familiar to adolescents may meet resistance from students who expect a single narrator to guide them to meaning. The multiple genres or narratives may seem a jumble of disconnected voices, devoid of the familiar "coherence" of identifiable protagonists, antagonists, settings, linear chronology, and clear beginnings, middles, and ends. Gradually

developing Polaroids are simply not in many students' reading repertoires.

Generally speaking, the more "multi" the genre or voice (and the more complex or unfamiliar the genres), the less firm the ground for the reader. For these novels readers must take on some of the narrative task and assume greater authority over the text. They are thrust into the position of reporters, detectives, or juries hearing testimonies. They must review evidence and draw patterns from what they see and hear, actively constructing meaning. Although they are obviously guided by the nature, content, and sequence of the genres, readers must pull the story out of the bits, whether they are bits told by the twenty girls in *Bat 6*, the memos of *Up the Down Staircase*, or the sketches of *Making Up Megaboy*. Successful readers of these novels step back, extract information, and form and test hypotheses. They look for points of juncture—scenes, events, and genres that show chronology, connect one person's perception to another's, and add significant information—much as they would piece together a jigsaw puzzle by looking for intersecting colors, lines, and shapes. We can help our students be successful at reading these novels by helping them become more conscious of the strategies required by their new reading role.

Drawing parallels between viewing and reading is a useful way to introduce multivoice literature. By analyzing how viewers process information, students are able to see that different programs require different viewing strategies, and that the viewers themselves create meaning when characters are not always to be trusted. Soap operas abound with unreliable people and multiple perspectives, since the plots hinge on characters having only partial information. Only the viewers know the truth behind the secrets, schemes, and lies because they witness actions other characters do not see and because soap characters think out loud for the benefit of no one but the viewer (as do Shakespeare's characters in asides and monologues). The "dramatic irony" is easy to grasp. Reality television puts viewers in similar positions. Certain talk shows and televised courtrooms center on people with clashing perspectives, often extreme. On *Survivor*, contestants reveal their tactics to each other and to us, but we may not believe them, since their objective is to "outwit." And some contemporary films (*Memento*, *Vanilla Sky*, *The Matrix*) play with our trust of the image and its reality. By discussing "Whom do you trust? What is

really going on and how do you know?" students discover that these programs require viewing strategies unlike those they use to watch more conventional dramas: do not believe that the world is necessarily as characters see it; stories do not always unfold in a linear way; rely on the sum total of what you observe and hear; withhold your alliances and judgments until you have more evidence; trust yourself. These are important tips for readers of multivoice literature as well.

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In life, whether we like or believe or trust a person depends upon the inferences we make. Sometimes our inferences prove valid, other times they are wrong, especially if they are based on insufficient evidence or stereotypes. Dramatic monologues are useful to demonstrate the unreliability of a narrative voice. Whether we use the monologues of Robert Browning or have students create monologues of fictitious characters (a student who is cheating and doesn't want to get caught; a hypochondriac on a crowded bus; an overprotective parent sending his or her child to school on the first day), we show, especially if the monologues are read aloud or acted dramatically, how voice reveals personality. What a character says is only part of the story; how he or she says it reveals as much about the character as about the subject.

Interpreting monologues, like interpreting events in life, requires the skills of perception and deduction—the awareness that people do not perceive events fully or in the same way and that the reality of an event may be the sum total of multiple views and voices. Some additional activities are useful for helping students hone these skills and acquire the more detective-like stance required by multivoice literature.

- **Crime scene investigator:** In groups, students draw from a bag and examine several

objects left at the scene of a crime and generate hypotheses about the perpetrator based on what they find (for example, a worn-out running shoe, a chewed pen, a gum-wrapper, a cup from Starbucks). Variations on the activity include giving more information about the crime, where the objects were found, and so on so that students recreate the “story” of the crime—the motive and the personality of the perpetrator from the evidence.

