

**Summer of the Skunks:**

*a family story, sort of*

a presentation by Wilmoth Foreman

We are here today to focus on how family stories can be used in classrooms across the curriculum. My part of that quest is titled *Summer of the Skunks: A Family Story, Sort of.* I want to zero in on that "sort of" and explore the possibilities of building fiction around family facts and/or memories.

There will be snippets of wisdom from advisors in the MFA program I recently completed, and quotes from Robin Hemley's book, *Turning Fact into Fiction.* But to illustrate points, I will use examples from my own writings—from *Summer of the Skunks*—and a few others. So if you were expecting something intellectual, consider yourself forewarned that this part of the presentation will be more along the "true confessions" line.

So, with an eye to creating fiction, how do we "explore" a scrap of family story? Hemley says, "Look for the story that didn't happen within the story that did." (91)

Okay. Here's what did happen:

I vaguely remember a short period of time during my childhood when skunks moved in under our house, but there's no memory of how long they stayed or how we got them out. The one thing I'm sure of is, the skunks did not get upset and spray any "perfume" while under the house. But the threat of their spray transformed the way we siblings acted toward one another. We had to be quiet; no matter how mad we were, we didn't dare yell, stomp, or slam doors.

Could a story that didn't happen possibly come from this situation? Hemley proposes that we "...write about 'what if' rather than 'what is.'" (91)

Think about that for a minute. No matter what your grade level, writing the "what if" has possibilities. And, curriculum-wise? In science, for example, to write the "what if," students would need a working knowledge of "what is" to build on.

Back to the memory just cited: What if the children of the family concoct a plan to get the skunks out? And what if one of them gets scratched and the skunk has to be kept for observation? What if that skunk becomes a pet? Hmmmm...maybe this sort-of family story fact has potential to grow into fiction.

Hemley says, "Transformation is the key to writing fiction based on real life" (3). One of my MFA advisor's way to say that was, "Fiction is not just a reflection of life, but a reshaping of it." How do we achieve that reshaping?

Here are some strategies, in no particular order of importance:

First of all, don't be bound by the facts. "Real life matters only as a conduit for the imagination" is the way Hemley phrases it. As a "before" and "after" illustration, I'd like to read from two stages in the writing of my story "Mr. Greer's Mule."

First, here are two fact-driven sections from an early vignette about the remembered incident: narrator is 8-ish

When Mr. Greer plowed our garden each spring, I'd sit on the ground in the yard and watch him and his old mule plod from square to square of the fence. Sometimes I'd climb up enough squares so that I could lean my elbows on the wide plank at the top. If Mr. Greer ever looked up, I'd wave...

I was gazing idly out the back screen when Mama vaulted the fence. She landed running toward the house. I flung the screen door open and plastered myself against it so she wouldn't bowl me over.

Mama never slowed down from that fence. She looked intent and readied herself to stop the mule in its tracks. His mouth was open a crack. Mama never slowed down from that fence to the phone. Her voice was shaking so, she had to give the operator Daddy's number twice.

"Claude?" she panted. "Come home quick. Mr. Greer is dead in the garden!"

To create a viable fictional account, this story's narrator needed to be less of an observer; more involved. In the fiction version, she's in the field, learning how to plow; she makes friends with both Mr. Greer and Jezebel, the mule.

Here's that version:

While Mr. Greer rests under the cedar tree, me and Jezebel plow two rows more than I bargained for...Every time we pass the cedar, Mr. Greer doesn't move a muscle. But Jezebel makes up for it, curling her lip back like false teeth are bothering her; shaking her head until her ears flop around and slobber flecks the reins...

I get to worrying that Mama will catch me plowing again. So I turn Jezebel for the next row, "shoo" her, and go to wake Mr. Greer. He's slouched peculiar, like he'd fall clear over if that cedar wasn't stopping him. His mouth is open a crack. A string of spit is making a dark patch on his overalls bib.

"Your turn, Mr. Greer." He doesn't wake up. Iudge at his brogan with my foot, but that doesn't wake him. A shiver takes hold of me...

