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TEACHERS IN THE TRENCHES: IF ONLY WE'RE BRAVE ENOUGH TO BE IT: A REFLECTION ON AMANDA GORMAN'S INAUGURAL POEM

By Laura St. John

A brilliant highlight of the recent inaugural celebration for me was Amanda Gorman's beautiful performance of her poem *The Hill We Climb*. If you have not seen it, I hope you'll consider taking five minutes to view at this [link](#). On that glorious sunlit podium, Amanda Gorman embodied our hope as a nation. It was perfection to see a young woman of color offering guiding principles from which we can heal and evolve. In her own words, she was speaking from a place:

*Where a skinny Black girl
descended from slaves and raised by a single mother
can dream of becoming president
only to find herself reciting for one*

I find myself so inspired by this young woman and her poem, which closed with a challenge to all of us:

*The new dawn blooms as we free it
For there is always light,
If only we're brave enough to see it
If only we're brave enough to be it*

And now, as a literacy professional in Chicago, I find myself asking what can I do to rise to Ms. Gorman's challenge? Recently I've been thinking more about helping the students I serve *discern* what they read so they may see the difference between propaganda and news. So that they can hear the difference between hate speech and facts. So that they may better recognize the beauty in a poem such as *The Hill We Climb*. In the poetry residency, my company, [Play In A Book](#), begins next week, we'll explore images of light, how those images are evoked through words, and how those words can inspire.

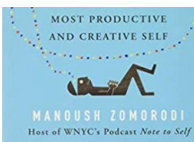
How can we, as a literacy professionals, rise to Ms. Gorman's challenge to be brave enough to see the light and to *be* the light? What are specific actions we can take to create unity and compassion and kindness in our spheres? I think a great many of us are asking such questions right now, fueled by our entry into a new era and ignited by so many inspiring words.

BOOK REVIEW OF *BORED AND BRILLIANT*

By Melissa Stinnett



Bored and Brilliant is written by Manoush Zomorodi. Boredom is a state of mind that gets a bad rap from many people. Maria Popova, the creator of the web-site, *Brain Pickings*, said, "We treat boredom as Ebola, something to be eradicated." What is the connection between a lack of stimulation—boredom—and a flourishing of creativity and drive?



The book, *Bored and Brilliant*, is grounded in neuroscience and cognitive psychology. The author, Manoush Zomorodi, includes practical steps you can take to ease the nonstop busyness and enhance your ability to dream, wonder, and gain clarity in your work and life.

With the advent of smartphones and tablets, mobile consumers now spend an average of two hours and fifty-seven minutes each day on mobile devices and about eleven hours a day in front of a screen. Although we don't know if all this screen time will have longer-term harmful effects, we know technology is changing us (and it's unclear whether it's for the better.)

If our children are constantly engaged with bits and bytes of information, what is happening to their ability to imagine, concentrate deeply, reflect on past experiences, decide how to apply those lessons to future goals, and figure out what they want for themselves, their relationships, and life? The implications for business are significant as well. There is evidence that people could be better at their jobs if they weren't always plugged in.

Zomorodi endeavors to understand what happens when we constantly keep our brains busy and never give ourselves time to mentally meander. She spoke with neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists about "mind-wandering" — what our brains do when we're doing nothing at all, or not fully focused on a task.

This book is an exploration of the history, cultural issues, and science of being bored, guided by studies, stories, and conversations with researchers, doctors, artists, and ordinary people.

What exactly happens when you get bored that ignites your imagination? Dr. Sandi Mann, a psychologist said, "When we're bored, we're searching for something to stimulate us that we can't find in our immediate surroundings. So we might try to find that stimulation by our minds wandering and going off someplace in our heads." That is what can stimulate creativity. Once you start daydreaming and allow your mind to wander, you start thinking beyond the conscious and into the subconscious. This process allows different connections to take place.

