

5 The Art of Questioning

Reader Response and Literary Discussion

The view of literary discussion that informs this book emphasizes the value of readers' personal responses to literary texts. Students are invited to talk about these responses and to engage in collaborative construction of meaning in the social context of the classroom. Talking about shared texts allows students to articulate their own unique, personal, and emotional transactions with the text, along with their opinions and interpretations. In a literary discussion, students not only share and defend their own ideas, they also discover and reflect on the perspectives and interpretations of others. This type of interchange often leads students to rethink, expand, and enrich their initial transactions with texts as individual readers.

Literary discussion as defined in this book reflects the dual nature of reader response. That is, on the one hand, reading literature is an *aesthetic* experience in which readers enter into a story and participate in it as a personal and emotional experience. In the words of Louise Rosenblatt, the "aesthetic reading of a text is a unique creation, woven out of the inner life and thought of the reader" (1982, p. 277). Aesthetic readers who enter into the lives of literary characters, walk in their shoes, and see the world through their eyes have an opportunity to explore worlds beyond the boundaries of their own experience. They are able to gain new insights about what it means to be human, about the universality of human experiences as well as the uniqueness of each human being. Reading literature is also a *learning* experience when readers *step back from the text* to reflect on their own responses and interpretations, explore layers of meaning, and study the craft of the storyteller, writer, and/or artist. In most transactions with literature, readers move back and forth between affective and cognitive response, between participating in the story and stepping back to engage in inquiry, analysis, and discovery. Meaning making is learned. Teachers can support this learning by

1. demonstrating meaning-making strategies,

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2. helping students build the literary and linguistic knowledge necessary for developing these strategies, and
3. guiding students in an exploration of the text as a resource for information, ideas, and inquiry about human experience, about the world, and about literature and the craft of writers and artists.

One of the meaning-making strategies used by readers is questioning. According to Frank Smith, comprehension of a text is related to what the reader knows and what he or she *wants to know*; comprehension means asking questions and getting answers (1988, p. 154). Reader-initiated questions shape the reading experience. The teacher can use questions as valuable teaching tools to promote aesthetic response, guide the meaning-making process, and foster higher-level thinking. At the same time, the teacher demonstrates questioning as a meaning-making strategy that students can learn to use in their independent transactions with texts. The ultimate goal is for students to generate their own questions to guide the meaning-making process and to use as learning tools that enable them to become more deeply involved in literary experiences as readers and writers. The primary goal of using teacher-initiated questions, then, is to help students discover and use the art of questioning as a basic strategy for independent reading, writing, inquiry, and learning. Teacher-initiated questions are also introduced to enrich reader response and to help students become critical readers who explore social issues in the texts they read and who ask questions about the assumptions and perspectives of the authors and illustrators of these texts.

Questions as Teaching Tools

Open-ended questions can be introduced as an integral part of shared reading experiences to invite students to talk about their personal and emotional responses to the text and to articulate their own perspectives, interpretations, and opinions. Other types of questions invite students to step back from the text in order to:

1. engage in literary analysis,
 2. explore the craft and perspectives of authors and artists,
 3. search for connections between diverse literary texts and between literature and life,
 4. consider the perspectives and interpretations of others, and
 5. probe multiple layers of meaning.
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Although teacher-initiated questions encourage students to explore multiple meanings and interpretations as well as connections with literary and life experiences that take them *beyond* the text, these questions always take them *back to* the text as well. That is, the text defines the validity of responses, and students are expected to provide textual support for their interpretations, inferences, opinions, and comparative analysis.

The central purpose of this chapter is to describe various categories of questions teachers can use as teaching tools to enrich the quality of students' transactions with and responses to literary texts, and to demonstrate the art of questioning as a meaning-making strategy. Sample questions will be included for each category.

