The Book Resisters: Ways of Approaching Reluctant Teenage Readers

Margaret Mackey
and
Ingrid Johnston

Department of Secondary Education, University of Alberta, Canada

Large numbers of teenagers choose not to read for many reasons. To foster reading as a creative pastime, librarians and teachers need to ask some pertinent questions. What is it that such reluctant readers need to know about reading? What do their librarians and teachers need to know? What can schools do to encourage reading? What kinds of books may be best suited to attracting those who normally do not read for pleasure? In this article, we explore such questions and suggest some answers.

Does it matter if young people read? With so much information and entertainment available to them in other media, perhaps we should stop worrying about their enthusiasm for print.

We all know that large numbers of teenagers in particular can read but hate to do it. Should their librarians, teachers, and parents even bother to attempt to change that situation?

The standard answer is Yes, of course reading is important. There are many versions of this standard answer, from the venerable line that allows for all kinds of "junk" material, "Well, at least they're reading something," to the more stately arguments of the cultural literacy faction. Any realistic and honest assessment of the world, however, must acknowledge that a large group of intelligent, interesting, and moral people don't read. Not reading is a legitimate choice, especially if it is made on the basis of a considered knowledge of the benefits and drawbacks of a reading life.

Just as a number of adults do not read, many young people can read but choose not to do so. Perhaps they do not really understand what is involved with reading, or they may not have found a book that caught their imaginations. In some cases, they have not learned how to establish a sustained connection with a text longer than a page or two. It would be reassuring to consider that every reluctant reader had at least made an informed decision based on some positive experience of reading but we know that many young people have never really given reading a chance. What can their teachers and librarians do?

In this article we explore some of the issues surrounding those students who appear never to read. Some special categories of readers have problems beyond the scope of this article. We do not discuss issues of people who
cannot read at all effectively, nor do we address the further complications that attend those readers who may be literate in another language but who struggle to read English. We do not underestimate the difficulties that beset such readers and their teachers, but in this article we address questions raised by another, perhaps larger group: those who can read but usually do not.

**The Arguments for Reading**

Although it is important to allow for the individual’s right to reject reading, it is also useful to clarify what it is that we think makes reading important. Birkerts (1994) has commented passionately on the power of literature.

> Serious literary works have always derived their artistic value, their importance, from the fact that they comprehended the changing terms of our world and gave us narratives that could help us understand the forces impinging on our lives. (p. 204)

Krashen (1993), in a synthesis of research into reading practices, provides a more practical and utilitarian argument. He is discussing American citizens but the point he makes is universally relevant.

Nearly everyone in the United States can read and write. They just don’t read and write very well. Although basic literacy has been on the increase for the last century, the demands for literacy have been rising faster. Many people clearly don’t read and write well enough to handle the complex literacy demands of modern society.

The cure for this kind of literacy crisis lies, in my opinion, in doing one activity, an activity that is all too rare in the lives of many people: reading. Specifically, I am recommending a certain kind of reading—free voluntary reading. (pp. ix-x)

Krashen (1993) emphasizes the importance of making provision for young people to read without imposed follow-up tasks. This point is also made by Pennac (1994) in his book about reading. His “Reader’s Bill of Rights” outlines aspects of reading that adults often take for granted but that may sound radical in the context of school reading.

When it comes to reading we grant ourselves every right in the book, including those we withhold from the young people we claim to be teaching.

1. The right to not read.
2. The right to skip pages.
3. The right to not finish a book.
4. The right to reread.
5. The right to read anything.
6. The right to escapism.
7. The right to read anywhere.
8. The right to browse.
9. The right to read out loud.
10. The right to not defend your tastes. (pp. 170-171)

At first glance, these items seem like common sense, but it is not the kind of common sense that holds sway in many classrooms, where the need to control and account for students’ reading takes priority. It is worth considering the value and importance of letting students control at least some of their own reading time and tastes.