As fiction takes shape, there are literary casualties. One of the most traumatic is that "you may have to discard the very thing that attracted you to the story in the first place" (Hemley 128).

Remember the real-life scene where the mother who finds Mr. Greer dead in the garden jumps the fence? That is one of only a handful of childhood memories that has remained clearly pictured in my mind.

Guess what! Since that fence-leaping did not move the fictional story forward, it got cut. My advisor's spin was "...if it has to go out of this story, which it probably does have to do, some time you can put it into another story."

So far, it's still looking for a home.

A relevant question is: "How do you know what to give up in the interests of good fiction? How do you feel when doing so—like a traitor?"

continued on p.2
Summer of the Skunks
Wilmoth Foreman (cont.’d from front)

To answer that question, here’s a good rule of thumb for fiction—and for most writing: “If something doesn’t serve a purpose, it doesn’t belong” (Hemley 65). Hemley stresses that giving up characters may be a must in the interest of a story’s progress. His spin on this is: “In fiction, a character is either necessary or extraneous” (25).

Here are some examples of my own character assassinations. A first draft of a goat story, in order to be true to its origin, was peopled with the same family members as those in Skunks, plus a grandmother. On my own, I realized the siblings served no purpose in the goat story, so I disposed of them. Then, an advisor asked if the little girl’s doll was essential. In answer, though it was traumatizing, I committed suicide. Later, in response to questioning by another advisor, I deleted the Dad. So a goat story that started out with seven characters, not even counting the goats, wound up with only three: a girl, her mom, and her grandmother.

In early versions of Skunks, Jill had a close friend she palled around with. But side trips such as their going to the movies together weakened the story’s focus. So, though Jill’s siblings have outside friends, scenes that included Jill’s friend [I’ve even forgotten the girl’s name] got cut.

Now that we’ve talked about getting rid of stuff, the other side of that coin is adding on. Sometimes, to flesh out the reader’s experience of a writing based on your family story, what you know isn’t enough. You may need more facts to significantly enhance the fiction. One advisor’s succinct directive was, "Try to make things clearer," Hemley suggests that one way to do this is, "If you don’t know something, find out about it" (149).

Here are three of the many places in my fiction that “finding out” was needed in order to “make things clearer”:

As the previously-referred-to mule story expanded, it needed accurate terminology for the plowing gear. Luckily, my dad, who grew up plowing with a mule, was a readily available source for these terms. He also read the finished story to be sure the terms were used correctly.

A remembered “frog gigging” outing triggered one story that’s in Summer of the Skunks. Until that segment was critiqued in a workshop north of the Mason-Dixon Line, it never occurred to me that the whole world didn’t know about frog gigging. Questions included: "Why do you gig frogs?" Answer: to eat frog legs; "What does a frog gig look like?" Answer: a tiny, usually dark green, pitchfork on a long, long pole handle; "How do you gig frogs?" Answer: "Beats me. I never got to go with my dad and brothers."

But, to give the reader a clear picture, answers to ALL these questions needed to be part of the story. They now are, and have gotten a “passing” grade from the brother who still annually gigs frogs.

On occasion, adding facts can be fun. When an advisor read my first draft of a picture book that has an octopus for the main character, she suggested I include more octopus characteristics. I looked up "octopus" in the encyclopedia. Among other improvements, the new knowledge changed the insipid line "...filled Oran’s heart with joy" to the more informative "...filled all three of Oran’s hearts with joy."

The word “research” still scares me, and may terrify your students. So far, we’ve looked at examples of “research” that students may be comfortable with: asking folk they know who are legitimate sources of information about the topic; and good old World Book.

But, even in a fictional book about skunks, the second syllable—search—has to happen sooner or later. I had finished the book and my editor hadn’t said a word about how accurate—or not—the description of the pontoon was. But it was bothering me. So my “research” took two routes.

First of all, I was in line at the local Co-Op when the cashier and a young man who goes to my church began talking about boats. When the word "pontoon" surfaced, I perked up my ears.

“We have our pontoon stored in my mom’s garage,” Danny told the clerk.

"I need to see it!” I blurted out.

