

Don't Get Blood On My Carpet

By Ernie Cohen © copyright 2012

Introduction:

I have assembled stories about my wife's work as a 7th and 8th grade teacher. She left them in a manila envelope along with pictures and papers collected one summer when I was away. They were written during the early years of her teaching career when the challenges of teaching English to adolescent and remedial students forced her to experiment and improvise. Four of the stories included here, I wrote. These were based on many of the talks we shared about her work and from my own reading difficulties.

When I first read her stories shortly after her death, I was too upset to realize that the lessons she learned and the stories she wrote about them should be shared with teachers, parents, and administrators. Perhaps those times suited her more than the present times would. Or perhaps it is still the teacher, her life experiences, dedication, and native intelligence that make the difference.

Let me introduce these stories by telling you about a fight starting outside her classroom.

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By Ernie Cohen 2011

“Mrs. Estra, Mrs. Estra come quick, Fred and Tom are going to fight. They'll hurt each other, don't let them.”

The calls from a female student descended upon the teacher as she was preparing her attendance sheet. Immediately, her five foot two inch frame stood straight up and bolted toward the hall where the shouts came from. Pushing her way through the crowd of students gathered around the two boys she entered the ring. Both Fred and Tom were eight inches taller than the teacher and their eyes were fixed on each other and not on the gray haired, middle-aged woman who suddenly appeared. In a voice, firm and clear, and projected from below she addressed them.

“Who gave you permission to get blood on school property? Do not get blood on my carpet.”

“What did she say, Tom asked?” “Am I bleeding?”

“I don't see any blood, Fred snarled, “and I don't see any carpet.”

“That teacher's don't know what she's saying.”

“Yeah and she's got gray hair too!” “Let's get back in the room, we'll settle this later, if we feel like it.”

“That's OK with me.”

As the crowd broke up and went back to their desks Mrs. Estra took a deep breath. Yet, she had one more hurdle in front of her. It was the principal running down the hall.

“What happened here,” Mrs. Estra? “Who was fighting? Can’t you control your class?”

Mrs. Estra’s eyes turned from pale blue to steel gray as she calmly addressed the principal.

“You missed all the fun. It was an argument about a baseball game, two young males butting heads. It’s all settled now. You can go back to your office. Or you can pull them out of class, write a report to the superintendent, and request both sets of parents to attend an evening meeting. Only, I won’t be there, because I won’t drive after dark until my cataract operation.”

The principal stared at Mrs. Estra then started to turn away.

“Well if its settled and no one was hurt we’ll let it be. And you had better get back to your class.”

And so Mrs. Estra, the remedial teacher at Kelly Junior High School, stopped another fight. Fred and Tom had all day to think about their teacher with the gray hair before they fight again, and maybe even wonder if it would be worth “getting blood” on the carpet.

Now that I’ve introduced you to Mrs. Estra, I’ll let her introduce you to her class.

“Hello, you’re now entering my classroom where I teach 8th grade Remedial language Arts. Many of my students find reading boring. For them reading is often an unpleasant chore. My job is to change this. Please, join us; our class is about to begin.”

Adolescents and Literature

By Reba Estra

July 9, 1973

Edited by Ernie Cohen 2011

“They’re pigs because they’re pigs,” she cried.

“Why do you feel that way?” I asked.

“Because I called them and called them when my mother was dying, and they never came until it was too late.”

Colleen wears green eye shadow that accents the pallor of her face and her stringy, over-bleached hair. The memory of her mother’s death has brought her to her feet with tension and her voice has become a hateful shriek. She is angry, in pain, and powerless. She is an adolescent.

Merton is in his usual seat atop the closet portion of the storage area in back of the room. Like a pimpled Buddha he sits cross-legged, remote, but unsmiling. The closet is his refuge today because he has had a haircut. He heard one “skinhead” crack too many. He is angry but the pain of rejection, frustration over his parents’ choice of hairstyle, and embarrassment of having to appear so different hurts him even more. Merton is an adolescent so the only right he seems to have in life is the right to be unhappy.

“This is the dumb class; isn’t it?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because we’re all dumb here, too dumb even to get books to keep.”

Mary comes to school on days when her younger brothers and sisters are all

functioning and the housework is up-to-date. Days like this rarely occur more than once each week. Mary fills an adult role at home. She is sensitive, observant, and capable of some sharp insight. She was almost retained this year because her attendance was so irregular. It seems that the term “extenuating circumstances” is for the use of adults, not adolescents.

“It’s pizza! We just made it in homemaking.”

“He’s trying to poison you!”

“It’s good, honest. He ate his but I saved you some.”

The pizza was good. David, who can’t tell left from right or divide reliably by two, discovered he can do something well. He is elated. He will remind the class about his pizza for weeks. He has made many discoveries about himself lately, not enough of them were good ones. But this one he will remember. To be an adolescent is to begin to discover oneself.

“That’s not right!”

“We ought to tell them they’re crazy.”

“Let’s do it -- we’ll write letters.”

The cause was the firing of a teacher because he had become blind by a school board that decided no blind person could work with young people. The newspaper report brought in by a student was shared. Indignation consumed them. They all knew the eighth grade teacher who shared this room. They remembered how their initial uneasiness gradually changed to awe as they saw her walk through the room, read with her fingers, laugh, and joke. They expressed their anger well because they felt injustice deeply. Most adolescents do, for they are busy discovering others while they are exploring themselves.

“Colleen’s in the office – boy, is she in trouble!”

“What happened?”

“She didn’t do nothing. She only wore her new clothes.”

Colleen’s clothes were a skimpy halter and a pair of almost non-existent hot pants. The only wrong act was in her timing, February with the temperature at barely twelve degrees. There wasn’t a boy in seventh grade that didn’t know about the hot pants by the end of the day. Colleen had accomplished her purpose. The greatest discovery in adolescence is sex. It unsettles adolescents only slightly less than its manifestations among students unsettle their teachers.

So my definition of adolescence is made up of many parts of pain, pain caused by frustration; anger; powerlessness; and self-discovering of shortcomings. The pain diminishes as discovery begins to reveal unsuspected skills and ability to control one’s self, and one’s life. Adolescence is a time when the doors to the adult world begin to crack open and young people can finally view the hidden mysteries. Only the mysteries hurt as often as they delight and this happens at a time when hurts are sharpest and joys most exciting.

What can literature be for this self-involved, sensitive, excitable and often confounding group? According to the schools literature at this age, especially for those who have reading difficulties, it should be a diet of anthologized pabulum carefully strained to exclude any sex, hate, love, controversy, or UN-Americanism. The words don’t matter, only the skills. But the kids are alive, and the words do matter!

My school has an ample supply of skill teaching material. I have a room full of it. I use it sparingly. Even the worst anthologist slips sometimes and includes some meat. Most of what I use has been purchased with my own money, with the help on an immediate superior who sneaks some materials in, or by virtue of my sharp tongue properly aimed. My

students are teaching me what to buy. They direct me through their competent work in thinking and reading when they work on sufficiently challenging ideas. Pabulum won't do.

They reveal in words that explore the very things that have caused them pain, injustice, loneliness, rejection, and alienation. Why? I don't really know, but I have a theory. The kids I teach are skilled, only not in the areas that count in school so they are classified as "below average." They can feel, but they can't usually articulate what they feel. To find themselves or their worries and problems in what they read is to discover they share a hurt with the wider world of humanity. It seems to give them peace, sometimes even joy.

The book Sounder was the supreme experience of this past year. I heard more flawless oral reading among kids who supposedly can't handle anything beyond fourth grade material. They were angry, they were hurt, but they identified totally with the boy; and the vast majority of my students are white. They borrowed copies so those at home could read them, but returned all except one when I commented there would be no reading next year because I couldn't afford to buy another set.

Robinson Crusoe, rewritten at about third grade level is another book that fills a need. Coming from crammed homes, as do most of my students, the idea of loneliness has a novel beauty. They also find something that touches them deeply that man can be totally self-sufficient.

For the adolescents I work with, literature is a very necessary tool to help them begin to understand and accept themselves, to begin to perceive other life patterns, and to become familiar with a wider world. Through literature they can begin to encounter solutions and adjustments to problems that can help them in the present or encourage them to look forward to a

possibly better future. They can also be enabled to experience life, beauty, excitement, and joy that their own lives too often deny them. They also learn to read better. But I consider this to be just a fringe benefit.

“Don’t stop now!”

“That was the bell. The period has ended.”

“You better let us read that book tomorrow!”

Anyone who has ever experienced the shattering effect of the poorly timed bell need never ask whether literature is for adolescents. Any literature that helps an adolescent to see himself or his world as it is, as it can become, is right and will be heard.

The Peacock in an Oak Tree

By Ernie Cohen 2011

Prologue: Maybe you're thinking Mrs. Estra's challenges are only in her classroom. If so you would be mistaken. Her remedial students make up only a small part of the student body just as the remedial teacher is only a small part of the faculty. Being in the minority sometimes means being less equal and this is not something to be taken lightly.

The next story started outside Mrs. Estra's classroom, and is based in part upon an actual happening there that she shared with me.

This year Mrs. Estra's class would meet in a modified hallway as there were no vacant classrooms for her remedial students. While she was preparing her lesson plan for the start of the school year, Mrs. Estra was conscious of several problems. One, she would have to teach listening skills so that her instructions could be followed. Two, she would have to teach thinking skills, pausing to consider instead of jumping to conclusions. But, above all she would have to change the stigma that this was a dumb class and not as worthy as the others. True, some of her students miss-spelled words, wrote illegibly, and had trouble with pronunciations.

