Why Ronnie Wrote about Cars

by

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Our school psychologist parks his motorcycle, a Harley Davidson, next to my car in the school parking lot. The students are very impressed with how cool an older person can be. Some other teachers drive sports vehicles, and one teacher owns a red truck with dual gas tanks. All these teachers are cool.

The sixth-period physical education class must pass through the parking lot to get to and from the track and soccer fields. So everyone’s car is up for scrutiny.

Seventh period I teach language arts to these twelve-year-olds, and I am used to them coming into my class with cars on the brain. What I had not been prepared for, however, was Ronnie’s automobile obsession.

Sometimes I read picture books aloud and show the students the pictures. Through their journals, they respond to the relationships of the characters in the stories and sometimes write about the plot. They love this exercise, and I do too.

We read Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge by Mem Fox. It is a tender tale about a young boy and the residents he meets in a nursing home. One student said it all:

A little boy made his older friends know that life is worth living and helped them realize that life is nothing without memories.

Ronnie, a subdued child, apparently with his own repertoire of memories, wrote at a furious pace. Even though there are no cars in the story, a car was prominent in Ronnie’s journal entry:

Last year my father and I went with my little brother to get a hair cut, one just like the little boy in the story. My father had a small car then, yellow. The car only played one channel on the radio but we took it around town anyway.

Weeks went by. I read Owl Moon by Jane Yolen to the class. Most students wrote about their grandparents and themselves, apropos of the story. One child said:

When the owl was sitting on a branch watching the little boy and his grandfather, I thought how my own Papa Joe loved animals and taught me to love them too.

Ronnie wrote:

Owling reminds me of cars, hooting horns like owl talk and speeding wings moving down and down, just missing tree branches, sometimes even not missing them.

I thought about Isaac Bashevis Singer’s observation, “If you write about the things and the people you know best, you discover your roots.” I began to wonder about Ronnie’s roots.
Sometime later, I read aloud a portion of Chapter Three of *The Cay* by Theodore Taylor. This time I modeled a technique I picked up at a workshop to prompt students' literature journal entries. I asked for responses in three categories: (1) What I know I know about the book (2) What I think I know about the book and (3) What I want to know about the book.

Most of my 26 students responded enthusiastically to this excerpt. They wanted to read this book. Many had strong opinions about the main character, Phillip: "Phillip makes me mad. He has a bad attitude" or "I think Phillip will learn to understand about survival and maturity." But they did not pay all that much attention to the categories I had set up.

Ronnie, however, did write about what he thought he knew about the book:

*So far this book is o.k. What I think I know is how people feel. Theodore Taylor wrote, 'There were sounds of metal wrenching and much shouting.' I am good at picturing this in my mind. I picture a Ford Mustang.*

I asked Ronnie to stay after school. When he did, I handed him paper and told him he could write. Ronnie had always written easily in his journal, but increasingly he had developed a preoccupation with daydreaming. That afternoon I sadly learned why. He wrote:

*A Day I Will Never Forget*

I've never seen my father cry but last July 4th, he did. I remember everything that happened that day. It was hot and I was in the pool in my backyard. It started to rain so my mother told me to come in. My sister was waiting for her boyfriend to come. She had told him to come at 1 o'clock but it was now 4 PM. She was starting to get worried so she called his mom but the lady said he had left long ago. An hour later my sister's boyfriend's brother called my father to say that he was dead. He died in a car accident on the way to our house. My father tried to hide it from my sister but she found out. That's a day I will never forget.

— Ronnie

He finished and silently got up to leave the room to take the late bus home. I asked Ronnie if he wanted to discuss his paper. He said "No."

"Do you want to write more?"

"No."

"Would you like to take this paper home to show your family?"

"No."

"Do you want to talk to a guidance counselor?"

"No."

"Thank you," he said. He was smiling. It was the first smile I had seen in a long succession of frowns.

This was a personal catharsis for Ronnie and a learning experience for me. What I learned was that, given the chance, what is inside the child may come out on the paper, as it did with Ronnie. If he avoids the assignment but writes about family tragedies, let it be. If he writes about cars but his focus is on the tears of his sister, let it be. On that day Ronnie and I both learned that writing can cleanse the soul, can nudge feelings to the surface, can make us begin to feel whole after life has torn us asunder. Writing can give us peace.

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