

## If You Could Commission an Article for the *English Journal* . . .

**If you could invite any living person to write an article for the *English Journal*, who would it be? What would you hope they would write about?**

What do Harper Lee and Erma Bombeck, Peggy Noonan and Carl Sagan, Eudora Welty and John Updike all have in common? Some one out there would like them to write articles for the *English Journal*. Like Annie Dillard and Jacques Cousteau and Mark Mathabane, they have spoken to us eloquently in print and in their work, but we wonder if they do not have ideas that might be particularly relevant to English teachers, who admire them and present them to the young. Does Tom Wolfe have “an electric, kool-aid, tangerine-colored” message just for us? What might Robert Coles have to say about “teachers in crisis”? And that quintessential pack-rat Andy Rooney—surely he could lighten our day and perhaps enlighten our understanding of the world of language we late-twentieth-century Americans inhabit.

In the early days of the *English Journal*, we are told, the editors had the prerogative and the funds to commission an article each month from a leading critic or scholar. Those were, we can assure you, the “good old days.”

Occasionally we let ourselves fantasize what we would do if we won the Florida lottery or one of those sweepstakes giveaways that Ed McMahon touts on TV. It doesn't take us long in an *EJ* staff meeting to generate a list of writers to whom we would gladly assign the writing of our lead article. For this eightieth-anniversary Round Table, we thought it might be interesting to have our readers join in. What follows is a list of your suggestions—an *English Journal* to dream of.

Rest assured that we have conveyed your re-

quests to everyone on the list. Who knows? Maybe some—or all—of them have something they have always wanted to say to more than 50,000 English teachers.

BFN

### “Wildness, Originality, Genius, Rapture, Hope”

Elaine Murphy

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“Works only on what interests her.”

**Annie Dillard**, really. How could your high-school profile include the same kind of description that I could give to so many of my students? And a slip in that same school file noting your suspension for smoking. And, to boot, a juvenile court record for drag racing! All this from a future Pulitzer Prize winner?

I'd love to hear what you think of English education in the 1990s. What literary works really speak to the adolescent, that character whom you describe as alternately “longing to kill someone and bomb something big” and wanting to play Johnny Appleseed-does-Jack Kerouac? Am I, in my teacher-knows-best smugness, directing my students to the “duds” instead of the “bombs” of literature? Do you shake your head incredulously as I wait expectantly for every student to share my own literary passions? If you still see poetry as “secret and subversive,” tell me how we teachers can manage to deal with poetry as “curriculum.” Does anything in my school's canon meet your own adolescent requirement that literature provide “wildness, originality, genius, rapture, hope”? Or should I resign myself to facing students like the teenaged Annie Dillard, those who “siphon off the restlessness” by drawing caricatures in the margins of their anthologies?

I could listen forever to tales of your idyllic childhood: about your witty father with his notebook of favorite jokes and about your free-spirited, perspicacious mother. They gave you security and books and a free rein so that your childhood became a quest to “notice everything, as [Sherlock] Holmes had, and remember it all, as no one had before.” Is there a way to arouse a sense of wonder in students who have never experienced that idyll, a generation who often feel they have already seen too much?

Are you flattered that I use snippets from *An American Childhood* (1987, New York: Harper) and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974, New York: Harper) to teach good writing to my classes, or should I simply throw open the classroom door and turn a roomful of sixteen-year-olds loose on a creek or a meadow? They do love your descriptions of nature as flawed, messy, extravagant, motley, a “wild tangent of the creator.” Your nature sounds to them like themselves. They love your vivid images: the little friend with legs so skinny her knee socks fall down, the funny vibrations you feel throughout your body when you ride a bike over cobblestones. They can “get into” the universality of charming stories about monster shadows on the bedroom wall and sweaty-palmed prepubescent dancers. But why, they wonder, do you still read so much?

So, Annie Dillard, what about all these students in front of me with high-school profiles resembling your own? Any ideas?

### Why Thirty Years of Silence?

Luana Russell  
Midland High School, Michigan 48640

Yoo-hoo, **Harper Lee**, what have you been up to? How will you celebrate your sixty-sixth birthday in April? I'm a busybody like Miss Stephanie who wants to know about your life after the success of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1960, after you became the first woman since 1942 to win the Pulitzer Prize.

