

## Project Outreach

### Oakland Writing Project Joins National Writing Project Network

For one week last summer, a team of Oakland Writing Project (OWP) teacher leaders joined their colleagues from seven other states in Berkeley, CA, for an intense learning experience, focusing on issues of equity, access, and social justice. And that week was just the beginning—for the team and for the Oakland Writing Project itself. The Project Outreach network, initiated and supported by the National Writing Project, has the following goals:

- ◆ To increase the *number of teachers* of low-income youth participating in sustained professional development at Writing Project sites;
- ◆ To increase the *quality of services* provided by Writing Project sites by improving the professional development they offer and making it more relevant to teachers in low-income communities; and



Dick Koch, Bessie Burden, and Linda Harrington enjoy the California sunshine while working to develop their Project Outreach plan of work for 2001-2002.

- ◆ To increase the *quality of programs* conducted by Writing Project sites by increasing the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity in project leadership so that teacher knowledge can more closely reflect the linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity of the local community.

“It’s important that the NWP is supporting such a network, with financial support and opportunities to collaborate with educators from across the country,” says OWP Associate Director Dick Koch. “The network gives us credibility and backing to tackle difficult issues that are critical to the well-being of youth in this region, and indeed, the entire country.”

OWP Project Outreach Director Sylvia Bailey notes that Project Outreach has already supported her in visiting classrooms, schools, and programs in Hamtramck, Pontiac, and Philadelphia, and her understandings evolve with every new reading and observation. “Project Outreach supports us in helping teachers to help kids,” she says.

“It’s time for the Oakland Writing Project to extend its good work, to find ways to be relevant to teachers serving children in the greatest need,” says OWP Director Laura Roop. “Our classrooms are linguistically, culturally, and socio-economically diverse in



Members of the traveling team and their matching t-shirts made quite a splash.

metropolitan Detroit—it’s time for us to talk about this richness, and to learn from one another in deeper ways than ever before.”

This year’s travelling team members included Sylvia Bailey, Southfield HS; Bessie Burden, Birney MS, Southfield; Linda Harrington, Hamtramck Community Schools; Kathy King, Madison MS, Pontiac; Dick Koch, Adrian College; Kathleen Kryza, Huron Valley Public Schools; and Laura Roop, University of Michigan School of Education.

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# Author! Author!

## Writing Groups:

### Professional Writers Group

The Oakland Writing Project is pleased to announce the start of a professional writers group for teachers interested in reflecting on their practice. The purpose of the group is to assist teachers who are interested in publishing their writing on classroom practice, sharing resources and classroom practices with like-minded teachers, and becoming part of a community of reflective practitioners. The group will use a workshop model to encourage participants to respond to each other's research and writing in a supportive manner. There will be time designated in each session for writing and discussion. There will be six meetings, one each month, from December to May.

The cost for the workshop will be \$35.00.

Contact: Pete Shaheen  
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### Teachers As Writers

The Teachers As Writers group would like to welcome you to a community of writers who inspire, encourage, and support your writing. Each meeting includes dinner, time to write, response groups, writing models, and publication information.

Contact: Linda Denstaedt  
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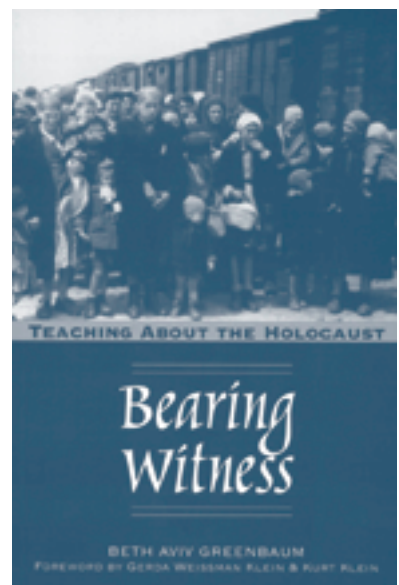
## Making American Literatures

Anne Ruggles Gere, University of Michigan Professor and current National Conference for Teachers of English President, and Peter Shaheen, Seaholm High School, Birmingham, edited *Making American Literatures in High School and College*, (NCTE 2001), a compilation of articles by teacher-researchers. Four other Oakland County teachers wrote for this volume. Kara Kuutilla Shuell, Southfield High School, discusses the steps, challenges and successes of her change in American literature curriculum to include literature from various cultures in her article, "The Puritans Have Nothing to Do with My Life." Laura Schiller, Southfield Lathrup High School, explores the importance of culturally centered student activities and texts in, "Making American Literatures in Middle School." Jim White, Farmington High School, discusses the use of memory maps to help students navigate through literatures in "Literature of Place and Place in Literature: Orienting Our Maps."

