

Kids and Books

by SUSAN OHANIAN



Susan Ohanian is a longtime teacher and freelance writer whose articles have appeared in periodicals ranging from the *Atlantic* and *Washington Monthly* to *Phi Delta Kappan* and *Language Arts*. A frequent speaker at schools and education conferences, Susan is the author of more than a dozen books, including *The Great Word Catalogue: FUNDamental Activities for Building Vocabulary* (2002), *Books Day by Day: Anniversaries, Anecdotes, and Activities* (2001), *Caught in the Middle: Nonstandard Kids and a Killing Curriculum* (2001), *One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards* (1999), and *Math at a Glance: A Month-by-Month Celebration of the Numbers Around Us* (1995). Writing honors include awards from *Child* magazine and EdPress; George Orwell Award for Distinguished Contribution to Honesty and Clarity in Public Language, National Council of Teachers of English.

My school in a working-class neighborhood “grouped” kids with unrelenting rigor, and I was assigned 20 third graders who lived up to their reputation as “rotten” readers. The LD specialist said she’d never seen a single group with so many difficulties. When I sent in our first book club order, I had to buy seven books myself in order to make up the minimum order of 10—and two of the student purchases were posters.

But then came the Amelia Bedelia miracle. During sustained silent reading, Jennifer discovered something startling. Her eyes opened wide, and she turned back a page and read it again, this time very slowly, mouthing each word to be sure. Then she burst into giggles. She showed the joke to her best friend and they both giggled. Chris insisted, “Let me see,” and before he realized what was happening, a book was making him laugh.

Suddenly, those eight-year-old “rotten” readers were experiencing a new sensation: scrambling to get their names on a waiting list for a book. Dougie came in the next day with a smug, gleeful look on his



face, announcing he didn't have to wait his turn. He had persuaded his mother to take him to the city library.

Be still my beating heart.

In September, sustained silent reading began with a tortuous five minutes. By January, kids complained when I called a halt at the end of an hour. And in January, when the book club offered a new Amelia Bedelia, these kids ordered 48 copies—copies for themselves and for their relatives. They said the world needed to know about her. They had written Peggy Parish fan letters and she responded with a pre-publication copy of a new title.

Our school required homework, and I hit on a strategy that tied together reading, writing, and parent enthusiasm. For at least three days a week, the children and I shared an “easy” read to which they could respond in a short write. For example, I handed this writing prompt from *More Spaghetti, I say!* by Rita Golden Gelman.

I love it.

I love it.

I love it.

I do.

I love it on pickles,
On ice cream and ham,
With pickles and cookies
And bananas and jam...

I eat it all day.

I just can't

Get enough.

Directions: Tell about a food that you or someone you know loves this much.

Kids wrote about pancakes and hot dogs and such. Jack wrote about Uncle Carl: “He loves beer so much He just can't get enough.”

Mike Thaler's *There's a Hippopotamus Under My Bed* provided another favorite homework prompt. But this time I sent an idea from the book before sharing the story. Here's the prompt, accompanied by a cartoon sketch of the predicament:

Think About This: If you found a hippo stuck in the bathtub, how would you get him out?

Likewise, before sharing Bernard Most's wonderful *If the Dinosaurs Came Back*, I asked the children to respond to that "If" title before showing them the book: What would happen if the dinosaurs came back? They loved the fact that some of their responses were the same as Most's—and we all agreed that some were better.

Student writing on these prompts was short—two or three sentences. I typed up the responses, which filled no more than front and back of one page, sometimes less. The homework was for the child to read all the responses aloud to an adult. Kids would report parental enthusiasm: Think how the shyest child in the class felt when David reported, “My dad liked Joanna’s!” Think of how I felt when the secretary reported phone calls from parents of absentees, wanting to know if it was a “good homework day.” If so, they’d stop by and pick it up.

Further proof came when the custodian reported that dads were reading the homework out loud at the local bar, remarking they hadn't realized their kids could be so clever.

Toward the end of the year, this homework prompt won a Scholastic contest offering a prize of 100 books. They wanted to send Box A or Box B, but I replied, “No, send catalogues. We will choose individual titles.”



Each child chose 4 books: 2 to keep and 2 for the classroom library. They argued and advised. When Jimmy started to choose a Snoopy comic, classmates warned him: “You’ll only read it once.”

Most of the kids ended up choosing an easy read and a harder one, something to aim for. A number chose *Trumpet of the Swan*, which I had read aloud to the group. Some kids chose a *Little House* book because they’d heard that kids in the 4th grade top reading group read it.

No selection committee ever took such care—or made such good choices.

During our sustained silent reading, I read too. Most kids had never seen an adult read. I’d provided the same model with 7th grade “rotten” readers on our Reading Thursdays, the whole period devoted to sustained silent reading. Kids from first period class would check back at the end of the day to see how many pages I’d read. After Spring Break, the mother of one of those 7th graders wrote of a miracle. “We were leaving for vacation. Nick was in the car, but he said, ‘Wait! I have to get my book.’ I never thought I’d hear such a thing coming from his mouth. I honestly don’t know if he ever read anything during our vacation. The miracle is that he thought he might.”

When *The Acorn People* was shown on TV, a high school junior who had been the most reluctant of readers, stopped by my classroom, asking if I’d seen the show: “It wasn’t as good as the book. Do you still read that book to kids?”

As teachers, when we aim high, our reach is broad and long-lasting.