I've done research. Your picture in *Current Biography 1961* looks like Scout Finch grown up to thirty-five (New York: Wilson). Short, straight hair frames a non-nonsense face; eyes look directly at the lens. You published three magazine pieces in the 60s. But since then, nothing—no second novel set in the South as *Current Biography* predicted.

So what happened? Maybe your articles give clues. The Christmas memoir in *McCall's* (December 1961) portrays an ideal family and friendship. They had given you a year off from a job to write, “an act of love.” And in *Vogue* (April 1961), “Love—In Other Words” suggests a purpose for life other than writing. “Without love, life is pointless and dangerous,” you wrote. Were loving and writing incompatible since writing is selfish rather than selfless?

Referring to a nephew and to other children in a later *McCall's* article (August 1965), you describe an ordinary lifestyle—neighbors and a “cake covered with caramel frosting.” At thirty-nine you added, “As we grow older the world closes in on us, and we gradually lose the freshness of viewpoints that we had as children.” Is the explanation for putting down your pen that simple?

My research outlines the jigsaw puzzle. Please fill it in. Did you go back and finish law school? Did you lack a room of your own? Did you have only one story to tell? Have you been sick? Did you just put off writing the second novel until tomorrow? Have you followed the debate about teachers having time to write?

Adrienne Rich said Emily Dickinson declined “the invitation of other lives” (1979, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose*, New York: Norton). Perhaps you ac-

cepted that invitation. You wrote in *Vogue*, “the reward of love is peace of mind, and peace of mind is the end of man's desiring.”

You seem to have quietly slipped into a self-imposed obscurity. Maybe I should accept that as Scout accepted Boo Radley's choice, but I want to understand your literary silence. So write and let me know, will you? Have you found disillusionment or peace of mind?

### Six Decades of Sensibility

G. Douglas Meyers  
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I would like to invite **Eudora Welty** to write a piece for English teachers based on the three themes that form the chapter titles in her autobiography, *One Writer's Beginning*: “Listening,” “Learning to See,” and “Finding a Voice” (1984, Cambridge: Harvard UP). Though Welty denies that she herself possesses the teacher's “instructing turn of mind,” there is no doubt that her reverence for the word, her passion for life, and her six decades of short stories and novels endow her with a sensibility that would be instructive to English teachers interested in connecting students with the power of language.

The “real subject” of her fiction, Welty proclaims, is *human relationships*; isn't that also the real subject for English teachers, as we strive to sensitize our students to their unique gifts as creative language users? How can we excite students with a love of books? How can we encourage them to the urgency of their own voices? How can we involve them as listeners in reading and writing? How can we get them to prize the value of particulars, to prize the value of memory? These are some of the questions for which Welty's answers would be appreciated, for they would surely suggest other questions that need exploring.

### Assignment: Another Centaur

Pamela Orth  
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My journal contains snippets of letters I would like to write to **John Updike**. When I read his descriptions that are so precise, they move me to write, but I cannot, of course, come close to his ability to create plot and character. So instead I find solace in dialoguing with the author through imaginary letters.

I would like Updike to write an article which is simply John Updike. Perhaps he could write a story about a teacher in 1991 trying to move students to react to words. He could be a modern-day Caldwell (1963, *Centaur*, London: Deutsch), or better yet for me, a Ms. Caldwell who has been teaching for twenty years, who still loves going to school on Mondays, who loves reading student essays, who does not have burn-out. I'd like a story about me: an English teacher looking for new ways to inspire today's kids who are pretty darn wonderful!

### A Man of Action; A Call to Action

Cynthia B. Payne  
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Although most people associate him with his love for the sea and its creatures, **Captain Jacques Cousteau's** concerns embrace the human race as well. Cousteau could offer us his views on the future of children worldwide, their chances for living lives safe from disaster both natural and human-generated. He could stress the need for sound education and the lifelong satisfaction of productive work.

He has demonstrated his intense interest in children as the hope of the planet through his voyage to Antarctica, his ship bearing one child from each of the populated continents, symbolizing the need for world-level cooperation. His recommendation that world leaders exchange their own children as reminders against aggression and warfare reveals a man deeply rooted in compassion and hope for a better future.