So, the next Sunday afternoon, Danny and I headed for his mom’s house. I not only saw the pontoon boat. I climbed aboard and wandered around it. Then Danny chauffeured me all over town, visiting boat companies I didn’t know existed so I could see various designs of pontoons.

That was helpful. But I needed to know more. While visiting my daughter in Anchorage, Alaska, I spent perfectly good tourist time in the local library. First of all, let me tell you that, if you want to write about a subject that has almost nothing written about it so far, choose pontoon boats.

Both of these very different types of research triggered decisions. Thanks to the afternoon tour with Danny, I rebuilt Polly. Her cabin was originally in the center of the boat; whereas, the pontoons I saw had cabins at the back.

As to the library research? It turns out that pontoons were not manufactured much until 1950. This makes it logistically unlikely that there would have been a used pontoon available in time to be in this novel. Please keep that to yourself.

While we’re on the pontoon, here’s another strategy for fictionalizing family stories. Hemley writes that the process "...often involves putting two real details side by side, though they’re separated by months or years" (7). He adds: "For the purposes of fiction, you can always collapse events together."

While I was at college—the just-out-of-high-school time—my older brother, Buddy, bought a used pontoon boat. He and his young family were in an apartment, so he left the pontoon in my parents’ cow pasture until he could repair it.

I only saw that boat once—walked back to the pasture, and there sat this ramshackle pontoon with weeds growing around it. On the strength of that one sighting, Buddy’s boat got transported back in time more than a decade to be a part of this childhood-based novel.

Though I won’t elaborate much on this point, I’d like to mention that: when an unlikely object just “appears” in a story, trust the subconscious; wait and see if that object crops up again to move the plot along. Examples from Skunks of things that I had no idea of the “why” when they first showed up include an army helmet, the pontoon, a jar of mayonnaise, and blackberries. These “props” can always get zapped later if they don’t serve the story.

Now that we’ve discussed ways to transform family stories into “what if’s,” it’s time to admit that, “Sometimes real life just can’t be improved upon” (Hemley 101).

Here’s a scene from the too-real days of riding a school bus. Although this scene is not in Skunks, Jill is the narrator.

In my opinion, many “made-up” scenes pale in comparison to this slice of real life:

About the time the new driver closes the bus door, this whoop of laughter
cranks up in the back of the bus.

"Y'all stop it now!" Jamie Jo hollers.

I turn in time to see Steve and Mud heist Jamie up like a floppy log.

Each of them has one end of her on his shoulder. Mud passes her feet first up the aisle to the teen boys in the next seat.

"Grab aholt of that hairy leg!" Steve yells at a girl who hasn't reached up to grab Jamie.

"Put me down, you hear?" Jamie whimpers.

Even the ones who usually aren't mean to her are boosting Jamie up so she won't fall on them. She's caterpillarling along toward the front at a pretty fast clip.

I hope your students will be less reluctant than I was when it comes to using family situations in their writings. To move me from "invented" characters and imagined happenings, one advisor had to get rough. "What's your relationship to writing born out of memories?"

She wrote, "Do you think it's cheating? That you score more points if you cook up to grab Jamie.

"Put me down, you hear?" Jamie

In answer, I pointed out that my childhood was basically a happy one, so was worthless as writing material.

She replied, "You don't need to have had a traumatic childhood! You only have to remember it deeply."

One result of Carolyn's challenge to base my writings on memories is this published novel that's...well, sort of a family story. Hemley considers "dreams, lies, and trouble" to be "the stuff of fiction" (8). Skunks has its fair share of dreams and lies, but is low in the serious trouble department. This was not intentional; it's just how things panned out. Although I'm not sure I agree with him, Hemley warns that "writing shouldn't be for therapeutic purposes." His perspective is, "If you need therapy, see a therapist. Writing, if anything, will make you more neurotic." He thinks that the only reason to write about trauma is if "it would make a good story" (92).

My final quote from Hemley has no relevance to this presentation, but is included because I like it. Plus, it may apply to a select few of your students. Hemley says, "You shouldn't go around saying you want to write eternal verities, or people might slap you."

