

There Is This Book



Laurie Wig

Be prepared to be very surprised at what this committed public education teacher of 5th grade Brainerd students has to say about her reading interests and thoughts about books, books and more books after 34 years on the job, soon ending.

For example, have you ever heard of authors like Jason Reynolds, Ibram Kendi, Joseph Marshall, Alan Gratz, Hyeonseo Lee, Lynne Kelly, Svetlana Chmakova, Raina Teigemeier and Kazu Kibuishi? And Curious George, probably better known –

from your childhood or your children's childhoods, who is not an author but who is known to many and who, indeed, has many stories to tell. If not, then you are about to.

Or have you heard about, or read, books like *The Lakota Way*, *Refugee*. *All the Impossible Things*, *Song for a Whale*, *The Girl With Seven Names: A North Korean Defector's Story*, *Educated*, *Becoming* and *Opening to God*? Or *Warrior Cats*? If not, then you are about to.

Guess which book, and why, and what Laurie Wig would do with it, if she was relegated to quarantine for the next two weeks. Give up, because you never will be able to answer these questions.

And a twist on how to absorb the wonders of literature, including a motivating suggestion as to how to get through that pile – or those piles – of books causing the floors in your home to sag.

When given an opportunity to invite any author, living or deceased, to dinner and a great conversation, how many of us would decline and instead give that once in a lifetime dinner and conversation to a classroom of 11 and 12 year olds? Laurie Wig would.

All of this started in an old Carnegie Library basement, air-conditioned in the hot summers of the 1970s when the young Laurie Potvin walked a block to her favorite place, that quiet basement, and dove into the world of books, a lifetime love she has shared with students since “before the turn of the century.”

The Brainerd community can only hope that the wisdom and enthusiasm of Laurie Wig for children and books will continue, just in another form and place. And when the Friends of the Brainerd Public Library have their next in person evening of the highly attended *Wine and Words*, with authors from around the country present and speaking to several hundred people after dinner, look for Laurie Wig near the front and near the speaker’s podium, taking it all in.

[This interview was edited for clarity].

Q. What is the last great book you read?

Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You, by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi. In the wake of George Floyd’s murder and subsequent riots in Minneapolis, I looked in the mirror for my own racist tendencies and confronted them through reading, listening, learning and acting. I internalized this book by listening to Jason read it aloud! His reading, and the book, of course, by both Jason and Ibram, cast a bright light on the intricacies of racism in our country from 1619 to the present, illuminating ways to be anti-racist every day.

Q. What is your favorite book no one has heard of?

The Lakota Way, by Joseph M. Marshall III. In this book, Mr. Marshall reveals the virtues of his Indigenous culture via Indigenous people storytelling and personal antidotes. He focuses on twelve core qualities crucial to the Lakota way of life: Bravery, fortitude, generosity, wisdom, respect, honor, perseverance, love, humility, sacrifice, truth, and compassion. His stories and personal reflections reveal the Lakota Nation’s philosophy and path to a meaningful life.

Q. Do you consider any books to be “guilty pleasures” and if so, or if not, then why or why not?

I try not to be “guilty” in my reading. I like to read all kinds of books, magazines and websites, and I teach my 5th graders to do the same, within boundaries, of course.

I tell them that it's important to eat a varied diet of food, including dessert, and the same goes for books. Variety allows us to learn, question, think, laugh, sympathize, empathize, time travel, and figure out "who did it!" There is no guilt in that.

Q. What is your favorite book to recommend to others, and why?

Refugee, by Alan Gratz, is one I recommend to both students and adults. Three stories in one, we follow the plights of Josef from Nazi Germany to Cuba, Isabel from Cuba to Florida in 1994, and Mahmoud as he moves from civil war torn Syria to Germany in 2011. Based on real lives and times, the mind and heart are filled with new knowledge, emotion, and sympathy for all in danger and forced to leave their homes. As the journeys in *Refugee* end, the reader is surprised, but satisfied.

Q. Do you consider any books that are considered to be "great books" to be overrated, and if so, then why?

They say that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" and I find the same to be true about books. One of the most lovely things about being a reading teacher is to see the same story, the exact same words, enter the heads and hearts of a roomful of listeners and know that, based on their individual personalities and life experiences, the author's message is being filtered and wonderfully received by those students in a myriad of ways.

In my opinion, "great books" are those that prompt great emotional response, and they are even greater if the reader feels the need to discuss, share, or argue over his/her response. I may not align with the thoughts presented, but that's the beauty of literature: Seeing your perspective and learning the perspectives of others.

I like to tell my students to "be curious, not critical" when encountering any kind of personal difference. Ask, listen, and learn first; keep an open mind before making any sort of judgment. I think this is true for "great books," too.

Q. What subjects do you wish more authors would write about?

I wish there would be more books about people surviving, coping, or thriving with mental illness. One of every five people has a mental illness, yet many books make it seem unusual and emphasize the struggle and pain. My daughter recently pointed this out to me. Those with illness (mental, emotional, physical) often suffer

and die in novels. Wouldn't it be great if books erased the stigma, reflected their common occurrence, and celebrated the successes of those with mental illness?

Q. What moves you most in a work of literature?

The ways humans respond to life and the circumstances in their lives. I'm truly blown away by human intelligence, resilience, perseverance, grace, and capacity to rise up on behalf of others, and especially for others who they don't even know.

Q. Which genres do you especially enjoy reading, and which do you avoid?

I especially enjoy memoirs, historical fiction, and mysteries. I avoid fantasy until one of my students recommends one and kindly reminds me of my "reading diet." So, it's "do as I do" - even if the "doing" is *Warrior Cats*.