Questions Introduced *Prior* to Reading a Literary Text

In the context of a shared reading experience, the teacher sets the stage for the literary transaction by inviting the children to make predictions about the story and genre and to pose their own questions about the story. The children begin a "cover-to-cover" study of the book by examining the front and back covers, dust jacket, endpapers, dedication and title pages, author's notes, and/or other text or pictures that precede or follow the story text *per se*. Their predictions and questions are triggered by the title, the illustrations, what they know about the author, reteller, or illustrator, and other clues found in the "peritext" (i.e., the peripheral features that surround or enclose the verbal narrative). The quality of students' transactions with literary texts is determined in large part by the nature of the *knowledge* they bring to the text and how this knowledge is used as the story unfolds. Thus, before reading aloud, the teacher introduces questions that evoke retrieval of relevant background information for use in making predictions and comments about the story. This *prereading* discussion shows children how they can use their own background knowledge and literary histories to begin the meaning-making process even before the story begins. The sample questions below suggest the nature of prereading questions:

What does the title tell you about the story? What does the picture on the front cover tell you about the story? (Or: What do you notice on the front cover?) Children often find clues about the genre, setting, characters, and plot in the words and pictures on the front cover. Unfamiliar words in the title may need clarification. The title itself may prompt questions. For example, when *The Amiable Giant* (Slobodkin, 1955) was introduced to a group of first graders in the context of a "Giant Unit," several children asked for the meaning of the word "amiable."

The teacher suggested that they search for clues in the story to try to figure out its meaning. This search began with an examination of the title and cover illustration:

"It probably means what *kind* of giant it is."

"He *looks* like he's going to knock down those houses. 'Amiable' probably means he's a bad giant."

"No. . . . I think he looks sort of sad. Maybe it means he's lonely. . . . The lonely giant."

"Maybe he *is* a good giant. . . . Usually only the *good* giants get to be in the title . . . like Fin M'Coul and Glooskap." [See the children's books by Byrd (1999) and DePaola (1981) for stories about M'Coul (or MacCoul); see Norman (1989) and Bruchac (1995) for tales about Glooskap (or Gluskabe).]

As the children listened to this story about a lonely giant who looks for and finds friends, they were able to confirm, refine, or revise their initial, tentative definitions of this unfamiliar word. In this excerpt, the children were "thinking out loud" as they articulated what they noticed and what visual clues and intertextual links they used to make sense of an unfamiliar word. As the story unfolded, they continued to think out loud and to monitor their understanding as new information emerged, and they discovered that he was a "friendly giant." Later, they consulted a dictionary to confirm the meaning they had figured out from the context.

What is meant by the words "retold by" written on the front cover? This question can lead to a discussion of the nature of traditional literature, the difference between a reteller and an author, and the distinguishing characteristics of the particular genre, such as legend, fable, or folktale.

What is the copyright date? Why is this important? For example, sixth-grade students who read two novels about the Revolutionary War, *Johnny Tremain* by Esther Forbes (1943) and *My Brother Sam Is Dead* by James and Christopher Collier (1974), discovered two very different attitudes about war: the 1943 text, shaped by the World War II experience, offers a patriotic viewpoint; the 1974 text, shaped by the Vietnam War experience, offers an antiwar message. Stories about the past often reveal as much about the era in which the book was written as about the period that is recreated.

Look at the endpapers or the pages that precede the publication data page. What clues do they offer about the story? Sometimes the endpapers can best be understood *after* reading or listening to the story. For example, in *Crow Boy* by Taro Yashima (1955), the endpapers show a butterfly and a flower, respectively. After listening to this story of a

boy who blossoms from a small, frightened child to a confident youth, third graders interpreted these pictures as symbols of this metamorphosis and as a reflection of a central theme of the story.

What do you think the author meant by his/her dedication? In some books the dedication can also be best understood *after* reading or listening to the story. The dedication for *Crow Boy* concludes with the words: “and to Takeo Isonaga who appears in this story as a teacher named Isobe.” After listening to the story, the children returned to this dedication:

“I think he [the author] wrote this story about *himself*! Mr. Isobe was really important for Crow Boy, and he [the author] must be Crow Boy!”

“And Crow Boy liked to draw, and the author also did the pictures for this book!”

“Maybe the author wrote the book to say thank you to his favorite teacher! It’s sort of like *Thank You, Mr. Falker* [Patricia Polacco, 1998]. It’s about a girl and the teacher who helps her learn how to read in fifth grade! She [the author] said it’s her own story.”