I hope my future writings—none of which will be eternal verities—will not be based solely on family stories. But, to quote from Dreams and Wishes by Susan Cooper, "The child I was is the only child I really know" (131). So, it's likely there are more family-based stories to be told. I expect that to be true not only for my own writings, but for yours, and for your students'. Amen.

Works Cited


Note: Wilmoth Foreman was the opening presenter at the workshop for teachers sponsored by WTWP and held at the Ag Center in Jackson, Aug. 2, 2003. Wilmoth, a Teacher Consultant of WTWP, received her MFA in Writing for Children from Vermont College, serves on the Tennessee Arts Commission's roster as an "Artists in Education" teacher of writing, and writes a weekly column for The Daily Herald in Columbia, Tennessee. This is a slightly abbreviated version of her Aug. 2 presentation.

Modeling/Coaching/Mentoring

The West Tennessee Writing Project is the recipient of a $6,000 Jump-Start grant from the National Writing Project to develop a program of professional development for teachers.

Last spring, WTWP was invited to participate in a focus institute on inservice in Boston held at the end of July. From that institute, the WTWP team of Teacher Consultants to Boston–Betty Jordan, supervisor of instruction in Benton County, and Douglas Cook, chair of the Department of Visual and Theater Arts at UTM–developed a program of Modeling, Coaching, and Mentoring (MCM) for the Benton County School system.

Twenty-five non-tenured teachers will be invited as participants to observe in classrooms of Teacher Consultants of WTWP and will have opportunities to meet to reflect upon practice. A Response Panel involves the authors of the grant, the WTWP director, the head of the Department of Educational Studies at UTM, Benton County System administrators and a representative from the non-tenured teachers and the Teacher Consultants. The first observations took place in October with additional observations, meetings to reflect, and the insights of the Response Panel and evaluation to be completed by late March.

A part of the grant application included the commitment of WTWP to become a more intentional and stronger presence in developing, offering, and marketing professional development opportunities for WTWP for teachers in West Tennessee.

Writing with Passion

Spring semester 2004, Margrethe Ahlschwede, director of WTWP, will offer a graduate writing seminar, English 696: Seminar in Language or Literature: Writing with Passion, on the UT Martin campus, 5 p.m. Mondays, beginning Jan. 12, 2004.

The focus for the class comes from Tom Romano's book, Writing with Passion: Life Stories, Multiple Genres.

This course may be used as part of the 18 hours of subject-matter specialty in the MS in Education offered through the UT Martin College of Education and Behavioral Studies. It also may count as points toward teacher recertification (check with supervisors of instruction) or as part of the "thirty above" the Master's.

To register, students first must be accepted for graduate work. For information about admission to graduate studies at UTM, contact the Office of Graduate Studies, 309 Administration Building, UTM, 38238 731.587.7012. Students may register either on-line through the UTM home page, www.utm.edu, then click on Banner under quick links, or by contacting the Records Office through the UTM line, 1-800-829-8861.

For information about the MS in Education, contact Dr. Bonnie Daniel, coordinator of graduate work, the College of Education and Behavioral Studies, 237 Gooch Hall, UTM, 38238, 731.587.7125.

For additional graduate offerings in English, check the department home page off the UTM website, www.utm.edu
**News of Teacher Consultants of WTWP**

- Stacey Stewart has been named Teacher of the Year for Camden Elementary School.

- In last spring’s election, Deanna Chappell, Hillcrest Elementary, was elected the first woman alderman of Troy, Tennessee.

- Mary Lou Marks, media specialist Camden Central High School, and colleague Jennifer Hall will be making presentations at both the Tennessee Council of Teachers of English meeting in Memphis in September, and the meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English in San Francisco in November. Tim Hacker, faculty member in the Department of English at UT Martin, also is presenting at the Tennessee Council of Teachers of English September meeting.

- Kelly Rimel, Dyersburg Middle, is the recipient of the 2003 Adrian McClaren Memorial Scholarship awarded by the Tennessee Council of Teachers of English to be used for college tuition fees or as stipend to attend the National Council of Teachers of English meeting for the first time. Kelly will be attending NCTE in November.

