



# Having Favorite Authors

by SHELLEY HARWAYNE

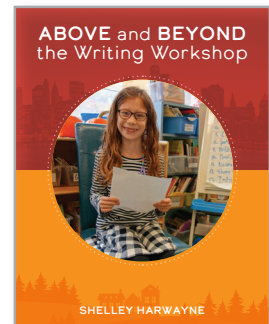
*Literacy educators often feel overwhelmed by the mound of curriculum memos, sample materials, teaching guides, and instructional suggestions that accumulate on their desks. Facing this overload of possibilities, I suggest that teachers, librarians, and even family members ask themselves one simple question, “Do my instructional practices lead to and resemble the behaviors of passionate, thoughtful, and accomplished readers?”*



## LITERACY CHAMPION: SHELLEY HARWAYNE

Shelley Harwayne has been affiliated with the New York City public schools for over half a century, having served as a teacher, literacy staff developer, principal, school superintendent and, currently as an elementary school volunteer. Along the way she served as the Co-Director of the Teachers College Writing Project, received the NCTE Language Arts Educator of the

Year Award, became a consultant to school districts and professional organizations throughout the country, and published several professional texts. These include *Going Public*, *Lasting impressions*, *Lifetime Guarantees*, *Writing through Childhood*, *Novel Perspectives*, *Messages to Ground Zero*, *Look Who's Learning to Read* and, her most recent, *Above and Beyond the Writing Workshop*.



## One to Know: The Having of Favorite Authors

When I was an elementary school principal, I loved to lead staff meetings that really mattered. Imagine asking colleagues to make a list of behaviors that mark a passionate, thoughtful, and accomplished reader. My contributions would include never leaving home without a book, giving books as gifts, considering books as a favorite gift to receive, keeping a running list of books to read, supporting local libraries and bookstores, and having favorite authors. Once staff members agree on all the behaviors that mark committed readers, the next necessary step would be to ask, “How do our instructional practices inspire, promote, and support such behaviors?”

The last behavior on my list, having favorite authors, is one I think about most because I am often surprised that children, even those who love to read, struggle to answer the question, “Who is your favorite author?” Qualify that question by asking, “Who is your favorite poet?” or “Who is your favorite non-fiction writer?” and the responses dwindle even further. Many years ago, I wrote about the most important reading test in my ideal world would involve students answering such questions. Wouldn’t it be powerful, if every child graduating your elementary school could enthusiastically answer these questions—perhaps not merely with one name, but many? If someone were to ask me these questions, I would find it hard to name just one. How could I omit such favorites as Isabel Allende, Margaret Atwood, or Chang Rae Lee?

## What to Do: Encourage Young Readers to Have Favorite Authors

What follows below are practical suggestions for promoting the having of favorite authors among children at the elementary-school level.

- **Demonstrate what it is like to have a favorite author.** Do your children know who your favorite poet is? Your favorite fiction writer? Your favorite non-fiction writer? Don’t keep these names a secret. Share your joy when their new books are released.
- **Be ready to suggest a wide range of irresistible authors to children who have not yet developed their tastes as readers.** This requires adults to keep up with children’s literature by scouring published book lists, related journal articles, professional literacy texts, book reviews, and browsing bookstores and libraries.
- **Rethink classroom libraries, making sure that stacks of books by powerful writers take center stage.** Build up the size of your poetry and non-fiction collections so that these genres become as appealing as fiction.
- **Dig deeply into genres, so that children know accomplished authors in each.** Just as April has become known as National Poetry month, create your own genre tribute months, so that students have opportunities to fall in love with new authors, genres, and formats.
- **Ask students to “hang a shingle” on their desks, becoming known as experts on favorite writers,** much the way university professors become known as William Shakespeare, Langston Hughes, or Jane Austen experts. Invite other classes to visit to learn about unfamiliar authors. (See Chapter 22 “Creating Author Scrapbooks,” in *Above and Beyond the Writing Workshop*.)
- **Host author studies, demonstrating what it means to examine the works of one author in depth.** In addition to reading, rereading, and discussing the chosen author, invite students to borrow the author’s distinctive crafting techniques when they write. (See suggested authors in Chapter 4 “Learning from One Writer,” in *Above and Beyond the Writing Workshop*.)
- **Announce the names of favorite authors in the school newsletter,** encouraging students, colleagues, and family members to share any relevant clippings, book reviews, and new titles.

- **Read aloud work written by students' favorite authors to reinforce their choices,** counting on students to share information about other works by this author. Encourage students to contribute information about crafting techniques as well as biographical background.
- **Ask students to create recommended reading lists to enrich the reading lives of their peers on school holidays and summer vacations.** Students can highlight their favorite authors and their publications. Distribute suggestions widely throughout the school.
- **Create a favorite author bulletin board in a prominent location in a school hallway or library.** Announce students' names alongside their favorite authors. Encourage colleagues to create a similar board, posting their adult choices.
- **Ask students to form favorite author book clubs, bringing together students across classes and grades who share favorite authors.** Arrange opportunities for students to meet to discuss their chosen author's work, life, and craft.
- **Create school-wide rites of passage that promote the having of favorite writers.** For example, graduation yearbooks often ask fifth graders to include their favorite inspirational quote. Why not ask graduates to list their favorite authors? How memorable and meaningful it would be for students to look back on these choices when they're older. Or ask graduates to make a timeline of how their favorite authors changed as they moved from grade to grade. Wouldn't that reveal a lot about students' own tastes and interests as they grew older?

## More to Know and Do

Perhaps the most important action teachers, librarians, and family members can take involves keeping the conversation going about favorite authors. We ask friends, neighbors, and family members if they have seen any good movies, eaten in any new restaurants, or found any great vacation spots. So too, we need to ask, "Have you read any great books lately?" When their answer is yes, we can add probing questions, such as, "Have you read other books by this author?", "Does this author write in more than one genre?", "Do you know anything about this author's life?", "Is this author one of your favorites?" Similarly, when we work with children, we can ask the same questions and promote the idea that having favorite writers is as meaningful to committed readers as owning a library card, carving out abundant time to read, and recommending books to others.

### How to Reach Shelley Harwayne:

[sharwayne@nyc.rr.com](mailto:sharwayne@nyc.rr.com)