How To Catch a Shark

by Donald Graves

Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998. $15.00; 134 pages

reviewed by Bob Sizoo

It seems like every book I pick up about teaching writing includes in the preface an acknowledgment to Don Graves for revolutionizing the author’s teaching practices. If you’ve read Writing: Teachers and Children at Work, the more recent Fresh Voices, or any of Graves’ books on teaching and writing, you know why. I know of no more observant kidwatcher and no stronger advocate for schools as a place to help students find their places in the world.

In To Catch a Shark, Don Graves examines his own learning — but not those lessons learned during his formal education. Rather he probes those experiences and relationships in which he learned valuable lessons outside of school. He learns from teachers as diverse as a stranger sitting next to him on an airplane, his Uncle Nelson, and his wife, Betty.

Character education is a hot topic in the public forum on classroom practice. But how does one “teach” students to have good character? Anyone with more than a few days of teaching experience knows that posting the Ten Commandments on the classroom wall is not the solution. Kids learn to be moral citizens by watching the behavior of people they respect, and from reading and hearing stories.

To Catch a Shark serves a dual purpose; it shows how and from whom Donald Graves has learned about life, and it subtly explains what he’s learned, as well. From his wife, he’s learned how to elude the aging process. Uncle Nelson demonstrated lessons on topics ranging from boulder splitting to showing compassion for one’s neighbors. A golf pro’s instructional methods informed Don’s teaching practices twenty years after his one golf lesson.

The story, “The Man on the Plane,” dramatically shows the effect of quality writing instruction on a student and his family. Upon meeting Don Graves, “the man” mentioned he was from Boothbay Harbor. When Graves asked if he knew Nancie Atwell, the previously remote stranger suddenly became animated. His son, B.J. Sherman, had her as a teacher; the man said, “That woman saved my son’s life.” It turns out that Atwell had helped B.J. find a form in which he could write about the difficult topic of leaving his mother. Graves says in the commentary, “Life is simply too short to have our students write about topics that have little connection with issues that mean so much to them.”

Graves follows each of his thirty-one stories with a commentary and a suggestion/writing prompt. As well as being entertaining and illuminating reading for teachers, many of these stories could be read aloud in a classroom. The commentaries could give students a window into the writer’s thinking process, and many of the prompts, though written to a teacher audience, could be used to encourage student writing on a similar trajectory. Prompts include: “Think of a time you have been misunderstood — How did it affect you?”; “Think back to a time when your own prejudices surprised you and subsequent events showed your initial impressions were unfounded.”

A few of the stories reflect rather “adult” lessons learned; “The Preacher,” profiled in the piece of the same name, demonstrates such effective public speaking that Graves’ presentation style was forever influenced. If you’ve seen Don Graves speak, you know of his inviting and thought-provoking style. As a writing prompt, we’re asked to consider mentors from our past. Most of the stories, however, I would read aloud to my sixth-graders. Many are perfect for younger writers/readers; “Shoe Tying” celebrates Graves’ mother’s teaching style and asks us to recall an early teaching experience with one of our parents. The Science Lady in “Meet Myrtle” asks Don to prove that his cool bravado is for real by cozing up to a twelve-foot boa constrictor.

We in education have heard a lot of talk about encouraging students to become lifelong learners. To do so, we must help them see that education isn’t just book learning. In the introduction to How to Catch a Shark, Graves says, “Thousands of stories become part of us during our lifetime. The question is, can we recall these stories with any profit? Can I reach back and recall stories that might help me not only to understand myself but to assist others in teaching and learning?” After reading To Catch a Shark, I think he has answered both of these questions with a convincing, “Yes.”

Bob Sizoo is co-director of the Redwood Writing Project in Arcata, CA.