But some did well in arithmetic, and even excelled in tasks that

required dexterity such as building model houses and making fashion clothes. So she looked forward to the start of the school year and the challenges ahead; while aware of the lasting damage that stigmas cause and their self fulfilling prophecies.

Across from the teachers lounge and under a tall oak tree was her favorite place to park. As she was locking her car that first morning of school, she heard a noise. It sounded like the wind swaying the branches, but they were still, there was no wind. She paused to look, her eyes stepping up the tree stopped at the top branch. She had seen turkeys in trees near her home and a red tailed hawk had a nest there. But this bird was different. It had a purple tail, green feathers on its chest, and what appeared to be feathers rising from its back. Could it be a peacock, like the ones at the Mohegan Park Zoo?

The Zoo was less than half a mile away and the peacocks were the main attraction in the bird section. She recalled how beautiful the males' trains were when they strutted across the pen to the delight of the spectators. But this one was free except its leg appeared tied to a branch with a piece of kite string.

She had to hurry now to welcome her remedial students. As she ran past the teachers' lounge she announced just as the bells were ringing:

“There's a peacock above my car.”

Laughter filled the lounge even as she pointed to the oak tree. But they were already on their way to their classes. The morning went quickly for the students wanted to make a good impression on their first day. She managed to send a note down to the principal before reading Mark Twain's classic story about a jumping frog. As she read, her thoughts kept retuning to the bird. Suddenly it came together. Maybe it was the story of the jumping frog

or the earlier laughter of her colleagues that sparked it. For the first time today a smile appeared.

As the last morning class entered she announced:

“Class, I have a surprise for you. We will be going to see the peacock. But first turn on your computers, and click encyclopedia. Now search for the word “peacock.” You are to write a description of the male, and draw its picture in your note books.” The class could hardly believe their luck and finished the assignment just as the bells were ringing. Quickly they lined up at the door as Mrs. Estra led them into the parking lot.

“Where’s the bus, Mrs. Estra? Will we have sandwiches for lunch?” Slowly she addressed the class:

“This will be a lesson in listening and thinking before jumping to conclusions.”

“But you promised we could see the peacocks at the zoo”

“That’s not what I said. I said. I would show you the peacock. I never mentioned the word “zoo” and I used the singular form of the noun “peacock.”

A silence descended over the class; no longer was the glow of anticipation painted across their faces; rather there was now a glow of budding anger, anger at being wrong and anger at being wronged.

“That’s not fair, we want to see a real peacock not a picture.” Slowly Mrs. Estra turned and slowly walked across the parking lot, letting their anger and their mistrust build. Turning, she motioned for them to follow, and stopping just beneath the great oak she addressed the class again.

“I did not lie to you or mislead you, you heard what you wanted to hear not what was said. Now, let’s start again. Look at the tree above you; examine each branch as you look higher and higher.” All the heads tilted

skyward, still doubting their new teacher.

“Look one shouted, it’s a turkey.”

“Wait a minute it’s got a purplish green neck with a greenish belly.”

“There are long feathers along its back.”

“It’s a peacock alright, male turkeys have red bibs.”

Mrs. Estra was listening. She felt, a quiet sense of joy like when as the first housewife and older student to be admitted to the freshman class of a prestigious women’s college, her poems received encouraging comment in literature class. For today she had taught the first lesson on listening and thinking. And she had made good on her promise to the class. But what about those skeptical teachers who laughed at her this morning? It was now time to get even!

“Alright class, you can go to lunch, and be sure and tell your friends about the peacock. Would you two boys also go to the front office and tell the principal what you saw. Thank you.”

That afternoon the word peacock spread like feathers throughout Kelly Junior High School. Soon the principal was at her door.

“I’ve seen it, Mrs. Estra. Two of your students pointed it out. I’ve called the fire department as well as the zoo. They’re on their way. Will those two students show them where it is?”

“Yes, we’ll take care of it”

But, that was not the end of it. The next morning the lead story in the Local Section of the *Norwich Bulletin* read:

“Kelly students find the zoo’s missing peacock. The principal praised Mrs. Estra’s class for their keen interest in nature. He also thanked them for showing the zookeeper, Mr. Johnson, and the firemen the location of the peacock. The large bird was freed from the kite string around its leg

by the zookeeper who was lifted 30 feet in the Central City's new hook and ladder. As a reward the principal gave Mrs. Estra's class tomorrow afternoon off for a trip to the zoo and with the promise of sandwiches and ice cream for lunch."

The next morning when Mrs. Estra entered the teacher's lounge there was a basket of assorted donuts and fresh coffee, waiting. While the teachers ate and exchanged peacock stories they let Mrs. Estra know if she needed assistance with her class, all she had to do was ask. As Mrs. Estra walked toward her homeroom she thought 'this is going to be a pretty good year thanks to the lesson plans she had prepared for the week.' And then a smile crept across her face.

The Contest, A Short Story

By Reba Estra July 1973

Edited by Ernie Cohen 2011

Prologue

A teacher's encouragement can go only so far. There are some barriers that can block the light the teacher offers. Still, there is the chance that the light will get through, and so the teacher must always try.

Joyce was drinking the last of a coke during free period. While the woman picked up a pile of papers whose top sheets were literally scared with red pencil tracks, those at the bottom showed only the careful black curves and uncluttered white of a final draft. The girl watched closely as the teacher began to read the neatly finished copy. Then the girl moved quietly to the windowsill for the spray cleaner and sponges. She wiped some coke drops off the desk then cleaned some chair arms. She looked up covertly to study the woman and noticed her smile once. The waiting was hard. She took the empty bottle across the hall, making only the slightest click with the door latch. On tiptoes she returned. The woman had finished reading.

“It’s a good Story?” “I told you that when I saw the first draft.”

“How do I know you like it, not just me?”

“You told about some people, Joyce, you made them real. And you make your readers feel things.”

“Feel things? What kind of things?”

“ Well, there are sad happenings that made me feel sad. And when your people are happy, I felt happy too.”

Joyce smiled then picked up the pile of papers. She held them in both

hands against her chest. Carefully she moved a hand up to riffle the sheets, as if to be sure they were still there.

“What you think of that man? The one in the story?”

The woman thought a moment before she answered.

“I like him. I don’t think he tried hard enough to work things out, but he was a good man, a very good man.”

“Do it really tell you that?”

The woman nodded.

“You sure it’s a good story?”

“I told you how good I thought it was. That’s why you’re the one who got the Contest entry form to use.”

“Suppose that magazine don’t like it.”

“Then they’ll be missing something good.”

“You sure now, you sure its good?”

“No, it’s the worst spelled, messiest garbage I ever put my red pencil on. You deserve an F and should be fired as a student. That make you happy?”

Joyce smiled then wrinkled into thought.

“But that magazine say it gotta be typed.”

“So what’s the problem, you’ve been taking typing.”

“That typing teacher, she’s unreal. You do any thing on those machines that's not in the book and she thinks you calling her a whole list of four-letter words.”

“Bet she’s right sometimes.”

“You funny, you know that?” Joyce leaned back and laughed.

“You can use my typewriter, the one your always pecking at when I’m not looking”

“Not me, I don’t use those bad words. That’s Robert, he’s a mean one.”

They settled the matter. The typewriter was moved across the classroom to a big desk with a pile of fresh paper on one side, the story on the other. Joyce fussed everything into precise order. Everything was ready.

“How you type a story?”

“Same way you write one, one word at a time.”

The drilling of the keys crowded the room. The woman waited a moment and then began to sort through a pile of papers with one hand while working the red pencil with the other.

“How you spell robbery?”

“What’s wrong with hold-up?”

“Don’t sound proper. That magazine for proper people.”

“They let us read it, don’t they?”

Laughter merged into typewriter sounds. The woman at the desk moved on to more papers.

“I’m in trouble again; can’t spell penitentiary.”

“What’s wrong with jail?”

“Same thing.”

“Joyce, don’t try to get too proper. You can add just so much, and then pow!”

Joyce bounced in her chair with laughter. “You mean like we done in rocket club and that thing went slamming into the walls.”

The typing resumed with efficient briskness. Then it slowed down until after one final click it stopped.

“That man in the story, you really think him good?”

“Mixed-up, but certainly good. He loved his children very much,”

Joyce turned to type, but sat instead looking at the carefully written sheets. The woman looked up from the paper she was reading. The clock movement was audible.

“That man, the one in the story, he my father.”

The teacher looked up, but not at Joyce. “Maybe that’s why your story sounds so real.”

“I tell it with a boy instead of me and I change all the names around.”

“Every writer does that. Every good one.”

“Do you think they really print it?”

“If they think it’s good enough.”

The typing began again. It stopped even before the bell rang for the end of the line’

“They print it then everyone know about my father.”

“Everyone will know Joyce wrote a prize-winning story. Isn’t that also important.”

“My grandma won’t like it. She tell me not to talk about him. Make like he no good or gone, maybe dead.”

She sat silently at the typewriter. Her head was down and her voice very low.

“But I love my father.”

The woman put down her pencil. She looked at the piled papers. Her voice was also low.

“Your grandmother means well.”

“How can she anything, when she hates him so.”

It was quiet for a time. The clock scratched out another minute.

“She loves you, Joyce. She doesn’t want anything to hurt you.”

Joyce turned back to the typewriter. A few keys sounded. Then she sat

rereading the story. With a sudden movement she squared the pile, carefully adding the typed sheets. She stood up.

“Jest remember. I forgot to tell that dumb, old study-hall teacher where I’ll be. He’ll raise a fuss; that’s for sure.”

“All that needs is a quick intercom call from me.”

“But I got my math to do. I forget any more homework, and I never get out of this place.”