Compare the cover on the first hardcover edition of the book with later paperback editions of the book. For example, when several fifth graders examined the original hardcover edition of *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson (1977) along with subsequent paperback editions, they noticed that the hardcover and the 1978 paperback featured characters who could be identified as either male or female. In contrast, the 1987 paperback portrayed two characters who could easily be identified as male and female, respectively, and who appeared to be older than the characters on the covers of the earlier editions. The students attempted to explain these and other differences they found and to use this information to make predictions:

“It’s probably going to be about a *regular* friendship between a boy and girl . . . not a romantic one. See, they’re younger here and in these two [the 1987 and 1998 editions] it’s like the boy-girl difference isn’t really important.”

“Even in the picture with the older kids, it doesn’t look romantic. Probably the publisher put a picture of older kids on the cover to get older kids to read it. When I first saw the hardcover, they looked awful young and I didn’t think I’d like it. But this one [the 1987, Harper edition] looks more interesting.”

Look for other information in the text and pictures surrounding the narrative that might help you understand the story. For example, the back flap of the hardcover edition of *The King’s Fountain* by Lloyd

Alexander and Ezra Jack Keats (1971) includes a few notes about the author and artist and concludes with the following:

Collaborating for the first time, both men feel that the theme of *The King's Fountain* expresses each of their strong convictions. In his comments about the book, Mr. Keats notes that this theme is summed up in the words of the Hebrew sage, Hillel:

If I am not for myself,
Who will be for me?
And if I am only for myself,
What am I?
And if not now,
When?

After listening to this story, a group of fourth graders revisited these wise words to begin their discussion of the theme of this beautiful picture book. In the process, they were discovering the importance of reading each literary text "cover to cover" in order to generate meaning.

Questions Introduced *during* the Oral Presentation of a Story

Since prediction is an important strategy used in the reading process, the teacher can demonstrate this strategy by stopping at significant points and asking, *What do you think will happen next?* As children internalize this question, they develop an anticipatory attitude toward print, making predictions as they read or listen to a text in order to generate meaning as the story unfolds. They learn to construct a working interpretation of the story based on the clues they gather and to revise or refine this interpretation as they find new information in and generate new meaning from the unfolding text. For example, as a group of fourth graders listened to *The Mapmaker's Daughter* by Mary-Claire Helldorfer (1991), a modern fairy tale about a young girl, Suchen, who rescues a prince from an evil queen, they predicted that she would marry the prince. However, when the prince rewards her with a horse and a red cape for her next adventure, they realized that they had made their prediction based on their prior experiences with traditional fairy tales:

"It's so different from the old tales . . . like the only thing in life for a girl was to get married. But Suchen wants to have an interesting life!"

"This is a *modern* fairy tale. The author doesn't use the old stereotypes about men and women."

"And the *prince* is the one to get rescued . . . by a girl!"

The teacher may decide to insert a question to call attention to a literary technique found in an unfolding story, such as a flashback, an

embedded story, or alternating viewpoints. Questions about literary techniques may be used to clarify elements of the author's craft in order to assist in the meaning-making process or to provide the language of literary analysis for students to use as they explore the tools authors use to create stories. The teacher might also interrupt the story to ask a question such as, *What did that character mean by saying, "_____"*? This question helps children develop the habit of clarifying unfamiliar words and phrases that contribute to the meaning of the text and, in the process, learn a basic reading strategy: *monitoring the meaning-making process*. For example, in *The Great Quillow* (Thurber, 1944/1994), the town council members refer to the toy maker as "The Great Quillow." The reader must use the author's clues to understand that the word *great* is used as a form of mockery in one context and to express scorn in another. By the end of the story, Quillow the toy maker has managed to save the town from a giant and has earned the respect of the townspeople. The meaning of the word *great* changes significantly as the story unfolds and new information is provided.

These questions are used sparingly, of course, so that a given story can unfold with few or no interruptions. Over time, however, the teacher can demonstrate strategies of prediction and monitoring so the children can internalize these strategies and use them on their own to make sense of texts they listen to or read independently.

