



Deb McPherson has advice that will allow you to enthuse even your most reluctant readers...

What might truly grab your reluctant readers?

Background

Research detailed in “An Exceptional Schooling Outcomes Project 2001-2006”(AESOP) (Sawyer, Brock & Baxter, 2007) into what happens in effective classrooms had something to say about “Lower ability” students in English. It showed that such students in those effective classrooms were not confronted by a sole diet of functional literacy, pen and paper activities, comprehension and vocabulary work, but also (my italics) “*engaged with IT, media, novels, poetry*”.

Classroom strategies

Dr Jackie Manuel at Sydney University has highlighted the importance of choice -- the need for students to have some say in the texts selected for study and enjoyment. Her paper, *Effective Strategies to Address the Needs of Adolescents 13+ Experiencing Difficulty with Reading: A Review of the Literature* (2003), is available online at <http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/middleyears/assets/pdf/jmanuelres.pdf> and sets out a range of excellent strategies to “enable” students in the classroom. If, as teachers, we give students the opportunities to write their own texts, to find some of their own texts (using book boxes, library visits/displays and web searches for example), if we position them as writers, readers and viewers worthy of respect and give them time to explore digital and multi-modal texts as well as print texts then we should see increased engagement.

Letting students hear from their peers or older students about the excitement and joys of literature can also really inspire engagement. One strategy is to invite students from other classes who have read or viewed engaging texts and ask them to promote those texts to your class. Such a strategy can also provide models of articulate speaking for younger students. It could also provide a great link between primary feeder schools and their high schools. Using audio versions and book trailers are a key way to increase student interest as well.

Below is a grid showing a small selection of old and new texts that could be effective “hooks” in the classroom in engaging disaffected or resistant students. Texts can move up and down the school years based on the needs and interests of your students. The table is prefaced with a few reviews as a start in opening up the list. Other reviews are available online at the BOSTES site at <http://syllabus.bos.nsw.edu.au/english/english-k10/suggested-texts/> or in the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) journal *English in Australia*.



Digital text for Years 6-9 students

Inanimate Alice <http://www.inanimatealice.com>

Inanimate Alice represents an epiphany of sorts for me; a turning point in my understanding of the amazing appeal of the digital text.

Inanimate Alice was created to be read and viewed online. This interactive novel was created as a story that unfolds over time and on multiple platforms. As the website says it, “uses text, images, music, sound effects, puzzles and games to illustrate and enhance the narrative.” Education Services Australia, Bradfield Company Productions, Promethean Planet and Everloop are some of the players involved in its creation.

Inanimate Alice is the story of Alice at different times in her life as she travels with her parents around the world. Her story is told over increasingly interactive and complex episodes. As Alice grows older the story’s duration becomes longer and more sophisticated and the interactivity becomes more demanding. In episode one, set in China, Alice is eight and the episode lasts five minutes. Alice’s father has gone missing and she and her mother set out to find him. In those five minutes you share Alice’s anxiety about her father, you travel in the four wheel drive with her mother through confusing and intimidating landscapes, your sense of time is challenged and you too can seek refuge in the games and puzzles Alice plays as the journey continues.

In episode two, set in Italy, Alice is ten and the viewing time lengthens. In episode three, in Russia, Alice is growing up. She is thirteen and hiding in an apartment from some sinister figures who are making trouble for her father. It feels like you are in the closet with her. It takes at least fifteen minutes to participate in this episode. In episode four, Alice is fourteen and the reader/viewer finds her in Great Britain. In this thirty-minute episode Alice is settled in a school and delighted that her school has boys, lots and lots of boys! As I read, viewed, listened to, (and participated in) the episodes I felt quite drawn into this new medium for storytelling.

Inanimate Alice is a sure-fire way to engage and stimulate students. Students will enjoy and be challenged by the text that will also support their literary, cinematic, and artistic literacies. With edgy music, mesmerizing video and graphics, embedded puzzles and games, and an invitation to participate in the story, how could it miss? This digital text comes with extensive teaching ideas and materials that are freely available online. Set aside some time to read, view and experience *Inanimate Alice* and you won’t be disappointed. Neither will your students. There is now an exciting new episode to explore in which Alice is sixteen and an aspiring game designer. She finds that the, “so-called stable hometown life she yearned for is far from perfect. Bored and restless, she skates into deep trouble.” A trailer is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvQ09_nm09Q and there is a facebook group of teachers from all around the world sharing ideas on *Inanimate Alice* online at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/316194721922364/>



Fiction for Year 7/8 students

Patrick Ness: *A Monster Calls* (2011) Walker Books

Ever since I picked up *A Monster Calls* and read it I have not been able to get it out of my head. It has joined a special company of unforgettable books in my life. I can remember the time and place when I first read it, the profound emotions it evoked and the desire it provoked to tell everyone I knew about this magnificent book.

In the novel, thirteen-year-old Conor's mother is dying but Conor will not admit this terrible truth and suffers headaches and nightmares because of the conflict in his heart and life. One night, Conor hears his name being called. Gripping his bedroom window is the yew tree from the graveyard on the hill that has transformed into a massive and menacing monster. The extended illustration on pages 14-17 showing the force and frightening dimensions of this monster is amazing. But is Conor frightened and overcome? "Shout all you want" he says, "I've seen worse." And of course he has -- as he watches his mother decline into the grip of her disease. But the monster is not finished with Conor, and, over several combative nights he tells Conor stories – stories that lead him and the reader to the final, exquisite line in the book.