“Oh. Yes. Sure, Joyce. Want me to hold onto that stuff for you?” She looked at the papers. She nodded. Then there was an abrupt “No. I better keep it. Be safer that way.”

“What about the Contest?”

“I think about it. Winning a dumb old contest ain’t that important anyway.”

The teacher silently wrote the pass for the study hall, and held it out.

“I gotta think about things for a while. But I gotta do that math now.” The sound of the red pencil snapping was lost in the sudden slam of the door. Footsteps faded until only clock sounds stirred the silence. The woman remained at the desk holding the pieces of broken pencil and staring at the door.

The Book

By Reba Estra, 1973

Edited by Ernie Cohen, 2012

Prologue

Mrs. Estra knew what it was to be poor. She started school during the great depression of the 1930's and almost all the books she read came from the New Britain Public Library. Years later when she was raising two daughters on a limited budget she sewed and hemmed their dresses adding frills and trim to make them pretty. And still later when she was able to pay the tuition at Connecticut College with her father's life insurance funds, she had to borrow a second hand gown from the dean and shorten it to graduate

The papers scratched on Mrs. Estra's desk as she shuffled through them unfolding and turning them so they were all right side up. Then she

picked up the ones hidden beneath the open book.

“These yours?”

He nodded and sneaked a quick glance while she lowered her eyes to take another look at pictures that had been hidden. The rain had returned harder this time. It flattened the dry grass and turned the whole hillside into a pencil sketch of streaming water.

He had almost jumped when he first saw the book. It was the last thing he expected to see.

The pictures were of cars, hot rods, modified, and funny cars. He flipped the pages and the library disappeared. Automatically he felt for the pocket that held his pencil, thinking only of what paper he had available; and how he'd put all that noise, the dust, and the excitement into the picture. He hated to close it even to get at the sign out card. He wrote with care on the card because the Library teacher was watching him. Funny, how library teachers seem to care more about books than people. She read the card carefully to be sure he'd given his life history; then as she stamped it, she reminded him that he was lucky, Lots of students wanted this book, that he'd better get it back on time. He nodded agreeing it was a good book, that he'd remember the due date, and

that he was a bad risk.

Mrs. Estra was walking away with the papers in her hand. He put his head down trying to recall the homework instructions, but even the page numbers wouldn't come. It would be better he thought to be working until it happened, so he did what he could to look busy. After a while footsteps made him aware she had returned. Mrs. Estra still held the pictures in one hand. The other hand held only a roll of tape. And to his relief he didn't see anything that looked like a "note".

"That wall needs something," she said, as she pointed to the wall next to the flag. It had been painted a flat yellow that combined with the cinder-block texture made it look like the skin of a lemon.

"Would you mind letting these hang there for a while?" He didn't move. That was the last thing he was expecting. She put the tape and pictures down on a nearby desk.

"That table against the wall has a weak leg, so a chair would be better to stand on."

The book had lasted for one week. He hid it behind other books and in desks that didn't have those clumsy chairs with attached arms. He also hid it in his loose leaf, fattening it so the other kids wouldn't take it. When the weekend came he found he couldn't bear to leave

it behind in his locker. That afternoon on the bus it was quickly discovered. They passed it from hand to hand always managing to keep it from his grasp. Then he made the mistake of getting mad. The book was thrown from the bus, as it was crossing over the bridge. He could still hear the splash. The driver hadn't even turned his head.

The bell rang before the last two were hung. He watched her tuck them carefully under a pile of folders on a high shelf right near her desk. He handed her the tape and left for his next class. In math they were reviewing two- number multiplication. He felt good because he managed to end up with three extra sheets of math paper. He put them thoughtfully into his social studies book. That way the edges wouldn't get crimped.

When the bell rang he moved to the door slowly putting on a show of looking for something in his shirt pocket. Everyone used pencils in math. Usually there's a good chance. A yellow one, almost brand new with an almost new eraser was on the desk near the window. Perhaps he could get to it without being caught.

“Hey, wait a minute that's not yours! You know my rules, “any left pencils belong to me.” How do you suppose I get the ones I'm always lending to you?”

Social studies went well because the rain had stopped. He wouldn't get wet going home, and the wash would stay dry. But the rain began again just as he got home. The smell of the hallway was worse than usual because there had been so much rain.

"Frank, that you?" came from the chair next to the kitchen window. That was where she sat so she could hear the noise of the cars and people going by. It helped her feel less lonely.

"Maybe you ought to do the wash tomorrow, so it will come home all dry. It sounds so wet out side." The click, click of her needles seemed to bring the rain noises right into the room.

But, tomorrow the manager would not be there, and he'd have to pay to get the wash done. Maybe if he did the cleaning and left a note the man would get the money to him. It was hard to walk around with empty pockets, but other things were harder.

She was knitting him a sweater, probably for Christmas. Oh, she made a good act of saying it was for his father, But he knew; There had been no word since last year. Not even on his birthday.

She was working on the sleeve. Ever since he'd figured out a way to translate the instructions into bumps on cardboard she could feel how to make and attach the sleeves. It made her feel useful

although he hated the drab browns and grays of the wool. They never seem to save any of the good colors to put on sale. He started to sort the laundry. He wondered if he should tell her about the book. But that would only upset her. What if the librarian calls when I'm not home? There were no easy answers.

Two weeks later the homeroom teacher put the overdue reminder slip on his desk and a comment of which he only heard "careless" and "trouble". He ignored the words as he tried to ignore the slip. The next week his English teacher, Mrs. Estra, had talked with him when she found his name on the No Library List.

"Are you sure you lost it? Maybe you just left it somewhere, and it will show up. I can write a note and stall her off for a while."

Later that day Joyce showed up at Mrs. Estra's homeroom.

"Come in Joyce. How is your writing going?"

"Its going O'K. I'll have it finish next week. Would you like to read it?"

"I would and I promise to go easy with the red pencil."

Both laughed and then Joyce spoke softly so that only Mrs. Estra could hear her.

"Frank is in trouble."

“You mean the boy who draws picture of cars in my English class?”

“Yes. I was on the bus last Friday when three of the older boys started bullying Frank, and one of the boys grabbed the book he had tried to hide. They passed it around and when Frank got mad one of them threw it out the window, and it landed in the river.”

“So that the reason for those library notes.”

First thing the next morning another slip arrived. He had to go to the library, immediately! The book had been new the library wanted the whole twelve dollars, and they wanted it tomorrow unless his parents telephoned. Otherwise the school would call them, tomorrow.

When he finally got to class it was half over. He kept busy. The rest of the class was noisy so nobody noticed what he was doing until English. That’s when the pictures were examined and put on the wall.

He finished sorting the wash and piled it into the basket. Maybe the manager would lend him some money. He wouldn’t have to tell him anything. It would be just a business deal. Carefully he tucked an old piece of plastic sheeting over the wash. Then he put the potatoes in to bake; checked to be sure there were eggs and bread for supper. He left his mother still sitting at the window. When he got there the manager was in.

“Lend! You lend something when you’re sure you’re going to get it back, kid. How’re you ever gone to do that? Five dollars. Think I’m crazy?”

By the time he finished wiping down all the machines and mopping the floors, the wash was done. He folded everything carefully, first the towels so they could be piled into a barrier. That way he could fold the rest while hiding the fact that some of the wash was woman’s underwear. A lot of things he had to do were hard to explain to anyone.

It was still raining when he walked home. The potatoes smelled good when he opened the door. He heard her fumble with the lamp until the light came on. He put the wash down till after he fixed supper.

“ I can tell you did a nice job with the wash. You’ve really learned to be a good housewife.” She laughed. After a moment he laughed too.

“You know I think we’re really getting there. Like I told you when it first happened. It’s no use complaining or even explaining, you just go ahead and do your best. People will respect you for that. It’s how you handle hard-times that make a difference. Respect is worth more

than anything.” She picked up her knitting, counting aloud the stitches and carefully fingering the directions. The rain sounds came inside again.

After supper he worked steadily but carefully. Three sheets of math paper don’t go very far. And they don’t erase very well either. The point of the light blue pencil broke just as he was finishing the last car. He had been blending the blue with regular pencil to give a metallic gloss to the side of a car. He’d have to wait till he got to school. You don’t get smooth, even points if you sharpen them with a knife. Of course sharpeners wasted a lot of the pencil some times. But a sharp point always made a pencil feel new, no matter how small it got.

Tomorrow he had English first period. He’d be able to hang the rest of the pictures. There might even be room for the ones he’d done tonight. He remembered how careful she’d been when she put the pictures away. Fussed until she found a spot where they’d lie flat and wouldn’t be accidentally mussed. She’d liked them. Really liked them. And she didn’t have a second period class.

He wondered how early they made that call. It was still raining when he went to bed. Somehow in bed the rain didn’t sound so bad.

Some Thoughts about a Short Story That Has No Ending

By Reba Estra August 9, 1973

Edited by Ernie Cohen, 2011

Prologue: This can't be a short story because it will sound contrived, un-real, artificial, and dumb. But, my kids know that dumb is often more true than smart. But, this is the way it comes out.

Since the day the novel, Sounder, was finished I have been asking

myself, “where did I go right?” For something was right. To experience for three weeks with a volatile, erratic group of adolescents an intense closeness and at the end of each period a deep regret that time had run out was a new experience for me. Proper plans for reading skills and taking homework of the usual sort now seemed, somehow, unnecessary and superficial. For we were embarked on a search for truth, dedicated to a quest that reached beyond word meanings and sequential skills. My class lived Sounder, and they took me along, into their reality. Together we explored the injustice, the beauty, the love, and the loneliness of a strange boy in an unmentioned time belonging to an unnamed place.

