

Reconsidering Stories

After reading *Farewell to Manzanar* (Houston & Houston, 1973), nine-year-old Mari talked about the experiences and struggles that other Japanese-Americans were forced to endure as a result of their imprisonment in internment camps during World War II. In particular, she drew a connection between her own life and the experiences of a

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young girl named Jeane whose father was "sent away to an internment camp like my great grandfather." Mari uses the story of hardship and separation that Jeane and her father experienced as a way of dramatizing and further understanding the difficulties that her own great grandfather may have encountered in such camps. In this sense, the story offers her a vehicle through which to understand and strengthen the nature of her relationship with her great grandfather and the difficulties he once endured. As she explained:

The story *Farewell to Manzanar* starts out with an adult and she comes to Manzanar, when, after the war is all over and everything and then she remembers the whole story about when she was a little girl and that and how her father was sent away to an internment camp like my great grandfather was, and didn't come back 'till about five months after the war. . . . I was thinking that one of my great grandparents was this man [in the story] who was very proud, and it was very hard for him to be locked up in this place, so it made him kind of crazy. . . . [And there was a little girl in the story] and I thought that I might be very much like that if I was in the war, 'cause she didn't understand you know, what was happening and why her father was sent away, and what they were going to, like a camp, or something like that. . . . Even though it is something that happened a

long time ago, it was a big thing, and it was hard, and I wanted to know just how they got through it.

Similarly, after eight-year-old Jamar had finished reading *I Have a Dream: The Story of Martin* (Davidson, 1991) and *Encyclopedia Brown Gets His Man* (Sobol, 1982), he reflected on the meanings he associated with these books that allowed him to explore the possible selves and future responsibilities he might one day assume as a member of the African-American community in which he lived:

They [these books] make me think that I want to, that I could help the community or go up in space or be an actor or have all three. I have three choices to choose from [when I grow up], helping the community, going up in space, or being an actor. . . . See, if I think about my life, I only think about being an actor, but if I read *Encyclopedia Brown* or a book about Martin Luther King or Abraham Lincoln, it helps me to think about different things instead of being an actor.

When Mari and Jamar read these and other stories, they were students participating in separate language arts classrooms in different demographic regions of the country. The teachers in these two classrooms sought to develop literacy activities that would verify and authenticate children's own lives and experiences as legitimate school "subjects" or "topics." As part of their participation in these unique programs, children were provided with opportunities to read, write, and talk about themselves, their family and peers, and their communities and cultures. Through a variety of instructional activities that encouraged children to reflect upon their own lives and experiences in response to their reading, they were introduced to the idea that stories can be a means of personal and social exploration and reflection—an imaginative vehicle for questioning, shaping, responding, and participating in the world. As Mari, Jamar, and the many other children who were members of these two classrooms shared their thoughts about reading, they brought to light a wealth of ways in which reading and responding to literature led not only to understanding the conceptual content of the

stories they read but also to a process of reflection that helped them to understand themselves, others, and the world in which they lived. In sum, reading for these children involved not only constructing textual understanding of the literature they read but also constructing their identities, their moralities, and their visions for social and community life.

In this article, we foreground this dimension of children's reading as it serves to illustrate and clarify some of the life-informing possibilities often attributed to stories by narrative theorists and reader-response theorists. Although we do not disregard the importance of developing children's knowledge of written language and the relationships among letters, sounds, words, and meanings that are so important to becoming a proficient reader, we believe that such knowledge alone provides children with an inadequate lesson in the nature of literacy and the power of literature (Willinsky, 1991). Specifically, we want to suggest that stories can have a role in the language arts classroom that goes beyond their contribution to the acquisition of literacy and the many specific activities and approaches that characterize its teaching, from phonics and vocabulary instruction to question answering activities and reading comprehension tactics. Although the act of reading literature or stories will continue to provide an important instructional context through which a variety of language-related knowledge is transmitted to children, developing their knowledge of the many ways that reading stories may be instrumental in helping them to make sense of human experience and the world around them is equally fundamental or *basic* to becoming and remaining a reader.

