

## At Home on the Page

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Picture it. A crowded classroom—bodies and books and twenty eight desks and chairs, a white board, hardwood floors in a Boston school building as old as time, three glossy plants, a water bubbler, and tall windows that let in luscious light. As a teacher, I knew to expect this sight come September just like I could expect juicy Expo markers to run dry by October. What I did not anticipate that first year I taught middle school: the nightmare called “independent reading.”

First, let me provide some background. I was brand new to teaching seventh and eighth grade English language arts. The school had been open two or three years prior, and so far, two teachers in this position had quit. I accepted the job in late June. Up until then, I had only taught high school and university courses in addition to a couple years of elementary school teaching right out of college.

Now *really* picture it. The first twenty minutes of every class period, students engaged in independent reading or “silent sustained reading” or “drop everything and read”—whatever tag I gave it, all students acted independently, but few actually read. A typical scene included kids slapping the backs of heads, poking each other with pencils, talking, going to the water bubbler, opening windows, shutting windows, “looking” for their book inside their backpack, asking for gum, applying lip gloss, asking for a pass to go to their locker because they forgot their book, or for a pass to the nurse or the bathroom. Some kids literally pretended to read. Sometimes books would be upside down. Some students would use their books as shields to hide the fact that they were really on their phones, or asleep, or eating chips.

I remember one time a student threw his

book on the floor and declared, “This is a force.” I walked over to him and whispered, “Take a deep breath.” He stared at the ceiling. I picked up his book and placed it on his desk. He did not read it.

Sometimes, I didn’t whisper. Sometimes, I yelled so loud I couldn’t even hear my own voice over the students talking, laughing, and crunching plastic water bottles—an irritating habit that nearly sent me over the edge several times. Sometimes, it would take a good seven minutes to get everyone seated with open books. Even then, inevitably, there would be one student turning her chair 180 degrees, whispering to her friend, going on and on about a girl and a fight—or, the student who, when I actually start the day’s lesson, *keeps* reading.

Despite my giving out warnings—including pink photocopied TAB (Take a Break) worksheets, listing names for recess detention, or threatening to send them to the office or to call their parents—nothing worked. Shocking, I know. But sometimes, the teacher is the last one to learn the lesson. And for me, that lesson was this: My students hated reading. Or, more accurately, they didn’t like the books in our classroom. Or, even more accurately, these brilliant young people deserved better.

And that’s when something shifted. I realized that *I* had to do something different.

My students—black, brown, most living at or below the poverty line in an urban neighborhood—did not see themselves reflected in the books they were being asked to read. The books we had in our classroom library were either donated or leftover from the previous teachers. They were boring. And either too easy to read, or too difficult. Almost none of the books featured characters of color.

By now, we have probably all seen that op-ed from the *New York Times*. The one written by the late Walter Dean Myers—“Where Are the People of Color in Children’s Books?”—published in March of 2014. In it, Myers shares the alarming statistic that, “Of 3,200 children’s books published in 2013, just 93 were about black people, according to a study by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin.” He continues:

Today I am a writer, but I also see myself as something of a landscape artist. I paint pictures of scenes for inner-city youth that are familiar, and I people the scenes with brothers and aunts and friends they all have met. Thousands of young people have come to me saying that they love my books for some reason or the other, but I strongly suspect that what they have found in my pages is the same thing I found in ‘Sonny’s Blues.’ They have been struck by the recognition of themselves in the story, a validation of their existence as human beings, an acknowledgment of their value by someone who understands who they are. It is the shock of

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recognition at its highest level. (para. 12)

Every time I read this quote, two things happen. First, I am reminded of my own experience of being struck by the recognition of myself in a story. It happened for the first time my freshman year at Connecticut College when my English professor

had assigned *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. Until then I had never read work by a Latina author. In middle and high school I had read a range of authors—Shakespeare, Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison—but never a Latina. And certainly, never a story with Latina characters, or a strong Latina protagonist. Second, Myers’ quote also moves me to take action. It makes me want to give students that experience, that “shock of recognition,” much (*much*) sooner than their freshman year in college.

That first year I taught middle school, upon witnessing my students’ disinterest in reading, I decided to do some research. I asked successful middle school teachers what books they had in their classroom libraries. I talked to librarians. I visited other schools. I accessed lists and recommendations from We Need Diverse Books (<https://diversebooks.org/>).

And I rolled up my sleeves and vowed to finish my own YA novel.

It was Toni Morrison who famously said that, “If there’s a book that you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it” (1981). For me, that book is *Don’t Ask Me Where I’m From*. The main character, Liliana Cruz, is a strong, willful, sassy, in-between-worlds Latina balancing normal teen drama with the fact that her father has recently been deported to Guatemala. While this was never my specific experience (this year marks the fiftieth anniversary of my parents living in the United States and they became citizens before I was even born), I do share much of Liliana’s experience of constantly having to code switch, navigate predominantly white spaces at school and social groups, and then return home to a Latinx immigrant household. Liliana is also realizing for the first time that her story is part of a larger story. This moment in each of us is so powerful. It’s a critical time in our lives.

The truth is, I can’t wait to share my book with students from all backgrounds. The biggest dream I have for *Don’t Ask Me* is that it may serve as a window *and* a mirror for readers. I hope it is a book that a student in any classroom can pick up and read—not toss on the floor, not say it is a “force,” but will read and take what they will from it. Above all, I hope that the book provides the experience of being transported to a different place in the



world and within themselves.

I am grateful that by the end of my time teaching middle school, I was able to equip my students with a classroom library full of books that provided windows and mirrors. I won't say that every day was perfect, but occasionally, some days came really close. Some days, I would look up from my desk at the beginning of class and want to pinch myself—every single student was genuinely engaged in reading a book that was at their level, and no one asked for a pass to the nurse. And sometimes, when independent reading time was up, some students actually groaned. *One more minute! Aw, not yet!* In so many ways, the nightmare of independent reading time had turned into a dream.

What a win for students to *want* to read. To find stories they can connect to, really get into, in which they

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can imagine themselves beyond the margins of the page, of the classroom, of the building, of their neighborhood and city. Stories in which they can feel empowered and recognized and curious. Where, like Liliana in *Don't Ask Me*, they can go back and forth between worlds and yet feel at home in their own skin.

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