On the day the last pages were to be read, my J-7 class arrived with haste and settled in without the normal ten minutes of foolishness. They were ready to read before I even entered the room.

There was a discussion question on the board, a search for truth, one I had told them about before we began reading Sounder. And so I read the ending where hope and belief leaven the sadness, so painful, several of the students were quietly crying. I just sat there to have spoken would have destroyed the special world we were in the midst of sharing. The discussion question had become superfluous too, for the first comment established a better one. “What happened to the boy?” asked Joyce. We ended by agreeing to write our own separate version of what the future might be.

The student papers were shared before being returned. I have only my recollections to go, but recollections still bring a sense of wonder to me. My J-7 class is made up of mostly school failures trying to survive among hostile adults who too often demand that they overcome impossible obstacles. They are very often competent but not in school. And yet most of them wrote in their papers of school as a source of opportunity to become some one better and more respected and that the boy in Sounder would lead a better life through education. There is a message for schools in their conclusions.

Most of them too, foresaw a time when the boy would become a man and would work to undo the injustices that shattered his life. A few crossed the gap from fiction to the front page of today's newspapers and wrote in their own way about civil rights. And there were a few that gave the boy revenge with the help of a gun.

Their predictions were usually more practical than profound. But the wonder to me is the memory of their clear thinking and logical reasoning as they worked out a fruitful and happy life for the boy in the book, this from a class once condemned in a faculty meeting as a "hopeless bunch of illiterate animals".

Illiterate? Yes, at times. But during the work with Sounder, as the class gradually did more of the reading aloud, I would sit amazed as one student after another read almost flawlessly. I asked once or twice "How come?" The answer was some version of "I liked the book." So much for all the reading kits and structured motivational material!

There were apparent effects on many of the students. Colleen, whose spiteful words had once caused pain learned some more about words that hurt. She was shocked to find the word "nigger" on page 22 of the book.

Her sense of shock was strengthened by her current boy friend, Robert, who volunteered to explain the words painful connotations:

“You ain’t human, you ain’t nothing good, you just like dirt.”

Colleen accepted the assignment of why the word was used. Her report to the class touched several times on the pain that could be afflicted by words.

Joyce was staggered by the story. Here was evidence that a man could be good even if he was put away in jail. Joyce took a copy home and read it to her grandmother. She reported with delight that her grandmother was planning to take her to the movie when it comes. She also added very quietly “we talked some about my father.”

And Frank, our artist, did the bulletin board. All the loneliness was there. Huddled on a bleak brown patch surrounded by long rows of green and fronted by a road that unwound to infinity, the small shack stood. On one side the forest crowded the landscape. The only other human sign was the elegance of a white pillared-mansion at a far distance down the road. Mountains rose in the distance catching on their peaks the last flares of a just set sun. Frank had lived Sounder through his crayons and brushes,

The bulletin Board became the talk of the school. All three principals stopped by. Art teachers including one from the high school visited. It became a very frequent occurrence for passing students to pause ask permission to look, and come out remarking that Frank was a real artist.

Frank carried his new fame with dignity. He managed to write a very correct note to the high school teacher thanking her for the scholarship to summer art classes. He also managed to keep his promise not to talk about the ending of the book to the class. He had read it three times including once to his mother.

Of course there were more students in this class including four others

that also worked on Sounder. Their reactions were equally favorable. Even a few who were initially hostile to reading about a black family moderated a bit as the reading progressed. And there were some failures, but fewer than I usually experience.

What then made this reading the right literature for my special and demanding class? From several years of acquaintance with the kinds of students I teach I have been taught to understand their views of the world; that injustice is frequent, cruelty constant, and honesty a slippery ally, more apt to cause trouble than to be of any real use. Sounder gave them a world that fitted their view and permitted them to reach a deep level of identification with the main characters. But Sounder also offered them hope. They saw anger controlled and then constructively redirected. They saw love flourish and grow despite separation. They saw hope in a sad ending that really marked a beginning. Ultimately, perhaps they even saw hope for themselves.

What then should literature for adolescents be? Like education it must begin where the students are. The conflicts and problems in their literature must be the ones that have a real place in the students own, very real world and reflect already felt hurts and needs.

Solutions and resolutions must be equally valid, valid in terms of what the student knows of the world. Mine don't believe in miracles, they already know that there are problems that must be lived with, problems for which no solution is possible. They accept this. Their literature must be no less mature.

Treasures in the Barn.

By Ernie Cohen 2011

Prologue: I believe I learned to read by a combination of fortune and disobedience. This story is part autobiographical and part based on what I believe my wife's reaction would have been in behalf of her student.

Jim was always outside playing ball, riding his bike, or skiing on hills near his home. Even after supper his wiry five foot six inch frame could be seen jumping over stone walls or bolting from bush to bush in a desperate

game of hide and seek until finally when it was too dark to see, he would lie on the grass tracking the shooting stars across the sky. It was as if school was an alien land, disconnected from his life, and reading was way down on the bottom of the list just above cleaning his room and talking to girls. He had stayed back in third grade and this year his sixth grade teacher recommended he be placed in Mrs. Estra's junior high remedial class. But almost before summer vacation began Jim's mother contacted double pneumonia, and her condition was further weakened by complications from the medicines she received. The family had to split up. Jim and his younger siblings, a brother and sister, were taken to separate foster homes.

Jim's was in a rural town about thirty miles from Norwich. His foster family had no boys near his age. Three girls lived on the second floor; but they did not want to play ball or catch frogs. So, Jim spent most of June sitting alone on the curb in front of the house or in back sitting in a large oak tree where he had placed four boards for a floor across a pair of branches. His main activity during the week was daydreaming, usually about his movie heroes. He imagined himself swinging through the trees with Tarzan, Boy, and Cheetah chasing greedy ivory hunters back to their ships. On Sundays, his father would take him to visit his brother and sister; still his loneliness and boredom grew deeper until that day when his foster family was away shopping.

In back of the house near the tree where he had built a platform there was an old, red barn. The front of the barn had a pair of doors large enough to drive a wide truck through. The only windows were about six feet above the ground, one on each side and about a third of the way back. On the right hand side there was a small door with a broken latch. Several times he had been told never to go into the barn. Maybe it was his curiosity, or the

boredom of hot summer days that led him to disobey..

The only light came from the window above his head. Dust on the panes caused the light to appear as if filtered through a web. He crept slowly toward the window trying to avoid stumbling into the stacks of cardboard boxes, burlap bags, and barrels closely scattered across the floor. They appeared to be filled with discarded household items from attics, basements, and garages. He had to act quickly, for his foster family might be back any minute and would start looking for him. Drops of sweat ran down his neck as he decided to open one of the boxes. He chose the one stacked against the wall closest to the window where by standing on a burlap sack he would be able to see outside as well. Quickly, he stepped on top of the sack and opened the cardboard flaps revealing sheets of newspapers. Anxiously he removed the newspaper, and in the dim light from the window he could make out several stacks of half sized books. Why couldn't they have been baseball cards, he thought, as he picked up the top one? On the cover he barely was able to make out the figure of a man sitting on top of an elephant. Holding the book closer to the window he realized it was Tarzan, Jim's movie hero on the elephant. Quickly, he picked up several others. Each one had a different picture of Tarzan on the cover. His heart started to race as he replaced the newspapers and closed the box. But, the top book he put inside his shirt. Exiting the barn Jim needed a place to hide the book. The tree platform had two cigar boxes nailed to the floor. One contained Jim's matches and firecrackers, the other was empty. Climbing up the branches to the platform he put the book in the empty box and closed it tightly. Then, swinging down from branch to branch, he landed just as the family car was pulling into the driveway.

The next morning he climbed up the tree. At first he read slowly,

writing down words he didn't know and looking them up later in the big Webster dictionary in the living room. Each day his speed increased until he could finish a book in two or three days and soon knew by heart Tarzan's commands to Boy, Jane, and Cheta. Even after supper, sitting under a streetlight several streets from his home, he sat reading.

The summer passed quickly now. Jim's mother had come home and being the oldest, Jim would be home first. Mrs. Estra was also home. She had spent part of the summer teaching at a camp for handicap children. That evening as she reviewed the records of students assigned to her classes she noted that Jim's record indicated he had a keen memory and often entertained the class by telling humorous parts from the prior nights "All in the Family" and "The Jackie Gleason" shows. Those were two of her favorites as well.

Jim's mother was standing on the porch of their second floor house when her husband brought Jim home. When she saw her son she cried with happiness and remembered her promise to God that if she would get well enough to take care of her family, she would honor Him and obey His commandments. Jim ran up the stairs two steps at a time and mother and son embraced and kissed there on the open porch for all to see. Jim saw that his mother's appearance had changed. Gone was her shiny black hair, replaced now by gray, almost white. But that did not matter to Jim for her smile and warmth were still there, and he would sleep in his own bed tonight. His mother noted that Jim had changed. His hair was down to his shoulders and that evening instead of going out to play he picked out a book from the living room bookcase and sat down to read it. The book was "The Nile; a Journey through the Heart of Africa".

School started right after Labor Day, and Mrs. Estra greeted her

remedial students by passing out books with stories by Stevenson, Twain, and Melville. She had purchased the books earlier with her funds and told the class they could keep them and even bring them home to share with their families. Jim was staring at a picture of a man in torn clothes building a tree house on an island. The picture reminded him of last summer when he was alone. Then, just as if being awakened from a dream he heard his name called:

“Jim, Jim,” Mrs. Estra was smiling and calling his name, “would you please join us and read page four.” Jim started to rise, and while half standing and sitting, he found the page and began to read.