Irish writer Siobhan Dowd had the idea for this book but sadly died of cancer before she could write it. The publisher asked Patrick Ness if he could write it and his author's note and dedication to Siobhan adds another aspect to explore in this remarkable book. Myth and life and death have rarely been so powerfully combined.

Jim Kay's illustrations, his black and white drawings and washes, sometimes extending across three pages, other times a smudged fingerprint or a tangle of lines, are just extraordinary. His partnership with Ness and the great care and respect Walker Books have taken with the production of this text add to its magic. This masterpiece of storytelling won both the Carnegie and Greenway medals in 2012, the only book to do so. A haunting trailer at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEX5g6c7ueE> is a wonderful way to hook them. An audio version, read by Jason Isaacs is currently available from Book Depository for \$15.87. There is also a podcast of Patrick Ness reading a part of his book and answering questions at <http://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/audio/2011/may/05/patrick-ness-childrens-book-monster-podcast>

Addictive thrillers for Years 7 and 8

Gabrielle Lord: *Conspiracy 365 Book One: January* (2010) Scholastic Book one of a series of twelve books: *January, February, March, April, May, June July, August, September, October, November* and *December*.

This series has just about everything you have ever seen or read in a thriller and then some more! I started *Book One: January* on the 3rd of January 2011, as it seemed appropriate, and I was hooked! Over the following few days I managed to get ten of the twelve read. The series provided a relentless ride through murder, kidnapping, mystery and a staggering number of chase sequences that I thoroughly enjoyed.



Callum Ormond is on the run, accused of the attempted murder of his uncle and sister. But in reality it is a criminal gang who are after him and the secret his dead father tried to communicate to him in drawings just before his death. The Ormond Riddle entails great wealth, danger and death and Callum has to survive for 365 days to find out the answers to the clues his father has left him and solve the Ormond Singularity Puzzle. His good mate Boges is a constant support with technology, food and shelter and the mysterious Winter plays a sometimes ambiguous role as a fellow seeker after truth and ultimately good friend.

Gabrielle Lord also wrote the riveting novel *Fortress*, about a teacher and group of school children that turn against their sadistic attackers. She has lost none of her edge.

These novels are brisk, accessible and persuasive, including multiple cliff-hangers and enough tautness to keep any reader happy. They would be a great series to entice disengaged readers in Years 7 and 8 but good readers love them too. Buy multiple copies and watch the reading and discussion begin. It's all over the top but well written and very exciting.

There is a *Conspiracy 365* website to explore at <http://conspiracy365.com.au/index.php> and a television series. The use of graphics, texting and blogs within each book provides a contemporary context and added teaching and learning opportunities. The reader follows as the pages count down to 3, 2, 1. This is a timely reminder of the tension in the book as you are always racing to the finish as if a bomb is about to go off --- and quite a few do!

Fiction for Year 9 students

Louis Nowra *Prince of Afghanistan* (2015) Allen & Unwin

It's wonderful to see another young adult novel by Louis Nowra. His *Into that Forest* was one of the best books in 2013 and *Prince of Afghanistan* is a terrific read, especially for those less engaged boys in Years 8 and 9.

Nineteen-year-old Mark and Prince are alone in Afghanistan after a combined Australian/American mission goes badly wrong. The three kidnapped doctors are safely helicoptered away but Mark sees his friend Casey killed as the second helicopter sent to pick up the remaining soldiers explodes under Taliban fire. Casey's dog, Prince, is alive but wounded and Mark decides to find a way back to base through enemy territory for both of them.

Prince is a Doberman pinscher who has been trained to detect buried mines and he and his handler Casey had a close relationship. The explosion deafens both Mark and Prince and Mark must use the sense of touch to try and bind Prince to him. Their journey back under cover of darkness will take days and as they are both wounded and have few rations it will be difficult and dangerous as well.



Nowra is a wonderful writer and the tension and drama of Mark and Prince's story never slackens. Mark's memories provide flashbacks to his growing up and teenage years. The death of his mother, his own adolescent drug addition to marijuana and the retreat of his father are succinctly conveyed. Nowra captures the tough life, despair and daily rituals of people in a war-torn country and his ability to create such a convincing setting adds verisimilitude to the tale. This is traditional storytelling at its best as Nowra charts the growing bond between the wounded man and his dog. Evocative full-page photographs of Afghanistan introduce most chapters and there is one of Prince that is very appealing. From its opening line, "I am falling from the sky" to its powerful ending this is a text Year 9 students will be happy to explore in most classrooms. It could also be used towards the end of Year 8.

- [View a table of texts for disengaged students](#)

Deb McPherson taught English in NSW government secondary schools for twenty-eight years as a classroom teacher, Head Teacher and Deputy Principal. She was a member of the committee selecting texts for the Higher School Certificate English courses for over fifteen years. She worked as a Senior Curriculum Officer, English, at the Board of Studies and as the Manager of English for the NSW Department of Education and Training. She has been a lecturer and tutor at the University of Newcastle and at the University of Wollongong. She is an author of four anthologies for schools for OUP and co-authored Choices for English, a collection of recommended texts for the 7-12 English classroom with Helen Sykes and Ernie Tucker. Her review column, 'Reading and Viewing with Deb McPherson', appears in the AATE journal, English in Australia.

Attachment 1 – Texts for disengaged students