**The Reach of WTWP Consultants**

For the school year, 2001-2002, 41 Teacher Consultants of the West Tennessee Writing Project reported 3,757 contact hours of inservice delivered to individual teachers, schools, and districts. These programs of professional development included professional reading groups; workshops on reading, inclusion, writing, thinking and reasoning across the curriculum; panel presentations at professional meetings; and UTM courses in writing.

In the same year, 21 teachers reported working with a total of 255 youth, providing 4,305 contact hours through in-school and after-school reading and writing clubs, and a youth writing camp.

Ellen Brinkley, director of the Third Coast Writing Project, and the National Writing Project reviewer for WTWP’s continuation grant for 2003-2004, wrote, in response to these reports:

“For a rural site with an annual budget under $60,000, your site is engaged in an amazing array of programs that serve a number of audiences. . . . Your site has provided a range of inservice programs that seem carefully constructed to meet teachers’ needs in especially appropriate ways.”

**About WTWP**

The West Tennessee Writing Project is a program of professional development for teachers, K-12, from all subject-matter areas. It seeks to improve writing and writing instruction in our schools.

Headquartered in the Department of English at the University of Tennessee at Martin, WTWP is one of 160 sites of the National Writing Project and the only affiliate site in Tennessee of the National Writing Project.

The heart of WTWP is its annual invitational summer writing-reading institute for selected West Tennessee teachers, all subject-matter areas, all grades K-12 on the UT Martin campus. The dates for next summer: May 22 and June 7-July 1, 2004. To apply, see WTWP website for application and information: www.utm.edu/wtwp.

Why a writing project? To increase the frequency of writing in the classroom, expand the variety of modes of writing, develop a love of reading and writing among students; publish student writing; combine writing with reading to increase reading fluency and comprehension. Through the summer institute, teachers develop more effective ways of teaching students to read and to write and more effective approaches to assessing student growth in reading and writing.

WTWP is supported by grants from the National Writing Project of the University of California, Berkeley with matching funds from the University of Tennessee at Martin. Additional gift contributions support particular workshops and programs.

The director of WTWP is Margrethe Ahlschwede, professor in English. Associate director is Paula Cox, 5th grade teacher at Camden’s Briarwood School. Co-directors are Molly Coffman, chair of the English Department at Madison Academic Magnet High School, Jackson; and Beth Halbert, Mt. Juliet High School, English. Technology liaison for WTWP is Shannon Tolene, Waverly High School English teacher. Inservice liaison, Betty Hicks, Northview Middle, Newbern. The WTWP Advocacy Council also includes Renee Cooper, 2nd grade, Camden Elementary; Doug Cook, chair, Visual and Theater Arts, UT-Martin; Sandi Walden, Hollow-Rock Bruceanton 5th grade; Helen New, 7th reading, Tigrett Middle, Jackson; and Deanna Chappell, Hillcrest Elementary, Troy. Staff support to WTWP is provided by Lisa Pentecost, principal secretary in the Department of English, and accounting intern, Leigh Ann Moffett, senior accounting major from Stantonville. Staff of UT Martin’s University Relations write news releases and design publications. Paul Meek Library faculty and staff catalogue and house texts on reading and writing theory and practice.

Administrators who make WTWP possible: Chancellor Nick Dunagan; Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Tom Bakes, College of Humanities and Fine Arts Dean Jerald Ogg; Department of English Chair Lynn Alexander.

For further information about inservice programs, the summer institute, and other programs of professional development write or call: West Tennessee Writing project, Department of English, UT Martin, 38238; 731.587.7290, 731.587.7300; FAX 731.587.7276; or e-mail: wtwp@utm.edu WTWP website: www.utm.edu/wtwp National Writing Project site: www.writingproject.org
Successful Mini-Grant Applicants

Six Teacher Consultants are successful applicants for $100 mini-grants from WTWP to support their professional development or literacy development among their students. For 2003-2004, the Teacher Consultants are:

Stephanie Mattox Elliott, Davidson Academy, Nashville, "Reading and Writing for Understanding: An On-line Novel Chat with Peers." This project will produce better and stronger readers and writers through on-line discussions within the classroom of selected texts. Goals: That in discussion and collaboration with peers, students will gain a better understanding of a novel, will have another venue for writing and will become more at home with e-mail and other electronic means of communication such as bulletin boards and discussion boards.