“When he awoke, he was lying on a beach with the waves and surf crashing at his feet. Rising he began to shout, ‘where are you, can you hear me, is anyone there?’ As he waited the only sounds he heard was a faint echo of his voice and the sounds of waves crashing on the beach. It was then he believed he was alone!”

“That was well done, Jim. Did your mother help you with reading this summer?”

“No Mam, my mother was in the hospital. She just came home last week.”

Mrs. Estra noticed Jim’s nervousness when he answered and decided not to probe further.

During lunch Mrs. Estra discussed Jim’s sudden reading improvement with her language arts colleague. Her colleague, who taught the regular classes, suggested that Jim read one of the poems used in her classes to see if he could handle seventh grade reading.

That afternoon Mrs. Estra asked for volunteers to read poetry and since no one volunteered she again called on Jim. Handing the book to him

she asked if he would please read the poem called “Genie”. Jim began to read, nervously at first, for he wasn’t sure poetry was for boys.

Genie by Ernie Cohen © 2010

I am the oil genie that sleeps beneath the ocean’s floor.
I have been asleep for millions of years,
Do not disturb me.
Isn’t it enough you rob my brother,
Who sleeps beneath the plains?
You burn him in your furnaces,
And split him to make your gasoline.

But he fought back,
Though he is not the warrior that I am.
He pollutes your air, spills into your rivers,
And kills your fish.
He blankets your sky
Causing your earth to warm,
Your glaciers to melt,
And your rivers to flood.

And now you come after me
With your floating islands,
And steel teeth to drain my blood.
I will teach you a lesson,
A lesson you won’t soon forget.

I will wash over your shores,
And stain your beaches.
I will destroy your fisheries,
Your oyster beds,
And your shore birds.

My terror will reign for ninety days.
I will humble your CEO's, your President.
For I am the oil genie,
That sleeps beneath the ocean floor;
Do not disturb me!"

When Jim finished the class was silent. Even Mrs. Estra hesitated before speaking.

"Thank you. That was very well read, Jim. Did you like the poem?"

"Yes Mam, that genie was strong. He and Tarzan would make a hell of a pair."

After the laughter died down, Mrs. Estra asked Jim what he thought the poem meant. Jim hesitated for a while; the poem reminded him of something he had read. And then it came to him.

"I read a story about a group of hunters who killed elephants so they could sell the ivory. But one time the elephants hurled them in the air and trampled them beneath their feet. The elephants took their revenge."

That afternoon before heading home Mrs. Estra stopped at the guidance office. Tim Ferro was bending over a filing cabinet filled with student reports. He was almost six and a half feet tall and when he stood up

looked more like a pro basketball player than a guidance counselor.

“Am I interrupting you Tim?”

“No, this can wait.” I was planning to speak to you about your remedial students. How are they doing?”

“Tim, one of my student’s sixth grade record said he reads only one syllable words.”

“Sounds like he may have dyslexia or a low I.Q. Have you formulated a plan to help him?”

“That’s just the point; he may not need reading help; something has changed. Today he read several paragraphs from a new book I had passed out, and later read and interpreted a poem from the regular class's language arts book. He seems to have taught himself to read!”

“That’s unusual for a youngster, unless he happened to have spent the summer with a supply of adventure stories and a good dictionary.”

“Tim, right now I’m not as interested in how he learned as how we can help him transfer to a regular class.”

“That’s not so easy, Rita. Classes are just about in place.”

“I want to meet with the front office on Friday.”

“Friday?”

“Tim. It’s important that the transfer occur while classes are just starting.”

Tim took two deep breaths as Mrs. Estra left, and then wrote on his pad:

Start developing a plan! I don’t believe that woman is for real!

During the following day Mrs. Estra called on Jim several times. Each time he hardly missed a word. She was now convinced he could handle the regular classes. Now, it all depended on Tim.

On Wednesday afternoon she was once again at the guidance counselor’s

door.

“ I thought you might have forgotten,” Tim said with a half smile.

“No such luck, Tim. Have you thought of a plan?”

“ At the start of each school year we test students who are new to our system to determine their right place in our classes.”

Rita was listening intently and did not interrupt.

“I’m planning to have Jim tested tomorrow along with several newcomers, and if he shows improvement I’ll help you with the transfer.”

Rita stood up to leave, but Tim had one more thing to say, “You are aware that our assistant principal will take a lot to convince. Joyce doesn’t believe in change, especially spontaneous change!”

Mrs. Estra knew what Tim meant about Joyce. She was a retired marine who ran her office like a military outpost. She could be difficult and delay or even scuttle Jim’s transfer. That afternoon instead of going home she called her husband and left a message. “ Hello, dear. I’ll be late; have to go to New London on a school matter. If you get hungry there’s tuna fish salad in the fridge; made it this morning.” She was formulating her plan.

As Mrs. Estra drove past Connecticut College on her way to New London her thoughts went back to the intellectual and stimulating courses she took for her English major; and then she smiled wondering how they related to her present problem of dealing with a tough ex- marine.

Mrs. Estra parked her car between two vans on State Street and entered a building across the street. In the two front windows there were pictures of ships, airplanes, and of men and women in uniform. The sign above the door read,“ United States Marine Recruiting Station.” The marine sitting behind the desk was shuffling a stack of olive green papers that looked like they could have been fresh directive from the Pentagon. His

blue-braided cap and white gloves were on a table near the desk. Mrs. Estra waited until he looked up.

“Good after noon, mam. I’m sorry, but we already filled our monthly quota for female volunteers.”

Mrs. Estra did not smile instead she gave the marine the same look she wore when one of her students started to act up.

“Young man, I didn’t drive through late afternoon traffic after enduring five classes of boisterous adolescents, to listen to your inept attempt at humor.”

The marine froze, as if hit with a swift karate chop.

“I came here to ask if the marines retest new recruits whose prior records are below standards.”

The marine relaxed a bit, realizing she wasn’t going to chop him or ask to have her son discharged.

“Yes we do. We will test them again, especially young men, who hadn’t taken school too seriously.”

“And do you sometimes see an improvement that enables them to meet the standards?”

“We often do, particularly among those who have begun to read books and newspapers.”

Mrs. Estra smiled. “Thank you sergeant.”

“May I ask, mam why you wanted to know this?”

“It has to do with being prepared . May I have your name and telephone number in case I want to contact you?”

“Certainly Mam, Sergeant Aaron Greenberg, 860- 442-4080, but I won’t be working, the week after next when the Jewish Holidays begin.”

As Mrs. Estra was leaving she called back, “ I hope you enjoy your New

Year Holiday.”

It was Thursday afternoon when Mrs. Estra again appeared at Tim’s office. Jim had been asked to leave class that morning to take a test at the guidance office. Tim was looking over some papers when Rita asked, “Well, Tim is the flag up or down?”

Instead of answering he handed her a sheet of paper with two sets of numbers on it, 5th grade 114, 7th grade 139. Jim had increased his I.Q. by twenty-five points putting him in the top, ten percentile.

“Rita, I’ll be there tomorrow when you meet with the brass.”

“Nice going Tim, and thanks. See you tomorrow.”

That night Rita slept peacefully for the first time in three nights, when the meeting came with the principal and Joyce, Rita was ready for the attack by the vice principal, “It’s almost absurd to think a boy who has been a poor reader since first grade has suddenly change into competent student, regardless of his IQ score. Those scores has been known to be unreliable,

Rita slowly rose to he feet, looking first at Tim who was clenching his fists as if preparing to fight the Vice Principal right there in the Principal’s office. Next she looked at the principal who was turning the pages of his note book and not looking up. Standing straight up she walked to the blackboard and with a piece of florescent purple chalk wrote the following sentences:

Sargent Greenberg at the Marine recruiting station told me many applicant who had failed parts of the entrance exams had passed the second time after being told to read sports and mystery stories over the summer. Sargent Greenberg's teteophone number is 860-442-4080.

Both the Principal and Vice principal were silent until finally the Principal spoke, Let’s give it for a three months trial” The Vice Principal

nodded her agreement. Tim and Rita had carried the day and celebrated with double ice cream sundaes at the local soda shop. But, there was one more thing she needed to do.

That night she called Jim's parents. She explained about his progress in reading and his improved test score. Then she said in both hers and the guidance councilor's judgment Jim should be entered in the regular 7th grade classes where he will get the challenging work he needs to help him grow.

"If you do not object the transfer will occur early next week and will be reviewed in three months." Both his parents were pleased with the transfer and his father said he would take Jim to the Red Sox and Indian play off game in Boston, as Jim's favorite team was the Cleveland Indians. Jim's mother told Mrs. Estra that this was the second good news she received today. The social worker and doctor agreed that it was time to bring Jim's younger brother, Franklin, home as soon as Sunday.

Mrs. Estra said, "I'm glad to be part of the good news. Still, there's one thing that puzzled me. How did Jim improve his reading over the summer?"

Jim's mother hesitated and then made Mrs. Estra promise to keep it a secret. She told Mrs. Estra about the barn, finding the stack of Tarzan books there, and how Jim spent all his free time reading adventures of his movie hero.

Later that evening, Mrs. Estra smiled. "Why of course, there's nothing better than a good adventure story to make a boy want to read. When are they going to learn that pabulum just won't do?"

The Beginning

By Reba Estra, August 1973

Edited by Ernie Cohen 2011

There was an eddy in the hall traffic as a hand reached around to upset an armful of books. Another eddy appeared as a game of tag invaded the traffic walking in the opposite direction. A yelp and more flying books marked the game's progress up the hall. They were on their way.

David and Joey still playing tag reached the room first. The crashing of desks lasted until they both ran out of breath. Now Mark arrived. He was early for a change, and with good reason. The books he tipped over had belonged to someone twice his size and very angry. Mark ducked behind me into the safety of the room.