- **Witness:** This activity involves giving several students roles as witnesses to an event. Each role is different, and each person has only partial information about the event. Another group of students are the detectives, whose job it is to discover what happened by interviewing the witnesses. For example, one scenario might be that a parked car slips out of gear, rolls down a hill, and crashes into the front of a convenience store, breaking the window and knocking over the rack of candy bars. However, no one knows the whole story. When the detective arrives, she finds the car with its nose inside the store and candy bars and broken glass all over the hood. The car has no driver and the gear is in neutral. Roles might include the shop owner, who was in the stock room at the time getting ready to open the store; a kid on a skateboard, who wiped out trying to dodge the car as it whizzed past him; the driver, who put the car in park, left it running, and dashed back into her house for a briefcase; a customer of the next-door, drive-through espresso stand, who saw the car race through the intersection and heard, but didn't see, the crash; and so on.
- **What did you see?** Most people do not observe events accurately or in the same way, especially when the events are sudden or unexpected. Several activities can illustrate the fallibility of perception. In one, often done in journalism classes, the teacher stages an event of some kind to take place in the middle of a dull lecture or a (mock) test. The event might be two teachers bursting into the room, angrily yelling threats at each other, or someone coming in the room doing something unexpected or outrageous (stealing something from the teacher's desk, giving an incoherent speech). Immediately afterwards is a quiz: How were the people dressed? What

was in their hands? What did they do? What did they say? A similar activity that requires less preparation is to show a picture for a few minutes followed by a quiz and discussion. Another is to quiz students on the details of something they see regularly but may not pay attention to: how their bus driver was dressed that morning, the color of their homeroom teachers' eyes, the logo on the mouse pads in the computer lab, the pattern in the tiles on the cafeteria floor.

- **Versions of reality:** By writing about a recent event or moment in their lives from at least three perspectives (their own, other peoples', even the perspective of an object), students become aware of how multiple perspectives enrich both writer and reader's knowledge of an event and its significance. The event may be simple (walking the dog, riding the bus to school) or more complex (an argument with a friend, a date, a meal), and each narrative should convey the personality of the writer as well as a unique perspective on the event. In addition, published or student-written retellings of well-known fairy tales from the villain's or a minor character's point of view, such as Scieszka's *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, reinforce the concept that the story is in the eye of the beholder.
- **Scrapbooks:** Scrapbooks are, in a way, multigenre books, and an effective way to introduce multigenre literature that includes more than written text. Students are familiar with scrapbooks; they know that scrapbooks contain artifacts of significant events, the meaning of which are known only to the creator. But how would another person “read” a scrapbook? Ask students (individually or in groups) to tell the story of an important event in scrapbook form. It could be a personal event, an event from a novel, an event that affected a community. What objects, pictures, or words would tell the story of that event? If the scrapbooks are not too personal, students can examine each other's and recreate their stories.

Activities such as these should be linked directly to reading: What inferences might we make about characters based on the way they describe the scene? What elements of their personalities become apparent as they tell the story? In the language they use? In what ways is their perception limited? By

becoming more conscious of their roles as active readers and of their reading processes—observing, inferring, and arbitrating reality—students become stronger readers of all written texts, more attentive to cues, and aware of their power as meaning-makers.

Of course successful reading of literature in multiple genres also requires familiarity with the nature of the genres. As I noted at the beginning of this article, each genre—obituaries, sports articles, lyric poetry, rap—has a different audience, purpose, and feel. And it is in the harmony or disharmony of those genres that a multigenre story lies. The books I have described use genres that are familiar to most students; however, if students have never seen a memorandum, they might not see the humor in those Sylvia Barrett receives. Prior to reading a multigenre novel students can profit from reading relevant examples and exploring the nature of the genres contained in the book: Who is the audience? Who typically writes this genre? What kind of information is important to the writer? What interests, knowledge, background must a reader of this genre possess? What actions, behaviors, attitudes, or responses does the writer expect from the reader—in other words, what is the genre designed to do? (The memorandum, for example, is a form of communication in the workplace that requires knowledge of routines, policies, operations, and personnel. Memoranda are generally formal, often written in professional jargon, and designed to impart information that will lead to action of some kind. A wonderful irony in *Up the Down Staircase* is that the memos are nonsensical, trivial, and regularly ignored—the opposite of their intent.)