Deborah Criswell, Dyersburg High School, Journalism and Special Education, "Writing and Publishing: Writing Is Still Cool." The Dyersburg High School Creative Writers Organization conducts an annual writing workshop for a group of fifth graders at Dyersburg Intermediate. One of the workshop's goals is to foster a sense of confidence and motivation in the young writers by showing them writing is still "cool" in high school and after. The project includes publishing students' work in a bound book.

Angela M. Redden, Oakmont Elementary, Dickson, "Dickson County Teachers' Study Council." The goal of the project is to form a group of teachers who realize the need for professional development and to surround that group with books and conversation. The group would be part of the Teachers' Study Council affiliated with the Tennessee Department of Education.

Beth Halbert, Mt. Juliet High School, "Mt. Juliet High School After School Writing Club." Currently, Mt. Juliet has clubs for students interested in math, science, Latin, Spanish, French, German, and agriculture but no writing or reading clubs. The writing club will meet weekly to write and to read aloud from the writing, with students active in the club having the opportunity to publish their work in an anthology.

Lana Taylor Warren, Obion County Central High School, "Watershed 16: Obion County's Students' Chance To Shine," the 3rd anthology to be produced by the school's writing club. Last year the writing club received 400 submissions of writing and artwork from students, faculty, and staff. More than eighteen students participated in the club. Enough copies of the publication were printed for classroom sets and for each contributor.

Lee Hudson, Dyersburg Intermediate School, "Fifth Grade Book Club Year Two: The Sequel." In its first year the book club had thirty fifth graders who met twice a month. For 2003-2004, the group will total fifteen, based on recommendations from reading teachers. The theories and teaching practices that support the book club come from Keene and Zimmerman's Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop.

Summer Institute Reading

These were the texts for the Summer 2003 WTWP invitational institute and school year follow-up:

For primary and elementary teachers:


For middle school teachers:


For high school teachers:


For all teachers:


In the few weeks before school began last year, I often visited my new classroom. Of course, there was much work to do, but that is not the only reason that drew me there. It was as if I could not stay away; a magnetic force caressed me with some strange power. Nervousness blended with eager anticipation as each day moved me closer to the launching pad. I was about to embark upon the adventure of starting fresh—again. Having taught high school students for the previous year and a half in a different school system, I was now to teach eighth-grade students in language arts at Dyersburg Middle School.

My dream had come true. I was home, in my hometown, working with hometown kids. I had arrived.

Now I had only to figure out how to be the absolute best, without a doubt, eighth-grade language arts teacher there ever was—all in the first year, of course. Seemed easy enough, but we all know what can happen to good intentions. Sometimes situations do not work out as ideally as we had dreamed.

Fortunately for me, I did have two things going for me: Ann Carson and Sandy Cross. These two wonderful teachers took me under their wing, and introduced me to the team area we would share together with open arms—literally. Their sage advice and moral support allowed me to stand tall that first day as we gathered all ninety students in the team area to inform them of team policies and eighth-grade hallway rules.

At the end of the first day, I could barely walk to my car as the sun was setting. How could I forget the pain the human foot could inflict upon the body? The second week of school, another DMS teacher and I crossed paths at a local shoe store. "You, too!" we remarked simultaneously. We were both in search of the same treasure—comfortable shoes. I think this year was particularly harsh on my flat feet because I had not been used to standing at all, much less standing all day. Being flat on my back at home for six weeks following a lower back trauma and subsequent surgery increased my excitement of finally getting "back on my feet" again and into the classroom. I did not know what I had wished upon myself.

Still, that first day went well, very well, in fact. And every day after that just kept getting better.

In the mornings, I could not sleep so eager I was to arrive in my classroom, pondering the upcoming events and activities of the day. This may not seem extraordinary to those of you who do not know me, but I assure you, a morning person I am not.

