

Mentoring by the Book: Developing the Self Throughout the Lifespan with Fictional Mentors
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It is no exaggeration to say that an entire generation of readers grew up relying on Albus Dumbledore, from the Harry Potter book series, for personal guidance and specific direction. Characters in novels serve as somewhat silent mentors and can exert a strong influence on our development, especially in the formative years. In this session, participants will explore what mentors from the literary realm have shaped them and will consider how to benefit even more from these relationships through intentional self-reflection. The transformative power of fiction is backed by an increasing body of research that studies the effect of reading on expanding selfhood as well as its ability to build social skills and empathy. These researchers have focused on Theory of Mind and gather evidence through examining reading habits as well as the results of psychological tests and brain scans. These fictional mentors form a very personal and malleable network that can be called upon again and again, throughout a lifetime of development, page by page.

Introduction

“I’m sorry. I was wrong. I need help. I don’t know.” These four deceptively simple statements are central to the teachings of Armande Gamache, a talented and generous mentor and Chief Inspector of the Surete de Quebec, who took me under his wing approximately one year ago. Although I would like to think that our relationship is singular, even a cursory search of the Internet demonstrates that he has protégés around the world. He has never met any of us face-to-face but connects and provides intelligent support through the pages of a mystery series by Canadian author Louise Penny. Because Penny uses the word mentor repeatedly when describing the relationship of Gamache to some of his detectives and because the books consistently describe his mentoring practices, I began to think about the impact he was having not only on those characters but also on myself. Like all good mentors, his words and behavior gave me food for thought and action. Was it possible that his influence could be as impactful as a living, breathing mentor? To explore this premise, I reviewed research studies on reading, explored lists of best books and bestsellers related to human developmental stages, and gathered input about the idea of literary mentors from colleagues at work. As a result, I would conclude that throughout the lifespan, readers may benefit significantly from a whole cast of literary mentors and, as a form of self-mentoring, it is also possible to harness those relationships in a very purposeful way.

The Power of Fiction

Any avid reader will tell you that certain books stick with them and specific characters are memorable. This is one of the reasons that some books transcend time and are re-printed continuously. A review of research shows compelling evidence that supports this individual experience and demonstrates the lasting influence of fiction in particular. Over the last decade, there has been significant study about reading habits, the ways in which reading can improve social skills, and how reading fiction results in changes in the brain. One of the major researchers in this field of study is Keith Oatley (2011) who provides a compelling summary of the findings in saying “The seemingly solitary act of holing up with a book, then, is actually an exercise in human interaction.” (p. 63). In 2006, Oatley and his fellow researchers published

their initial study about the reading habits of 94 adults. In this case, the adult participants self-identified as preferring either fiction or non-fiction and took the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test as a measure of their ability to perceive emotion and interpret social cues. In this test, participants look at photographs of adult eyes as if seen through a mail slot and choose what emotion the eyes are conveying. The results indicated that people who primarily read fiction scored better than those who select non-fiction. In 2007, Raymond Mar published his findings based on a study of 303 adults who were tested on analytical and social reasoning after reading either a short story or an essay from *The New Yorker*. Although the analytical reasoning scores were the same, those who read fiction performed better on the social reasoning test.

As this area of research continued, the number of participants increased and the measures became more specific. Findings from a 2009 study, which again involved Keith Oatley, included 166 readers who were given either the short story “The Lady with the Little Dog” by Anton Chekov or a non-fiction version of the same story. Care was given that the information, length and reading level was identical in both versions. This study used pre and post tests that measured five major personality traits and ten different emotions. Those who read the Chekov short story were found to have ‘small but measurable’ personality changes and as well as gains in empathy. (Oatley, 2011). Studies with children demonstrate even more specific results. For eight weeks, 22 second and third graders participated in Relationally Oriented Reading Instruction and pre and post tests assessed both their comprehension and gains in their ability to understand social situations. Both areas showed statistically significant improvements resulting from this purposeful use of picture books (Lysaker, 2011).

Related to this research are correlative studies on the influence of reading on actual brain activity. The Emory University Center for Neuropolicy studied the lingering affects of reading on 21 students over a period of 19 days. Prior to reading the novel *Pompeii*, the students underwent MRI scans of their non-reading resting state. When scanned again after reading, the results showed heightened connectivity in the parts of the brain associated with language receptivity as well as heightened connectivity in the sensory motor regions. In addition, the results persisted for five days after the students completed the novel (Emory Health Sciences, 2014). In another study at Washington University in St. Louis, participants read one word at a time from a short story as it was projected on a screen. In this case, the researchers found that the specific areas of a reader’s brain that were analogous to the activity taking place in a story, were stimulated. (Speer, 2009).

