

PROLOGUE

I watched the movie *Kinky Boots* the other night. I enjoyed it so much that I watched it again the next night, only this time I found myself thinking about what was going on in the movie and how it was crafted. I began “reading” the movie as a writer. The first time I was totally captivated by the story line, but the second time I noticed the way the film developed, the voice of each segment, the use of language to make the theme work, and how artfully the whole piece was seamed together to create a memorable experience for the viewer. If you haven’t seen this 2005 film, I highly recommend it.

The opening scene will break your heart. Much like the beginning of a great book, it grabs your attention by connecting with universal human experiences. To be sure, few of us have dealt with the stinging rebuke of a father who refuses to love a son who dresses as a woman. But who among us has not disappointed a parent and been crushed by his or her criticism? At the moment when Simon’s father raps his knuckles against the window and the tone changes from young Simon’s pure, unadulterated, “red high heels dancing on the boardwalk” joy to fear, then resignation, and finally despair, I remembered a time when I was rebuked by my father for something that I took pleasure in as well: creating the ultimate mudslide with the hose and a handy dirt pile. After seeing the mess that I had made, he marched me into the house to clean up and scolded me: “Girls don’t play in the mud like this. Shame on you.” I was wounded to the quick, and the memory still haunts me. Voice is the trait of writing that reaches out to readers and draws them in. This moment of voice in *Kinky Boots* resonated deeply within my long-ago child self.

As the story unfolds (spoiler alert!), we meet another set of father and son characters, the Prices. During a poignant scene, the son, Charlie, receives a phone call. He never says that his father died, but you just know it, and sure enough, the next scene is at the funeral. We get this key information through gesture, tone, and of course, the look on Charlie’s face. We don’t need to be told that something terrible happened that will change Charlie’s life because we’ve been shown it.

Later in the film, there's a pleasant sense of completeness when the scene on the boardwalk is reprised. The dancing image is called back, this time with Simon dressed as Lola, the adult, trying to recapture the magic of those childhood moments when the need to dance in high heels outweighed any punishment that the father could threaten. It serves to deepen a character element of the film and position the viewer/reader for the bigger ending. The scene is perfectly placed in the organization of the narrative, the same as a writer tries to do with key pieces of information or story elements in text. Having good ideas is critical, but as any reader will tell you, they have to be revealed logically so the entirety of the story line adds up to something important by the end.

When I finished watching *Kinky Boots* the second time, I was ready to watch it again because I wanted to look even closer at how masterfully the different ideas fit together.

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This leap from watching the movie to experiencing it as a writer reminded me of what an exciting challenge it is to find the right texts, the right moments, and the right images to show students how different elements of writing work. I am always on the hunt for mentor texts, and because I'm a reader and a writer, I find great stuff. I look at the world of print and nonprint through the eyes of a writing thief because I search for models of good writing that can inspire students to look at writing from a fresh perspective, try new writing techniques, and turn ordinary writing into something extraordinary.

Recently, I picked up the “do not disturb” signs from a Sheraton hotel. I was leaving early from Raleigh, North Carolina, for the trip home to Portland, Oregon, and I noticed that the door hangers were new, fun, and eye-catching: “I need some ‘me time.’ Please do not disturb,” “I need a moment. Make that thirty moments. Please do not disturb,” and, “I'm good to go. Please do not disturb.” It made me wonder why a big hotel chain would go to the expense and trouble to revise an already clear, succinct direction, “Do not disturb.” Their new versions added voice, a specific focus, and some fun word choice. The answer, of course, is that good writing is good business: At every level, even in this simple door hanger, it matters that the message is not only clear but also memorable.

I stole the door hangers (sorry, fellow travelers!) and will share them with students. We'll use them to try our hand at revising other familiar, everyday text messages: exit, occupied, and men/women. And we'll discuss the advantages and disadvantages of changing the message, trying new words, and adding voice to signs, which will deepen students' understanding of how important it is to communicate clearly in writing.

How did I figure out that reading informs writing? Well, there's a wealth of educational research to back up this thinking, which you'll find in Chapter 2. But mostly, experience has taught me that reading makes better writers. When I read poetry, I'm likely to try my hand at a poem or two. And while they may not be as memorable as those I've just enjoyed, writing my own provides me with a mental workout and a valuable learning experience. When I read a powerful nonfiction article, it makes me want to read more about that topic and find a way to weave that information into something I'm writing. When I see a campaign slogan, I think about how the candidate is saying a lot with a little. When I hear a song lyric that speaks to me, I find myself singing along, noticing the rhythm of the piece, and trying to replicate it in prose. I hear a powerful verb or phrase and steal it for my own writing. I'm a writing thief. It seems like every writer should be.