We as a society are being affected by our consumption of information on our digital platforms in many different ways—from wasting time to trouble sleeping. This book offers a seven-step plan (7 challenges) that harnesses boredom's hidden benefits so that we can discover our own personal brilliance. Zomorodi suggests that we choose one week to implement the *Bored and Brilliant* strategies:

1. **Observe yourself:** The first step in taking control of our digital behaviors is to notice and understand your baseline behavior from the moment you wake until you go to sleep. The important thing is to accurately report how often you check your phone.
2. **Keep your devices out of reach while in motion:** Keep your phone out of view (and not listen to headphones either) anytime you are in transit. Whether driving, taking the bus, or just walking down the street, make it a completely tech-free time. The idea is that when you are on the bus or walking down the street, your mind is not doing nothing. These are ideal times to let our minds wander.
3. **Photo-free day:** See the world through your eyes, not your screen. Take absolutely no pictures today. Not of your lunch, not of your children, not of your cubicle mate, not of that beautiful sunset. Use your brain instead of your phone.
4. **Delete that app:** Identify the app that you use too much and delete it. The one you use to escape—too often, at the expense of other things (including sleep). The one that makes you feel bad about yourself. Delete said time-wasting, bad habit app.
5. **Take a fakeation:** Entrepreneurs, executives, employees, and anyone whose job involves creative problem-solving needs some solitude in order to focus and really think up some new and interesting ideas. It's during those breaks from e-mail, texting, social media, and calls that connections are made and insights refined. Decide how long you need. An afternoon? An hour? Twenty minutes? It's up to you.
6. **Observe something else:** Train the attention you have been freeing up all week. Go somewhere public and stay for a while. It could be a park, a mall, the gas station, a café, the hallway at work or school. Hang out for a while and watch people, or birds, or anything that strikes you. The goal is to make one small observation you might have missed if your nose were glued to a screen. Notice. Notice because noticing is the first step in creating.
7. **Bored and brilliant challenge:** This last stage has three steps to it. Step 1: Identify an aspect of your life that you've been confused by, avoiding, or downright terrified to think about. It could range from figuring out a new career path to planning a vacation. Step 2: Set aside thirty minutes where you'll be completely free from distraction. Store away your phone, tablet, laptop, or any digital device. Put a generous pot of water on the stove and watch it come to a boil. Step

3: Immediately after you've completed Step 2 and are mind-numbingly bored, sit down with a pen and pad and put your mind to the task of solving the problem in step 1. You will bring new creativity and focus to whatever subject you've chosen. Come up with new ideas and get them down on paper. Don't worry about executing the plan just yet — that will come in time.

Bored and Brilliant offers a fresh perspective on the impact of technology and our everyday lives. The author makes a point of stating she is not against technology. She just wants each of us to be in control and not the other way around.

BALANCED LITERACY – A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

By Dick Koblitz

A *balanced literacy curriculum* has always been a very fluid concept. Some educators have thought of it as a balance between reading and writing (or reading, writing, speaking and listening), some as a balance in grouping structures (whole group, small group and individual), and some as a balance among the five basic reading instructional strategies – reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, and literature study groups. Balance has been defined as giving equal time to both free choice writing and assigned writing. Many teachers strive to balance the literary genres of fiction, nonfiction and poetry in their instruction. While all of these concepts of balance are important to keep in mind, they are all really only surface level ways to view a balanced literacy curriculum. At a deeper level, teachers need to understand balance in terms of individual student learners and how children learn language.

According to Short (1997), a balanced literacy curriculum should vary depending on the individual needs of students. It is not a static entity for every child. Strickland (1997) has noted that “there is no recipe for balanced literacy instruction” (p. 12). What is required is a deep understanding by educators of the literacy process and how children learn literacy. For many educators this understanding has its roots in Michael Halliday’s (1984) research of meaningful language events reflecting opportunities for children to *learn language*, *learn about language*, and *learn through language*. More recently Egawa and Harste (2001) added a fourth opportunity to this framework which they called *using language to critique* (critical literacy).

These four aspects of language learning constitute the basic framework of a genuinely balanced literacy curriculum with differing emphases for individual children at differing grade levels based on their strengths and needs as literacy learners. Children *learn language* when they have daily opportunities for independent reading, independent writing, teacher read alouds and shared reading. Children *learn about language* when they are engaged in opportunities to learn how language works, such as strategy instruction, contextualized word study, teacher demonstrations and focus lessons in reading and writing. They *learn through language* when they read and write in the content areas, engage in literature study groups, and keep inquiry and reflective journals. Lastly, children *use language to critique* when they learn about social issues, interrogate and evaluate texts, and understand how literacy empowers them to critique the world around them through activities such as social action projects, audit trails, and reading and discussing texts that support critical conversations (Egawa and Harste, 2001).