Questions Introduced to Encourage Aesthetic Response and to Initiate the *Post-Reading* Discussion

In her transactional theory of reading literature, Louise Rosenblatt (1978) defines the *aesthetic reader* as one who enters into a story and "lives through" it as a unique personal and emotional experience. Students are invited to share their initial reactions to the story as a whole, or to specific characters or scenes, or to the craft of the author or artist, and to share the thoughts and feelings they had as they listened to or read the story. As they share these personal responses in a group discussion, students discover that readers respond in different ways to the same text. Discovery of multiple perspectives provides opportunities for children to enrich their own understandings. The teacher can open the discussion with: *What would you like to say about this story?* Additional questions may be used to demonstrate ways in which students can articulate and reflect on their experience as they lived through the story. For example:

- As the story unfolded, did you change your mind about specific characters? Explain.
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- Did any of the characters or events remind you of people or experiences in your own life? Explain.
- How did you feel about this character's behavior? Why did you think this character behaved the way he or she did? Clues?
- What do you think it would feel like to be this character?
- What did you find that was surprising, puzzling, or disturbing about the characters or events in this story?

For example, the fourth graders who listened to *The Mapmaker's Daughter* expressed their surprise when they discovered that this story did not end with a royal wedding as they had predicted. They learned that the mapmaker's daughter planned to set out on more adventures instead of marrying the prince.

- Which parts of this story would you like to hear or read again or share with a friend? Explain.

Children often talk about the segments in literary texts that they particularly enjoyed. Sharing a favorite book with a friend often begins with the words, "Listen to this!" The purpose of this question is to invite children to identify these special segments and to try to articulate *why* they found them so interesting or compelling. In the process, they may discover something about the author's craft.

Questions Introduced to Guide Literary Analysis

After students have had opportunities to share and reflect on their personal responses to the text, they are invited to step back from the text and engage in literary analysis as an integral part of the meaning-making process. Teachers introduce questions that call attention to literary elements (e.g., setting, plot, characters, theme, style, viewpoint), genre, and author's craft, or the choices authors make as they use these elements and literary techniques to create narratives. As students identify literary elements, the relationships between them, and the role of a particular element in the story as a whole, they can begin to generate meaning through inference, interpretation, and the use of prior literary knowledge and personal experience. For example, a group of fourth graders was asked to talk about *setting* after they had listened to Katherine Paterson's *The King's Equal* (1992). An excerpt from the resulting discussion illustrates the students' collaborative meaning making as well as the potential of this modern fairy tale to stimulate interpretive exploration:

"There're *two* settings. . . . One is the palace where the prince is, and one is the mountain shack where Rosamund lives."

"The settings are opposite. . . . One's rich and one's poor."

[Teacher: "What *technique is the author using here?*"]

"I remember. . . . It's like those two-stories-in-one we read."

"It's the 'story-in-a-story' technique!"

"But these are more like side-by-side stories. One's about the prince, and one's about Rosamund. . . ."

"It's like those parallel lines on our math chart [points to the wall chart]."

[Teacher: "Yes! There's even a literary term for this: *parallel plot*."]]

"You could *draw* this plot . . . like on the chart. You could make the lines go like this [using his hands to demonstrate] for the two stories and then they intersect when the two stories come together . . . when she came to the *palace* to meet the prince."

"That's a good idea. . . . It would look like this [shows his sketch in progress]: See, before they meet, the lines are parallel; then they intersect here at the palace; then the lines get parallel again when they switch places . . . when the prince goes to live in the *shack* to prove he can do it and Rosamund lives in the *palace*!"

"And the stories intersect *again* when the prince comes back to the palace and she agrees to marry him [shows her own sketch]."

"The author really planned this story carefully. When that greedy prince switched places, he learned what it *feels* like to be poor and hungry and not have servants! And this is when he changes."

". . . and she had to be in the palace to fix up the mess he made when he took all the money and food from the people."

"I liked the way the author did this story. . . . In the old stories the prince looked for someone who's good enough for *him*, but in this story, he has to prove *he's* good enough for *her*!"

"I think that's the theme! When they switched places, he learned what's *really* important . . . that money isn't everything"

"I get it now! He learned that someone with friends is *richer* than someone with gold . . . and that's why Rosamund finally said she'd marry him!"

"Also, I think she wanted to see if he could learn to do things for himself."

"And he learned how to be *kind*. He really changed a lot!"

[Teacher: "A character who changes during the story is called a *dynamic character*."]]

"Maybe the author wanted you to think about stereotypes about men *and* women. Rosamund was gentle and caring *and* intelligent and independent, and the prince had to *learn* how to be gentle and caring! That was a switch, too!"