Rita Teague, Southfield High School, in collaboration with Colleen Claudia O'Brien, focuses on the powerful pairing of texts to explore race in "Looking for the Other Side: Pairing *Gatsby* and *Passing*." This book is a great resource for teachers looking for ideas to enliven, bring meaning to, and deepen American literature classes.

## Bearing Witness

Beth Aviv Greenbaum recently authored *Bearing Witness: Teaching About the Holocaust* (Heinemann, 2001), a powerful look at her curriculum for a semester-long course at Groves High School in Birmingham. Using *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Night*, *Survival in Auschwitz*, *Incident at Vichy*, *Maus I*, and *The Sunflower* as texts, Greenbaum takes her students through an in-depth study of issues of hate, witness, strength, and forgiveness throughout the Holocaust. This book is filled with student writing, personal reflections, suggestions, and teaching strategies that expose the power of teaching through literature.



# Terrible Things

By Jim Haugh

Terrible men had done terrible things. They swept down from the sky and tore a gaping wound in our nation's peace of mind. Every man, woman, and child in America felt the impact as our illusion crumbled. It *could* happen here. God help us, it *did*.

I dragged myself out of bed Wednesday morning, exhausted from the emotional pummeling of the previous day. Like the rest of the world, I spent Tuesday glued to my television set. Like the rest of the world, I felt helpless.

Dr. Jennings' somber and discomfiting voice on the PA, shortly after 3<sup>rd</sup> hour began, had many teachers switching on their classroom televisions. I didn't. Some children saw 6,000 people die—as it happened—in living color. Mine didn't. I was afraid of their reaction and of my own. Students looked to teachers for answers, kids looked to adults. What if they looked to me for answers? How could I begin to explain the incomprehensible?

Up until that moment, we were preparing to read Goodrich and Hackett's drama based on *The Diary of Anne Frank*. I like to start with the play because the intensity and emotion gives classes a powerful shared experience and makes for a solid foundation for the rest of the year. I was explaining how Hitler rose to power; the incredible might of the blitzkrieg, the horror of the Final Solution. Good and evil have never been so clearly defined, I told them. *We* have never been so right. *They* have never been so wrong.

I was ready, that Wednesday, to talk for a few minutes about the attack, then to insist that we press forward with the lesson. Then I stopped for gas at the "7-Eleven."

As I was pulling up, an employee was tearing down the yellow plastic tape that stretched around the pumps. It seems they had run out of gas the night before.

When I got inside, there was a man at the counter speaking to the clerk. Naturally, they were talking about the attack.

"Gas prices goin' up?" he asked. I guess he had seen the reports about stations gouging folks for up to five dollars a gallon.

The guy behind the counter said he didn't know, pointing out that both of the stations near them had similar prices. "The one across the street is even a few cents cheaper."

"Is it Ay-rab owned?"

"Dunno. I think so." The clerk responded.

The man swelled with pride as he proclaimed, "I'm boycotting Ay-rab owned businesses." He went on. "They come to our country, set up shop and get rich offa us. Half of them don't even bother to learn to speak American!"

I thought for just a second about pointing out that, while we weren't exactly sure who was responsible, we could be pretty sure that the man at the Citgo, who is *Indian*, was too busy restocking the Snapple to plot against the government.

I knew my responsibility then. I had to talk to my students. I had to stop the spread of hatred. In desperate times, a bigot can sound like a savior; ignorance can sound like patriotism. Our faith in humankind had been shaken, and we imagined devils around every corner. I had

*In desperate times, a bigot can sound like a savior; ignorance can sound like patriotism.*

been hearing the rumors all day: That a group of Middle Easterners cheered wildly at 9:03, when all hell broke loose. I was sure that my kids had heard them, too.

I pushed aside the textbook Wednesday morning. I talked about tolerance, patience and fear. Not every Arab was a terrorist, not every Muslim an extremist. Contrary to what they may hear from their friends, or read on the Internet, most of the world is outraged by this crime against humanity. Those cheering were few, those mourning were many. I begged them to squelch the rumors, to have faith in one another, and in their country.

When we resumed reading the play, things were different. This year, no one asked what the life of a Jewish teenager who lived over half a century ago had to do with them. They heard her message of courage and hope and will, I pray, remember her words: "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart."

*Jim Haugh, an Oakland Writing Project teacher-consultant, teaches English Language Arts at Birney Middle School in Southfield.*

Do you have a piece written that is burning a hole in your computer? Or an idea that you want to run by someone? Publish in *élan*!

Contact Laura Roop at [laurroop@umich.edu](mailto:laurroop@umich.edu) to arrange for submission or conference.

# Mentoring: A Question of Survival

By Sherri Masson

I didn't want to take it on. I didn't want the responsibility of being Jim's mentor. I had the following reasons all set to give to my principal: I'm busy getting my reading workshop going and that takes time; I need to use any "extra" hours leveling my books and figuring out this guided reading thing; the district wants me to do some workshops, and I need to spend hours putting those together. And golly gee, this teaching business is all-consuming anyway; who has the time for one more thing? Besides, how much difference can a mentor make? *I* never had one. I did OK on my own. Let the guy sink or swim.