My experience as a reader began very young. I was read to—something I took for granted at the time but have since learned set me on the path for a lifetime of reading and writing. I learned to read because my parents smoked—true story! When I was little, it was pretty much a nightly routine that we would join my grandparents for dinner, and afterward the four adults would smoke up a storm while they talked for hours. Even then I hated smoking and couldn't wait to be excused and make my escape. The timing of my exit was critical: At a precise moment between the first and second cigarette, I would gather my plate, glass, and silverware and ask to be excused. If I asked too soon, the answer would be no. If I waited too long, I'd have to suffer another round of smoking.

I always retreated to the bathroom. My grandmother hid a stack of comic books for me under her bathroom sink—hidden because she knew my mother wouldn't approve, making them all that much more attractive to me. I remember the cartoon characters well: Huey, Dewey, and Louie;

Archie and Veronica; Atomic Mouse. My grandmother knew I'd be bored in no time on my own, and because I was the only child in the house and there was no television, she provided the wonderful contraband. I loved my grandmother for lots of reasons, but this one was high on the list.

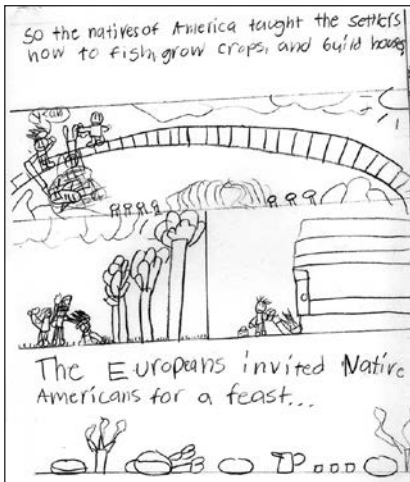
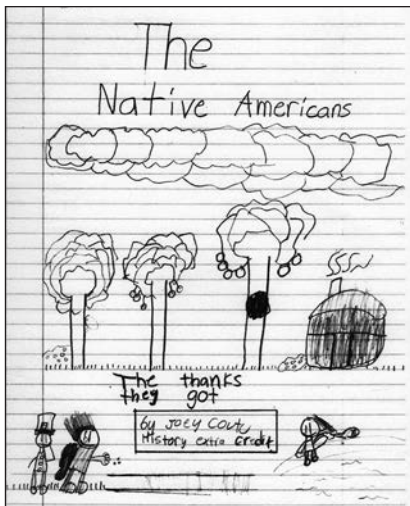
This happened when I was only 3 or 4, at the most. I couldn't read, so all I could do was look at the pictures and try to figure out what was going on. But something magical happened during those long evenings locked away in my grandmother's bathroom. The words started to make sense. At the same time, I began writing, learning my letters from the comic books I read. I began with my name and moved on to copying words, all of this done quietly on my own in what might be the first reading/writing center in the world: my grandparents' bathroom. It was just me and comic books, paper, pencils, and crayons—plenty of resources for a motivated child to learn to read and write.

By the time I reached first grade, I was reading. Maybe not fluently or deeply, but I was reading. And because my teachers didn't know about differentiation, they stuck me in a corner of the classroom with books and left me alone. The gap between me and my peers widened, and by the end of first grade, I could read almost anything. My reading initiation may be the only good thing to come from smoking cigarettes, but I thank my grandmother for starting me on my way to a lifelong love of language.

This example repeats itself today in the literacy stories of children I know. Meet Joey Coutu, the brilliant 12-year-old son of my friend, Ray Coutu. When Joey was about 5, he was totally obsessed with Dav Pilkey's Captain Underpants series and Jeff Kinney's Diary of a Wimpy Kid series. He'd have his dad read them to him over and over and over, always delighting in the stories and how they developed in the graphic comic format. Joey began to draw and then write his own graphic novels inspired by Pilkey and Kinney. Figure 1 is an example from fifth grade of his unique way of sharing information using a format he's been playing with for years: cartoon/graphic novel.

What I notice in Joey's work is how he imitates the mentor texts that he's read in his use of the cartoon/graphic novel format, the irony in the title, the way he edited the text and added in a key missing word, and how the piece ends on the same ironic note as it begins. He chose to inform readers about Native Americans in this format because he loved the cartoons and graphic novels that he had read and studied, so he lifts the

Figure 1. Joey's Cartoon "The Native Americans"



style and applies it to social studies. I love this double-dipping approach to literacy. We can use whatever catches our eye as a mentor text. As a writer myself, I use these models to dig below the surface to notice the moves the writer makes so I can try them in my own work. By stealing ideas and crafting lessons from mentor texts, I grow as a writer and learn firsthand that risk taking is one of the most significant skills that any writer can develop. I read, I write, I view, I write—it’s a cycle that I have come to appreciate as a critical part of literacy.

This is close reading—where reading and writing intersect. I’m reading purposefully and uncovering layers of meaning that lead to deep analysis of the text that informs both my reading and my writing. The mentor texts that I’ve come to value are more than books and magazine articles. As I’ve indicated, they can be movies and television shows, too. They can be peanut butter jar labels and tweets. If it communicates a message clearly, it can be a mentor text.