The teacher's questions about this story's setting and about the technique the author used to develop the setting helped the children retrieve

their knowledge of the literary technique they had studied earlier, the story-within-a-story. This enabled them to move on to the thoughtful discussion of the author's craft recorded above. In the course of the children's collaborative analysis of this story, the teacher introduced terms used for several literary concepts the children articulated as they explored character, plot, and theme.

Rebecca Lukens's *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature* (1999) is a very useful resource for teachers who want to review literary elements, techniques, and genres in order to formulate questions that guide children's analysis of narrative and introduce the language of literary analysis to enrich their study of literature.

Questions That Help Students Appreciate the Craft of Authors and Artists

The students who responded to *The King's Equal* revealed their appreciation of the author's craft. They figured out some of the choices Katherine Paterson had made to create this story, as well as the relationship between the setting and the development of characters, plot, and theme. Teachers can introduce questions designed to call attention to author's craft by focusing on literary techniques such as story-within-a-story and on the use of viewpoint, traditional forms and motifs, and literary genres. For example:

Whose story is it? Why do you think the author chose this character's version of events? One way authors shape a story is through the use of viewpoint, the perspective from which the story is told. In *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by A. Wolf (Scieszka, 1989), a modern illustrated revision of the traditional tale, Alexander T. Wolf tells his own version of what happened when he encountered the three pigs. *A Frog Prince* by Alix Berenzy (1989), another modern *viewpoint revision* of a traditional tale, is told from the frog's point of view because the author's sympathies were with the frog instead of the spoiled princess in the Grimm tale. *Cinderella's Rat* (Meddaugh, 1997), another picture book, is told from the viewpoint of the rat who was transformed into a coachman by Cinderella's fairy godmother. *I Was a Rat!* (Pullman, 2000) is a novel told from the perspective of Cinderella's rat-turned-pageboy.

The critical study of a historical novel or memoir begins with the identification of the perspective from which the story is told. *No Pretty Pictures: A Child of War* by Anita Lobel (1998) is a first-person account of the author's childhood after the Nazis came to her comfortable home in Krakow, Poland. *Four Perfect Pebbles: A Holocaust Story* (Perl and Lazan, 1996) is Marion Blumenthal Lazan's memoir of her childhood,

the six and a half years she and her parents and brother lived in refugee, transit, and prison camps. *Behind the Bedroom Wall* (Williams, 1996) is a story told from the perspective of a thirteen-year-old girl who is an ardent member of the local Nazi youth group in Germany. *Parallel Journeys* (Ayer, Waterford, & Heck, 1995) juxtaposes excerpts from two autobiographies of individuals who lived through World War II and whose stories are told in alternating chapters. One perspective is offered by Alfons, who attained a high rank in the Hitler Youth; another perspective is offered by Helen, a Jewish girl who ended up in Auschwitz.

Examples of questions about the craft of artists are listed below:

- How did the artist show the feelings of the characters?
- How did the artist's choice of media help to express the mood of the story?
- How would this story be different without the illustrations?
- Compare/contrast two or more artists' interpretations of a traditional fairy tale. What choices did they make?

For example, a group of third graders compared several illustrated retellings of the traditional Beauty and the Beast tale. They were especially intrigued with Jan Brett's illustrated retelling of this French fairy tale (1989). As the story unfolded in the read-aloud session, the children noticed that the engravings on the stone wall in the Beast's garden and the tapestries in his palace reveal humans engaged in the same actions as the animals that serve Beauty or play music for her. The children discussed the possibility that Brett created these parallels between the story characters and the tapestries to show life in the palace *before* the prince and his servants were transformed into animals prior to the beginning of the story. After listening to the whole story and paying close attention to the illustrations, the children discovered that the written messages woven into the tapestries had foreshadowed the plot and theme development. They wanted to hear the story again and to search for details they had missed during the first reading. One child commented: "Now we'll be able to read the pictures better. She [Brett] decided to use the pictures to tell some of the story that's not in the words!"

Questions That Encourage Students to Search for and Use *Intertextual Links* to Generate Meaning

Teachers can introduce questions that encourage students to

1. draw from their literary histories, personal experiences, and
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knowledge to generate meaning in their transactions with literary texts, and

2. build a “literary data bank” about genres, character types, motifs, patterns, themes, narrative elements, literary devices, and literary language.