"OK, I'll do it."

The fact is, every reason I wanted to give for not being a mentor was true. I *did* need to focus on the new structures I was learning. All of us who participate in intensive study groups of any kind want to find a way to make those things work in our own practice, and that means rethinking what we do. Parting with the old is a painful process. But I found it was far less painful working side by side with a young teacher who had no pre-conceived ideas of how reading should be taught. What I hadn't realized was how mentoring would push me to practice the adage: "We learn by teaching."

So I began to get the reading workshop going and I shared each step of the process with Jim. He asked questions to which I didn't know the answers. I was forced to articulate the purpose for what I was doing and deal with management issues I wasn't sure I could handle myself. And, as it turned out, walking through the process with someone else helped put it into place for me.

As for those workshops, I did them—and guess who was sitting in the front row at each session?

Jim was my right-hand man. Not just a participant, but a source of energy and support.

When I was a new teacher I didn't have a mentor formally assigned—that's true. But I was wrong about not having one. I've had many. I've learned about being a teacher/writer from Laura Roop and Linda Denstaedt. From Barry Lane, Ralph Fletcher and Lucy Calkins I've learned about craft and classroom management. My teaching partner of 13 years has been my primary model for good teaching. From him I've learned about dealing effectively with large groups of kids, and how to laugh at myself. So I passed those people along to Jim. The books, the Oakland Writing Project, the exposure to what I know to be best practice in the teaching of reading and writing.

Finally, the part of my rationale for *not* taking a mentee that was tragically true is the notion that he could sink or swim. In this world of high stakes assessment and test driven curriculum, our new teachers *will* sink if they don't have the support of practitioners who are passionate about learning and understand the need for authentic instruction. That's us, folks. The veterans. The OWP alumni who still can't find the time to catch our breaths in a school day. We must remember the frustration we felt when we first set up a workshop, and the feeling of desperation and loss of control.

Imagine a rookie fourth/fifth grade teacher responsible for implementing a curriculum full of specific information and large concepts, and at the same time preparing his students for at least three standardized tests in the month of February. Somewhere in that impossible maze of requirements, he's expected to conference with kids individually, know each of their reading and writing needs, and prepare mini-lessons scaffolded in a way that will meet the needs of the whole class. Throw in technology

instruction (but only on the days you have the lab!) and, oh yes, there's one hour of D.A.R.E. for the better part of a semester. There's music, gym, art, chorus, orchestra and an occasional assembly. Stop!!! Can you blame a young professional for having second thoughts about his career choice?

I had a conversation with a new teacher from New York City while at the Teacher's College this past summer. She made a comment about hoping to make it to year five. I assumed she was referring to New York's tenure law. I soon discovered she was alluding to the statistic that has new teachers leaving the classroom after an average of five years. I found this alarming. Was it only a New York City problem? Not at all. We know the profession needs the best and the brightest to create literate individuals. How can we attract them to the job, and more importantly, how can we keep them? Perhaps one way is to provide all new teachers with a support network of experienced professionals. Is there a way to convince teachers that in addition to the impossible job they already have, they *must* be a mentor to new teachers in their building, whether formally assigned or not?

There are rewards. Jim's fourth graders are now fifth graders and in my classroom. They speak confidently about craft of writing and using the language of a response group. They came in with the expectation of using a writer's notebook, and for the most part think of themselves as readers and writers. Now that Jim is an OWP alumnus himself, we have even more to share. It's a good feeling to know I may have helped keep a good teacher in the profession. We need to look around us for those promising young teachers and take them under our wings to ensure the survival of the species.

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*Sherri Masson teaches 5th grade at Brooks Elementary School in Huron Valley School District.*

# A Peek into a Classroom



Sherri discusses reading choices with Chris Werth.

## Sherri Masson Fifth Grade

Brooks Elementary  
Huron Valley School District

SCENE: Ears directed toward the animated teacher's voice, eyes glued to their own copy, these fifth graders are deeply involved in the adventures and misadventures of Jerry Spinelli's *Maniac Magee*. Barely into the school year, Sherri Masson's students know how to enjoy a good read.

Even when reading aloud, Sherri's students are learning important strategies for reading. Reading a line about Maniac being allergic to pizza, Sherri shuts her own book and looks at the students with questions poised. "Close your books and turn to your neighbor. What do you think about that? Allergic to pizza? How would you feel?"

Giving the students time to talk one on one to each other, Sherri then opens the discussion to the whole group. Before she finishes the chapter, she tries this technique again, asking the students their opinion of Maniac's wish to be called by his real name, Jeffery, in one environment, and Maniac on the streets.