Toward that end, we begin by briefly describing some relevant theoretical work that addresses the meaning and importance of stories in our lifetimes. Next, we explore several related issues pertaining to the teaching and reading of stories in school. We then draw upon the voices of two elementary school children as they provide insight into some of the ways stories are capable of functioning in children's lives. Finally, we discuss two teachers who developed instructional practices that were sensitive to the important role that stories can play in the language arts curriculum.

Perspectives on the Meaning of Stories

In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Wayne Booth (1988) reminds us of the storied nature of our lives—the role that stories play in shaping and defining us. According to Booth, anyone who engages in honest introspection knows that individuals live

much of their lives through images derived in part from stories of themselves and others in the world (both real and fictional). The narrative process through which readers create and define themselves through the personalities and experiences of the characters they encounter in books is so "spontaneous and unrehearsed" that they often "cannot draw a clear line between what [they] *are* and what [they] have become" as a result of the stories they have enjoyed, experienced, and appropriated over the course of their lives (p. 229).

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Similarly, in her now classic work *Literature as Exploration* (1938), Louise Rosenblatt presents the idea that literature represents "an embodiment of human personalities, human situations, human conflicts and achievements" (p. vii). According to Rosenblatt, the people and events we encounter in books can become part of our repertoire of experience to be remembered, reflected upon, and recomprehended over the course of our lifetimes. Through stories, Rosenblatt explains, we "do not so much acquire additional *information* as we acquire additional *experience*" (p. 38).

Those of us who have become readers need little reminder of the life-informing influence that stories can exert on our lives or the kinds of insight and understanding they can provide. We know that stories can become "renderings of life" that not only serve as forms of pleasure and entertainment, but as uniquely powerful ways to learn about ourselves and others in our world. As readers, we are also aware that our reasons for reading particular stories are many and diverse, often changing over the course of our lives. At times, the storied worlds of protagonists and the experiences they "live out" on the page may offer us a psychological or moral journey. For example, in his book *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*, Robert Coles (1989) tells us that stories may serve as a kind of moral or ethical companion, enabling us to explore life's contingencies, its conflicts, and its dilemmas by inviting us to participate in the experiences and subjective worlds of story characters. It is through such textual "journeys," Coles explains, that we become sensitized to matters of commitment and choice more than we might otherwise have become had we not read.

On still other occasions, reading stories can be an act of discovery through which readers not only participate in and learn from the experiences of characters, but explore possible selves and possible worlds, savor past experiences, affirm their cultural identities, and in general, acquire insights that make their own lives more meaningful and comprehensible. In his book *Acts of Meaning*, psychologist Jerome Bruner (1990) reminds us of the power of stories to engage readers in the exploration of human possibilities rather than in stated certainties. According to Bruner, stories can provide a "map of possible roles and possible worlds" that enable readers to dramatize and imaginatively re-create their lives.

This dimension of story reading is embodied in a passage from the novel *Black Boy* by Richard Wright (1937). In the following excerpt, Wright recounts the feelings he experienced as a young boy listening to a story as read to him by his teacher Ella:

She whispered to me the story . . . and I ceased to see the porch, the sunshine, her face, everything. As her words fell upon my new ears, I endowed them with a reality that welled up from somewhere within me. . . . The tale made the world around me be, throb, live. As she spoke, reality changed, the look of things altered, and the world became peopled with magical presences. My sense of life deepened and the feel of things was different somehow (47).

Like Richard Wright, most of us have read stories or had them read to us at some point in our lives. Some of us, perhaps because of a teacher, a parent, or friend, have found the experience of reading to be especially meaningful, so much so that we have continued to find time to engage in this activity. Although the words of Richard Wright endow the experience of story reading with life-changing power and significance, they also may also serve as an occasion for reflecting upon the extent to which other children are provided with opportunities to make similar connections during their school-based reading experiences.

Reading and Teaching Stories in School

Although theories about the life-informing potential of stories are interesting and compelling, the experience of reading and learning to read stories in school for many children and adolescents is not necessarily associated with the development of the kinds of personal insights or humanizing possibilities evi-

dent in the words of Mari, Jamar, or Richard Wright. Indeed, Gordon Wells (1986) was right to remind us that although stories remain "one of the child's most powerful ways of understanding, enlarging, and working on experience," this dimension of children's reading is often secondary to the more "serious matter" of developing their "language facility" or their ability to understand the semiotic system (203). According to Wells, stories are much more than "enriching contexts" or convenient vehicles through which to provide children with knowledge of a variety of specific language-related skills, comprehension strategies, critical thinking procedures, or literary reading and interpretation techniques.