This eloquent humanist delivers his message of caution mixed with hope for the world in a style of elegant simplicity. His mastery of English as a second language reveals itself in poetic imagery that reminds native speakers just how inspiring our language can be when it sounds a call to action.

No language functions for its own sake—it must embody content and purpose. Cousteau would counsel us as teachers of communication to make that content and purpose nothing less than the rescue and nurturing of the planet and its people.

### Closing the Gap between Newton and Shakespeare

Sandra M. Couch

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Long before hemispherisity became a part of educational jargon, it was evident to many that students usually excelled in either the sciences or the humanities. When I was a student, science and math were, to me, alien inventions filled with grotesque shapes and uncompromising logic. As a language-arts teacher, I kept my distance from the science wing of my high school. Then, one night while watching *Masterpiece Theater* on PBS, I stumbled upon the now classic series, *Cosmos* (1989, KCET and Carl Sagan Productions). For the first time the complexities of physics and chemistry and math suddenly became relevant to me. The left side of my brain sprung to life.

Thanks to **Carl Sagan** my universe is a harmonious blend of the purity of math and the sciences and the beauty of art and literature. Sagan is a true renaissance man. His expansive background, experience, and knowledge are fully expressed in his scientific writing as well as his fiction.

I would enjoy having Sagan write about how he came to such a unique balance of the sciences and humanities in his life and work. Perhaps he could include suggestions about how to motivate teachers and students to integrate all curricula and thus lessen the gap between Newton and Shakespeare.

We need to help our students to see the language-arts curriculum, not in isolation, but as part of a glorious universe, a universe explained by the scientists and exposed by the poets. This would be a valuable addition to the curriculum of the twenty-first century.

### To Survive; To Overcome

Barbara J. Henry

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Most of us who read *Kaffir Boy* probably came away from the experience mesmerized, appalled, and grateful that our struggles for knowledge, identity, and fulfillment, although severe in many cases, could never compare to **Mark Mathabane's** struggles.

The abject poverty, characterized by the squalid living conditions, the life-threatening situations young Mathabane and his family encountered daily because of the oppressive apartheid laws under which they existed and barely eked out a living, attests to the worst kind of evil. Yet Mathabane survived because of persistence, discipline, courage, and the other intangibles displayed throughout the book.

Mathabane also had a great mother and a few compassionate black teachers who saw his potential and nurtured him as best they could under the circumstances. Influential white friends, like former tennis great Stan Smith, helped him develop and use tennis as a springboard to freedom and an opportunity to pursue an education in the United States.

Should Mathabane write an article relating how he motivated himself to overcome challenges, I believe English teachers across the country would be moved first to tears, then to greater action on their students' behalf.

### Moral Introspection

Jeanne A. Becker

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He has dealt with children and young people in his professional capacity and has sought to understand their motivations, their morality, their problems. He has been moved by their stories and humbled by their courage. He has shared his experience with us in his series *Children of Crisis* (1967, Boston: Little) and informed us of the plight of young blacks, migrants, sharecroppers, Eskimos, Chicanos, and Native Americans. He has traced the problems of children in middle-class America. No living person is better qualified to guide and inspire teachers to greater heights of compassion when dealing with the young.

**Robert Coles**, child psychiatrist and social scientist, is also a devotee of literature. Like his mentor, William Carlos Williams, he sees in fiction the opportunity for self-scrutiny. Coles teaches in the schools of medicine, business, and law at Harvard—courses on the great novelists and writers. His list includes Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Thomas Merton, Charles Dickens, Flannery O'Connor, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, George Orwell, George Eliot, and Walker Percy among others. He has fashioned his own courses: one on social ethics for the medical and business schools, one on Dickens and the law for the school of law, one on the literature of reflection at Harvard College. He seeks to engender high moral standards through the examples and paradoxes of literature.

What would I hope Robert Coles would write about? Anything at all gleaned from his vast experience. I

would like him to repeat for us, as he has in the past, that each child is important, that there is courage and even nobility in each of our students, that as we teach them, we can also learn from them, and that, if we probe long enough, we can find a “Ruby Bridges” in each of our classes. I would want him to allude to that literature which best serves the purpose of personal and moral integration.