Q. What book might people be surprised to find on your bookshelves?

The Girl With Seven Names: A North Korean Defector's Story, by Hyeonseo Lee. In 1997, having grown up on the Yalu River across from China, 17 year old Hyeonseo decides to cross the frozen water in hopes of a life free from fear, poverty, and starvation for herself and her family. Little did she know of the harrowing twelve year, "seven names" journey that lay between her and her dream. Fascinating and hard to imagine!

Q. Who is your favorite fictional hero or heroine, and who is your favorite antihero or villain?

This is a HARD question, but for favorite fiction hero I choose Curious George! He sets the greatest example of how to live and learn. But then again, maybe it's The Man in the Yellow Hat for his unconditional love.

While more of a movie villain, I would choose Cruella De Vil. I love the way that the authors and illustrators made her look bad in every single way: Her name, two toned hair, skeletal frame with huge mink coat, long red gloved fingers, a green cigarette holder with constant trail of smoke, her words, and what she's after - puppies for a coat! She's a perfect first villain for kids. Despicable, and fun to root for her demise!

Q. Do you consider any books, which are not generally thought of as being among the great books, to be candidates for such a list, and why?

I believe that a book becomes "great" when an individual reader completely connects to the text intellectually, spiritually, or emotionally. Because of this personal nature, I would hesitate to create or add to an "official great books list."

Q. What books are stacked by your favorite place to read, waiting for you?

I always have a stack of the newest titles from my classroom collection. I find that my students will read what I "bless," so this is my present 5th grade list: *Cape*, by Kate Hannigan; *Lifeboat 12*, by Susan Hood; *All the Impossible Things*, by Lindsay Locket; and *Each Tiny Spark*, by Pablo Cartaya.

Additionally and nearby, I have *The Deep Dark Descending*, by Alan Eskens; *The Buy Nothing, Get Everything Plan*, by Liesl Clark and Rebecca Rockefeller; *Opening to God*, by David G. Benner; *Still Alice*, by Lisa Genova; *Educated, a Memoir*, by Tara Westover; and *Becoming*, by Michelle Obama.

Q. What book do you intend to read – and finish – next?

I "read" two ways:

With my eyes - *Song for a Whale*, by Lynne Kelly. Born deaf, twelve year old Iris has a hard time communicating and being heard for who she really is. When she learns about Blue 55, a wandering lonely whale who sings an unusual song, Iris wonders if Blue 55 is deaf, too. Iris also is a tech genius and she has an idea: Could she invent a way to "sing" Blue 55's song?

With my ears - *Tap Code: The Epic Survival Tale of a Vietnam POW and the Secret Code that Changed Everything*, by Carlyle Harris and Sara Berry. This memoir includes the perspectives of both Air Force Captain Carlyle "Smitty" Harris, a pilot, and his wife, Louise. Reading about American heroes who overcome the darkest of days is inspiring and puts today's worries into perspective. I am anxious to get started on this book.

Q. Just guessing, how many books are in your personal library?

Hundreds, if you count my classroom library, which I do. I am especially proud of that collection because its curation began six years ago when I returned to the

classroom after three years in administration, because it is extremely diverse, and because it is shared daily!

Q. If you could invite one author, living or deceased, to dine with you, then who and why?

I would hand this opportunity to invite over to my students and let them pick! Authors are often hidden behind their books. They aren't as famous to the kids as pro football players, movie actors, or "you-tubers," but they should be!

For 34 years, I have watched the popularity of children book authors rise and fall. In the past it was Judy Blume, Roald Dahl, Gary Paulson, and Kate DiCamillo. Most lately, I have seen the rise of graphic novelists, like Jennifer Holm, Shannon Hale, Svetlana Chmakova, Raina Telgemeier, John Lewis, and Kazu Kibuishi. The pictures and words of this latter group help my highly visual tweens navigate middle school, explore fantastic places, and learn history. I think my students would pick a graphic novelist, but it would be hard for them to choose just one.

Q. Do you read one book at a time, or more, and whichever way you read, why do you do so "that way"?

I usually "read" two books at a time.

One with my eyes and one with my ears. I have a student novel by my bedside, but I also have an adult book on *Audible*. I like to "read," audibly, while I drive, and audiobooks also push me to exercise or work around the house. I tell myself "Laurie, no listening to your book if you aren't doing something physical."

It gets me every time!

Q. If you know there is a movie and there is a book, which do you "consume" first, and why?

The book!

There is usually so much more in the book than the movie; additionally, I enjoy comparing my literary imagination to someone else's.

Q. What do you think about the skills and abilities of those who reach the level of authors who are published by established publishers?

Being a “jack of all trades and a master of none,” I am always in awe of those who are masters. I am impressed by all who excel in their calling - surgeons, artists, entertainers, athletes, entrepreneurs, and so on – but, with writers, I also admire the ingenuity, stamina, and bravery it takes to reach the highest level. It often is **years** of imagining, writing, researching, rewriting, and editing to complete one book. Authors pour **themselves** into their written words and then they are judged - for all the world to see!

Q. If you are about to be quarantined for two weeks, and can only bring one book with you, then which book will you bring, and why?

After answering all of these questions, I would take *The Lakota Way*, by Joseph M. Marshall III. Mr. Marshall reveals the virtues of his culture through Indigenous people storytelling and personal anecdotes. His focus in writing about the twelve core qualities crucial to the Lakota way of life easily engrossed me in *The Lakota Way*.

And I believe that *The Lakota Way* would bring out the storyteller in ME! Not only would I read the work, but I would, in quarantine, think and write in response to the reading. The best books force us to examine ourselves. Given two weeks with *The Lakota Way*, I would wrestle with, and respond to, at least the following questions: What are my core qualities? Why are those qualities “core”? How did I obtain them?

Laurie Wig
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