An Insider/Outsider Perspective
We work as researchers in a university department of secondary education and often visit schools to talk to students and teachers about particular books and about issues of reading in general. We have both taught in secondary schools (in Canada, Britain, and South Africa) and one of us has been a school librarian. Our experiences have provided us with an insider/outsider perspective that informs our approach to reluctant readers and their teachers and librarians. Our contacts with these groups have raised many questions in our minds.

What do Reluctant Readers Not Know?
What stops many young people from reading? Are there aspects of engagement with text that are known to those who enjoy reading but that escape these reluctant readers? Under this heading, we want to consider a number of questions.

Do these reluctant readers know that reading is enjoyable?
This may seem so trite a question as to be ridiculous, but the implications are actually enormous. If your main experience with reading involves texts chosen by someone else, with constant checks on your progress and comprehension; if your usual reading strategies are laborious rather than free-flowing; if your main experience of reading for pleasure is based on nonfiction with a high value placed on a tangible return for your effort; if any or all of these experiences apply to you, then why would it cross your mind to associate reading with pleasure?

Do these reluctant readers know that even good readers are often confused, especially at the beginning of a story?
Again, this is a question that seems too obvious to be worth asking. Surely reluctant readers don’t think that avid readers are always entirely clear about what is going on in their books. However, one of the major facts about reading is that it is invisible. Poor or unwilling readers actually have few windows into the minds of keen readers and may have little understanding of the processes involved in making sense of a text. Readers who are more likely than others actually to make public some of their reading processes are teachers; however, all too often, teachers talk about reading a book they have already previously read many times. With the best of intentions, teachers may mislead some of their students into believing that good readers know
everything there is to know about a book on the first acquaintance. No wonder some of these students are intimidated into thinking that they are not and can never be such good readers. It is important to acquaint them with the idea that what good readers know is how to suspend judgment in the early parts of a text. Quite possibly, many of these young people know how to apply such strategies to a film or video, but the mystique of print has baffled them.

*Do these young people find enough fictional enjoyment elsewhere that they simply feel no need to look for vicarious experience in books?*

Many kinds of fictional experience are available to people in even moderately affluent circumstances today: television, video, film, computer game, and so forth. It is important for those who value print not to undervalue the importance of other kinds of fiction. On the other hand, it is necessary to find ways to encourage reluctant readers not to undervalue the power of written text.

*Do these students know how to find books they will enjoy?*

In some ways this question is the most basic of all. Many important issues are involved in the whole area of selection, both in institutional and in personal terms. We return to this whole issue below.

**What do Some Teachers and Librarians of Reluctant Readers Not Know?**

It is easy to despair of the large numbers of students who disdain reading. However, the issue is complicated, and teachers and librarians might benefit from asking themselves a couple of questions as well.

*Do teachers and librarians know enough about what students actually do read?*

High schools in our part of Canada offer two general English courses, one for the standard academic route and one for those whose level of achievement or interest in English is less rigorous. We visited a number of nonacademic high school classes to give book talks; while we were there, we asked students to describe what they liked to read. We stressed that answers could include newspapers, comics, magazines, and anything else. About a third did not read, but a substantial majority said they regularly enjoyed some form of reading. The range of the positive answers surprised us. Students whose teachers perceived them as reading-refusers actually claimed to read a variety of texts. The boys cited hotrod magazines, comics, the sports sections of newspapers, girlie magazines, gory books, and guitar magazines. Boys and girls read Stephen King; girls read V.C. Andrews, Christopher Pike, and R.L. Stine, as well as women's magazines. Much of this material is not considered "suitable" for reading in school and the inexorable question arises: Is "read-
ing” a matter of definition and, if so, who has the power to define what will qualify?

Do teachers and librarians know enough about books that might appeal to such readers?