My mentor, Ann, smiled happily one day as I mentioned this casually to her.

"I just can't sleep anymore. I stay up thinking about it all, and then I am so excited to be here the next day, I wake up early and can't wait to come in."

She told me she understood that exhilaration, and I know she does. She is an enthusiastic person and teacher.

The days rolled by, and I was still processing new information about tasks to be completed, including sending home progress reports.

Upon printing these reports, I was disappointed. Why were several students not making the grade? Well, they were not completing homework assignments or in-class assignments, for that matter. What were they doing to look so busy then? When they did not return with their progress reports signed, I was frustrated. Perhaps I should make some phone calls, I thought, and I did. I tried to balance the "negative" calls with more positive ones. For every set of parents I called to tell them how wonderful it was to have their child in my class, that he/she had been keeping up with all assignments and that their child had a bright disposition, I followed with a call to parents about lack of homework or tardiness or rude behavior.

One such student's mother with whom I spoke assured me this problem behavior of not completing work would be rectified immediately, or else her son would not continue playing football. I felt more confident then that I would be seeing great things from him.

Weeks passed and still Cory's work was lacking. He had made improvements, but I knew he was capable of more. I believe this frustration is the greatest in teaching for me. I know what my teachers meant when they told the class we were not living up to our potential. They probably felt as stymied as do I when I am perfectly aware that a student could excel and achieve his heart's desire, yet he sits idly, content with mediocrity or even less.

Cory had sat listlessly in my classroom, only there in body. He was in danger of failing if he did not pull up his grade, I was afraid. How could I reach him? How could I make him understand he must not give up?

I decided to try a different approach other than the constant pleading with him to do what he should have been doing anyway. After conferencing with Cory, I was assured he would have all his work turned in ("I'll have it tomorrow"), and he did begin making more of an effort.

Before the end of the third nine weeks, I listed all his missing grades. I informed him I would accept the work, but only for partial credit.

"Cory, I have grown extremely tired of watching you sit here day after day not participating. You have so much talent and you are wasting it. I want to see you do this work, because I know you can. Don't deprive me the opportunity of reading your writing. Please get caught up in your journal."

"But I can't write, Mrs. Rimel. I can't do it." His soft brown eyes pleaded with me. It was then, finally near the final days, that it hit me. Eureka! Cory is not lazy; Cory is insecure. This is why he does not complete assignments, because he does not believe in himself to do well. What kind of teacher was I not to have thought of this already? I needed to evaluate my teaching practices.

While I did not want to decrease my expectations for students, I desired to transform my classroom into a more accepting environment. Cory taught me that maybe all students are not alike. Now there is a concept: different students have different needs in the classroom. Some even need more encouragement than others. Had I not been taught this before? Did common sense not dictate this to me?

That last nine weeks of school, I concentrated on different learning styles and the variety of expression these students craved. Every day I customarily brushed by Cory's desk and commented on how I liked his drawing or briefly read what he was writing and smiled. During group meetings, I called on Cory to share the group's findings, gradually giving him more responsibility. At first, he seemed squeamish about appearing "smart" in front of his peers, but he grew into his new role in the classroom.

I will never forget the day The Outsiders essays were due. On this day,
Cory found me in the team area. It was morning, and I had not yet met with second block (his class).

"Did you get my essay, Mrs. Rimel?"

"You don’t have to turn it in until your class, Cory."

"I put it on your desk this morning."

He smiled, waiting for my reply.

"Thank you, Cory, I look forward to reading it this weekend," I told him.

And enjoy it I did. His essay was wonderfully crafted. He showed purpose and depth. He actually stayed on topic. He eloquently discussed the familial theme in the novel. My heart warmed and tears of joy cascaded down my cheeks onto his hand-written words.

"Thank you, Cory," I said to no one in particular.

As I called students back to my desk one day to conference with them about their progress and their current grades, Cory walked nervously toward me after I called his name.

I covered his grade with my finger and put my other hand on his shoulder as he stooped over.

"I am really proud of you, Cory. Your hard work has paid off, and I think you’re going to be pleased," I said, not able to contain the giddy smile dancing across my lips.