I believe that the best instructional framework for accomplishing these four aspects of a balanced literacy curriculum is a meaningful and authentic workshop approach, specifically a daily literacy workshop (reading and writing), math workshop, and inquiry workshop (science, social studies and health). A workshop as an organizational classroom structure provides daily opportunities for children to *learn language*, *learn about language*, *learn through language*, and *use language to critique* with built in differentiation based on their individual strengths, needs and interests. Children move to deeper levels of literacy learning both cognitively and affectively (social emotional learning) when they have teachers who focus on their individual needs as literacy learners and who understand balanced literacy at a deeper level.

Egawa, K. & Harste, J.C. (2001) What do we mean when we say we want our children to be literate? *School Talk*, 7(1). Urbana, IL: NCTE.

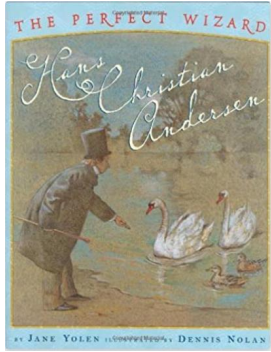
Halliday, M. (1984) Three aspects of children’s language development: Learning language, learning through language, learning about language. Paper presented at Ohio State University.

Short, K. (1997) *Literature as a way of knowing*. York, ME: Stenhouse Publishers and Los Angeles, CA: The Galef Institute.

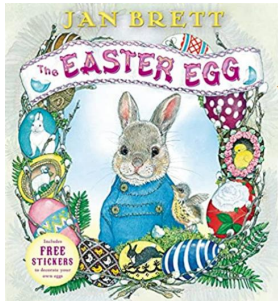
FAMILY LITERACY BOOKSHELF

By Barb Ashton, IRC Family Literacy Committee Chair

While March is going out like a lamb, April is heading our way with the promise of warmer sunny days. During April we celebrate Easter, National Library Week (www.ala.org/aasl/slm), and National Poetry Month (www.poets.org), April is also Autism Awareness Month, Sexual Assault Month, and of course, Opening Day of your favorite baseball team.

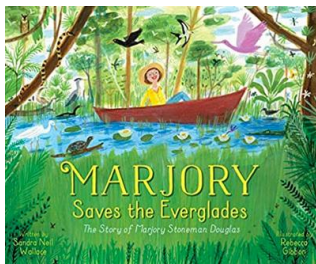


Fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen are enjoyed by children of all ages. However, not much is known about his life. ***The Perfect Wizard: Hans Christian Andersen*** by Jane Yolen gives the reader an introduction to his rather unique life that included poverty, a patchwork education, unattractiveness, a love for the theatre, and a desire to become a writer. Jane Yolen, who has been given the honorary title of “Hans Christian Andersen of America,” uses quotes from his fairy tales and stories, located at the bottom of each page, to portray his life. The muted colored illustrations further enhance the life of a timeless favorite author. *The Perfect Wizard: Hans Christian Andersen* is a fine addition to any library and also makes a good introduction to a unit on fairy tales.



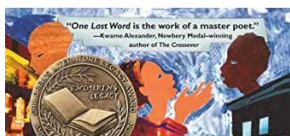
Easter arrives early this year. To celebrate this special day ***The Easter Egg*** by Jan Brett is a delightful book to read as part of this spring tradition. Hoppi, the young rabbit is finally old enough to decorate an egg for the Easter Rabbit and hopes to win the prize of helping the Easter Rabbit hide eggs for all the children and ride in the Easter Parade. However, Hoppi feels discouraged that his egg isn't good enough and decides to visit his neighbors in the forest to get some ideas and art supplies. After visiting his rabbit friends, he stops in the forest to think about how he'll decorate his egg. While pondering his ideas tragedy occurs as a blue egg falls from Mother Robin's nest. The egg is undamaged and Hoppi can't return the egg to the nest, so he decides to sit on it until it hatches. Time passes. The baby robin

hatches and the day for the Easter Rabbit to choose the winning egg arrives. Did Hoppi miss his opportunity to win? You'll have to read *The Easter Egg* to find out. This is another beautifully illustrated book by Jan Brett. Visit www.janbrett.com to access some nice activities to accompany this book.

