'Ripples in the Upside-Down Lake of the World': Running a Read-Aloud Marathon

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In my first graduate class, Child Development, the Italian-German professor taught me that "Play is children's work." Luciana was an expert on Piaget, and that simple, straightforward, stunning formulation she drew from his work has stayed with me for the past 25 years of teaching. Yet this principle proved difficult to enact as I left behind middle school classrooms and began to teach older students, especially those New York City adolescents from middle-class families, who became more conscious of tests and the compulsions to achieve. I taught so many high school seniors who held dim memories of those times when "reading used to be fun." The work of reading was perhaps epitomized in the summer reading assignment, which I dutifully handed out to high school students every June, when they most needed to see beaches, mountains, forests. But I wanted to challenge these kids in at least one extra way—to get them to enjoy a novel that questioned not only middle-class aspirations but also interrogated basic US values. I assigned Jack Kerouac's On the Road for summer reading.

A Beat Aesthetic

Kerouac's long autobiographical oeuvre, which the author himself called "the legend of Dulouz," did not make me want to become a teacher—or an English professor, or educator, or even a Beat writer. Rather, his books spurred me, as they did so many others, to travel across the United States, with eyes wide open to Something Else. And when I studied in Germany, in the late 1970s, and hitchhiked throughout Europe, I encountered fellow travelers—German, French, and Scandinavian students—who carried their own cheap paperback editions, in English, of On the Road and The Dharma Bums. I read through Kerouac into my early 20s but entertained no illusions about copying a Beat lifestyle: even the hippie era looked long gone by 1980. Nevertheless, Kerouac's books, unlike the mad poetry of Ginsberg and Corso and the terrifying science fiction of Burroughs, remained simple pleasures. I read and reread them for fun. This was surely "aesthetic reading," according to Louise M. Rosenblatt (86 ff.). Yet as I edged, or plunged, into middle age, I wanted to see if the experience of reading Kerouac still held the possibility of joy for US teenagers. So many aspects of the Beat ethos had already been, at best, recycled and, to many of us older folks, co-opted by the media, e.g., a Gap ad featuring Jack Kerouac wearing chinos.

When I had first shown my summer assignment letter to the school's principal, she paused, raised her eyebrows, and said, "OK. You think Kerouac has merit?" I responded by pointing to the book's improved reputation in scholarly circles. There had been a late 1990s symposium on Kerouac at NYU, and a passage from the book had been used on the previous spring's SAT. (When students first informed me of this testing passage I told them I was uneasy: the spirits behind the story were all dying.) The principal was less than impressed, and I knew she knew I had different motives for teaching this book. In short, I wanted some adolescents to read an important but untraditional and typically unacademic book, while they were still adolescents, at the beginning of the millennium. So I
promised her that I would develop a unit plan that integrated sociology class lessons and that would include an exam, some historical digging, much poetry, and short-story writing around the photos of Robert Frank's *The Americans*. I proposed to end our "unit" on Fifties America and the Beats with a daylong read-aloud marathon of *On the Road*.

**Risky Business**

So, here I had driven myself to a problematic, interesting crossroads. This was a book that meant much to me, one that I loved and loved to revisit, and one that I had heretofore resisted teaching. I think that all English teaching involves risks, but the risk factors mount exponentially higher when you bring in any text (music, poem, story) that you love and hope that students will also enjoy. And I felt that the "academization" of Kerouac's work betrayed it to a degree. The prospect of a read-aloud marathon appealed as an attempt to overturn the taint of academe—and to return to a spirit of lightness within that rush of reading a book straight through.

That year's seniors were an exciting and challenging group to teach. A wide rebellious streak ran down their backs, and they brought significant energy into our small school building. When I broached the possibility of our organizing a reading marathon on the anniversary of Kerouac's death, a fair number of them supported the prospect. To be sure, a number of them expressed complete bewilderment, as in "We didn't like the book so much the first time. We're gonna read the whole thing again?" Yes: we shall not omit one word. And yes: we will read all day long. The only breaks occur when we move to a different setting, but someone always picks up the text when another stops reading. And yes, again: everyone in the room gets to read, with no prescribed order.