If we are to formulate instructional activities that acknowledge the life-informing possibilities of stories, we need to develop our understanding of some of the personal and social ways that stories may function in children's lives.

Such a reminder seems appropriate, if not somewhat overdue, for those of us interested in children's reading. Indeed, as a perusal of much research on the teaching of reading over the last two decades will reveal, attention to the life-informing dimension of children's story reading is surprisingly absent from discussions that focus on the teaching of reading or the reading process. Although numerous studies of children's reading from a range of theoretical perspectives have resulted in significant insights with respect to the way children comprehend and make sense of written language (e.g., Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984), they reveal little about the possibilities for negotiating and interpreting human action and feeling that might be associated with reading stories in school. Across a range of studies from a variety of theoretical perspectives, growth in reading continues to be construed primarily in terms of a child's ability to comprehend written texts.

These studies and the circumstances they describe raise important questions about the reasons for which stories are read and discussed by teachers and children. For example, for what purposes are children asked to read stories in school? How often do they engage in story reading for "no other purpose" than to simply become a better reader? What specific behaviors or abilities are we referring to when we use the words "reading better" to describe the development of particular children? We realize, of course,

that on one level such questions may appear confusing or inappropriate. After all, developing children's ability to better comprehend the texts or stories they encounter is a very important component of school reading curricula. However, our concern is that "reading better" is more often than not construed as "comprehending more," "decoding more accurately," or "answering questions more correctly." Helping children to understand that story reading can contribute to their lives in personally meaningful ways should not only be considered a significant part of becoming a "better reader," but it should also be recognized as an important element in sustaining children's interest and motivation to read beyond school. We might expand what we mean by the words "reading better" such that it would also describe a student's ability to "read both the word and the world," to borrow a phrase from the Brazilian educator and author Paulo Freire.

It bears reminding that when children or adolescents come to school, we provide them with a schooling in "how to read" literature or stories. In other words, we introduce them to a range of instructional activities and experiences that we believe should accompany the reading of stories. Through these activities and experiences, we socialize or "school" children into particular "ways with reading," and we help them to define and understand the kinds of learning we consider to be important and possible when it comes to reading and responding to a story in school (e.g., Bloome, 1985). Embedded in the reading-related activities and assignments we provide for students are answers to the unspoken questions that children ask each day as they enter and later depart from our classroom: "Why are we reading stories?" "What are they for?" "What do they offer me?" As teachers, we need to ask ourselves how our own students might respond to such questions as a result of their experiences in our literature classroom.

In relation to this point, we are concerned that many children will be unable to develop an understanding of the kinds of personal or social understanding stories can provide without appropriate instructional support. Instructional practices that focus primarily on the development of children's ability to understand and communicate the conceptual content of written texts offer little or no opportunity for them to become familiar with the possibilities for personal exploration and reflection that stories might afford.

Indeed, if we are serious about the life-informing possibilities that stories may offer children, we need to develop our understanding of the many roles stories may play in their lives. Such knowledge is important for developing instructional activities that encourage children to value a way of reading and re-

sponding to stories that entails reading both text and life. This process, however, may take considerable effort given the emphasis that has been placed on developing language fluency skills, comprehension strategies, and literary analysis techniques over the past two decades. We offer the words of Jamar and Tanya, two children in a urban elementary school, as a place to begin exploring the nature and meaning of stories in children's lives.

The Role of Stories in Understanding Experience: Jamar and Tanya

Over the past several years, we have spent numerous hours on school playgrounds, on the floors of classrooms, in hallways, and in libraries, listening to children talk about a wide variety of books and stories. In sharing excerpts from some of these conversations, we hope to illustrate some of the ways that stories can provide uniquely powerful means through which children can explore new social roles and responsibilities in their families and communities, savor past experiences in their lives, affirm their cultural identity, objectify and perhaps reconcile problematic emotions, celebrate role models and envision possible or future selves, forge and develop their moral and ethical sensibilities, and even wrestle with vexing social and political problems, to cite just a few of the possibilities (McGinley & Kamberelis, 1992).