While I turned away to settle a noisy quarrel, several of the girls came. They were deep in a conversation about something. I overheard the words "Snakes" and "Children."

The rest of the boys scrambled through the emptying halls practicing Kung Fu moves along the way. They stopped briefly when they saw me, but hurried to the corner of the room out of view of my hallway station.

Twelve members of my J-7 class had arrived. Only Colleen was missing. I asked for information.

"She took off out the hall door."

"You're crazy, she's in the lav smoking a joint."

"I saw her in the office. She's in real trouble."

"It's that substitute in math. Colleen's trying to rape him."

There was a quick way to shut this off, and I took it. I put my fingers in my ears. Next I over-rode the laughter to ask again if anyone knew where Colleen was. The round of nonsense began once more. It ended when Colleen opened the door.

She stood just inside the door a moment gathering her audience. Then she moved to her seat, pausing to flap a shirttail as she passed Robert. Her

stilted walk in high clogs held everyone's eye. David broke the silence.

"Some teacher you are. She's so late you ought to throw her out."
Colleen threw a look of hate in David's direction. Their affair had broken-up angrily.

"Do you have a reason for being late, Colleen?"
She looked at me. No anger, only innocence was in her eyes. "I didn't do nothing wrong."

Ways to cut this game short ran through my mind. I tried the first one to surface. "O.K., I'll take your word for it."

Rumbles of mutiny arose from the class. Colleen smiled. "Don't you want my pass?" She tottered to the desk and deposited the official admit form.

"She forged it!" Called David.
Hoping to end the exchange instantly I put a stack of paperbacks into Colleen's hand and asked her to pass them out.

Her performance was polished and showed much feeling. She moved from desk to desk, bestowing books like marks of affection on some and slamming them disdainfully on others. There were a couple of surprises on her latest hate list. As usual, those out of favor, except David, hardly dared to protest beyond the silent pleas for justice in their eyes.

"Take it easy, Colleen, they're brand new," helped a little.
"We gonna have to read this?"
"Might do you some good."
"The whole thing?"
"The w-h-o-l-e thing," ended that volley in laughter. They all loved to see the closing of a trap.

"This is getting to be a lousy class. All we do is read lousy books in it."

“Maybe you want a class in reading tea leaves?” More laughter. They began to open the books. Word of pictures bound into the middle spread quickly and everyone began to study them. It was time to move into the lesson plan.

On the board went the word “novel.” It was not a new term for some of them. Joey looked up with disgust on his face. “Aw, that means a bunch of fake lies.” Joyce who had spent a time in silence studying the pictures was not so sure.

“But there’s black people and it look real in the pictures.” Frank, with the book in one hand and a pencil busy sketching in the other asked quietly, “Is it a true story?”

My opening had come. “That’s going to be for you to decide. I won’t put you on, it’s considered a novel -- a story -- but whether it’s true or not, that’s going to be up to you.

“That’s not fair. All teachers make you work.” Came a mutter from David. Robert and Colleen were in deep conversation over the pictures. Colleen carefully raised her hand and waited with patience to be recognized. “I’ve got a question.”

“Go ahead, Colleen.” She hesitated. Robert nudged her, urging her to ask it. I should have suspected, but things were going well.

“It’s about the pictures. There’s woods and everything -- and lots of animals and things, maybe snakes too?”

The rest of the class suddenly became attentive, too attentive. Even the covert karate chops between two of the boys stopped.

“Ask her” followed by a half-giggle came from several places.

“Go ahead, Colleen” was my invitation to my own undoing.

“Well, I read something about snakes and I don’t know if it’s true -- true like we’re talking about the book.”

I nodded an invitation into the silence.

Colleen took a deep breath. “If a snake has intercourse with a woman, what will the children be like?”

Silence. Laugh? Scream? They were waiting. Silence.

I put on a thoughtful face. I stalled watching warily to find the trap. There didn’t seem to be any. Every face was serious. Was this really a problem? They looked so trusting, so expectant.

With a longing glance at my open plan book and a panicked look to check for an observer at the door, I tried to find an answer that would satisfy them.

“The Bible, any of you familiar with the Old Testament?” There were nods from some, and a wry face from David.

“In the very first part, about creation, it tells about every creature being its own kind. People feel those words mean that each of the different animals could only have children like themselves.” It was feeble, but it was safe. “A snake is very different from a man -- or a woman.”

They were listening. David spoke up. “That’s nothing but old stuff.”

“There are other reasons from science. Know anything about genes?” There were nods, more than for the Bible. A quick resume of genetics followed. There was still some uncertainty. I promised a visit to check the facts in the library for anyone who decided to stay for the tutoring period after school. They seemed satisfied.

“How come you didn’t give Colleen detention like Mrs. Ginny did when she heard the question?” Complained David.

“Maybe I ought to keep all of you for having listened to the question,”

ended that.

Twenty minutes yet remained of the period. All I needed was an instant bridge from snakes to Sounder. I picked up my copy of the book. I prayed. And Colleen spoke up.

“If the story about the snakes wasn’t true, why do you want us to read a book that isn’t true?”

“I said Sounder was a novel. And that you would have to decide what ways it was true.”

There was some squirming and a few complaints. Karate and Kung Fu were starting. A stick of chewing gum passed between almost concealed hands. Frank unfolded a social studies map and began to color. I lost my temper.

The sermon that followed was brief, noisy, and probably a bit familiar. It ended with a very customary “all I want is to have you use your minds and hold your tongues for a while!”

David took my orders literally. As he tucked his protruding tongue with precision between a finger and his thumb he looked around for an audience. He didn’t find one.

I moved a chair to a place between the desks of the karate practitioners, opened my book and began to read.

They listened in silence until the bell rang.

Of Thistles and Poetry

By Reba Estra, July 1973

Edited by Ernie Cohen 2011

Prologue:

My seventh graders rate below average in reading, math and general educational achievement. They are well above average in the creation of classroom disorder, casual mischief, and bubble gum balloons. I have taught a poetry unit in the past, and being persistent in my follies, I will try again. Sometimes I have succeeded, but only when I managed to catch them unaware like a thistle.

Thistles are what I need in teaching poetry. Thistles are what I have collected. They are chosen for the hooks they deploy to catch my word-weary students to whom “poetry” is a dirty word equal in rank with “grammar” and only a step behind that dirtiest word of all, “reading.”

But before the thistles can catch them, I must use an even sturdier hook. The one I have used has become the best catchers of all, Simon and Garfunkel. The word “poetry” is not mentioned, at least not at first. The sinking of hooks and spikes takes place in this order:

Day One. The big stereo recorder is set up. The Simon and Garfunkel tape lies on the desk. Questions are asked. There is no answer beyond a deliberate frustration of “Tuck in your tongue and find out.” I play “Save the Life of my Child” from their “Bookends” album. The initial explosion of sound is tuned up loud to weld them into attention. They listen. Their assignment is to answer one easy question, “What’s happening.” I have yet to have a student who caught the story on the first try. And I’ve yet to lack a student who doesn’t complain, “That’s not fair, it’s only a song.” We listen again. Same question. They learn first that words have meaning, that careful listening, even when “only a song” is involved, is necessary. Then, by the third try when everyone is supplied with a copy of the words, their awakened curiosity (or annoyance with me – hard to tell them apart sometimes) has led them into a discovery. There is meaning in words, more meaning than is often readily apparent. Discussion that follows leads easily into such topics as the compression of thought, or paragraphs of meaning in a single phrase. They listen again, if time remains, and I can warm myself in their glows of satisfaction.

Day Two. On the board is written the phrase “Word Puzzles.” Questions again. Similar saucy answers. I begin with a brief reminder of

yesterday's experience (and promise a repeat of the tape at the end of the hour.) Then I ask who has heard of Satchel Paige? Someone usually has. If not, I tell of the old miracle man of baseball, ageless, gifted, and endlessly patient. (The why of his need to wait for recognition is answered honestly, "He was black.") I read the poem "To Satch." Maybe I read it again. Then only do I pass out copies. Here I get the first accusation, "But that's a poem." I play straight man to their annoyance and insist it's a puzzle, a "word puzzle." The idea that concentrated thought requires some work from the reader, work that yields pleasure, may take fragile root at this point. Then I read the James Dickey football poem, "In the Pocket." The classes are a bit confounded. Who ever heard of football poetry? On lucky days, my hooks and spikes have been swallowed. I will be allowed to explore with them some more of these confounding "puzzles."

Day Three and Maybe Day Four. Of formal learning there is very little. Mostly we deal with meaning, not word by word, but in key phrases such as "steel winds, and "snow is lead" in Langston Hughes "Without Benefit of Declaration," phrases that have an imperative timeliness.

The poems have been carefully arranged to deal with specific questions, all related to meaning, all designed to provoke. Page two touches on two uncommon views of common themes, God and Christmas. Page three deals with mothers and sons. On page four, we explore another quality of poetry, its unusual power to make the commonplace compelling. Page five poses the most difficult problems in meaning and we learn that interpretations though varied can be equally valid. Page six permits us to compare two views of the same strange object: the poet.

The unit rarely lasts beyond four days. Other poetry is examined to refresh the third rainy day in a row or to celebrate similar joyous or non-

joyous occasions. Sometimes, a very rare sometimes, we share the discoveries of the creations of my students. In a very special segment of my soul I cherish the memory of showing a father a poem written by his son speaking of his love for his father. I disobeyed the son who asked me to remove the poem before visiting night. The father died three months later.

