

## Teacher to Teacher: Trade Book Teaching Ideas from the OLRC Reading Group: "Every Living Thing"

### **Every Living Thing**

**Author: Cynthia Rylant**

*Summary:* This book consists of twelve short stories, each one depicting a moment when a person's life has changed, each one involving an interchange between an animal and a human being.

*Introductory Notes:* Because these stories are short and the vocabulary is easy, students may enjoy reading them independently, listening to the teacher read them, or taking turns reading them aloud. Teachers will probably not want to use them all but may want to choose a few followed by an open or directed class discussion.

The following teaching suggestions pertain to four of the short stories. Note, however, that many ideas for one particular story could be adapted to another story in the collection. Teachers should be careful not to overwhelm these little stories and their impact by assigning too many follow-up activities, since they are not fully developed novels and could easily be overtaught.

Patricia Bloem

### **Teaching Ideas**

#### "Retired"

Teachers may want to open the discussion by asking the students what they think might be meant by the title. The teacher may then turn to the dictionary and read various definitions, relating each to what has been offered by the class.

We suggest using the attached form describing the technique of a DR-TA (see attached form), stopping at the following places:

- a. p. 10, bottom, after "Velma thought about hers."
- b. p. 12, top, after "saw the school playground."
- c. At the end.

Students may want to follow the reading of the story with a discussion about retirement. Teachers may ask students to reflect, then write about the issues of aging and retiring from formal employment, of when retirement is a healthy and good thing, and when it is a negative.

### "Drying Out"

- a. Pre-reading: Tell the students they will make up a story based on specific words. After writing a story, they will read the Rylant story and see how similar or different the two stories are from each other.
- b. Present the words on page 4. Tell the students to use all the words and especially to use them in the given order. (A small group of students could work together in constructing the story, or they could work individually). Allow writing time.
- c. Read the story or stories together.
- d. Ask the student or class to read the Rylant story.
- e. Discuss how the two stories differ. Make SURE that you don't use language that gives the idea that the author's story is the "right" answer. Many different stories can be created from a given list of words.
- f. Ask the student(s) to respond to the Rylant story either in writing or in discussion. Did they like it? Why? Why not? What do they think about Jack? Will Jack stay on the wagon?

### "Stray"

We suggest using a DR-TA (see attached form), asking the students to stop

- a. On p. 43, bottom, after "She said nothing."
- b. On p. 45, middle, after "came into the house."
- c. On p. 46, bottom, after "No one spoke."
- d. At the end.

Teachers may want to suggest the following ideas for journal writing:

- a. Students may want to write about a time they longed for something--a pet, a new baby in the family, a new pair of shoes--and describe the circumstances.
- b. Students may want to write about a time when a parent's decision surprised and delighted them.
- c. Students may also want to think about why we change our minds (and why Mr. Lacey changed his) and what kind of evidence we find persuasive.
- d. Students may simply prefer to respond to the story by writing about individual topics.

### "Shells"

1. Many readers find this story the most moving in the collection. We suggest using a DL-TA (see attached form). As a follow-up, teachers may want to discuss the idea of symbolism. How does the image of the crab coming out of the shell relate to the aunt? To the boy?

2. Teachers may want to focus on character development by doing the following.
  - a. Ask each student to divide a sheet of paper in half lengthwise. Label one half "Michael" and the other "Aunt Esther."
  - b. Read the story aloud (or ask students to read silently), stopping four times:
    - on p. 74, middle: " Michael!' yelled Esther."
    - on p. 76, middle: "always quickly changed the subject."
    - on p.78, top: "said nothing."
    - at the end.
  - c. After each stop, ask students to make notes on their charts about each character's personality. Starting with the second stop, students may wish to revise their previous ideas based on additional information from the story. After their notes are complete, ask each student to talk with a partner about the characters.
  - d. Possible post-reading activities include:
    - develop a character sketch, either verbal or visual.
    - develop a Venn diagram that lists similarities and differences between characters

### **Follow up**

1. Teachers may want to close the teaching unit with a discussion on the following statements, asking students to agree or disagree, asking them to draw on the stories for their proof or evidence. Teachers may also use these statements as writing prompts, asking students to write one paragraph using evidence from the book and a second paragraph with evidence from personal experience.
  - a. Caring for an animal is a step toward caring for people.
  - b. Animals are morally superior to human beings.
  - c. If you want to understand a person's character, observe the way he or she behaves around an animal.
  - d. People behave in neurotic and unbalanced ways with their pets.
2. Many ABE programs encourage students to write their own stories and books and tales and even publish them through small presses. These very short stories may serve as models of the kinds of stories our students are capable of writing. However, it is often very difficult for students, as well as teachers, to see how to revise a piece of creative writing and to pinpoint which elements are the ones that move a story from mediocre to very well told. Three elements that students and teachers could jointly explore are
  - Rylant's careful attention to language
  - her pacing (for example, the number of phrases and sentences of background information provided to the reader, or the points at which she moves a story along)

- characterization, her method of creating a portrait of a person with very few words.

After the teacher and student together examine the Rylant stories for these elements, students may want to apply the same creative writing lessons to their own stories.

3. If the students enjoyed reading short stories, you may want to steer them next to another Appalachian writer, George Ella Lyon, and her powerful set of stories, *Choices*. Or if your students would like to continue to read more by Rylant, you may want to look at her picture book *An Angel for Solomon Singer* with them as a class and analyze the similarities between the theme of the picture book and the theme of several of the stories in *Every Living Thing*. You may want to steer them on to Rylant's *A Couple of Kooks and Other Stories About Love* or to her short novel *Missing May*.

### **Field Testing**

Three of these stories, "Retired," "Stray," and "Shells" were field tested in a rural ABE program with a small group of both men and women, including an ESL student and a seventy-two-year old. "Shells" has also been used with a large group of adults. "Drying Out" was used in a one-on-one situation with a thirty-five-year-old man in an urban program.

#### *Teachers' Changes:*

In the field-testing for "Stray," "Retired" and in the several times "Shells" was field tested, teachers followed up the students' predictions of what they thought would happen with lots of probing, with the intent of getting students to verbalize what they were thinking and why, and of demonstrating that good writing either prepares us for what is about to happen or surprises us for a specific reason.

In the field testing for "Drying Out," the teacher took dictation under letter b.

#### *Readers' Responses:*

1. In all cases the students reported that they enjoyed the stories, and the teachers reported their delight with finding accessible, short, and good quality stories to present to students.

2. In the field testing of "Stray," one student--a solid reader--reported that the DR-TA felt confining and that the story was so good that she couldn't stop at the right places.

3. The individual student who field-tested the method under "Drying Out" was hesitant at first, claiming that he couldn't write a story and his would be lousy compared to the "real" story. As he continued to brainstorm possibilities from the word list, he became more comfortable and at the end was quite proud of his efforts. He expressed

amazement that his story and Rylant's could be so different even though the same elements were present.

- Jack
- Divorce
- Whiskey
- Arrest
- Veteran's Hospital
- Weeks
- Miserable
- Dawn
- Squirrels
- Saltines
- Stronger
- Home
- Peanuts

*Publication Information:*

New York, Macmillan, 1985. ISBN 0-689-71263-4 (paper)

*Reminders:*

ABLE teachers can order this book from Book Wholesalers, Inc. for 40% off list price.

For other recommended books, see Recommended Trade Books for Adult Literacy Programs, available from ABLE Directors, public librarians, or online <http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/tradebooks/index.html>. Call the OLRC for details.