



california

ENGLISH

volume 3, no. 4
SUMMER 1998

Who Will Teach Them to Read ?

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The cover picture is *One Aim, One Love, One Purpose*. Shown here: (upper left) *Misery*; (upper right) *Julie-Belida*; (lower) *Misdirected*; (below) *David Wood*



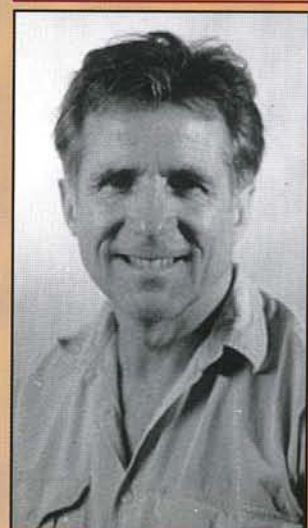
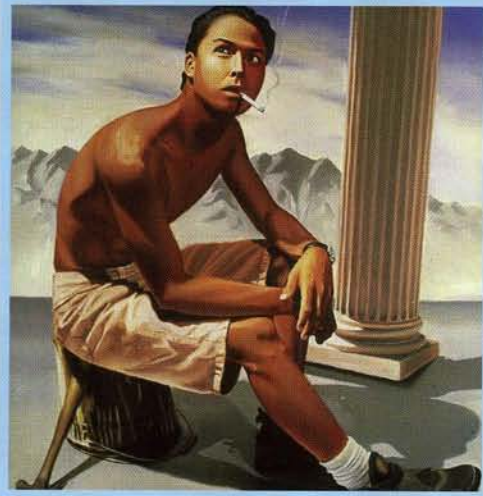
I wonder if I should entitle this body of work "Recipe for Road Kill." The title appears appropriate; however, perhaps it is a bit harsh for the subject matter of this inquiry is my students. These particular students have, during the past 30 years of my secondary instruction, captured my attention. Their arrogant shouts or nervous glances bewildered me; I turned to my easel in search of an understanding.

The public education arena offers an interesting view of society. Albeit, my work as an art teacher has been rewarding, I have found myself intrigued, yet disheartened and dismayed with the way in which some of my students enter my classroom. At times, their attitudes, behaviors and spirits seem diametrically opposed to one another. As a civilization, at what point does one's chosen path in life serve to diminish the quality of life? Why do many young girls choose to corrupt their innocence? Why are the purities of the heart swallowed up by so many of our young boys' desires to be thugs? As a society, we appear to be mesmerized by the energy of violence. Perhaps this work is an attempt to illustrate the emergence of such behavior

..... Yet my commentary is by no means meant to cloak those painted in a negative manner. Their spirit, their presence struck me in a manner that I didn't understand. At times, my paintings question more than they explain.

THE ARTIST OF THIS ISSUE DAVID WOOD

explains his work in the statement to the left. He has exhibited throughout California and on the East Coast. The winner of numerous awards, he is currently Chair of the Art Department at Santa Monica High School. David Wood can be reached at 11684 Vennura Blvd., Suite #5066, Studio City, California 91604.



The Librarian's Sense of Snow

by John McGinnis

emory is strange. After twelve years of full-time high school English teaching, I bid farewell to my last class in June, 1980. Of the approximately 2,000 students I taught, I still possess a fragment of a memory of a boy who was transferred into one of my junior classes from out of state. He stayed only a few weeks. I could not now identify his face or name if they appeared before me in a yearbook. But he wrote one paper in response to an assignment before he transferred to another school. I have to confess I do not even remember what he wrote. And as far as his oral contributions, they seemed few and only in response to direct questions. But looking back on it, I believe that student planted some of the early seeds of my future decision to leave the teaching of English and become a high-school library media teacher.

What I do remember has more to do with me than with him. I remember the pleasure of listening to this student speak in articulate fashion, even if uninspired, of reading a five paragraph essay written by a student who appreciated the virtues of good grammar, of complete, coherent sentences, of paragraphs that began with topic sentences and were developed with relevant specific examples, of transitions that eased the passage from one idea to the next, of the deliberate variation of sentence length and structure to add interest to the ideas, even when the ideas were not "deep." And whatever his ideas were, they were not deep. I remember this not because he was my only student who could write well. Others could write well, but they were all in "X" classes, college-bound. This student had been placed by his counselor, based on transcript grades and test scores from his previous schools in Massachusetts, into one of my "Y" classes. "Y" students were not going to college.