This developing body of research provides evidence that we are influenced by reading fiction and that it, in fact, contributes to individual development of what social scientists call Theory of Mind (ToM). ToM is the ability to understand our own individual mental state of mind as well as to recognize and understand that other people may have beliefs, intentions, and perspectives different from our own. As a result, we can construct mental models of those experiences. In sum, “we have discovered that fiction at its best isn’t just enjoyable. It measurably enhances our abilities to empathize with other people and connect with something larger than ourselves.” (Oatley, 2008). Backed with these research findings, it is then valid to consider that characters in fiction can shape our thoughts and feelings and may serve as powerful mentors to readers in their personal and professional development.

Many Books, Many Mentors

Long before children hear the word mentor, their ideas, actions and self concept can be significantly shaped by literary role models. Reviewing the New York Public Library's 2013 list of 100 Great Children's Books, two of the oldest titles serve as enduring examples of this impact. *The Story of Ferdinand* by Munro Leaf, first published in 1936, is the timeless tale of that strong but gentle bull who is happiest when allowed to rest and smell the flowers. This story of individuality offers a strong message about embracing your individual identity, despite the pressure to conform and to behave like others who may look just like you. Librarian Nancy Silverrod (2013) in fact says that it "may very well be the first children's book which really shows a character transgressing gender norms, and it sets the pattern for most of the other gender transgressive books to follow ..." (p. 4). Another classic example from the same New York Public Library list is *Madeline* by Ludwig Bemelmans. In the first book of the series, we are introduced to her as one of the twelve little girls who walk in two straight lines. She is fearless when it comes to mice and even says "pooh, pooh" to that tiger in the zoo. Although Madeline gives everyone a fright when she has her appendix out, all of the other eleven girls eventually want to have the operation too when Madeline proudly shows off her impressive scar. In a re-publication of the Madeline series, author and columnist Anna Quindlen (Bemelmans & Quindlen, 2001) wrote an introduction in which she says "amid a childhood full of children's books, amid glorious pictures and imaginative plots, it is worth wondering why this story is among a handful of books that now-grown children can declaim without a text, that now grown children invariably buy for their own more than half a century after Ludwig Bemelmans began writing it on the back of a restaurant menu." She concludes that "The answer, I think, can be contained in one word: attitude ... she [Madeline] is utterly fearless and sure of herself, small in stature but large in moxie." Quindlen warns that "It's a mistake to stretch childhood associations too far – and also a mistake not to take them seriously enough – but it would not be stretching it too far to say that, for little girls especially, Madeline is a kind of role model." (p. 9-10).

As children mature and move on to chapter books in the middle elementary grades, the potential for mentoring through fiction becomes more layered and complex. In both an email survey and as part of a workshop at Everett Community College, I asked colleagues and participants if the concept of fictional mentors resonated with them. *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White was the title most frequently cited. Written in 1952, it is number fifty on the list of all time, best selling books and included in the New York Public Library's 100 Greatest Children's Books. The tiny but wise spider in the barnyard mentors Wilbur the pig and, by association, readers. Charlotte teaches, through Wilbur, how to recognize our strengths and indeed how to confront some of our biggest fears, including death.

As guest columnist Jonathan Young (2007) in the L.A. Times said:

The story reminds us that identity is formed in relationships. Wilbur doesn't know he is Some Pig until Charlotte tells him. Still, this is not a story about a victim who does nothing to save himself ... Charlotte did not create Wilbur's fine qualities, she just noticed them. He even protested that he did not feel particularly terrific, but she knows better. It is crucial that a mentor celebrates true qualities. The magic is that caring attention allows a glimpse beneath the surface.

A publishing phenomenon that may have outpaced all children's books in terms of mentoring impact is the series of Harry Potter books by J.K. Rowling. Collectively, the seven titles have

sold more than 500 million copies to date. Taken as a whole, that would make them the top selling books of all time. In terms of a developmental impact on the children who were reading the books as they were published, this was a singular literary experience. The first novel came out in 1997 and the last was released in 2007. With each new title, Harry grew by about a year and his readers matured at approximately the same rate. The stories became more sophisticated and serious with each new installment. Although there are several characters in addition to Harry that readers may identify with, it is Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, who serves as a very prominent mentor within the stories and perhaps to an entire generation of young readers. Stanford sophomore Sarah Quartey (2012) credits the wizard with mobilizing youth and calls him a "social justice leader" who "served as a role model for millions of children in the real world ... during the rapid-pace change of the internet and digital culture. Dumbledore's influence on the Millennial generation is becoming clear as youth movements like Gay-Straight Alliances storm plazas and demand justice." If this endorsement were not enough, consider Darby Dickerson (2008), Vice President and Dean of the Stetson University College of Law who says that "Although law deans do not have the magical powers with which Professor Dumbledore was blessed, he still provides an ideal role model ... Because he cared, Dumbledore made a positive and lasting impact on his school, and society. And fortunately for law deans, his legacy provides us with a clear roadmap of how to do the same" (p. 128).