Conclusion

With so many multivoice novels accessible to teens, we have a great opportunity to expand students' reading repertoires to include this rich, multidimensional literature. As so many teachers are discovering, literature by and about young adults has significant value in the classroom: the themes are relevant and meaningful to teens, and as Leila Christenbury points out, "The compressed plot, the limited number of characters, and the length of the works themselves . . . make it more accessible and often more immediately understandable" (18). Young adult novels are an excellent transition to classic literature that may seem remote and/or difficult.

(Joan Kaywell's series, *Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics*, is an excellent resource for using YA literature to enhance the study of classics.) They make the craft of literature accessible as well: theme, plot, setting, characterization, foreshadowing, symbolism, and imagery are all present in good YA novels. As Gary Salvner writes, "Many of your course objectives about literary elements and devices can be achieved quickly and coherently with a book that even your reticent ninth graders can read easily in several hours" (89). Young adult books with multiple narrators, Salvner notes, are especially effective for teaching point of view (90), thus paving the way for future reading of more challenging literature with complex narrative structures (for example, Michael Ondaatje's multigenre novel *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, or other works of postmodern fiction).

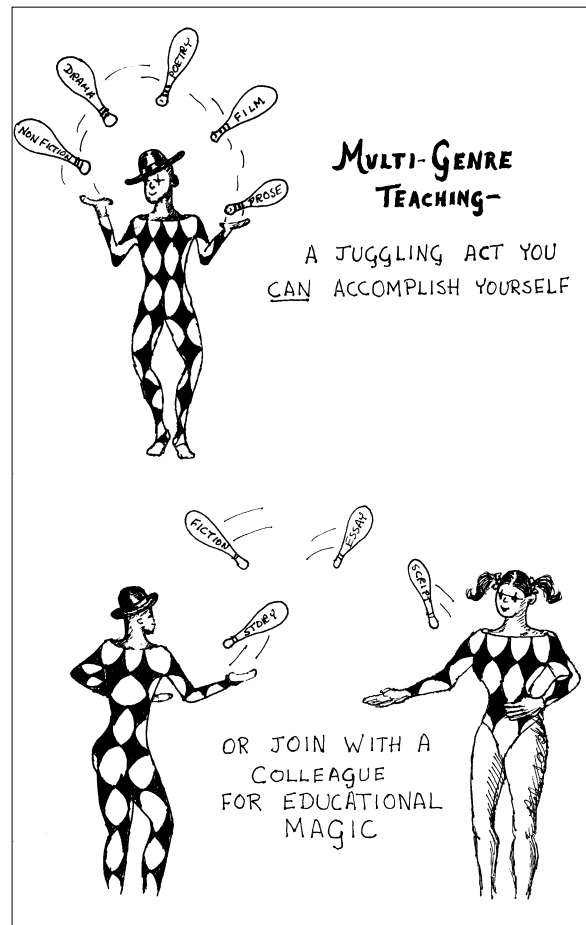
Multivoice novels show young readers new ways of writing about their lives and the world. They demonstrate how many ways there are to tell a story and the significance of voice to meaning. In a world that may seem increasingly uncertain and adversarial, the understanding that reality lies in the diversity and plurality of voices seems especially important for adolescents as writers, readers, and human beings.

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EJ 75 YEARS AGO

Inspiring Children to Soar

"Every teacher who has any kind of appreciation of her calling likes to think of herself as a maker, a potter shaping mass materials, some good and some not so good, into finished articles of value, perhaps even of worth and beauty. No true teacher wants to admit that her job, or any large part of it, is patchwork, mending broken crockery, patching defective vessels, catching up raveled edges, scouring off grime. God bless any of you who can teach your children to soar and sing. Those of you who can take thirty children and so guide their learning, so inspire them, that they will come to express themselves in story and poetry are the rare spirits of the earth. One child in a schoolroom who learns to express himself in that way is a blessing to the teacher. Thirty would be a miracle."

E. A. Cross. "Fundamentals for English Teachers." *EJ* 16.5 (1927): 364-73.