Students learn to approach each new text in light of previous literary experiences and their store of literary knowledge and to identify *intertextual links* to generate meaning. For example, the discussion of Katherine Paterson’s *The King’s Equal* was enriched by the students’ previous experiences with embedded stories or parallel-plot patterns. Their recognition of this literary technique enabled the students to focus on the way the author used this structure to develop the two central characters. As they listened to the story, these students were sitting at their desks, which were arranged in a circle, and they had been invited to draw or write something of interest about the story as it unfolded. Sketching a diagram of the parallel plot seemed to help many of the children visualize this plot structure in order to comprehend the story as a whole. These students also identified the intertextual link between this story and traditional fairy tales featuring the search for a bride. Using this link as a springboard, these fourth graders took the next step in the meaning-making process: they identified Paterson’s *revision* of this traditional pattern, which, in turn, led them to an exploration of the central theme of this modern fairy tale.

An *intertextually rich environment* can be created when the literature program is structured around cumulative experiences in which students are introduced to carefully selected, conceptually related texts in order to optimize their discovery of increasingly complex connections between diverse texts. Examples of questions used to generate *comparative analysis* of related texts and to spark the search for intertextual links are listed below:

We have been reading traditional fables from different countries. How are these stories similar? How would you define a fable? After identifying recurring patterns in these fables, a group of second graders formulated a definition of this literary genre. The next step for these students was to test the validity of their definition. To this end, the children listened to several additional fables and analyzed each one in terms of the distinguishing characteristics included in their definition. After relevant revisions were made and a consensus reached, their final definition was used as a starting point for a writing project in which the children created their own fables.

Compare Leo Lionni’s modern fables with the traditional fables of Aesop. What similarities and differences do you find? What can you

say about the differences between Aesop and Lionni in terms of their assumptions and beliefs about the human experience? These questions were introduced to fourth and fifth graders who were engaged in an in-depth study of traditional and modern fables. For example, they compared Lionni's *Frederick* (1967) with Aesop's "The Ant and the Grasshopper." Frederick the mouse did not collect grain with the other mice in preparation for the long winter, but these hardworking mice accepted Frederick's uniqueness. His poetry provided food for the mind, the spirit, and imagination during the dark days of winter. Lionni's modern fable reflects his belief in the importance of individual differences, the value of the arts in our lives, and the adage that human beings do not live "by bread alone." *Frederick* presents a sharp contrast with the harsh justice and work ethic pronounced by Aesop's ants, who turned their backs on the starving grasshopper when he begged for food. They said, "All summer long you made nothing but music. Now all winter long you can dance!" (Pinkney, 2000, p. 12). A survey of a number of collections of Aesop's fables revealed that most retellings of "The Ant and the Grasshopper" end with this harsh statement. However, a recent illustrated retelling by Amy Lowry Poole (2000) invites a new look at this old fable. Poole's *The Ant and the Grasshopper* is set in the Imperial Chinese Emperor's Summer Palace. The grasshopper danced and sang for the royal family while the industrious ants gathered grain for the winter, warning the grasshopper to prepare for the cold and snow. When winter arrived, the Emperor and his court left the Summer Palace and the ants "closed their door against the ice and snow" (unpaged). The story ends with the words: "And the grasshopper huddled beneath the palace eaves and rubbed his hands together in a mournful chirp, wishing he had heeded the ant's advice" (unpaged). The pictures, however, tell another story. Throughout the story, the artist depicts a young boy who watches the ants at work. The boy collects food in a basket and leaves it for the grasshopper before he departs from the Summer Palace. A small group of students examined this unique version and identified clues in the text and pictures to infer Poole's assumptions about human nature.

The main characters in these stories have similar problems. How does each character attempt to solve his or her problem? What are important differences in their responses or decisions? These questions were introduced to fifth-grade students who were focusing on the inner conflicts of characters in contemporary realistic fiction.