Here I hoped that we could create an event close in spirit to the exhortations of Frank Smith and his plea for "literacy clubs": "The classroom should be a place full of meaningful and useful reading and writing activities, where participation is possible without evaluation and collaboration is always available. No child should be excluded" (11–12). That year, I taught all members of the senior class, from AP English Literature students to special education students in a self-contained class-

room. Some students, I already knew, viewed their peers in other classes as "outsiders"—and not members of their own literacy club.

We began reading aloud at 7:00 a.m., an hour before school started officially, on October 21, with six groggy, happy readers, in a local café—the Paradise. We pushed together two tables, bought a few coffees, and began to read. There was background music that fit in, and a man in a suit sitting next to us maintained his space, unperturbed, as he read the *Times*.

Then we moved into the school building for the first period class, at 8:00 a.m., and we dug in. I vowed that I would avoid turning on the nasty fluorescent lights all day long. The previous day a couple of students and I had rearranged the room and placed an old, dusty black sofa in its center. When I left for home the night before, the autumn-lit room struck me as such a dead, quiet space without students and voices. I wondered what real marathoners think about before they begin moving to the awful prospect of the many miles ahead of them. But now we lit candles all over the room, and incense, and there were jazz CDs mixing in the background noise. At my invitation, a dozen staff members had signed up to read during their free periods. I laid out extra copies of the book and brought in a poster of Kerouac—a photograph that shows him stepping out for a smoke on a grimy NYC fire escape, a big, Beat photo, taken by Allen Ginsberg. I promised the seniors that I would provide apple pies and ice cream at some stage of the reading, since this dessert is cited several times in the novel—and it's "full of vitamins," according to Sal Paradise, Kerouac's narrator.

By the end of the day's first period, we had entered the myth of the American West. By 8:45 a.m. we had almost reached the section in the book when a big party develops in some mountain cabins outside Denver, but I was out of students: second period was a prep for me, and students had not been excused from their math classes. So I lay on the sofa, nearly asleep, and read aloud to an empty room. "What difference does it make after all?—anonymity in the world of men is better than fame in
heaven, for what's heaven? what's earth? All in the mind" (202). Larry, a hallway monitor and born-again Christian, entered the room, and we read a few pages together. Then Ellen and Lana managed to get free and joined the party.

Improvs

The following period was more lively: there were over 40 readers lounging around now, including several teachers who fortunately remembered that they had promised to sacrifice their prep periods. Not many teachers knew the seniors; they kept glancing at their faces as if to suggest, Do I know you? Have I heard about you? (And I thought you were the quiet one.) The tunes were turned up a bit. Periodically, I announced, all day long, "We are now [some fraction] of the way complete, and about ten minutes behind schedule."

One young man, born in Hong Kong, surprised all of us with his tenacity in reading. He just kept going with Kerouac; he tried out different intonations; he played with stresses and accents. His nasal, high-pitched voice bounced around the natural rhythms of Kerouac's prose—"Off WE RUSHED into THE night...I told THEM that I was THINKing they were VERY AMAZING maniacs" (40–43). Isaac was channeling the dissonant, Thelonious Monk poetry of this novel.

Another student, Kaisha, whose reputation as a difficult student certainly preceded her, shocked all of us teachers. She let the book, or the experience, take over. Social intercourse, her primary reason for coming to school, dropped away that day. Kaisha kept reading aloud with conviction and strength, even when she stumbled over words. She displayed exuberance—a mixture of spontaneity, which includes mistakes, and discipline, which a text imposes.