Like Coles himself, as teachers of literature we must use the subtleties of irony and humor to point to the moral vacuum in our society. His is a message we need to absorb.

### Teaching Endangered Minds

Jenny Flores

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“What’s wrong with these kids today? They don’t read, they can’t write, and they won’t do homework!”

The frustration echoes through teachers’ lounges across the country, from kindergartens to colleges. **Jane Healy**, a veteran educator who has taught at all levels and who holds a doctorate in educational psychology, has one answer to this mystery of why kids today seem so different from those of fifteen to twenty years ago.

Healy’s book, *Endangered Minds—Why Our Children Don’t Think*, presents convincing evidence that our brains are shaped and developed by our experiences and environments (1990, New York: Simon). Because of relatively recent changes in the way we live, including the advent of television, computers, day-care centers, frenetic lifestyles, and increasingly unstable home lives, our society offers less active stimulation to its children. Most children’s experiences are visual and passive. Young children especially have less opportunity and encouragement to “do” things than kids growing up a few years ago.

As a result, the sections of their brains that control critical thinking, verbal expression, and other higher order thinking skills are undeveloped when these children reach school. Traditional teaching methods, which are geared for students with a broader range of active experiences and more highly developed skills, are doomed to fail with many modern students.

Healy could explain the learning style of the new student. She could offer insight into teaching techniques that are effective in building basic thinking and communication skills, including whole language learning, metacognition, and effective use of televisions and computers in the classroom.

### Why Did She Avoid School?

Virginia Selanik

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**Peggy Noonan** was a speech writer for President Reagan. In her book *What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era* (1990, New York: Random), Noonan alludes to a time in her adolescence when she avoided school and lay in bed reading. This pattern of irregular school attendance combined with voracious reading seems to be fairly common in the lives of many prominent people.

I’d like Noonan to write about what she envisions as an “ideal” English program, and why her own high-school courses seemed, in a sense, to have been unfulfilling. Noonan went on to major in English literature and managed to break into the highly competitive field of communications. She has a poetic respect for words, a quality that, I’m sure, has enhanced her work. It would be especially interesting to hear her opinion of “the value of poetry” in a high-tech, instant-communication society.

Those of us who use the language in our work need a respite from work along with some pleasurable reading. I would like to know what Noonan reads for pleasure and what works she returns to for inspiration or relaxation.

And finally, I’d like Noonan to offer some strong advice for students, especially young women, in getting that all-important foundation for a career in communications. What would help them break the barrier of male dominance in certain communication positions, and what qualities are needed besides a facility with language?

### A Consummate Journalist

Sandra Dee Smith

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I would like to invite **Connie Chung** to write an article for English teachers. There is little written about most journalists. A few (Barbara Walters, for example) have shared some personal as well as professional segments of their lives and have helped to personalize their careers, create role models for young people, and serve as an inspiration to many. Connie Chung is the consummate journalist. She has demonstrated professionalism in network journalism while providing a calm delivery of information, and she holds the public’s attention with distinctive charisma.

Her article should include a biographical sketch describing early childhood and the educational experiences which contributed to her confidence in pursuing her career. What were her goals and aspirations? What motivated her? When she was discouraged, what drove her to persevere?

What goals did she set for herself personally as well as professionally? When did she feel she had achieved those goals? How did she balance the rigors of her profession with personal goals? Has she set new personal and professional goals? Has being a woman been an asset or a liability in her profession? What impact has her Asian descent had on her career?

What skills did she have to develop to become successful? What is her personal writing process? Why does she believe communicating and writing are important skills?

Finally, I would like her to offer advice for young people who want to pursue a career in journalism. What would be her advice to young women who want to pursue any career in terms of balancing professional and personal goals? What advice would she give me as a teacher of reading, writing, and communicating? An article by Connie Chung could be a profound salute to the profession of writing and rhetoric.

## Vision Pollution

Joanne M. Martinez

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Every Sunday I look forward to **Andy Rooney's** commentary on *60 Minutes*. Humorously, he makes us aware of society's idiosyncrasies. Take for instance his commentary on the "pack-rat mentality." He displayed old cans of paint, then asked: "Why do we save this paint when we know we will never use it?"

