Editors' note: The Quarterly editors asked Michael Smith and Jeff Wilhelm to write a few words about the experience of writing and publishing this book. Below is their joint response.

On the Experience of Writing: The Title Fight

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We all know the truism that you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover, but we all know that many people do. Marketing people know this too, and it can lead to a knock-down-drag-out title fight. That’s what happened to us.

Books typically have a working title from the proposal stage through the final revision. But this title is a tentative placeholder until the marketing folks bust on the scene. Our own working title was Reading Don't Fix No Cherys, a quote that alludes to the story the poet Jimmy Santiago Baca tells about how he taught himself to read in prison. Other prisoners ridiculed his efforts because, they said, reading lacks functional value. (This position clearly aligned with what the boys in our study believed about much of the reading they do in school; they felt differently about the reading they freely chose to do outside of school.)

We liked this title. It resonated with some important themes from our book. We thought it was zingy and catchy, and it recalled the quoted title of Jeff’s bestselling book You Gotta BE the Book. As well, we thought that teachers would recognize the sentiment the quote expresses. Well, the marketing people did not share our enthusiasm. Though we began and ended with this title, the journey between these two points was a long and harrowing one involving eleven other proposed titles.

Marketing people like dry and descriptive titles, such as Improving Comprehension with Think-Aloud Strategies (a title fight Jeff recently lost), that include the maximum number of “code words” that their data show currently sell books. After several weeks of wrangling, we were given a “drop-dead” deadline—the fall catalog was going to print. Our choices: Boys or Boys, Books, and Beyond. Michael was distressed, and emailed Jeff, who was on sabbatical in Australia. “We have to fight this,” Michael wrote.

At that moment, Jeff was working with 120 teachers in Hobart, Tasmania. He put the two titles on the board along with Cherys and asked them to choose one. The result: Boys—0; Cherys—117.

Jeff telephoned the results to our editor and said “This is important to us. We’re willing to hold publication rather than go with your titles.”

Obviously, we won our title fight. And we’ve had a great response to both the title and the book. But it took some heavy hitting and bold strategy to win. And that’s the rest of the story.

With a background that includes both high school and university teaching, Michael Smith currently teaches English education in the Literacy Cluster of Rutgers University’s Graduate School of Education. The former director of the Maine Writing Project, Jeffrey Wilhelm is currently an associate professor of English at Boise State University, Idaho.