Many teachers teach the books that are on the bookshelf and in the stock cupboard. A surprising number do not actually read extensively for pleasure themselves, or, if they do, they are nevertheless unfamiliar with much young adult fiction. The publishing industry has targeted teenagers over the past 15 years or so. It is easy to look at Stine and Pike and dismiss the entire genre as rubbish, but this attitude ignores the huge range of quality fiction addressed to adolescents.

Many librarians are more knowledgeable about literature for adolescents, but not all of them have given particular thought to the kinds of books that are accessible to inexperienced and reluctant teenage readers. Specific selection criteria may be useful in finding books to target this particular group. The following points may provide a useful start in assembling a list of descriptors:

1. The story should grip readers from the first page onward; reluctant readers have no patience for an elaborate and leisurely beginning.
2. Books should be short but not so slight that they offer no challenge.
3. The cover of the book should be engaging; even if the book is targeted at weak readers, the cover should not make this obvious.
4. As a general rule, the book should be about characters as old as or older than the intended reader.
5. Books should offer some literary rewards without being overwhelming; readers should finish the book feeling that they have had an experience worth the investment of their time.
6. The book should be accessible without relying completely on action, cheap thrills, and stereotyped characters.
7. Many readers prefer books that offer a perspective close to their own experience, but good books will expand readers’ horizons even if they begin with the known and the familiar. It is necessary to keep in mind, further, that what is known varies from reader to reader, especially when multicultural communities are involved.
8. Readers vary in their needs; some benefit from a book that makes them uncomfortable and challenges their assumptions; others have a profound need for books that make them feel secure.
9. The language of the book should not be too obscure and challenging, but it should rise above formula and stereotype. Inexperienced readers need some redundancy in their text, but too much repetition can be oppressive and unhelpful.
10. For the most part, though not always, it is useful to offer books that are recently published and describe a recognizable contemporary world.
Books that are set locally have a particular appeal but it is important to offer a range of stories from different cultures. Such general principles may be useful, but in the end there is no substitute for local information as well. We cannot emphasize enough how important it is that teachers and librarians not only know the books but also take full advantage of the fact that they know the readers. No one else is in a position to combine broader awareness with specific personal knowledge.

What is Needed to Help Reluctant Readers?

Time to read
Some of the requirements of reluctant readers are obvious, but it cannot hurt to make them clear. Many young people simply need time to read. If their classroom reading experiences are all bound up with the need to report back on their reading and to be evaluated on their performance, they may well never know what it is like simply to sit with a book and read for the pleasure of it.

Selection skills
Another primary need may be less immediately apparent. Many readers do not know how to find a book they will enjoy. They have no idea what kinds of strategies good readers use to select books for pleasure. Faced with a wall of books in a library or a shop, they do not know where to start looking. They have no received categories for dividing a collection of books into meaningful and manageable subsections.

Hatt (1976) suggests that teachers who automatically make the choice of what book will be read in class are actually undermining one of the necessary accomplishments of readers.

One effect of extending the reading act to include the “finding” of the text is to draw attention to much of the reading done in educational situations, where students are obliged to read prescribed texts. The “finding” in these cases is highly artificial. The student does not go through the process of selecting a preferred need, nor of matching a text to it on the basis of descriptions or clues. Having had the first part of the reading act done for him, he has to behave as if it were his own work and assume the right [mind]set for the rest of the reading act, and so reading becomes a kind of simulation game. (p. 67)

For some students, reading the class novel is their only sustained reading experience. If there are ways in which such students can gain even limited practice in making choices within these limits, it is probably worth exploring the benefits of such approaches. High school students given even the limited choice of picking one book out of a total of four responded enthusiastically when we asked them their opinions of this slightly more open approach. Jared’s comment was typical: “I liked that because I’m not a reader myself. I don’t like reading, so being able to choose made it a little more enjoyable.”
Connie agreed: "It was better because you can choose something you can enjoy more instead of being stuck with something you don't want to read. As an alternative to the class novel, allowing students to work in small groups with different books enables them to develop their own strategies for coping with uncertainty and dealing with the unknown in conditions that are less pressured than could possibly be the case in a whole-class situation.