After another short class discussion at the end of the chapter, and before sending them off to read independently, Sherri reminds her students, "When you start your reading, back up a little so you can get a running start." She also offers them new book marks, suggesting, "Make a goal for yourself of just how far you can read today. Put your book mark where you want to stop. At the end of reading time, we'll check in to see if you read to your book mark."

Students scatter throughout the room, under tables, the reading carpet, or at their desks next to a buddy reading the same book. Sherri draws names for students to use the new Lounge Lizards, or sit in the hallway. When all students are comfortable and definitely reading, Sherri, holding her clipboard marked off with squares for reading conference memos, makes her way through the maze of readers. She stops often, sitting with an individual, asking them a question, listening to them read, jotting a note in the designated square. **(continued on page 6)**



**Left:**  
Sherri Masson's fifth-graders enjoy reading in the coveted Lounge Lizards.



**Right:**  
Students listen attentively as Sherri reads aloud from *Maniac Magee*.

# Book Review



Allington, R.  
(2001).

***What Really Matters  
for Struggling  
Readers: Designing  
Research-Based  
Programs.***  
***New York: Addison-  
Wesley.***

By Laura Schiller

Allington's new book is a must read for every educator grappling with the pressures of high-stakes reform, test mania, and accountability. Allington helps us keep our heads on straight and our teaching focused on what really makes a difference. He writes, "We have learned much about the design and delivery of more effective literacy instruction in the past thirty years and much of what we have learned is being systematically ignored in the current wave of high-stakes reform." (vii)

Allington sees three challenges facing educators today. One, that American schools "work better for children from certain sorts of families." (7) Two, that while basic reading and writing skills are improving based on NAEP data, the more sophisticated literacy that our society demands is harder to achieve. And three, "[o]ur schools create more students who *can* read than students who *do* read." (8)

*What Really Matters for Struggling Readers* brings together "...topics such as the importance of reading volume, access to books, especially books of appropriate difficulty and interest, on developing reading fluency, and fostering thoughtful literacy through promoting literate conversations." (vii)

As the MEAP and those who receive its financial incentives highlight, our schools particularly benefit mainstream students from well-funded districts. The inequities between the haves and the have-nots are glaring and disparities are growing. There are examples of schools who beat the odds and there's much to learn from their success. But as Allington reminds us, it isn't easy and, "[n]o school has ever produced students who could all read and write and do math at the Proficient Level, for instance, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. None." (146)

I've starred, highlighted, and Post-It noted my copy to death. Next fall, *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers* will be a selection for our district book study. This is a book that all K-8 educators need to be reading and talking about.

A Peek into a Classroom  
(continued from page 5)

The classroom walls are covered with open invitations to read and write such as "Step Up and Read," and "What Writers Do...". Quotes about writing from authors fill in spaces everywhere. One colorful poster, obviously composed by Sherri and her students, asks "How Do We Know a Just Right Book?" Answers include:

- ◆ It made sense after reading the first page
- ◆ I can read most of the words—only a few bumps
- ◆ I can make "mind movies"

In the reading corner, there are shelves and shelves of books organized by author groups, classics, and even themes.

As the school day ends, students groan when they must put their books away, but seem happier when Sherri reminds them to put their books in their backpacks so they can read that evening. She also suggests when they finish an especially good book, they would like to recommend to classmates, they put it in the "Great Reads" Box. As they file out, Sherri asks them if they met their reading goal, and reminds them not to forget to set another for the evening.

In Sherri Masson's class, reading and writing never stop.

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## This Summer . . .

The 2001 Oakland Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute was a soaring success. Participants engaged in extensive writing, reading, and discussion—about teaching, about learning, about students and about themselves. Response groups fostered friendships that will last well beyond the summer or even next school year.

**Above:** A response group discusses their latest drafts.

**Above Right:** Nidia Foley is inspired.

**Right:** The whole gang poses.



This year's Summer Camp for Young Writers was magnificent. 94 students in third through tenth grade participated in the two-week camp taught by alumni of the Oakland Writing Project. Teachers facilitated students' work on their creative writing skills through a variety of exercises, assignments, and peer-response groups.

**Above:** Laurie Runk discusses techniques for writing poetry with a Camp participant.

**Above Left:** Kathy Combs facilitates a response group for students' writing.

**Left:** One student spends time revising her writing assignment.

# Mark these dates!

- December 12, January 9, February 6, March 6, April 10, May 8

## **Professional Writers Group**

Pete Shaheen

6:30 - 9:00 PM Seaholm High School Room G108

- December 3, February 28, March 19, April 24, May 13

## **Teachers As Writers**

Linda Denstaedt

5:30 - 8:30 PM Oakland Schools Room 315

- March 9

## **Teachers Research/Action Research Conference**

9:00 AM - 12:30 PM Oakland Schools



*élan*

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