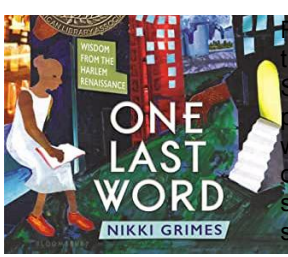


Protecting our environment and climate change are hot topics these days. ***Marjory Saves the Everglades: The Story of Marjory Stoneman Douglas*** by Sandra Neil Wallace is the story about a little-known activist who played a major part in saving what is now a national park. Born in Minneapolis, she grew up in Massachusetts, and worked as a journalist in Florida at her father's newspaper, *The Miami Herald*. During WWI she served in the Navy Reserve and also worked for the Red Cross. Upon returning to Florida after the war Marjory was dismayed at seeing the Everglades disappearing due to post war development. Marjory used her journalistic voice to write about preserving the Everglades and making it

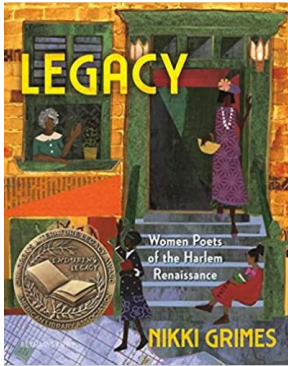
a national park. Although she met much opposition, Marjory continued to fight for the Everglades through her writings, speeches, forming an organization to preserve the Everglades, etc. The Everglades became a National Park in 1947. Marjory was not only an activist but also a suffragette and feminist who lived to be 108 years old. Rebecca Gibbon's folk art illustrations enhance the story of Marjory Stoneman Douglas. *Marjory Saves the Everglades* is a great book to add to your STEM or Women in History collections. The back of the book has an excellent timeline and great resources to assist with reading the book. The author's website www.sandraneilwallace.com has activity kits and additional resources as well as a YouTube video of the book.



April is poetry month and celebrates various forms and types of poetry. ***One Last Word: Wisdom from the Harlem Renaissance*** by Nikki Grimes is a collection of poems by poets from the Harlem Renaissance who had an impact on Ms. Grimes. Nikki not only incorporates some well known



Renaissance poets but also includes Renaissance poets who have been lost to time. Ms. Grimes's poems are written in a poetic form called "The Golden Shovel." This poetry form, as explained in the introduction, "is to take a short poem in its entirety or a line from that poem and create a new poem using the words from the original. Then you would write a new poem, each line ending in one of these words." The poems are interesting, powerful, and reflect on the struggles and racial injustices of the past that are still prevalent today, but also speak of hope. The illustrations for the poems are done by some of today's best known African artists and help to enhance the themes of the poetry.



Continuing her work with the Harlem Renaissance poets Nikki Grimes's newest book *Legacy: Women Poets of the Harlem Renaissance* focuses again on the little known women poets of the era. Continuing "The Golden Shovel" poetic form, Ms. Grimes not only addresses themes from the past but also includes current topics such as racial injustice, climate change, and diversity. Again the poetry is enhanced by today's African American artists. Both books contain information about the Harlem Renaissance and how to write a "Golden Shovel Poem." The backs of both books contain short biographies of the featured Harlem Renaissance poets and the artists whose art work accompany the poems. Websites and books for additional reading are also included. Nikki Grimes's website www.nikkigrimes.com has a teaching guide for her books along with additional poetry links and a link to a YouTube video of *One Last Word*. Both books are great for middle

school and up but also serve as a mentor text for a poetry unit and are an excellent addition to all libraries.

Looking Ahead

April 1 – April Fool's Day – Tell a funny joke to someone today

April 2 – International Children's Book Day – Marks the birthday of Hans Christian Andersen – Read *The Emperor's New Clothes*, *The Ugly Duckling* or any fairy tale

April 4 – Easter – Read a Peter Rabbit book

April 4-10 – National Library Week

April 10-17 – Money Smart Week – Visit www.moneysmartweek.org for financial literacy ideas

April 22 – Earth Day

April 30 – Arbor Day – Visit www.arborday.org for activities or read about your favorite kind of tree

April 30 – Dia Children's Book Day - Go to www.dia.ala.org

LITERACY LINKS

By the IRC Educational Media Committee

Take a moment to review some of the Literacy Links provided by the IRC Educational Media Committee to help Illinois educators in today's classrooms.