Jamar. Jamar was one child who participated in a literacy classroom that was designed to encourage children to take up reading and writing in ways that they found personally and socially relevant to their lives and the concerns of their families and communities. One of the books Jamar read during the year was *St. George and the Dragon*, a story adapted by Margaret Hodges (1984) about a "brave and noble knight" who saves a kingdom of people from a "grim and terrible dragon" who was laying waste to their land. When asked about what he was thinking while reading the story, Jamar answered quickly and plainly:

The story made me feel that I'd like to be both characters in the story. I would like to beat the dragon, and I would like to be the dragon. I'd like to know how it feels to be something, a giant animal, but then you're defeated by a little person. I'd like to know how it feels to be like, crush cities and stuff, but not hurt people.

Jamar's comments about *St. George and the Dragon* reveal that the story enabled him to vicariously experience and participate in the lived world of characters from a time and place quite different and removed from his own. In addition, to "experiencing" this world through the hearts and minds of specific characters, he was provided with a vehicle through which he could also begin to envision and perhaps explore possible roles and responsibilities for himself. One can perhaps understand some of the questions that his comments betray, as a 9-year-old child, living in the midst of a variety of significant social problems common to many inner-cities: What it is like to be strong and powerful? What is the experience of accomplishing something heroic such as saving a whole kingdom of people? What does it feel like to overcome or triumph over some formidable force or task? Each time we reread Jamar's comments, we are struck by his sense of expectations as they pertain to reading a story and his sense of the possibilities that such an activity might afford. In reading a story, he expects to acquire knowledge or understanding of "how it feels" to actually be a particular person or to accomplish a particular goal, as opposed to expecting to acquire "knowledge about" some person, topic, or experience.

This is precisely the lesson that Louise Rosenblatt (1938) offered us in her book *Literature as Exploration* some fifty-six years ago when she wrote that literature enables readers to "acquire not so much additional information as additional experience . . . Literature provides a *living through*, not so much *knowledge about* the world in which we live" (38). Jamar's comments help to illustrate this distinction, as well as the unique contribution that stories can make to one's understanding of themselves and others in their world.

Tanya. Tanya was another child who, like Jamar, offers us an important lesson in the nature and power of stories. Tanya was a 9-year-old African-American girl in the same classroom who welcomed the opportunity to share her thoughts about the stories she read. She had recently read *Lulu Goes to Witch School* (O'Connor, 1987), the story of a young girl named Lulu and the difficulties she encountered with Sandy, another young girl who picks on Lulu during her first days at "witch school." In responding to the book, Tanya described how the storied experiences of Lulu and Sandy helped her to understand the difficulties she once encountered in school, and the importance she assigned to her developing friendship with a classmate named Mary:

Umm, it [the book] made me laugh, and it was talking about school, and how she [Lulu] was. I liked how it began where she was in

school 'cause it was just like me when I went to school that first day, everybody picking on me.

It brought back memories, when I was little, not when I was little, back when people, when I was picking on people and people picked on me. . . . When I first read the first part of the book, it was talking about Lulu going to witch school and I predict, I said in my mind that this might be how my life was when I first came to school. . . . And as I read on, it [the story] kept talking about how I was when I first came to school.

And then it came to the part where Mary (a new student that had just arrived in Tanya's class) came to school, and I started, started thinking on her (Mary). And then it (the story) went on and on, and started, then we (Mary and I) started being friends.

The words of Tanya provide insight into the many ways that children participate in the lives and experiences of story characters, using them as imaginative resources for reflecting upon and trying to understand people and events in their own lives. In later conversations with Tanya, it became clear that reading about the friendship of Lulu and Sandy was a way for her to dramatically re-create the kind of friendship she had developed with Mary. In fact, we believe that in re-thinking her relationship with Mary, she re-fashioned her ideas about the value and importance of friendship in general.

In retrospect, the remarks of Jamar and Tanya remind us of the words of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) who tells us that an individual's understanding of society is a function of the repertoire of stories they have read, heard, and inherited over the course of their lives. These stories, MacIntyre tells us, make up an individual's "dramatic resources" or "moral starting points" to be used in developing their own moralities and evaluating those of others. "Depriving children of stories of social traditions and moral life" he writes, "leaves them unscripted anxious stutters in their actions as in their words" (201).