Our school has an early lunch: we broke at 11:00 a.m. By that time we had been reading out loud for four hours. Two student teachers and graduate students in a writing class I taught at Columbia University had joined us and seemed confused by what was going on. They toured the school, spoke with some students, and promised to read later. Seniors who were committed to reading through lunch reported that they were too cold to read outdoors, in the building's courtyard, so they returned to the sofa with take-out, greasy bags of stuff that was not rich in vitamins. I told them that William S. Burroughs had enjoined us, "Humans were made to go" (qtd. in Watson 36). Our fundamental freedom entails that we keep moving.

After lunch and homeroom, my largest group of English students entered. Our goal was to be halfway through by 1:00 p.m., and with over 50 voices taking turns, we were getting there. There were occasional experiments with call-and-response readings and choral efforts; some pairs of young men and women worked well with the sexual situations described by Kerouac. My personal highlight had arrived earlier in a favorite section of the novel, when Sal Paradise hooks up with a Chicana he meets on a bus to Los Angeles. My classroom-neighbor, Sofía, who taught HS Spanish, read some of this section with me. But by the sixth academic period, several teachers were aware that some student voices had emerged as stronger than we had ever heard them. Three students who read poorly, but who kept going, kept volunteering and picking up the slack. Several students from our school's freshman and junior classes joined the gathering and fit in well. Nothing in the classroom looked typical or traditionally academic, yet all who entered and remained felt safe.

By the end of the school day, we were all exhausted and still had four more hours to read. Every reader had by now experienced, at least once, the phenomenon whereby the words lose their meanings and you sense that you are merely uttering animal sounds when you read aloud, but there were other, deeper connections occurring: "we would stick together and be buddies till we died" (157). My daughter Ariel, a sixth-grade student in our school, joined us but had buddies of homework to plough through before she felt free enough to read aloud. This was one of my favorite times: there was a buzz in the room. Students were getting their gear out of lockers, checking their homework, making plans, getting ready for work—and some of us just kept on reading. Reading aloud was one more of life's activities. It was both demystified and elevated. Reading was meditation, a process and not a
goal toward anything other than itself. All we were doing was reading. We had already crossed the map of the United States with Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty three times, and we were headed back East:

We saw them waking, we heard them sleeping, we sensed them dreaming, we were permeated completely with the strange Gray Myth of the West and the weird dark Myth of the East. (201)

One of the novel's most famous sections, in Book Three, Chapter 4, best illustrates Kerouac's "spontaneous bop prosody" by mimicking the furor of an inspired tenor saxophonist in a San Francisco club. It is a noisy chapter—one that I read aloud over my college's radio station late one night while I spun Charlie Parker more than two decades ago. Listening to a dozen students play with this now filled me with some teaching ambivalence. I wondered about the value, the possible centrality, of literature in the lives of our youth. I wondered about the bad karma of taking Kerouac into any classroom. I wondered and worried, a bit, about the message that some students read into these proceedings, such as the possibility that they took offense at their teachers—Authority Figures!—embracing such characters as Kerouac's crew. (No book is meant for every reader, but what makes some works of fiction more "suitable" for the classroom than others? Their didacticism? Their beauty?) I wondered about reading aloud and its primacy as an artistic experience as our eyes and brains decode and force warmed air through our windpipes and around difficult juxtapositions of glottals and aspirants. And I wondered hard about how these kids-becoming-adults saw this America, the one outside our darkening classroom window, and the one preserved, in a way, on the Road.

Road Warriors

By 4:30 p.m. Sal Paradise gets road-sick—"My eyes ached in nightmare day . . . 'I'm going in the back seat, I can't stand it any more'" (193)—and I had unrolled a futon-pallet and sunken into it as our readings continued. The meditation deepened. But we were nearing a good, healthy break. I stepped out with two volunteers to fetch some more junky foods from the local greatest diner on the avenue, and we fueled on fats and fries. Then I made sure that candles were extinguished and parents were notified, and a small crew of ten of us headed for the Hudson River. Some lagged behind to covertly light cigarettes. Some appeared a little shaky, as if the reality of leaving this womb-room unsettled them. Good, I thought: this stuff has to unsettle and disorient sometimes.