With adolescence, teenagers have access to an increasingly varied and rich body of literature written especially for them. This is an especially impressionable developmental stage, ripe for mentoring.

As stated in a white paper by the Young Adult Services Division of the American Library Association, one of the unique characteristics of the young adult genre is its capacity for: "telling its readers the truth, however disagreeable that may sometimes be. This equips readers to deal with the realities of impending adulthood and for assuming the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. By giving readers such a frame of reference, it also helps them to find role models, to make sense of the world they inhabit, to develop a personal philosophy of being, to determine what is right and, equally, what is wrong, to cultivate a personal sensibility." (Cart, 2008).

Lizzie Skurnick (2008) in her book *Shelf Discovery: The Teen Classics We Never Stop Reading* says "And they [young adult books] challenge us, like the best of friends, in general – not only to be ourselves, but to be more interesting, inspired versions of ourselves ..." (p. 8). An illustrative and now classic title is S.E Hinton's *The Outsiders*. Told by Ponyboy Curtis, this is the story of rival gangs of teenagers and the novel explores what these young men are thinking and feeling beneath their tough exteriors. The main character, Ponyboy, idolizes several of the older boys but he recognizes that it is his reflective and sensitive friend Johnny who is the real role model. "Johnny was something more than a buddy to all of us. I guess he had listened to more beefs and more problems from more people than any of us. A guy that'll really listen to you, listen and care about what you're saying, is something rare." (Hinton, 1967, p. 154).

When employees at Everett Community College were asked about literary mentors, they readily identified characters in fiction written for adults and often classic works which had influenced them in their formative years. Given the continued popularity of Jane Austen, it was not

surprising that Elizabeth Bennett from *Pride and Prejudice* was among the first characters to be named. As one faculty member said: “I was just beginning to recognize that women are not required to live the life they are told to live, that we have choices, and that we are within our right to demand respect from men. Further, the lesson that men who respect smart women of their own accord are the best ones . . . Miss Bennett was a godsend.” (T. Davies, personal communication, February 10, 2016).

It almost goes without saying that *To Kill a Mockingbird* must be considered in any discussion of literary mentors and this was the most frequently named adult novel by EvCC employees. The characters of both Scout and Atticus are strong role models for very different reasons. Scout is the penultimate tomboy, outspoken but thoughtful and it is through her reflections that the reader makes sense of prejudice, fear and indeed the curious neighbor next door. In addition to EvCC readers, Scout has an impressive and loyal following. Oprah Winfrey has said “I wanted to be Scout, I thought I was Scout.” Winfrey has called the book “our national novel” and says that because Scout “was learning about this whole world of racism in such a way that I could feel myself also experiencing or learning about it – my eyes opening as her eyes were opening to it.” (Murphy, 2010, p. 202). Author Lee Smith goes further when she says “I think Scout has done more for Southern womanhood than any other character in literature. I’m quite serious. She’s turned girls into the kind of women we want.” (Murphy, 2010, p. 179).

Atticus, in contrast, is the mentor who we admire greatly but who we probably can never be. His wisdom spans everything from the ability to raise children to commanding respect in a courtroom. “There’s just this beautiful naturalness that he has and sense of confidence in his own skill as a parent. And respect for the child, that mutual respect.” (Murphy, 2010, p. 75). Novelist Scott Turow, who is himself an attorney, said that “It’s true that there aren’t many human beings in the world like Atticus Finch – perhaps none – but that doesn’t mean that it’s not worth striving to be like him. . . . He is a paragon beyond paragons.” (Murphy, 2010, p. 196). Because of these compelling characters, the publication of Harper Lee’s other novel, *Go Set a Watchman*, generated excitement in the adult literary world akin to what J.K. Rowling’s book releases had meant for much younger readers. Many readers were disappointed when they encountered a very different Atticus in this new novel when Harper Lee knocked him soundly off his pedestal. In the context of mentoring, it lends an excellent opportunity to reflect upon the fallibility that we eventually discover in our real mentors. As one critic said “Though it does not represent Harper Lee’s best work, it does reveal more starkly the complexity of Atticus Finch, her most admired character.” (Kennedy, 2015).