His apprehension waned as I slowly slid my finger away. He did a double take.

"It’s a ninety-one," I whispered dramatically. "Cory, you have a B, almost an A."

He beamed. He strutted back to his desk. Yes, he strutted.

I told Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Carson about his achievement, and they both made a fuss over him as well. He was not ashamed; the pride in his eyes could not be mistaken.

Cory maintained his B average that last nine weeks, and he passed with a C for the year. He did it. He succeeded because he wanted to, because he knew he could.

On annual signing day, I asked all my students to pen their parting thoughts in my annual. When I read Cory’s entry, my heart sang.

"Mrs. Rimel, Thanks for everything. I will miss your kindness, patience, and just you. Thanks a lot, Cory J. AKA Afroman."

I will miss Cory, but his invaluable lesson will live on with me forever.

Author’s Note: This story grew into existence during my participation in the 2003 West Tennessee Writing Project summer invitational institute. This particular teaching story originated from hours of reflection and discussion with other teachers who also attended WTWP. I am forever grateful for the positive feedback of Deanna Chappell, Angie Carey, and Carlotta Jones, as well as Cory’s success and endearing smile. Cory, who was a real student, gave his permission for publication of this story and Tyles Davenport, principal of Dyersburg Middle School, also has offered his continued support.

Kelly A. Rimel, a teacher consultant of WTWP, teaches 8th grade students at Dyersburg Middle School.

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2003 Summer Institute Participants

**Summer Institute Teachers:**

Kimberly Hamilton  
Crockett Co. Middle, 7th

Helen Exum New  
Tigrett Middle, Jackson, 7th reading

Zann Easterwood  
Martin Primary School, 1st

Allen Pounds  
Obion Co. Central High, English

Shannon Tolene  
Waverly CHS, 10th

Mark Yoder  
Jackson Central Merry, English

Darla Crackel  
Hillcrest Elementary, 4th

Sandi Walden  
Hollow Rock Bruceton, 5th

Carlotta Jones  
MTSU composition instructor

Mary Julie Habenicht  
Whitehall Elementary, Jackson

Angelique (Angie) Carey  
Gleason School, 1st

Kelly A. Rimel  
Dyersburg Middle, 8th

**Summer Institute Focal Team:**

Betty Hicks  
Northview Middle, Newbern, 6th

Deanna Chappell  
Hillcrest Elementary, Troy, 5th

Beth Halbert  
Mr. Juliet High School, English

Margretthe Ahlschwede, Director  
West Tennessee Writing Project, UT

**Institute Morning Residencies by Teacher Consultants of WTWP:**

Jane Robinson  
Milan Elementary, kindergarten

Renee Cooper  
Camden Elementary, 2nd

Lee Hudson  
Dyersburg Intermediate, 5th

Sheryl Alford  
Dresden Middle, Media

Molly Coffman  
Madison Academic Magnet High School, Jackson, English

Glenda Arant  
Martin Middle, reading

For information and application for the Summer 2004 invitational institute, see www.utn.edu/wtwp or watch for newspaper announcements and brochures.
What’s Ahead from WTWP

Mark your calendars for Saturday May 1, 2004, and the WTWP spring workshop at Newbern’s Northview Middle School. The workshop will feature interactive demonstrations led by Teacher Consultants of WTWP, a guest presenter, lunch, coffee, and certificates of participation. Watch for further announcements in area newspapers and on the WTWP website: www.utm.edu/wtwp

Plan to attend the poetry workshop with poet Bill Brown, March 6, 2004, Trinity Presbyterian Church, Martin, sponsored by the Tennessee Writers Alliance in collaboration with WTWP. Watch for newspaper announcements and check the WTWP website.

The 12th annual invitational summer institute of WTWP will meet on the UTM campus May 22 and June 7-July 1, 2004 with applications due by February 27. The institute is for already excellent teachers, all subject matter areas, grades K-12, who are looking to revitalize their classroom practice particularly as relates to reading, writing, and assessment. Watch for newspaper announcements and brochures or check the WTWP website for information and application materials: www.utm.edu/wtwp

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