The Tales of Two Teachers

In thinking about the successful development of classrooms that are sensitive to the life-informing possibilities of reading stories, several specific dimensions of classroom organization, culture, and practice come to mind as important. The characteristics of successful programs are embodied in the classrooms of Vicki and Jeff—two elementary school teachers, living and working in two very different schools and communities.

Vicki. Vicki was an experienced 3rd- and 4th-grade teacher in a neighborhood elementary school in northwest Detroit, Michigan. She had been living and teaching in and around the city for approximately twenty years. Throughout those years, she devoted a considerable amount of her time and energy to trying to improve the community in which she and her students lived. In the classroom, Vicki searched for ways to validate children's personal interests and life histories. She wanted them to view their lives and experiences as important subjects, about which they might read, write, and talk. The specific literacy activities that eventually came to characterize her classroom were the result of a teacher/researcher collaboration involving Vicki, Dan Madigan, and William McGinley.

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One result of this collaboration was that children in her class were engaged in reading a variety of fictional and non-fictional texts. In general, children's reading took three different forms: shared reading of stories from the classroom basal series, self-selected reading of school library books, and stories that Vicki elected to read aloud over the course of the year. In addition, as children's interest in reading developed, Vicki began purchasing a number of culturally relevant picture books and children's literature that represented a range of genres and topics of interest to the children. Some of the more popular texts that the children read included: *I Have a Dream: The Story of Martin* (Davidson, 1991), *Honey I Love and Other Tales* (Greenfield, 1978), *Diana Ross: Star Supreme*, (Haskins, 1986), *Knots on a Counting Rope* (Martin & Archambault, 1966), *The Chalk Doll* (Pomerantz, 1989), *Ragtime Tumpie* (Schroeder, 1989), *Encyclopedia Brown Gets His Man* (Sobol, 1982), *Maniac Magee*, (Spinelli, 1991), and *To Hell With Dying*, (Walker, 1987).

On most days, children began by reading silently from a teacher-selected basal story or from their self-selected books. In conjunction with this reading, they were encouraged to "reflect" or "write a sentence" in their reading-response journals about events or characters in the story that reminded them of experiences in their lives. Each day after reading, several children were invited to share entries from their reading-response journals, and the other children in the class were invited to discuss these entries in small and whole-group meetings. Within these activities, Vicki encouraged children to reflect on and share their feel-

ings in response to particular texts by posing specific kinds of questions (e.g., "How did the story make you feel?" "What did the story make you think?" "Did the story help you to imagine being a certain kind of person?" "Did the story help you to imagine doing certain kinds of things?"). She also encouraged them to explore the reasons why an author might have written a particular piece (e.g., "Why do you think this author wrote their story?" "What did they want us to think, know, or do?" "Are they trying to change our minds about anything?").

Vicki's discussion of *The Chalk Doll* (Pomerantz, 1989) was emblematic of many of the book discussions in which the children took part. The story is about a young girl named Rose and her mother who grew up in Jamaica. Reluctant to take her afternoon nap, Rose convinces her mother to tell some stories about her childhood in Jamaica. After listening to her mother's stories of rag dolls, chalk dolls, birthdays, milk, and a pink taffeta dress, Rose asks her mother to help her make a "rag doll" like the one she had as a child in Jamaica. In reading aloud from their response journals, several children described an event or experience from their own lives that the book brought to mind. Vicki then reinforced this way of reading and responding, discussing in more detail the ways that "people often connect what happens in a story with their own lives." In a similar discussion of the children's book entitled *To Hell With Dying* (Walker, 1989), Vicki began by asking the children to share their ideas about why the author might have written such a book. As the discussion developed, Vicki helped the children to identify the qualities and traits of the characters they admired and sought to emulate in this, as well as in other books. In this discussion, as in

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subsequent conversations about a variety of fictional and non-fictional texts, the children were frequently invited to "read" the experiences of such real and imaginary characters as Rose and her mother, Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, Malcolm X, Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King, Maniac Magee, Lulu and Sandy,

Encyclopedia Brown, Romona Quimby, and Nate the Great as "dramatic resources" for thinking about how to live their own lives.