What other methods can teachers use to increase their students' awareness of selection strategies? One simple approach is to ask students themselves to share their own tactics for picking the right book out of the mass. A quick survey of 14 avid adolescent readers provided a list of 27 possible routes to successful book selection; the most popular among those options (in descending order) were as follows:

- following an author
- browsing
- talking to a friend
- following a genre
- seeing a book cover
- starting one book in a series
- seeing someone else's reading
- following a topic
- talking to a teacher or librarian
- doing a novel study
- receiving a book as a present
- using a book club list
- working on a school unit such as mythology, poetry, mystery
- finding a title appealing
- forced reading—picking up any book in a hurry if you forgot yours.

It is obvious that not all these strategies will work equally well for more reluctant readers. If you don't like to read, for example, you are unlikely to talk to your friends about reading. However, the mere fact of raising the question of selection may be useful in its own right, and some of the strategies of more experienced readers may be useful for their less enthusiastic classmates. Conducting such a survey among a class or a school might produce many other strategies; at the least, it would open up the subject for discussion and it might be possible to post a list of the most popular tactics.

In our work with reluctant readers and their teachers and librarians, we have explored other options for making the selection issue visible. Somewhat to our surprise, we have achieved some success with some simple tools. On occasion, visiting a classroom, we have distributed a small number of books to each student in the class (we have found that three paperbacks per student works particularly well) and asked them not only to choose the one that is most appealing but also to reflect on the criteria that guided their choice. This activity has led to some stimulating discussion, not to mention enthusiasm for some of the books thus distributed. After making their own choice from a
set of three, students can then combine in pairs and enlarge their discussion. Often we hear laments as we collect the books back, and students have been known to head straight for the library after school.

Another strategy is also simple. Experienced readers have a considerable repertoire of selection strategies; reluctant readers often are not prepared simply to give any book the time to make its appeal. We have found that by putting the cover and/or the first page of a book on an overhead transparency, we have been able to slow down the reflex of automatic rejection and give the book time to instill some of its charm. Some books, of course, work more successfully this way than others. A variation is to show alternative covers for the same text and discuss some of the ways that publishers use to attract potential readers.

As visitors to a school, of course, we have novelty value that the usual teacher and school librarian cannot rely on. Nevertheless, we have found that talking about ways of making choices may sometimes enable us to slide in book recommendations almost as a side issue.

An oral rather than a visual approach is the tried and tested method of reading part of a book aloud to a group. Often the first pages are the most successful choice for this tactic, because they are designed to "hook" readers; in addition, reading the early section of the book aloud gives weaker readers some assistance in the process that we may describe as "tuning the voices" on the page (Meek, 1991).

It is important to allow all students the chance to make choices from a manageable collection of books, and it is here that the class library may come into its own, especially if it is put together with the needs of reluctant readers in mind. It is all too easy to picture the class library, which is assembled largely for the benefit of the inveterate readers, or indeed to cater to the interests of the teacher. We believe that a useful classroom collection should make a wider appeal, and we suggest that teachers and librarians explore options other than mainstream book-length fiction. For example, graphic novels may appeal to readers who would reject more traditional fare; sometimes called comicbook novels, these books use the devices of drawings, speech bubbles, captions, and other conventions of American comics. In most classes, and certainly in most classes where reluctant readers are numerous, many students would be much happier if nonfiction were part of the diet. It is also important not to overlook the many subtle and sophisticated picture books now published with teenagers and adults in mind. Furthermore, it now seems to us to be essential, whatever the make-up of the school, to provide books about a variety of cultures; even students who live in all-mainstream communities now inhabit a multicultural world.