It was chilly on the Hudson River's Pier 52, on Little West 12th Street, a fine pier of pock-marked concrete that stared out at Hoboken, New Jersey. Ariel and I had raced home first to get warmer clothing and fresh film and fruit. We caught up with the other readers right at the pier. We read the end of the Mexico section, Part Four, when the trio of travelers encounters jungles and bugs and marijuana bombers and whores, and we watched the setting sun bounce off the Empire State Building spire. One or two readers had chattering teeth; the light was failing. Some of the same students who started with me at 7:00 a.m. walked with me to the Hudson River pier sunset to close the book, when the rain began, and the wind picked up, where we all read aloud the final, one-sentence-long paragraph together: "So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey . . ." (254).

We moved off the pier to West Street and passed an illegally parked car with dubious activity inside. It was 7:40 p.m. and we were tired and some of us teachers were ready to move to a bar. And some of us had homework to finish.

One student videotaped the event and later brought in stills that showed these adolescent faces on the cusp of adulthood, with eyes slit and ears resting on neighbors' shoulders. This was more than a celebration of Kerouac, which was incidental, or of literacy, which was a stated goal. This marathon reading created a bond. One young woman told me that she cried, happily, on her way home to Brooklyn on the subway after we had concluded. Two others said they went to sleep with words visually dancing before their closed eyes. I knew this sensation and it reminded me of sleeping.

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in a car while your driving partner drives into the night, and you can “see” giant semis zooming past you on the opposite side of the highway: “When I closed my eyes all I could see was the road unwinding into me” (193). Because of this unusual, exhilarating rush through a book in one day, the students had a touchstone that they referred to throughout their senior year. They had, in effect, run a marathon together.

What is this about? It is not about a celebration of a dead Beat author but, rather, a celebration of the life that we, as students of literature, put into printed matter. On October 21, we made some words fly off the page. High school seniors were able to forget, for a few hours that day, that they were responsible for getting something out of their books. Instead, they lived with the book, in the book’s time, or it became a part of them, of their hearts and minds, as they read within a group of readers. They did something they had never done before in school and that went against the grain of school. Simultaneously, they entered a tradition. This was not a purely aesthetic experience for the majority of readers that day; I am certain that some students reentered the novel with a sense of obligation and duty. Yet many students remarked, during our marathon and the following day, that it was a great experience. It transformed the school setting for them. By the time students have entered high school, they read (and, to a lesser degree, also write) as lone minds. As Elspeth Stuckey notes in The Violence of Literacy, “Only in school are people who fail to decode a text not helped by those around them” (111). But as these seniors experienced, when their eyes dissolved with too many words, their egos also dissolved and they joined in a community play with words.

By reentering the novel and moving along with it, they pushed at or pushed away some academic boundaries—and discovered—what? They discovered something that we sense when we first learn to read along with a parent or teacher or sibling: that reading is fun and that reading is power, the power to lift words from paper and make them a part of your breath a part of your heart a part of what being human means.

Works Cited

Dave Iasevoli taught for 25 years in New York City schools, including two years teaching inmates on Rikers Island. He now serves as assistant professor for SUNY Plattsburgh in its Education Unit and is working on a history of educational efforts in prisons. He may be reached at david_iasevoli@yahoo.com.

ReadWriteThink Connection

Joyce Bruett, RWT

In looking to bring an untraditional text, On the Road, into his classroom after reading it for their summer assignment, Iasevoli was hoping to inspire students to experience joy in reading. “Authentic Persuasive Writing to Promote Summer Reading” can help students find joy in their summer reading list (or any time of the year) by researching and then creating the list of potential books themselves. Students select texts and promote their choices through brochures and flyers aimed at the teacher, administration, or other students. In addition to inspiring engaged summer reading, this assignment allows for students to write persuasive texts for real audiences.

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=312

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