Jeff. Jeff was a 4th- and 5th-grade teacher in Boulder, Colorado who, like Vicki, was concerned with finding ways to help his students bring literature to life. We first met Jeff in 1992. Upon initially visiting his class, we were overwhelmed by the number of simultaneous activities and experiences involving reading and writing in which children were engaged. However, as the year progressed, we became most interested in the "read aloud" time that took place in "the group center"—a small carpeted area separated from the rest of the room by a sofa, some chairs, and a book shelf. Each morning the children gathered on the floor of the group center, and Jeff read aloud from a children's book or a young adult novel.

After several weeks of listening to these read-alouds, we began reflecting on the kinds of knowledge about stories that Jeff's reading, discussion questions, and other activities seemed to embody for students. Through these daily read-alouds, it seemed that Jeff provided his children with opportunities to learn how to imaginatively re-create their world and their place in it through the events they encountered in books.

On one especially memorable day, Jeff read *The Mountain That Loved A Bird* (McLerran, 1985), the story of a mountain made of "bare stone" that "stood alone in the middle of a desert plain." Each year a singing bird visits the mountain "carrying in her beak a small seed" that she tucks "into a crack in the hard stone." As years pass, plants begin to grow and eventually the mountain is no longer bare and alone. At the conclusion of the story, Jeff directed children's attention to the mountains they could see from the windows of their class. As the children looked out the window he asked, "What might the mountain be thinking?" At this point, children were invited to go outside and write about what they thought in their "writer's notebooks."

This is a simple enough activity. Yet, we need to ask what lessons it teaches children about stories and what is possible when we read them. Judging from the written comments students recorded in their notebooks that day, the story and the question that Jeff posed enabled the children to re-create or see their mountains in ways they had not thought possible prior to reading the story. Jeff's question helped children to "read" the story as an imaginative vehicle through which they could dramatize and reconsider some aspect of their world. In this instance, children were thinking about a mountain and their relationship to it; however, on other days with other stories they were reconsidering such important issues as racial preju-

dice, the loss of loved ones, their relationship with grandparents and older adults in their lives, or memorable past experiences.

Throughout the remainder of school year, Jeff continued to question children and engage them in similar activities designed to help them draw upon the stories they read as a way to revisit and "experience" a number of important personal and social issues. In reading the book *Teammates* (Golenbock, 1990), a story of the friendship that developed between baseball players Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese, students explored racism through the eyes of Jackie Robinson and reflected on moments in their own lives during which they felt persecuted. Likewise, in the book *A Grain of Wheat: One Writer Begins* (Bulla, 1985), the autobiography of the well-known children's author Clay Robert Bulla, the children were encouraged to remember, revisit, and savor personal experiences from their own childhood through reading about the childhood experiences of the author.

Final Thoughts

If we are to formulate instructional activities that acknowledge the life-informing possibilities of stories, we need to develop our understanding of some of the personal and social ways that stories may function in children's lives. In this article, we have tried to foreground some of these possibilities while also describing the instructional contexts through which children might learn to read both literature and life. We offer the words of Mari, Jamar, and Tanya in the hope that teachers might encourage students to glance up from the pages of their stories, poems, and plays in an effort to uncover some part of the literature they read in their own lives and in the world. Undertaking such a change will certainly not be easy. Our own attempts to collaboratively reform language arts curricula with teachers have taught us that revisions of this sort can be as frustrating as they are satisfying. In exploring ways to help children read both text and life, we think it is important to remember that such changes will not automatically occur in the context of a "whole language" classroom or within a "reader-response-based" approach to teaching literature. Additionally, we do not believe that such programs can be developed by simply replacing basal readers with authentic children's literature, replacing teacher-led discussions with more peer-led discussions, and supplanting product-oriented approaches to writing with more process-oriented ones.

In retrospect, the stories of Vicki and Jeff serve to remind us of something that John Willinsky (1991) wrote in regard to the lessons we teach students about literacy each time we ask them to answer a question,

write a summary, or discuss an issue in relation to a story, poem, or play. As Willinsky explains, "I want to see if there is not more that the teaching of literature can do for learning about literacy" and what is possible with it (p. 5). We offer these stories from the classrooms of Vicki and Jeff because we believe they provide initial insight into some of the ways we might begin to help our students learn about what is not only possible with stories and literature, but what is possible with literacy.

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