For those who never understood the principle of predestination, a semester of teaching in this system would make it clear. In those days we taught a hierarchy of English classes designated by "*", "X", "Y", and "Z". "X" students were going to college. "Y" students were going to work, unless they went to jail. Gifted students, which were designated by an asterisk, which we called a star, were not going to college either. They were going to heaven. Our aspirations for "*" students included heavens like Harvard and Yale. And then the "Z" students. Ah, they were not going to heaven, college or work. They were all going to hell. And we who taught them were going to hell with them. The assignment to teach a "Z" class was simply intended to ease the transition. In the naiveté of my first year of teaching in 1968, I assumed "Z" students lacked ability. Some of them did, but many of them were quite intelligent, and some even possessed the ability of "*" students. What a number of them lacked, in the opinions of the teachers who cast them out of their gardens into the wilderness of a "Z" class, were what could euphemistically be called social graces. They lacked them in the extreme. I taught two of these freshmen classes in my first two years of teaching. I remember the draining intensity of the class sessions, my need for late-afternoon naps when I got home, and a heightened appreciation of Fellini films.

Within this hierarchy, the Massachusetts student was placed, not at a seraphic

level, but at the "Y" level. From what I could discern in his transcripts, he was in the equivalent of "Y" classes in his Massachusetts schools. But we were about to transfer him to the "X" level before he moved on. It is with this student I now associate an early insight into why some students possess a greater facility with language than others. This insight was confirmed by future unscientific, unrandom and unquestionably inadequate sampling of other students who transferred into my classes from some other states.

Over the years, the Massachusetts student was followed by others from northeastern and midwestern states who also generally possessed greater facility with language than their California counterparts. At first I wondered if they had better teachers back there. My own ego resisted the impulse to jump to that conclusion. Nor did I want to believe those states were populated by genetically superior inhabitants. Instead, the meteorology of their origins began to emerge as the dominant commonality. Compare the following lists:

A	B
New Hampshire	Arizona
Maine	Florida
Massachusetts	Alabama
North Dakota	Louisiana
Iowa	Hawaii
Wisconsin	California
Wyoming	Mississippi

What distinguishes states in column A from those in column B? Listed side by side, the answer emerges as clearly as if you were looking at a map. The states in column A, the kind of states from which my language-superior students were coming, are all above the 38th parallel, and they pass much of their winters beneath blankets of snow. The states in column B, all below the 38th parallel, rarely see snow and mostly only on mountain tops. So, back in the mid-seventies, based on a snowy insight, I made some changes to the management of class time and eventually became a library media teacher.

Now, many years later, I confess to feeling smugly vindicated by the publication of the fourth grade NAEP reading scores which seem to confirm that earlier insight. If you are an aficionado of those scores, you recognized that column A represents the states with the seven highest 1992 average reading scores. Column B represents the states with the seven lowest average reading scores. And the remarkable thing is that this is generally indicative of the entire NAEP list. There are forty-one states plus the District of Columbia and Guam on the list. Of the highest scoring twenty-six, twenty-five are above the 38th parallel. Of the lowest scoring seventeen, fifteen are below the 38th parallel. I realize some would scoff at the amateurishness of my "research" but teachers must sometimes make decisions based on what they sense. And my sense of snow coincides with some common sense fundamental principles, as follows:

1. Students read better when they read *more*.



2. Students read more when they *enjoy* what they read.

These principles formed the foundation of changes I made to the management of my class time. However, they seem to be wholly ignored in the debate that raged in reaction to California's near-last-place finish in the NAEP race. Some Californians concluded, erroneously, that the NAEP scores revealed that California students cannot read. Actually, the NAEP scores revealed that virtually all of them can read. They just do not read as well as students in almost every other state on the list. The "not as well as" goes to issues of vocabulary, speed, comprehension, retention, etc. These are the skills which grow with practice, with reading more, and not just with teaching methodologies and pedagogies and all the other "...ogies" that make us educators sound impressive. So, based on an erroneous interpretation, how did we react? Two sides engaged in hostile and recriminatory battles pitting phonics against whole language, each mining the fields of recent brain research to buttress their positions, and each blasting statistics at the other like buckshot.