How do the characters in this group of stories respond to injustice? This question invited students to engage in a critical, in-depth

study of stories that address social issues associated with differences in race, religion, gender, class, and ability. For example, *The Other Side* (Woodson, 2001) is a picture book that opens with the words: "That summer the fence that stretched through our town seemed bigger" (unpaged). The fence separates the Black side of town from the White side. Clover, an African American girl who lives on one side of the fence, watches the White girl, Annie, who lives on the other side. Both girls have been told to stay on their own side. Eventually, the girls find a way around this racial barrier constructed and maintained by adults on both sides. In her own words, Clover tells the story of the summer she and Annie become friends. On the last page of the book, Annie comments: "Someday somebody's going to come along and knock this old fence down." Clover nods and says: "Yeah. . . . Someday" (unpaged). This poignant story invites readers and listeners to talk about the injustice felt by both girls and their response to the racial division in this rural community. This picture book was read aloud to older students to introduce a unit of study addressing a provocative subject and to demonstrate ways to respond as critical readers to literary texts that address complex social issues. In her book *Teaching with Picture Books in the Middle School*, Iris Tiedt introduces middle-grade teachers to the "wonderful possibilities of the picture book" and highlights the value of the picture book as a stimulus for classroom discussion (Tiedt, 2000, p. 2).

Maniac Magee (Spinelli, 1990) is a novel about another racially divided town, Two Mills, Pennsylvania, in which the East End and West End are two hostile camps separated by Hector Street. Maniac Magee, a legendary hero in a contemporary realistic novel, crosses Hector Street and moves between these hostile camps in an attempt to break down barriers and build bridges between those who are different. This larger-than-life character confronts the prejudice, ignorance, and fear that he finds on both sides of Hector Street, fear of the same type that Clover finds on both sides of the fence in *The Other Side*. Unlike the unstated context in Woodson's story, the racial tensions that serve as the context in Spinelli's story are clearly defined.

The Storyteller's Beads (Kurtz, 1998), an example of historical realism, is set during the famine and political strife in Ethiopia in the 1980s. It is the story of Sahay, a Christian girl, and Rahel, a blind Jewish girl, who escape their native Ethiopia and set out on the dangerous journey across the desert and, eventually, to Jerusalem. These two girls, who had been taught to hate and fear the other, manage to overcome cultural prejudices, become friends, and help each other survive. As in the other stories selected for this study of social issues associated with diversity,

the central characters in *The Storyteller's Beads* take action against injustice and break down social barriers.

Identify examples of journey tales in this group of stories. What are the different meanings of the word journey? Talk about the different kinds of journeys you found in these stories. For example, *Journey* (MacLachlan, 1991) is about a boy's search for the truth about his past and about his mother, who has abandoned him and his sister. The title of this novel refers not only to an inward journey but also to the name of the protagonist and to the physical journey taken by his mother in response to an inner restlessness. Fourth graders who read this book explored the differences between emotional and physical journeys. They discovered that the protagonist's search for truth guided his emotional journey. His quest ends successfully when he is able to confront the truth and to accept the cold reality of abandonment so that he can move on with his life.

A study of the *quest pattern* can also be the focus of thematic units featuring traditional literature and modern fantasy. The *quest or journey tale* is an almost universal story pattern, according to Joseph Campbell, who describes in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949/1968) the initiation journey of departure, adventure, trials, tests, and return. Whether the story is about Peter Rabbit's quest for adventure, Max's quest for inner control in *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963), Theseus's journey to Crete to slay the Minotaur, Leje's quest for his mother's stolen brocade in *The Weaving of a Dream* (Heyer, 1986), or the young girl who seeks her beloved in the castle that lies east of the sun and west of the moon in a translated Norwegian fairy tale (Dasent, 1991), the heroes and heroines leave home, set out on a journey, survive a series of tests and ordeals, and return home triumphant.

Questions That Invite Students to Explore Connections between Literature and Life

Teachers introduce questions to build bridges between the story world and the child's own world of reality, imagination, and dreams. Children are invited to consider the story in light of their own experiences and values and to identify with a character's feelings and concerns. They are given opportunities to gain insights about their own lives and to expand their thinking beyond *what is* to *what could be*. Students are also asked to step back from the text and to respond to it objectively, using information from relevant outside sources whenever appropriate. Questions are introduced to invite subjective as well as objective evaluation of the story.

A few examples of questions introduced to elicit *subjective evaluation* based on children's personal experiences and their inner lives are included below:

- Do you think this story could really happen? Explain.
- How did you feel about this character? Did you change your mind about this character as you listened to the story? Explain.
- Has this ever happened to you? Did you ever feel this way? Explain.
- Who do you know who is like this character? How are they similar?
- What do you think this character will do the *next* time something like this happens?