In teaching this unit I accomplish several goals. My plan book meets specifications as the words “reading for meaning” decorate the deceitful pages. I have also introduced to my classes several gifted poets who happen to be black. Most of all, I have sometimes accomplished my goal of greatest importance, that of ridding the word “poetry” of some of its negative connotations through trapping many students into an unexpected discovery of themselves.

The Words

By Reba Estra August 1973

Edited by Ernie Cohen 2012

Prologue: This next story is about bullying, not physical bullying, but as the title implies verbal bullying which often can be more painful and its pain more lasting than the physical kind. However, words can affect the bully as well.

The first time Mrs. Estra had to handle a bully was when she was five or six years old. She had just bought a bag of candy and was walking away from the store, when she was stopped. A tall burly boy was blocking her way and demanding she give him the bag, or suffer the consequences. She said: "No! But I'll share." The bully looked down at the small girl, stopped to scratched his head, and then said: "share? What does that mean?" "You can have half of the candy." And so the bully and the little girl became friends, and no other boys tried to take candy away from her. As for the bully, hopefully he will make many more friends by using his strength in a civilized way.

In the next story that same gift for words will be just as useful forty years later for Mrs. Estra.

“You got no right!”

She stood in the doorway rigid from the tips of her plat formed clogs to the straggling curls on her cheeks. Her jeans were skin tight on her thin legs. A plaid shirt fell open to reveal a skimpy halter worn in defiance of the school dress code. Blue halos above her eyes seemed to intensify the glare. Colleen had arrived.

“Who says so?” I threw back from behind the desk.

“You got no right to make me stay here now and miss the dance!” came her shriek. There was silence from the desk so Colleen continued.

“My father’s gonna get you for this. He’s gonna call.”

“Good idea.” I scribbled briefly and held out a slip of paper. “Here’s my phone number. I’ll be home after seven.”

“Not you, he’s gonna talk to the principal!”

“That’s an even better idea. I’ll write a brief report of what happened for the principal. And since you’re here, you can check it to be sure it’s right.”

Colleen closed her mouth and moved a bit into the room. “You teacher’s are all alike, you lie, all the time you lie.”

“This time you can be witness to what’s being said about you. I’ll even leave room for you to tell your side.

“I didn’t do nothing. This whole thing’s a fake. You lie, all the time you lie.”

“Go ahead, throw away a chance to catch a teacher in the act. In writing, too.”

Colleen stepped into the room. She collapsed herself into a seat, legs thrown wide, and halter fully revealed.

“Go ahead, write your lies.” She took out a bottle of metallic blue

polish and began delicately to touch up imaginary chips on her fingernails. She glared at me while waiting to be told to put it away.

I ignored her. Quickly I grabbed a piece of composition paper and with the purple felt-tip I had been using to correct papers I wrote the report. The purple pen was sure to cause comments if the report ever actually reached the office. Then I handed it to her to read.

“Lies, all lies” she muttered as she picked up the paper.

“Today Colleen came to class five minutes late. Her lateness was for an excusable reason, but her behavior that followed cannot be excused.

When she entered, everyone was quietly busy with the day’s assignment. She walked from desk to desk, greeting classmates she had not seen for the last ten minutes. She slapped playfully at Robert when he had no gum to give her. She pushed Joey’s books onto the floor when he couldn’t find a pencil to lend her. Then she draped herself around David to discuss whose turn it was to find the after school cigarettes. All of this was ignored; my only action was to urge Colleen to get to her desk.

Then Colleen spotted Mary. Two sharp sentences sent Mary in hysterics running from the room. This upset class order so; little additional work could be done for the rest of the period.

For these reasons Colleen was assigned detention today. She was asked to serve it during time set aside for the school dance because transportation problems make any other arrangement impossible.

Colleen has been asked to read this report and make any corrections necessary.

“You sure took long enough. Must have told a whole bunch of lies,”

was her comment as she grabbed the sheet. She read it, laughing at first, then “You lie!” she screamed.

“Where?”

“It wasn’t gum. Robert had Life Savers.”

Colleen read the report again and asked one question, “What’s ‘hysterics?’”

I told her. I was waiting for more explosions.

“That Mary, she’s dumb. I didn’t do nothing to her.”

“Mary didn’t just begin to cry and run out because you walked past her desk.”

“You don’t understand. She looked so awful, I just told her so. Besides, saying something’s not like doing something,” Colleen brooded for a minute and then grew indignant again. “You got no right to keep me here!”

“You’ve got no right to make Mary so unhappy.”

“She’s stupid. Anyway, no one has to listen to anyone. I was just fooling.”

“It’s not funny when you tell someone she looks ugly and everyone’s laughing at how ugly she’s dressed.”

“I told you she’s dumb. She should’ve known how silly she looked. I only told her the truth.”

“You knew Mary had made the dress herself and was so happy about it. Was that what you couldn’t stand?”

The mascara filled tears fell faster. Colleen put down her head and stumbled into a seat. In a quiet voice she answered, “It’s her fault. She was talking to David.”

I handed the box of tissues across the desk. “You’re feeling pretty

miserable. Have you thought about how Mary's feeling now?"

The wet eyes looked up. "She's probably hiding near the bleachers." The thought almost brought a smile.

Suddenly Colleen headed for the door. "I'm going to that dance." I'm gonna go out that door and you can't stop me."

"Go ahead. You'd better see David today, because you won't sit near him in my class again, ever."

She hesitated, playing with the doorknob. "All you teacher's lie." The words had an almost automatic sound.

"You saw all the lies in my report you tore up."

"Slowly she turned back into the room. "But it was only a couple of words. You've got no right."

"When a couple of words cause such unhappiness, I've got every right."

"Just because your class got messed up you got me in trouble!"

"No, I care about the class, but I'm more concerned about you and Mary. She didn't have to be unhappy today, and you and I didn't have to miss the dance. You know, I like those dances too."

"All you teachers ever do is nag about gum and keeping sneakers on and not running and shooting rubber bands."

"Because all you kids do is try to chew gum and go barefoot and raise hell."

We both laughed. Colleen sat down and waited.

"Want to help correct some papers to kill the time?"

She nodded. "Can I use the purple pen?"

I handed her the pen and the answer sheet. "Study it for a minute. I'll

go get us some Cokes.”

“Maybe I won’t be here when you get back,” she called as I reached the door.

“Lies,” I grinned, “all lies.”

Nice Gneiss

By Ernie Cohen,

July 2011

Prologue:

She had been hiking at Fort Shantock where the Mohegan Indians once had a village. The village overlooked the Thames River on its way to Long Island Sound. On that day instead of Indians gathering oysters and crabs fishermen were casting lines from the shore. Close to where the fishermen parked their vehicles, deep, muffled sounds repeated and repeated. Turning, she saw a dog tied to a post. Rope had twisted around the dog's neck forcing its head to hang close to the post while a hot July sun beat down on the struggling animal. The fisherman were also looking at the dog, a large black German Shepard, but none of them had moved toward the animal. Mrs. Estra moved quickly; she picked up a pan by the roadside, and filling it with water from a nearby stream approached the animal, talking softly while she moved closer. The animal looked directly into the eyes of the gray haired woman as she placed the pan near its feet. Then as Mrs. Estra froze, it lowered its head and drank the water.

But there was more to be done. The rope was still twisted around the dog's neck. Again she approached the animal. The sun's rays had caused the dog's dark eyes to narrow and its tongue hung loosely between its large, curved teeth. Moving closer she began talking as she gently untwisted the rope, " I see your problem and I will help you."

At the start of each year Mrs. Estra placed on her desk objects that had attracted her attention on summer hikes. She was particularly attracted to banded rock whose hard surface resembled the arch on a turtles back. The bands, about a quarter of an inch wide, were separated by stripes of dark and light, granular crystals. As she bent over to pick it up she could hardly have known the events that rock would lead to.

When her remedial students headed for the exit door on a hot September day, none seemed to notice the banded rock on their teacher's desk. Standard good byes mixed with their urgent rush to escape to freedom.

“See you tomorrow, Mrs. Estra.”

“I'll bring my homework in, Mrs. Estra; I promise.”

“So long; keep cool, Mrs. Estra.”

And then sounds she least expected to hear: “Nice, nice.”

He was the last one to leave, and his remark brought her to attention.

“What did you say?”

“Oh, I just said that's a nice piece of gneiss”, pointing to the smooth, banded rock on her desk.

Mrs. Estra could hardly believe her ears. The boy's seat was in the last row next to the window. He always seemed bored and had barely written a few sentences on tests she had given.

“How did you know this rock is gneiss?”

“Oh, I read about it in one of my brother's books.”

“Is your brother in high school?”

“Oh no, he's a senior at Virginia Tech; he's going to be a mining engineer.”

That evening Mrs. Estra sat long at her desk. There was an assortment of teaching tools near by. One however, did not belong with the others. It had a hickory handle inserted into a hammer-like head of forged iron, with a four-inch long spike at one end. She had purchased it the summer she completed her master's degree. Her English advisory suggested she take Elizabethan drama but the opportunity to get out of the classroom and her inquisitive nature strongly favored geology. The weapon-like, spiked hammer was used to chip out geodes and rock specimens at abandoned quarries and ledge outcroppings. Now, one of her remedial students had identified a form of metamorphic rock she had learned to do only after several field trips while at Wesleyan University. The facts did not add up. She needed to get to the bottom of this or she would be troubled for the rest of the year.

Next day during free period she visited the guidance office and requested to see the boy's records. They started in fourth grade when he moved from Oklahoma to Connecticut: 'John is failing to keep up with his class. His work is often incomplete.' The fifth grade report was similar. 'He needs extra help with his work. He only completed two sentences on the essay test. I believe he should be assigned to the remedial class even though his math teacher is impressed with his work.' Similar comments appeared on his sixth grade record. 'He does not complete his work and often seems withdrawn.' Mrs. Estra closed the file and said nothing to Tim, the guidance councilor. She needed more information.