Rooney could comment on our apathy to the constant bombardment we receive by advertisers, especially at the supermarket. Consider for a moment a typical visit to the grocery store. Armed with list and cart, I descend down the aisle, unable to see the locators above each aisle. Signs three-feet square obstruct the view: "Everyday All Fresh Meat" or "Lower Prices." Would they tell me if the meat was rancid or the prices were high? At any rate, to see the aisle locators, I think—should I get down on my knees to look under these signs? Would people think I'm crazy? Would I be able to get up again? Well, I opt for driving up and down the aisles, fearing the manager might call the paddy wagon.

As I travel down one aisle, I finally locate an item on my shopping list. Again my vision is impeded by smaller beacons staggered all over the shelves, taunting me: "Smart Buys," "Lower Prices" (conspicuously hiding the prices).

I drive my cart up and down the aisles like a race car driver, selecting items on my list. Then I proceed to the check-out counter. Whew! No more imposing signs! Wrong! Signs spin overhead: "Cookie Stacking Contest," "Cookie Coloring Contest." After paying for my purchases and leaving the store, I think—How would Andy Rooney handle this? Would he question, as I do, whether this type of advertisement is successful?

## We Need a Good Laugh

Susanne Cook

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Because English teachers sometimes take themselves too seriously, I would like to invite **Erma Bombeck** to write about writing in *EJ*. She is adept at making people laugh at themselves and their problems. English teachers have problems. We need a good laugh.

In this article I would like her to discuss any teachers who were an inspiration to her and to give specifics as to how they helped her with her writing. I would also like her to write about any writing experiences she had in school (newspaper staff, literary magazines, and the like) and elaborate on good and bad experiences. I would like to know if she ever kept a diary or journal; if so, how often did she write in it and what would be a typical entry?

It would be interesting to know about her first job as a writer. What did she write and how did she feel when she first saw her words in print? Of all the articles and books she has written which one is her favorite? I would like to know how she managed the logistics of family life and writing and if her family was supportive.

I would like Erma Bombeck to discuss all the process-

es she goes through from the idea of a book or column to the final draft that goes to the publisher. Which parts does she like best? What does she do when she gets stuck? Does she have friends and family read manuscripts for feedback? Does she take their advice if they offer any? How does she feel when her work is edited? What kind of advice would she have for a student who wanted to be a writer? Are there pitfalls to be avoided? If so, what are they?

I believe Erma Bombeck has enriched the lives of others with her humorous accounts of family life. We can all identify with her trials and tribulations. How has writing changed her life?

## Mau-Mauing the Streamlined Electric English Curriculum Consultants on Whole Language and What Books with the Right Stuff of Multiculturalism Can Be Incorporated without Being Doomed to Bonfires

Faith Wyse

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If I could invite any living person to write an article for *EJ*, it would be **Tom Wolfe**, and I would ask him to write about anything he could fit under the above title.

## The Promise of the Impossible

Marty Brewster

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As children we beg, "Tell me a story." With age, however, we tend to pursue nonfiction to "set our examples." No longer are we entertained by the unlikely, the impossible. **Terry Brooks**, a modern master of contemporary fantasy, persuades adolescents—and adults—that the impossible is a promise. Through his magic, he transports us to lands reminiscent of the ancient gladiators, explorers, John Wayne, and the future.

When walls are dismantled, dictators invade and terrorize, morals are diluted, and diseases become insidious, Brooks' books are embers in a chill environment. I would like to have Terry Brooks warm us all. Through a sharing of his beliefs, his strategy, and his techniques, Brooks may inoculate us against an uncertain, sometimes frightening world.

## Whither Science Fiction?

Irene Matthews

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If inviting any living person to write an article for *EJ*, I would choose **Ray Bradbury**.

In the 1970s when electives were the rage and science fiction seemed to be a viable alternative to the "regular" literature courses, such classes were offered and even overbooked. In the 1990s we find our English classes "back to basics," and science fiction has all but been eliminated, except for a few short stories sandwiched in to their regular course of study by a few valiant teachers.

I'd like Bradbury to comment on the changes in curriculum in English and the need for including science fiction even though English teachers are overburdened with covering "traditional" works of American and Brit-

ish writers. Does he still believe as he wrote in 1974 that science fiction is “the most important fiction ever invented by writers”?