What Lies Ahead for Prospective Writing Thieves

T.S. Eliot has been attributed as saying, “Mediocre writers borrow. Great writers steal.” This book will show you how to help each of your students become a writing thief. Along with foundational understanding about teaching writing and why using mentor texts is such a powerful teaching strategy, I provide you with more than 90 examples of picture books, chapter books, and everyday texts in each of the writing modes—informational, narrative, and argument (opinion)—that can be used to show students exactly what to try in their own writing to make it stronger. Each is marked with its own icon so you can navigate through the list easily. Additionally, reproducibles and URLs for the original sources of the everyday texts are provided in the Appendix and Reference sections. You can steal the goods from me as I share all of my writing thief moves in the chapters to come.

You’ll also find personal reflections from awesome children’s authors that provide insight about how reading influences them as writers. I asked fiction and nonfiction authors whom I’m fortunate enough to know and call friends to share their thoughts on the subject of mentor texts.

My questions to them were, “How does reading influence your writing? Which authors have you stolen from to develop as a writer? What did you learn from these authors?” Their responses were varied and fascinating, and I hope these Author Insights sections throughout the book will give you and your students a firsthand glimpse at the power of mentor texts.

Years ago, I read that Marcel Proust wrote, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.” I’ve never forgotten that idea. Every book, sign, menu, brochure, website, and advertisement, along with hundreds of other formats, has the potential to serve as a mentor text. You just have to see it that way. I see the world differently from most people; I see reading through the eyes of the writing thief. And because you’re reading this book, you might be thinking about reading like a writing thief, too.

AUTHOR INSIGHTS: *Lester Laminack*



It may seem odd, but as a child, I was not an avid reader. I was able, just not avid. I certainly loved a good story, and I relished those times when some adult would lean in and commence with, “Did I ever tell y’all about that time when...?” Although I didn’t fall quickly into books, reading became more important to me as I grew older. Stories were, and continue to be, my preference. Even so, I spent my share of time stretched out on the floor, propped up on a sofa cushion, pilfering through pages of some volume or another of Compton’s Encyclopedia, soaking up facts about a foreign land, a famous person, or an exotic animal.

Today, as an avid reader, I consume a great variety of texts, including picture books of all types, young adult literature, newspapers, magazines and journals, biographies and memoirs, and both fiction and nonfiction for adults, and I have a strong affection for poetry. But I’m most drawn to the voices of Southern writers such as Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, Reynolds Price, Carson McCullers, Clyde Edgerton, Lee Smith, Kaye Gibbons, Mark Childress, Jill McCorkle, Tommy Hays, and Ron Rash, to name a few. I’m fairly certain

that being bathed in story, splashing about in the warm Southern voices of my people, is what attuned my ears to the music of language and sends me, even now, in search of Southern writers. When I read them, I hear my people speak, and see my landscapes unfold. I live there among them in those pages. I am certain that my insights about voice have roots in my reading each of their voices and recognizing my own among them.

Of course, I read outside the boundaries of Southern fiction, and when I do, I prefer books about folks making the most of ordinary life. From reading, I have learned to value the most mundane details of everyday life. I have come to recognize that ordinary life is a catalog of conflicts and tensions, characters, and plots essential to writing.

As one who writes for children, I am informed and inspired by many, but there are a handful of children's authors whose writing I keep close at hand: Ezra Jack Keats, Mem Fox, Patricia MacLachlan, Cynthia Rylant, and Jacqueline Woodson. Each of these writers masterfully manages aspects of their craft in ways I aspire to. So, when I hit a wall (or more likely dig a hole I can't get out of), I step away from my writing to consume theirs.

Keats creates story in such tidy packages with near perfect balance. His language is accessible without being oversimplified. His topics zero in on an aspect of childhood shared by children everywhere. Fox has rhythm; there is such music on her pages, and I know of no one who can pack such power in so few words. MacLachlan has the most beautiful cadence in her writing. The prose is poetic and rich without being heavy or dense. I savor her language as I do a fine truffle and an exquisite glass of cabernet. Rylant brings voice to the surface and lifts the importance of place (as does George Ella Lyon, by the way). And Woodson, well she just amazes me by her ability to take on tough and often sensitive topics with elegance, grace, and truth. I want to write like these folks. We all need someone to look up to.

So, when I sit down to write, I am never alone. Every writer I have ever read is somewhere in the room reading my words as they appear on the screen, listening in as I read my own words aloud to myself, whispering to me, coaching my next move.

Notes From Ruth

Lester's writing is inspired by what he reads and his keen observation of the details of life. I'm fascinated to see that the list of authors and books that he keeps close by are not that different from my own. We write for different purposes, but we both turn to the masters for magic—the kind of magic that takes an ordinary idea and turns it into something so fascinating and intriguing that you find yourself thinking about it long after the last page has turned. And just like Lester, I steal a little of that magic as I write, hoping to create the same satisfaction for the reader as the mentor author created for me.

And now, may you find what you need to turn yourself into a world-class writing thief with every page that follows.