Meanwhile, two groups of American students spend their winters engaged in different pastimes. One group occupies an hour or more on chilly winter afternoons and evenings reading, for recreation, while another group is skateboarding, surfing or generally hanging out. This observation was acknowledged in a recent editorial in *Minnesota Monthly*. David Mahoney's December paean to the joys of growing up in a reading environment, "Ring in the Reading Season," concluded with, "So let Californians and Floridians and Arizonans go ahead and gloat all they want about their interminable stretches of sunny days. The way I see it, we've got four or five months of good reading weather ahead of us before we'll be forced outside again." As a native Californian born and raised in Hollywood, I know in my heart he is right. And I did not need the NAEP scores or brain research to convince me. But weather alone does not induce these two different behaviors.

The second fundamental principle also applies. For students to read more, to increase those skills California students are deficient in, students must enjoy reading. To do that they must have enjoyable books and magazines to read. Here in California, we effectively tell students that their prime motivation for learning to read is so they can do their homework. And to do that we give them textbooks, workbooks and assigned novels. Many years ago, shortly after our children started school, one of their neighborhood friends came over to play. We asked her how she was doing in reading. She said, "Good. I can read almost everything I see on television." We had been in her home. Her television screen was one of the few places she would actually see words. For enjoyable reading, the average California school

offers little better. California school libraries rank at the bottom in terms of books and magazines for our children to read.

Which states rank at the top? You guessed it - basically the same states that topped the 1992 NAEP scores. In the Fall, 1990, issue of *School Library Media Quarterly*, Howard D. White reported on his survey of school library collections. He considered several factors including number of books and magazines, new acquisitions, expenditures per pupil, etc. His conclusion: "The top twelve states are all Northern, and eight of them are contiguous across the northern Midwest and Great Plains: Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Montana, and Wyoming." A similar survey by Marilyn Miller and Marilyn Shontz in the October, 1993, issue of *School Library Journal* reported similar results. Northeastern and north central states do better than western states in terms of school library collections.

But back in the seventies, when I was just going with my sense of things, I instituted two changes to my class time. Ten minutes of each class were devoted to free reading, and I tried to allocate about five minutes of teaching time to reading favorite passages aloud. To our advantage, our school had an excellent school library with current, balanced collections of books, magazines, media and technology. And that made these changes easier.

In time, the school library became occupationally seductive. For seven years, as a school library media teacher with a fairly good budget, I selected materials in every area at every ability level. We opened from 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. from the first day of school to the last day of final exams. Science classes from the least difficult through physics and chemistry visited every semester. Students discovered dozens of science magazines and books from the popular to the challenging. This was true of every subject area for students of every ability level.

The library was anything but a quiet temple of sacred knowledge. It was more like one of my early "Z" classes, transformed. The library was an untracked, democratic and wild garden

to which all types of students were not cast but rather drawn by the attraction of reading materials that uniquely appealed to each of them. I could write another article on the rewards of being a school librarian but here I will recount only one incident. As I hurriedly passed a couple of "Z" kids lingering at the paperback rack, I overheard one say to the other, "Whaddya readin'? Read this?" I almost swung around and said, "Hey, wait a minute. That's my line!" Sure, at early ages, kids need good solid reading instruction. But once they start to learn to read, kids also need a lot of good books and magazines, a good library environment, and time to read. With that, they not only become good readers, they become reading's best advocates. ■



**Shown here: *Just Hangin'*
1994, oil on canvas, 72" x 25"**

**Some Californians
concluded,
erroneously, that
the NAEP scores
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California students
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Actually, the NAEP
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them can read.
They just do not
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students in almost
every other state
on the list.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
John McGinnis, Dean of the Library and Learning Resource Center at Cerritos Community College, is a past president of the California School Library Association and a past member of the California Reading and Literature Project Policy Board. He is a member of the Education Council for Technology in Learning which oversees Digital High School grants and other technology funds.