Putting The Literary Mentor to Work

Having established the validity of literary mentors, how can we make intentional use of them? Because book characters cannot engage in an actual two-way conversation with us, this kind of a relationship is of the self-mentoring variety. As a first strategy, consider the words of French novelist Francois Mauriac who is credited with saying: “Tell me what you read and I’ll tell you who you are is true enough but I’d know you better if you told me what you reread.” Identify and return to the books that had the greatest impact on you as a child and young adult. Rather than taking a nostalgic journey through beloved stories, it is important with each book to pinpoint which characters made an impression and how that may have affected your beliefs, decisions and even actions. In an collection of essays entitled *Everything I Needed to Know About Being a Girl*

I Learned from Judy Blume, (O’Connell, 2007) contributor Beth Kendrick describes how when re-reading books by Judy Blume as an adult, she finds herself identifying with the parents rather than the teenage protagonists. “I’m bringing an entirely new set of experiences to these novels now and my reward is a fresh set of story lines that I missed the first time around.” (p. 309).

In the same book of essays, Stacey Ballis is even more emphatic when she talks about re-visiting the novel *Forever* when she is in struggling as an adult:

Why was I feeling so connected to a fictional seventeen-year-old when all my actual thirty-something girlfriends were supporting me? ... I realized it was because Kat [from the young adult novel *Forever*] wasn’t going to actually give me specific advice and then berate me for how I chose to interpret it. Kat could only lead by example. Her tale of love and loss could only be a parable for me to glean what I needed – she was a silent partner. (O’Connell, 2007, p. 176-177)

A second strategy in this use of fictional mentoring is to read deeper. Research has shown that reading literary fiction, such as award winners or books from the literary canon, improves Theory of Mind demonstrably more than reading lighter or more popular novels. According to these studies, when we read complex literature, we have to actively participate with the characters and this “prompts readers to enter a vibrant discourse with the author and her characters” (Kidd & Castano, 2013, p. 377). One example of a recent accessible literary work to approach in this way is Anthony Doerr’s *All the Light We Cannot See*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 2015 in addition to many others awards. In this novel, we have the privilege to learn a great deal from a blind teenage girl named Marie-Laure who lives in the small French village of Saint-Malo during World War II. Although she may seem too young and her situation too dated or remote, this is a mentoring opportunity not to be missed.

A third and final strategy is to read differently. Through books, we can live virtually in worlds that are otherwise inaccessible to us due to time or circumstance. By purposefully engaging with literary mentors from experiences other than our own, we have a powerful tool for development of cultural competency. Experiencing the world of those very different from us through fiction is no doubt the easiest way to really step in and walk around in someone else’s shoes. Think Boo Radley on the porch. Because this paper was written specifically for the 9th Annual Mentoring Conference at the University of New Mexico, it seems particularly appropriate to single out Rudolfo Anaya’s classic *Bless Me, Ultima* as a recommended example. This novel is the coming-of-age story of Antonio Marez, who lives in rural New Mexico. When Antonio is six, the revered and elderly curandera or female folk healer, Ultima, comes to live with his family. From the first page, the reader becomes part of a world rich with Mexican American culture and folklore including deep, if sometimes conflicting, family values and belief in the power of the unseen. As Antonio learns from Ultima, so can we: “She taught me to listen to the mystery of the groaning earth and to feel complete in the fulfillment of its time. My soul grew under her careful guidance.” (Anaya, 1994, p. 15)

In summary, let us return full circle to Inspector Gamache who prompted this entire inquiry. In *Bury Your Dead*, Gamache is struggling mightily because many of his talented, hand picked agents were murdered in a devastating raid. He is questioning his entire work and worth. For help, he turns to his own mentor Emile Comeau, a retired chief inspector from the Surete de Quebec. We discover that much of the wisdom the reader would have attributed from previous

books to Gamache actually originated with Comeau. Indeed Gamache credits Comeau with changing his life. In one of their interactions, a rich conversation ensues in which Gamache concludes that although one might travel faster when travelling solo, "... eventually you'll stall. We need other people." (Penny, 2010, p. 171). Literary mentors are among the "other people" who can assist us in our lifelong developmental journey. They wait patiently for the protégé to pick up the book and turn the page.

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