There are many books with varied appeal for reluctant readers, and teachers and librarians should look beyond the limited world of those series published directly for reluctant readers. We append a list of some suggestions at the end of this article.
It is important that teachers and librarians themselves read the kinds of books they want their students to read, but it is also useful to recruit students to make recommendations to each other. In our travels to schools and libraries in our local area, we have often observed the effects of good practice in creating a reading culture in a school. This is a complex and subtle process but the rewards are well worth the effort, and one of the primary rewards is that students begin to suggest books to each other. This process often works best by word of mouth, but there are ways of formalizing such recommendations. Displays, posters, brief annotations (not to be confused with an endless stream of book reports!), and book talks all have a useful place.

*Reading stamina*

Another invisible ingredient in successful reading is the development of stamina, a process that may take many years. Those who have not automatically moved from early readers to chapter books to more complex and sustained texts may simply lack the patience and perseverance that are required to enjoy the necessary process that we can best describe as “hanging in there.” For many of these young people, the whole question of why anyone would ever want to stick with a book long enough to get caught up in it is a complete mystery.

What ways are there of unveiling this mystery for such inexperienced readers? Finding relatively short novels can help; sometimes a set of linked short stories can be even more valuable. Paired and/or group reading can sometimes be a helpful strategy, enabling readers to make use of the support of other readers in sustaining their engagement with the book.

Series books offer another attractive route to the development of stamina. Many confirmed readers went through a period of intense identification with one or several series, and there is no reason why such a process should not work for adolescents as well as for younger children. Once readers have established the boundaries of the fictional world created by the series author, they can visit and revisit this territory with increasing ease but with the advantage of novelty of plot every time. Indeed, the work of the much-maligned Christopher Pike and R.L. Stine may be actively helpful to some readers in this regard, whatever their other drawbacks.

There are also series created specifically for weak and reluctant readers. These may have their place, especially with second-language readers, but we have many reservations about the ways in which such books offer a reductive form of engagement. It is not fair to every one of such books, but it is difficult to resist a comparison with the difference between watching an entire football game and watching a highlight film on the sportscast where every action presented leads to a goal or a spectacular error; readers learn less than they need to about the requirements of fiction in terms of pace and rhythm and in terms of plot and character development when the entire focus of the book is on constant action.
Overall, it seems to us that a better strategy for developing stamina is to find ways of strengthening the reading situation. Resorting to weakening the text should be a last resort.

**Conclusion**

No matter how many different strategies teachers and librarians deploy, there will always be some young people who choose not to read. Respecting that choice is important, but it is also vital to give every young person the opportunity to discover reading as an unthreatening, unpressured, enjoyable pastime. We realize that this project is more easily described than accomplished. Reluctant readers are adept at detecting a missionary tone ("Reading is good for you") and take appropriate and creative evasive action, such as watching the film and pretending to have read the book.

Nevertheless, learning how to engage imaginatively with a text is the essential step for a reader's development. Finding ways to make that step possible is the challenge for all those who value reading and want to pass on its pleasures and powers.

**Note**

1 This list of criteria is based on a larger discussion of this topic in Johnston and Mackey (1994).

**References**


---

**Twenty-five Tried and Tested Titles for Reluctant Teenage Readers**

The following list contains titles with a track record of success. We have chosen books with as wide a range of settings and characters as we could find, but, for the most part, the books have been published in four English-speaking countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. All were first written in English.


A cliffhanger opening page marks the start of an exciting thriller. Andy hears from an anonymous phone caller who announces that he has just killed someone. When Andy investigates, he finds that the caller has referred to a real person but she is still alive.

An example of a graphic novel, which takes many of its conventions from comics but offers a more complex and substantial plot. The interaction between print and pictures is often challenging, and this book has the extra dimension that some of the dialogue is in Spanish, with translations provided.


This is the original picture book for horrible adolescents! The text is dense and needs all the assistance the pictures can give it, but the single joke that fuels the book is one that may appeal to some junior high readers who resist other books. Fungus, his wife Mildew, and their son Mould live in the world of Bogeys where all normal standards of decency and hygiene are reversed.