Examples of questions introduced to stimulate *imaginative thinking and dreaming* in response to the story:

- What would *you* have done with those three wishes?
- This character really wanted to become an artist. What do *you* really want to become?
- What if *you* found a baby dragon that had been left alone when its mother was killed? (This is the challenge faced by Derek in *The Dragonling* by Jackie French Koller [1990].)

Examples of questions designed to elicit *objective evaluation*:

- What did you think about the way the problem was solved in this story?
 - Did you think the ending was realistic? Explain.
 - What did the author do to make the characters and events believable?
 - Do you think the author had strong feelings about a particular issue? Explain.
 - Can you identify any story characters who protested against injustice and inequities and/or provided insight and wisdom? Explain.
 - Look at the copyright date for this story. What is the relationship between the content or theme of the story and the social-political context of the author? (For example, Eve Bunting's *Fly Away Home* (1991), Stephanie Tolan's *Sophie and the Sidewalk Man* (1992), and Paula Fox's novel *Monkey Island* (1991) all feature homelessness, a significant social problem that received increasing public awareness and attention in the 1990s.)
 - Do you think the author revealed his or her *own* attitudes? biases? opinions? Explain.
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- How would you determine whether the events in this historical novel are accurately described? (An Author's Note or reference texts in the library could be consulted.)
- Would you recommend this book to a friend? Why or why not?

The Art of Teaching, the Art of Questioning, and a Note of Caution

The art of teaching is, in large part, the art of asking significant, well-timed questions that stretch students' minds and imaginations and that help them move toward growth and understanding as independent learners. Questioning is a *teaching tool* that can be used to help students discover the art of questioning as a *learning tool* and as a reading strategy. The types of questions featured in this chapter were designed to enrich children's literary experiences and to foster thoughtful and personally meaningful responses to literature. Questions can be used to guide the meaning-making process throughout group read-aloud sessions: (1) prior to the oral reading of the literary text, (2) as the students enter into and respond to the unfolding text, and (3) after the oral reading. Initial predictions are confirmed, refined, or revised, and initial understandings are expanded and/or modified as students gain new information from the unfolding text. During the post-reading discussion, students share their personal responses, understandings, and interpretations and consider other students' perspectives and conclusions that differ from their own. In the context of ongoing, cumulative literary discussions, readers form an interpretive community in which they negotiate group-constructed meanings. In the process, *teacher-initiated questions are gradually replaced by questions initiated by students* who are ready to direct their own literary explorations and learning experiences.

A note of *caution*, however, is in order at this point. The sample questions included in this chapter are offered as *general suggestions* and should be used sparingly. Too many questions can turn the enjoyment of literary exploration and discovery into the drudgery of meaningless drill. Furthermore, the sample questions included here were originally formulated to challenge specific groups of children from kindergarten through grade 6. In order to formulate questions for their *own* students, teachers need to consider the age, experience, and learning needs of their students as well as these students' level of involvement and interest in a particular literary text at a given time. The children who entered into each of the group discussions featured in this book were quite diverse in terms of language and cognitive ability, experiential background, learning styles, needs, attitudes, and social/emotional development.

The teacher's challenge was to enable *all* the children to become active participants in each of these group discussions of shared literary texts. Most of the questions introduced in these read-aloud sessions were open-ended in order to encourage diverse responses and to help children think in terms of possibilities and multiple meanings and perspectives rather than looking for a single, "correct" answer. The questions introduced in each group session varied in their level of difficulty so that every child could be appropriately challenged at his or her ability level. However, read-aloud sessions often "leveled the playing field" for many of the children who were less proficient or experienced as readers than were their peers. Many of these children enjoyed great success as thoughtful and insightful contributors to the collaborative process of literary study in these group sessions. They were able to respond to increasingly complex literary texts and engage in the meaning-making process unlimited by their skills as readers. At the same time, they were given opportunities to learn about literature and about the craft of authors and artists and to practice strategies that proficient readers use to read literature.

Different types of questions were presented in this chapter to suggest some of the *possibilities* for creating rich literary experiences in which students engage in lively discussion as they explore multiple layers of meaning and the craft of authors and artists. The ultimate goal is for students to initiate their own questions to generate meaning as readers and writers and to give themselves a springboard for inquiry and discovery, thinking and learning, as they respond to shared literary texts in the social context of the classroom.

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