At some schools science fiction was only an alternative for the “lower” students, yet the most gifted students screamed for it. Is he, as a writer, accepted as “mainstream” now more than he was when he first began to write, or has his popularity waned as has his science fiction in the classroom?

Finally, I’d like Bradbury to predict the future of the American school system, specifically the teaching of English. Perhaps this could be a story we could use in our teaching today and tomorrow.

### America’s Populist Storyteller

Mitchell Schorr  
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**Stephen King** write an article for the *EJ*?

Stephen King?

Master of dark castles, child-eating monsters, vampires, werewolves, deadly vermin, bogeys, and wild creatures that tap into the chamber of your secret heart where you hide your fear and dark secrets?

Stephen King?

Explorer of a real world where children win, where those with the courage to look into the light prevail, where laughter is healthy medicine, and truth is spelled with a capital T?

Yes.

Stephen King.

First, he’s not only this country’s best-selling fiction author, but he’s also America’s finest storyteller. Granted, the subject matter of his tales—traditional or macabre—is not chosen for an elite audience. Yet, while his work is populist, it is not “pulpulist.” His pages crackle with relevant themes—well-researched, well-resolved.

King’s genre is, primarily, horror. Horror writers don’t get a lot of recognition. But King has raised horror from gothic-goes-bump-in-the-night campfire stories to literature. Monsters, creatures, and specters appear in his stories; however, King’s characters fight real demons like doubt, shame, and fear. King’s heroes cannot destroy the tangible monsters until they have first wrestled with their own unresolved personal conflicts.

King includes these conflicts inside the smoothest fiction produced by an American writer in several decades. His characters are rich in voice and image. His descriptions leave you thinking, “Yes! That really is what it’s like.” The typical Stephen King story review is, “I couldn’t put the book down.”

### A Writer for All Centuries

E. Louise Guard  
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*Shogun* (1975, New York: Delacorte) has been one of my favorite historical novels ever since it was made into a movie or miniseries for television some ten years ago. The exquisite detail that went into the film version could

have come only from the original novel by **James Clavell**.

If I could invite any living person to write an article, I would invite Clavell. I would like him to discuss his methods of research for a novel like *Shogun*. Does he do all the research himself, or does he assign professional researchers to cover various aspects of the information he wants; for example, clothing worn at the time, the hierarchy of politics, women’s place in the scheme of things? I would like to know if the Japanese language used in the dialogue is typical for 1600, or is it more modern, like the English used in the book?

I would like to hear about what kind of outlining or overview he uses to create such a sweeping novel. Does he have the end of his story firmly in mind when he begins a novel, or does the novel simply evolve to a logical end as the result of the story line unfolding in a natural way?

Clavell could surely give us some excellent direction in helping us to focus our energies on historical novels.

### The Man behind the Pigman

Kathy Megyeri  
Sherwood High School, Silver Spring, Maryland 20901  
“It’s the only book I’ve ever read all the way through,” proudly admits one of my ninth graders.

Another writes on his year-end evaluation: “That book is probably the only thing I’ll remember about this class.”

“That book” is **Paul Zindel’s** near classic and his first famous book, *The Pigman* (New York: Harper). A science teacher at the time, Zindel wrote the novel in 1968, but it is timeless. It talks to teenagers, and they respond because the emotions are real, the plot is plausible, and the message comes through without preaching. Its remarkable strength is that it stimulates readers to reflect on their own experiences, which they write about and then share by reading the papers aloud, truly a remarkable feat given the numbers of teenagers who “hate” to read and even more who “hate to write.”

Zindel profiles a bonding between generations—a lonely widower and two high-school sophomores. Tragic consequences sober both teens into the realization that, as one says, “There was no one else to blame anyone—no place to hide. Our life would be what we made of it—nothing more, nothing less.”

Zindel establishes a personal relationship with his readers and answers their most frequently asked questions concerning his creation of the story in an unusual addendum to the book. He includes an address where students can write, invites their responses, and promises to try to reply. My pupils write more personal letters to him than most families exchange with each other. In reply to letters from one of my classes, Zindel thanked the students for sharing their thoughts and questions. He told us of his latest playwriting efforts and closed by saying, “I promise one way or the other, I’ll send all the energy you’ve given me back out into the world in ways that will make you proud.”