Flight #116 is Down by Caroline Cooney. New York: Scholastic, 1992. 201 pages. $3.95. 0-590-44479-4

This minute-by-minute account of a devastating plane crash is told from the perspective of several passengers and a number of young people at the crash site, who work to help the crash victims. The story is suspenseful and exciting.

We All Fall Down by Robert Cormier. New York: Dell (Laurel-Leaf), 1991. 199 pages. $4.99. 0-440-21556-0

This is definitely a book to read before you recommend it to anyone. It is very powerful but extremely disturbing and not to everyone's taste. The novel tells the story of the trashing of a suburban house, with all kinds of consequences for both victims and villains. It is a very strong and very sad story, almost impossible to put down.


This book is difficult and horrific but gripping. It is a collection of documents, apparently assembled by Stephen Messenger, a 16-year-old Australian boy who has since disappeared. The documents concern an intriguing but open-ended story that involves a severed hand with a ring missing from it, records of a shipwreck with hints of cannibalism, a suggestion of mass murder and at least one psychotic character. It is a heady brew and not for every reader.

Children of the River by Linda Crew. New York: Dell (Laurel-Leaf), 1989. 213 pages. $4.50. 0-440-21022-4

Sundara is a Cambodian refugee who now lives in the United States and is struggling to make sense of the two halves of her life. When she falls in love with Jonathan, an American boy, the culture clash becomes more crucial to her. The strong romantic plot line will carry many readers, and the commentary on the two cultures adds substance to what might otherwise be a lightweight story.


The title of this book will attract many readers, but the story is serious and engaging rather than flippant. Livvie and David are working on a school project for their sex
education class. They are supposed to find someone to care about; the consequences are unexpected and tragic. Read this book before you distribute it.


No list of books for reluctant readers would be complete without this novel that, many years after its first publication, still succeeds in winning some teenagers over to the pleasures of reading. Hinton was a teenager when she wrote it and her story of gang warfare, family loyalty and social tension is energetically told. The teenage narrator, Ponyboy, talks about the many trials of being an outcast.


Lisse is one of many young people who graduate from school in the year 2154 to face a lifetime of unemployment. She and her friends (both boys and girls) are intrigued to receive an invitation to a mysterious Game that offers them adventure and challenge. The issue of whether The Game is a sophisticated version of virtual reality or the real thing is a hook that keeps readers engaged, and a question that has a surprising answer.

*Jesper* by Carol Matas. *Richmond Hill ON: Scholastic*, 1989. 152 pages. $4.95. 0-590-24188-5

The first page of this book is irresistible: the opening sentences read, “I am to be executed. It will be soon.” Jesper is a Resistance fighter in Denmark and at the start of the book he has been arrested and tortured by the Nazis. The book is very accessible and exciting.


Uno Ramirez, the hero of this book, is only 12, but nevertheless he is conscripted as a soldier, fighting in the 43rd revolution of his Central American country. This book is not a quick and easy read, but every page is moving and compelling, and there is plenty of action.


The large amount of swearing in this book may put off some readers, intrigue others. The book describes the Vietnamese War as seen by one well-meaning but naive boy soldier in the U.S. Army. Richie Perry joins the Army because there are no other job opportunities in Harlem. His year in Vietnam, which he describes in this book, supplies horrors and cynicism, but also great humour and good-will among the soldiers themselves, and moments of concern and tenderness towards their victims as well.


This book tells of a brother and sister living under apartheid, separated from their parents by the work laws of South Africa. When their younger sister becomes dangerously ill, they must travel illegally and alone to the city to find their mother. Although the prose of this book is deceptively simple, there is much food for thought in a short framework.
Shiloh by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor. New York: Dell (Yearling), 1991. 144 pages. $4.50. 0-440-40752-4

This moving and powerful story of Marty Preston and an abused dog, Shiloh, is a sure winner for readers of all ages. Naylor successfully combines a suspenseful plot with unforgettable characters and important questions about life and morality.