Interactive Resources

[Forky](#)

This free online resource is an easy to use mind mapping tool that focuses on just connecting text boxes. Its simplicity makes it easy to use for students of all ages. It also allows for teachers to view it for grading and feedback purposes.

Video Resources

[Threadit](#)

This resource is Google's new tool for recording webcam and screencasting videos. These videos create a thread with collaborators who can contribute to the video discussions. This Chrome extension can even be used to embed videos right within email.

Web 2.0 Resources

[Wordtune](#)

This Chrome extension provides suggestions for ways to rewrite sentences in your Google Documents. This free extension will help writers vary their word choice and provide suggestions for improving their writing.

UPCOMING PD EVENTS

By the Illinois Reading Council

Don't forget to take advantage of some upcoming PD opportunities planned throughout Illinois.

- **April 6, 2021: Southern Illinois Reading Council and Lewis and Clark Reading Council** will co-host Capturing the Moment: What We Can Learn from Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman with Michelle Mohr as part of their Book Talk Tuesday from 6:30 to 7:30 pm via Zoom.
- **April 7, 2021: IRC Webinar** on The Literacy Lessons I Learned from Hamilton with Penny Kittle.
- **April 13, 2021: Lewis and Clark Reading Council** will host Heggerty Phonemic Awareness with Alisa VanHekken from 6:30 to 7:30 pm via Zoom.
- **April 20, 2021: National Road Reading Council** will host Literature and Art Paint Night with Patricia Braun and Marianne Stremsterfer from 6:00 to 7:30 pm at the Effingham Public Library, 200 N 3rd St, Effingham, Illinois.
- **April 21, 2021: East Central-EIU Reading Council** will host I See What You're Saying: Using Visual Images, Multiple Genre, and Varied Text Structures to Expand Literacy Engagement with Roxanne Owens from 6:30 to 7:30 pm via Zoom.
- **April 21, 2021: Suburban Council of IRA (SCIRA)** will host Anti-Bias Anti-Racist Teaching with Liz Kleinrock from 6:00 to 7:30 pm via Zoom.
- **April 21, 2021: Central Illinois Reading Council** will host the monthly CIRC Book Chats on alternating professional books and literature topics from 7:00 to 8:00 pm via Zoom. Following the discussion, participants are asked to share a reflective response of the topic.
- **April 22, 2021: Prairie Area Reading Council** will host Made with Maxine & STEM Challenge with Ruth Spiro from 6:15 to 7:30 pm via Zoom.
- **April 24, 2021: Chicago Area Reading Association (CARA)** will host a Literacy Spa for Unwinding around Remote Learning from 4:30 to 5:30 pm via Zoom.
- **April 26, 2021: Western Illinois Reading Council** will host New and Notable Books with Becky Anderson Wilkins from 7:00 to 8:30 pm via a virtual platform.
- **May 4, 2021: Southern Illinois Reading Council and Lewis and Clark Reading Council** will co-host Literacy as a Tool for Healing and Trauma with Julie Hoffman as part of their Book Talk Tuesday from 6:30 to 7:30 pm via Zoom.
- **May 5, 2021: IRC Webinar** on Making a Case for Reading Joy with Donalyn Miller.
- **May 19, 2021: Central Illinois Reading Council** will host the monthly CIRC Book Chats on alternating professional books and literature topics from 7:00 to 8:00 pm via Zoom.
- **May 24, 2021: Western Illinois Reading Council** will host Teach Like a Pirate with Dave Burgess from 7:00 to 8:30 pm via a virtual platform.

To view the full **IRC Events Calendar**, please visit the [IRC Website](#).

Visit the IRC Website

QUICK LINKS

Full IRC Events Calendar

Latest on the IRC Conference

Available IRC Awards and Grants

Bring IRC PD to your School District

Learn more about the Illinois Reads Program

Questions? Please feel free to reach out to the Illinois Reading Council by email at irc@illinoisreadingcouncil.org or by phone at 309-454-1341.

See what's also happening on our social media sites:

