



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
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## **Beyond R. L. Stine: Read-Aloud Books and Group Activities for Fifth Graders**

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by Teresa Matthews

"Few children learn to love books by themselves. Someone has to lure them into the wonderful world of the written word; someone has to show them the way."

Orville Prescott, *A Father Reads to His Children* The New Haven school system has recently proclaimed that trade books are the primary medium for teaching children how to read. This approach will prove challenging to even the best classroom teacher. Teachers will no longer be able to depend on the textbook and workbook approach to reading; we will have to be more innovative and creative. In addition to reading as part of the daily curriculum, students will be expected to do supplemental reading on their own. Group activities will include small group discussions of books read, along with supplemental exercises to explore characters, settings, historical perspectives, etc. What better way to bring about this reading "revolution" than by setting a positive example every day of the school year—by reading aloud to the class? Old-fashioned teaching methods associated with reading and reciting lost out to the invention of the ditto machine and more recently to photocopy machines. Educational researchers are now blaming the use of written busy work for the general lack of interest—even boredom—children feel toward reading. The challenge for teachers today is to keep their students interested in reading purely for the sake of enjoyment, because reading is fundamental to acquiring other forms of news and information.

"If we could get our parents to read to their preschool children fifteen minutes a day, we could revolutionize the schools."

Dr. Ruth Love, Superintendent, Chicago Public Schools (1981) Even though our students are older, we can still stress to them the importance of reading aloud. As teachers we can invite the parents to our classrooms for reading activities, for storytelling, for sharing life experiences. Our students need to be drawn beyond their own boundaries, and to feel important and positive about who they are. Reading is a key vehicle through which to accomplish this. Children are members of a society that needs to know and understand them. Reading and talking about the characters in various books and stories gives them a basis of comparison for themselves and for people they know. Life's lessons found in reading go beyond relating to characters in stories; they include introducing the reader to situations and conflicts that occur in all walks of life. Reading provides children with strategies for how to cope with and resolve these problematic situations. Through reading we can establish that there is a sameness of human needs that young people share. What better way

to do this than by class discussions about the books we are reading together?

I have prepared a unit of eight books to be read aloud to fifth-grade students. Over the past few years, we have taken part in the city wide "Read Aloud Day" but I have usually found it a chore to complete the book that is so generously donated to our class library. Last year I discovered R. L. Stine's "Goosebumps" and "Fear Street" series of books. My class and I were delighted to be so entertained; every chapter ended with us wanting to continue to see what would happen next. Sometimes we would read the first paragraph of the next chapter because we just couldn't wait; students would actually sneak a peek if I left the book lying on my desk. These books are not written to a specific gender, race, or age. They are both silly and scary, just plain entertaining and fun.

I believe that I have found other books that the students will enjoy as much as they do the R.L. Stine series. I want to expose them to other authors who have written books that they can compare to the ones they so enjoy. We will read these books together and form a means of comparison, a literature appreciation course so to speak. The beauty of reading aloud is that everyone can participate; the activities can be done both as a class and in small groups. In addition to the topics for discussion at the end of each summary, the class will talk about how the books are alike and how they are different. All of the books are supposed to be an adventure, which (according to Webster) is:

1. Hazard; risk; chance.
2. An enterprise of hazard; a bold undertaking in which hazards are to be encountered, and the issue is staked upon unforeseen events.
3. A remarkable occurrence in one's personal history; a striking event; as, the adventures of one's life.

I am sure that each book fits the broad definition of adventure and will easily lend itself to an in-depth discussion during and after the reading. As the teacher I will have a general plan for discussion of each book, but I will be seeking to create an atmosphere of spontaneity and curiosity as we move into questions and answers concerning each text. The children's insights and perspective on each book are what is most important, and my role will be to facilitate their sense of discovery. Remember that this is to be enjoyable for both student and teacher!

## SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOKS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

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The following is a list of books that I intend to read aloud, two each marking period. I am including a short summary of each book, a description of the characters, and a number of activities that can be done during or after the reading of each book.

### ***The Attack of the Aqua Apes*, by R. L. Stine**

*The Attack of the Aqua Apes* is a crazy adventure that begins when two friends send away for a kit to grow aqua apes. They successfully grow one ape who they name Mac. He gets them into all kinds of trouble and, of

course, they can't tell anyone because no one will believe them. Glen and Scott get blamed for ruining Scott's sister's prom dress, getting paint on Scott's father's car, and a wide array of other things that go wrong because of Mac. The worst of this whole situation is that Mac is indestructible: no matter what they do, they can't get rid of him.

### *Characters*

Scott: a boy who is bored with the lack of adventure in his life. He's yearning for a good story to tell at school.

Glen: Scott's best friend.

Kelly: Scott's older sister who often bears the ill effects of Mac's reign of terror.

### ***Topics for discussion during or after the reading of this book:***

1. Scott and Glen are the very best of friends. Tell about your best friend and an adventure you had when you were really glad you had each other to depend on.
2. Do you have an older brother or sister that you consider to be a pain in the neck?
3. Role-play one of the situations that the boys got in trouble for; pretend that you are trying to explain to your parents what happened.
4. The way the book ends leaves it wide open for the author to write a sequel. Let's brainstorm and see if we can write just one more chapter.

### ***Slake's Limbo, by Felice Holman***

*Slake's Limbo* is about Aremis Slake, a nerdy boy who grows up in New York City and is afraid of gangs. He winds up hiding in the subway for 121 days. The people who befriend him and help him to survive and eventually face life above ground are characters well worth discussing and comparing to people we all know.

### *Characters*

Aremis Slake: the main character in the story, a story about his survival in the city of New York.  
The Pink Cleaning Lady: one of Slake's newspaper customers, who befriends him and gives him some used clothes.

The Manager: a man who runs a coffee shop in the subway station.

The Waitress: a kind woman who works in a subway restaurant.

Willy Joe Whinny: a subway motorman whose route goes by Slake's hiding place.

**Topics for discussion while, or after, reading this book are listed as follows:**

1. You can't hide from life; you have to face your problems and find solutions.
2. What is meant by the bird in Slake's chest? Can you think of other metaphors?
3. Think about the people Slake makes friends with: how are they the same and how are they different?
4. Why is Willy Joe Whinney important? Could he have been left out of the book?
5. Consider the symbols used in the book; write a paragraph about rose-colored glasses, the bird, or the rat.

This book was also used as the basis for the ABC Kidsworlds video called Runaway. Viewing the video after reading the book will provide your class with the opportunity to compare characters as well as the story line. The book jacket depicts Slake as a white boy with blond hair and blue eyes but the video depicts him as a young black boy.

***Secrets Can Kill*, by Carolyn Keene**

*Secrets Can Kill* (The Nancy Drew Files Case #1) is the first in an updated version of the original series. This series began in 1986 and continues to the present. Nancy Drew goes back to high school as an undercover detective to find the thief who is stalking the halls of Bedford High School at night. When she meets her contact, Daryl Gray, Nancy thinks this new case could turn out to be fun but she is dead wrong. She takes Daryl for a ride in her mustang and the car explodes in a ball of fire. Instead of just catching a thief, Nancy winds up involved in a murder case

*Characters*

Nancy Drew: an eighteen-year-old super sleuth.  
Hannah: housekeeper for the Drews since Nancy was born.  
Daryl Gray: a sexy high school senior with an instant attraction to Nancy.  
Walt "Hunk" Hogan: the tough football captain who's acting strangely paranoid.  
Carla Dalton: a student who hates Nancy on sight.  
Hal Morgan: the class brain who catches Nancy cheating on a test.  
Ned: Nancy's long time boyfriend.

***Topics for discussion during, or after, the reading of this book:***

1. What are the best and worst parts of Nancy Drew's job as a detective?
2. Was this story believable? Is this the way that crimes are solved?
3. Compare this story to another detective story that you have either read or seen on television.
4. Write a letter to Nancy Drew describing a case that you would like her to solve for you. Be sure to include all the details that she will need to know (who, what, when, where and why.)
5. Draw a poster advertising a detective agency of your own.
6. Why did Nancy cheat on the test?

***George Washington's Socks, by Elvira Woodruff***

*George Washington's Socks* combines adventure with a good dose of history. When five kids who have formed a club take a walk along Lake Levart late one night, during a backyard camping trip, they come upon a wooden rowboat. As if in a trance, they climb inside and are transported back to the time of George Washington. They are on the icy Delaware River on the eve of the battle at Trenton. They learn what it was like during the American Revolution first-hand, and so do the readers. It is a compelling fantasy with a lot of factual information.

*Characters*

Matthew Carlton: the club president.  
Katie Carlton: the pesky younger sister.  
Quentin, Hooter, and Tony: the other boys in the club.

***Topics for discussion during, or after, reading this book:***

1. Choose one of the people that the children met up with when they went back to the days of the revolution and look them up in the encyclopedia. Write a short report about them.
2. Have you ever formed a club with some of your friends? What did you do together?
3. Why did they call the army "Washington's ragtag band of rebels?" Do you think you could come to school tomorrow dressed as one of Washington's men? Let's look back in the book to find some descriptions.
4. What souvenir did the group have from their adventure? When you go somewhere on a school

trip or a vacation do you like to bring back something to remember the occasion with? Maybe you can bring it to school tomorrow to show to the class!

### ***Maniac Magee, by Jerry Spinelli***

*Maniac Magee* sounds like a true story about an orphaned boy who is living on the streets but it also has some tall-tale qualities to it. It lends itself well to discussions of the characters, real-life situations, and creative story telling. Maniac earned his name by doing things that no one else dared to do; he defies bullies older and bigger than himself. He goes into neighborhoods with clearly defined racial boundaries as though he is colorblind. In fact, he lives with a black family who befriends him. When he realizes that they are being scorned because of him, he is on the run again. He winds up at the city zoo in the buffalo pen where Grayson finds him, and takes him under his wing.

#### *Characters*

Jeffrey Lionel (Maniac) Magee: a very human, caring boy who crosses boundaries that many people don't dare to cross.

Amanda Beale: a young black girl who befriends Maniac when he comes to Two Mills.

Mars Bar Thompson: the first black kid to challenge Maniac.

John McNab: a white kid who taunts Maniac about his views on race.

Russell and Piper McNab: John's little brothers who idolize Maniac.

Grayson: a former baseball player who works at the zoo.

Mrs. Beale: Amanda's mother, who gives Maniac a home

### ***Topics for discussion during, or after, reading the book:***

1. Is maniac a homeless person or a runaway? What is the difference?
2. Maniac doesn't say much about himself; how would you describe him?
3. If everyone in the world were the same color, would the author have been able to write this book?
4. What do you think is the most important lesson in this book?
5. Let's write a sequel to this book; what characters should we keep and what happens to them?

Jerry Spinelli has written a number of books for children; many are available through the Scholastic book clubs.

### ***Cracker Jackson, by Betsy Byars***

*Cracker Jackson* is a heart-warming story about a young boy who remains friends with his former baby-sitter. She is in danger and sends Cracker an anonymous note in the mail telling him that. He is an eleven-year-old who finds himself in a situation that most adults couldn't deal with. After many adventures and near misses, he and his friend Goat find a way to help. This is a fast-moving adventure with a real-life setting that many children can identify with.

#### *Characters*

Cracker Jackson: the eleven-year-old hero.

Goat: his best friend.

Alma: his former baby-sitter who is in trouble.

Billy Ray: Alma's husband.

#### ***Topics for discussion during, or after, the reading of the book:***

1. Cracker and Goat do some things that are against the law while they are trying to help Alma. Is this behavior excusable because, in their minds, they are doing something good?
2. What is Cracker's real name and how did he get his nickname? A discussion of personal experiences with nicknames can follow.
3. Have you ever known someone who was in trouble but you didn't know what to do to help them? Did you get any ideas from reading this book as to what you might have done?

### ***Scorpions, by Walter Dean Myers***

*Scorpions* is about best friends Jamal and Tito, Jamal being the leader and Tito the follower. Details are given about both their families giving the reader insights into who they are and also making the reader feel the anguish that they face. Jamal's brother Randy is in jail for killing someone and Jamal feels pressured to be the man of the house and to help his mother get the money to pay a lawyer to appeal Randy's sentence. Jamal is approached by a member of the Scorpions to run crack; he wants him to take his brother's place as their leader. Jamal tries to give back the gun they have given him and stay on the right track but the story shows just how hard it is. This is a believable story and one that many inner-city children live. The American Library Association recommends it as a book for reluctant young adult readers.

#### *Characters*

Jamal Hicks: A seventh grader who is torn between being in a gang and being the good child his

mother believes him to be.

Tito: Jamal's best friend.

Sassy: Jamal's younger sister who is always minding his business and threatening to tell their mother everything she knows.

Mama: a hardworking woman trying to do her best for her children (Randy, Jamal, and Sassy,) but not fully aware of what is going on.

Abuela: Tito's grandmother with whom he lives.

Mack: a member of a gang called the Scorpions.

### ***Topics for discussion during, or after, reading the book:***

1. Choose a scene from the book and act it out for the class the way that it happened in the book. Then act it out the way that you wish that it had happened.
2. Pretend that Mama and Abuela are having a telephone conversation about Jamal and Tito. Write a short skit with the dialogue between them.
3. Jamal never tells anyone except Tito what is going on in his life. Is this a good way to handle his problems? Why or why not? What would you do differently?
4. Write a letter to Mama telling her about Jamal's feelings.

### ***The Phantom Tollbooth, by Norton Juster***

*The Phantom Tollbooth* is about Milo, for whom everything is boring. When a tollbooth suddenly appears in his room, he drives through it because he has nothing better to do. Once through the tollbooth he embarks on a great adventure to places of sheer fantasy such as the Island of Conclusions and Dictionopolis. He learns about time from a dog named Tock who has a clock inside of him, and the importance of numbers from the mathemagician. After a seemingly endless journey with an incredible number of characters, Milo sees the world in a completely different light...life is no longer boring!

#### ***Characters***

Milo: a very bored young man until he embarks on his adventure.

Tock: an imaginary talking dog who is Milo's partner throughout the story.



***Topics for discussion during, or after, the reading of this book:***

1. In the end, Milo realizes that he has been dreaming. Do you ever recall your dreams when you wake up?
2. Make a list of at least ten different things that you can do when you feel bored.
3. Choose one of the places that Milo visits and draw a picture of it. Don't label it as we will display the pictures and see if the class can identify where it is and what happened there.
4. Think about the role sounds play in the story. Make a list of ten good sounds and ten bad sounds.
5. The king gives Milo a box of all the words that he knows. How many words do you think are in there? I am going to set the timer for five minutes and I would like you to write as many words as you can in that time.

Introducing these books to a group of children and having lofty goals for their interest in and their analysis of the plots, characters, and settings is a little unnerving. The challenge lies in sustaining the attention of the group. I hope to be creative and use a variety of approaches. Having taught for close to twenty years, one of my theories is that successful teaching is often a variation of entertaining the group. Children have a great imagination, a sense of humor, and lots of curiosity. These characteristics, along with the fine books selected, lead me to believe the read aloud unit and the group activities will be successful.

Students who enjoy reading horror and suspense books by R.L. Stine might also enjoy books by the following authors:

Michael Bedard

Robb Benchley

Jay Bennett

Anita Blake

Caroline Cooney

Richie Tankerley Cusick

Nicole Davidson

Lois Duncan

Jeff Hammer

Diane Hoh

Janice Harrell

Jesse Harris

Joseph Lock

Joan Lowery Nixon

Christopher Pike

Nicholas Pine

Laura Sonnenmark

M.C. Sumner

This was taken from a Wallingford, CT Public Library booklist for Teens 6/95.

## Readings for research:

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Butler, Francella and Richard Rotert. *Triumphs of the Spirit in Children's Literature* . Library Professional Publications, 1986.  
PN1009/A1/T76/1986

Landsberg, Michelle. *Reading For the Love of It* . New York, 1987. Z1037/L313X/1987/(LC)

Miller-Lachmann, Lyn. *Our Family, Our Friends, Our Worlds* . New Jersey, 1992. Landsberg, Michelle.Z1037/M654X/1992/(LC)

Rosenberg, Judith K. *Young People's Books in Series* . Englewood, Colorado, 1992.

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Trelease, Jim. *The Read-Aloud Handbook* . Penguin Books, 1995.

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