Nightjohn is a runaway slave who risks horrible punishment in order to teach other slaves to read and write. The story is told by Samy, a young female slave who is one of his pupils. The book is short and in many places gruesome, but the quality of the writing and the depth of insight it provides mean that it offers a genuine literary experience to readers at many levels, and at the same time provides a compelling and highly accessible read.


Manny lives in a cardboard box on the streets of Mexico. When he tries to cross the border into the United States, the guards chase him back and he is rescued by an American soldier who has gone to Mexico to get drunk. The interaction between these two disparate characters is at the heart of this short book, but there is plenty of action and suspense as well.

About David by Susan Beth Pfeffer. New York: Dell (Laurel-Leaf), 1980. 173 pages. $4.50. 0-440-90022-0

The story begins as Lynn’s oldest friend, David, kills both his adoptive parents and then commits suicide. Lynn must try to come to terms with this complete disruption of her life and her feelings. The topic is melodramatic but the book is subtle and well-controlled. The author never exploits her material; the story of Lynn’s efforts to untangle what made David behave as he did is suspenseful, powerful and moving.


Fourteen-year-old Margaret and her friend Zulma live in Toronto but their lives are greatly influenced by their West Indian heritage. Margaret’s father believes in “Good West Indian Discipline” and he has little patience with Margaret’s attempts to help Zulma to escape her abusive stepfather and return to Tobago to live with her grandmother.


These two volumes, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, make up probably the most extraordinary entry on this list. The books tell, in comic-book form, a complex, absorbing and terrifying story of one man’s experience in Auschwitz and his son’s attempts to come to terms with that experience. The conflict between Spiegelman, the cartoonist, and his father, the survivor, is as poignant as any of the events in Nazi Germany. Jews are mice, Nazis are cats, Poles are pigs in this version of the Holocaust story; surprisingly it works very effectively, and the result is a book that will attract unlikely readers, absorb even unsuspecting readers, and challenge everybody.

Shabanu lives in the Cholistan Desert of Pakistan. At the age of 11 she loves her camels and looks forward to her sister's wedding, knowing that her own will follow before very long. When her sister's betrothed is killed, however, all the plans change and Shabanu faces a future as the fourth wife of an old man.


This book is both sensational and sobering. It merges two narrations: one is the story of a homeless teenage boy, Link, who scrabbles a living of sorts in London's "cardboard city;" the other is the increasingly deranged account of a serial killer who preys on the homeless. The daily lives of the homeless are bleak enough; at first, they are not aware of the extra threat posed by the madman who is determined to cleanse London's streets. The book is easy to read, very difficult to put down, and extremely horrifying.


Although very short, this book offers a great deal of excitement and insight in a few pages. Tom's brother, Figgis, is highly sensitive to the suffering in the world. As the lead-up to the Gulf War escalates, Figgis's mind is taken over by the identity of an Iraqi boy soldier. The mystery of what happens to Figgis is supported by reflection on the apparent simplicities and actual complexities of the war against Saddam Hussein.


A powerful and persuasive story of a boy from Soweto who makes it to Broadway as part of a theatrical group performing a musical about life in the South African shantytown. Seraki's naivete in the opening stages of the book is very believable and the story of his developing understanding both of his own country and of life in general is extremely well told. The contemporary setting makes the book all the more compelling.

Make Lemonade by Virginia Euwer Wolff. New York: Scholastic (Point Signature), 1993. 200 pages. $4.95. 0-590-48141-X

A sad, compelling story that manages to rise to optimism against all the odds. LaVaughn, aged 14 needs a job; Jolly, aged 17, needs a baby-sitter to care for her two small children. LaVaughn is determined to break out of the ghetto but the needs of her three new friends threaten to drag her down. This story is told by LaVaughn, with the lines printed on the page in phrase-lengths, which allows for a great deal of white space on the page. The effect is to strengthen the poetic power of this compelling novel.