That next day during break she asked John if he would read a few paragraphs from a geology book. The book was the text she had used the summer of 1974, at Wesleyan. Opening the book to Chapter 14, *Metamorphic Rocks*, she handed it to him. He looked at the page turned the

book over several times and began reading the second paragraph. It described how metamorphic rocks formed billions of years ago. He finished that paragraph and the two following without missing a word. As he put down the book puzzled looks appeared on both their faces.

John spoke first.

“If no one has seen a metamorphic rock forming how do they know how it formed?”

“They don’t. It’s a past event based on the probable effects of pressure and heat on materials thought to be present when the rocks formed. Now, how would you like to tell me why you have trouble keeping up with the regular classes since you read at high school or college level?”

Slowly, he looked up at the teacher. Lines of pain now appeared on his face for the first time. He hesitated for several moments.

“I can read alright, but I can’t write. When I try to, it takes a long time to form letters, and if I rush no one can read it.”

Mrs. Estra thought for just a moment before she spoke.

“Now I understand. I will help you.”

As John left the room, Mrs. Estra smiled. She was glad she had taken geology that summer instead of Elizabethan drama.

The next day she made an appointment with the guidance counselor, Tim Ferro. Tim had helped her when she needed his support with promoting a student who had learned to read over the summer. Teachers also depended on Tim to keep up with most of the new thinking coming from the Secretary of Education. It changed every year and drove most teachers to distraction.

“Tim, this boy read to me several difficult paragraph from my college geology text. When I questioned him he admitted that he could barely write

legibly.”

“It sounds like your student has dysgraphia.”

“Is that the scientific name? Tim, I want to use a tape recorder for his test.”

“That sounds reasonable. It would get him through the written parts; the rest is either multiple choice or calculations. How’s his math?”

“Kate says he’s OK with numbers.”

“How about the brass?”

“I’ve a meeting with them tomorrow at 2:30. Will you come and bring reports on dysgraphia?”

“I sure will! This could be a first for our system.”

Mrs. Estra spent the evening correcting homework and planning for the meeting. She hoped that the principal’s own difficulty with writing would help; he always dictated his correspondence. Though she was cautiously optimistic and looking forward to the meeting she was worried about the assistant principal, a former marine.

Tim and Rita arrived at the principal’s office at 2:30.

“Well, you two are prompt. Please, wait inside my office while I finish dictating.”

The chairs were typical office issue, metal frames with black vinyl seats. When Joyce came in Tim offered his; but she waved him off and grabbed one from the front desk. She still retained the attitudes of her marine training.

“Rita, don’t you think all our students ought to be able to write legibly?”

“If they can, Joyce, otherwise they’ll use a secretary like the principal.”

Tim started to smile until he saw Joyce stiffen her back and clench her left wrist just as the principal walked in.

“Well Rita, we’re all here now, so start your sales pitch. I’ll sit in back.”

Rita related the incidents of the gneiss rock and her college geology text. Tim reviewed the guidance records from prior years and explained dysgraphia as a deficiency in handwriting and not an intellectual impairments. Then Rita again spoke looking directly at the principal.

“I would like your permission to use a tape recorder on the written parts of tests I will be giving in advance of the mastery.”

The principal looked slightly uncomfortable and waited till Joyce spoke.

“See here, Rita, we insisted that all our marines write legibly and if they couldn’t, they could joined the army or the navy.”

“Joyce, these are adolescents not marines. What did you do when a marine suffered shell shock and couldn’t even sign his name? When his brain and hand could not talk to each other? That’s what dysgraphia is, a break in neural connections, minus the shells.”

There were several long moments of silence when it seem the students future hung like a beany ball swinging back and forth across the room.

Finally, the principal spoke.

“Rita and Tim, I understand the problem, but the timing is not right. Joyce has a point about writing legibly. The superintendent and I were at last night’s board meeting and four people from the front complained that they’re not able to read their children’s writing. The super is now being pressured to recommend penmanship classes in grades two through six. Why don’t you contact Kate Collins? She’s starting her fall math club in October. Who knows, your student might enjoy it and possibly if he’s any

good at math like I was, he might help the club make the top ten at the regional Math Count contest. We've never been closer than twelfth."

Rita looked at Tim; he was indicating it was time to leave. She paused and then rose to her feet.

"Good bye, and thank you for your comments and suggestions. I will carefully consider them. You know, whether we like it or not, communication is changing. We've entered the digital age. Students will be E-mailing and texting messages on cell phones, and I plan to teach them word processing and graphic, now."

When Rita entered Tim's office she had to lean against the wall and breath deeply.

"Rita, you'll have to bide your time for now. Why don't you call Kate and find out more about the math club. The timing not right."

That night, during supper she told her husband what happened. She had hardly touched her food.

"Rita, I know how much you want to help this student, but you work for the school system, you don't run it. Give the principal's idea a chance. I met Kate Collins at the Coast Guard Academy when I was a proctor at last year's Math Count contest. She had her club up for a possible trip to the State finals when one student was disqualified for using a calculator to check the answers."

"Kate is a fine teacher, someone I fully respect; but what about the rest of his subjects? He will loose a whole year and possibly much more, and I can't help him!"

The next morning she told John about the math club and the fun the clubs had at the United States Coast Guard Academy. He listened without saying anything.

It was the first Saturday in February when the buses rolled through the guarded front gates of the United States Coast Guard Academy and headed for Dimik Hall. Rita had hitched a ride with the Kelly math club. But before the competition started it was time for donuts and apple juice. Every variety of donuts was on the tables. There were fat ones filled with cream or blueberry jelly and medium ones covered with cinnamon or sprinkled with coconuts, and medium fat ones with chocolate coatings on the top side, all donated by a local bakery that the Engineering Society had arranged with. Cadets in their snappy blue uniforms stood behind tables serving apple juice and opening fresh boxes of donuts. From the crowd in front of the tables you couldn't tell whether the students were more interested in the math contest or the donuts.

By 8:30 the students were gathered in the auditorium for the pledge of allegiance and review of the rules and schedules. Then it was time for the 400 middle school students to perform. The tests were divided in sections, each 20 to 30 minute. As soon as one section was completed, cadets would grade them. The first two sets tested the individual while the final set was a team effort and would determine how high the school finished. There were almost as many girls as boys taking the tests and quite a few minorities, particularly Asians. When the proctors finally said put down your pencils and send the answer sheets to your right, a sigh of relief accompanied a dash down the halls to reach the pizzas and sodas.

By noon, happily fed, they were back in the auditorium where students with the 10 highest scores would compete right after a talk on the 'statistic of weather' by the guest speaker, Dr. Thomas Crab, professor of applied mathematics.

The elimination rounds would pit the students against each other two

at a time. The monitor read the problem out loud and the contestant whose buzzer sounded first and gave the right answer won one of the four points needed for eliminating the opponent.

The names of the top ten were called out as cheers went up with each name. There were two from Mansfield Middle Schools where the State University was located and two from Mystic Middle School where scientist and engineers from Pfizer's and General Dynamics lived. Mrs. Estra held her breath as the last name was read, "John O'Neil." Now, the cheers rose from the Norwich contingents, and among the loudest were Mrs. Estra's.

Then the competition began, one on one. The monitor read the question and the answers came quickly, sometimes before the question was completed.

"That is correct. That is correct. That is not correct."

The questions were hard and some had a hidden trap. Soon there were only five pairs left, then three, and then one; the student from Mansfield, Tim Crab whose father had been the guest speaker and John O'Neil from Kelly Middle School. The final set of questions began:

"That is correct. That is correct. That is correct." And on it went until the last question.

The audience waited in silence as the monitor read the question: "The oldest rocks found in North America are gneiss from the Minnesota River valley. They have been dated at about 3.55 billion years old. If radioactive material in the rocks decays at a half-life of 1.30 billion years what percentage of the material is left. Give your answer in percents to....."

It was Tim Crab's buzzer that sounded first.

"What is your answer?" "Seventeen!"

"That is not correct. I will now repeat the last part of the question,

give your answer in percents *to the nearest tenth.*”

John who thought he had lost now hit his buzzer. The audience was hushed as he spoke, “seventeen point two percent.”

“That is.....correct.” As groans rose from the Mansfield audience, the Kelly-Norwich audience jumped to their feet. That is all but one, a middle aged, gray haired teacher. Mrs. Estra face had a smile and a tear both competing with each other.

John walked over to Tim Crab and shook his hand, then turning he smiled at the monitors and shook hands with each of the other eight contestants. The contests were over. The monitor congratulated all the clubs and before they left announced the top three schools that would be invited to the State contest. Kelly came in second!

On Monday morning Mrs. Estra received a call from the principal. “Would you please, come to my office; I’ll send a teacher to watch your class and bring John with you the superintendent wants to meet him. When Mrs. Estra entered the office Joyce was also there. Would this be a congratulations or an inquisition?”

The superintendent asked John about the last question. John smiled at Mrs. Estra before answering.

“ Well, I didn’t expect to get one on geology. It’s my favorite subject.”

The superintendent looked at the principal, “what’s keeping this boy in your remedial classes?”

“He has dysgraphia; the teachers can’t read his writing.” The superintendent looked first at Rita and then at the principal, “Why don’t you let him use a recorder for the written parts of the tests. Give it a try and let me know how it’s working”

As John and his teacher walked back to the classroom both were smiling and at least one was thinking about nice gneiss.
