

# Exploring the Past through Multigenre Writing

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with Amy Anson  
and Jacoy Baird

*Research comes alive when students explore a range of alternate genres instead of writing the traditional research report.*

On the final day of a month-long multigenre writing project, sixth-grade students gathered in small groups to share their discoveries. Animated discussion filled the room as projects were displayed and exchanged. Three boys huddled cross-legged in a corner, examining a set of vintage saddlebags containing writings based on an early twentieth-century Texas cattle driver, created by Eric, who earlier made no secret of his dislike of writing. Yet the minute the projects were introduced, Eric was, in his teacher's words, "hooked," coming in on the first day "prepared with not one, but two books—big thick books—the kind sixth graders do not volunteer to lug around." Even though he needed a little prodding when he bogged down in the middle of the project, Eric finished it and received his highest grade ever in English. The unexpected and sustained interest that students displayed throughout this writing project continues to astonish their teachers. One student echoes a common sentiment: "It was way better than a report and we got to be creative."

Amy Anson and Jacoy Baird teach sixth-grade English at a local middle school. They decided to incorporate a new writing project into their literature unit on *The Devil's Arithmetic* (Yolen, 1988). They ap-

proached me, hoping that a multigenre format would help their students gain a deeper understanding of the book's themes and increase their awareness of how different written genres relate to specific situations and social contexts. As we met over the summer, I shared recent books and articles on the topic (Allen, 2001; Grierson, 1999; Moulton, 1999; Romano, 1995, 2000) and examples I collected from other projects with teachers, as well as a multigenre unit about Ellis Island immigrants based on *The Memory Coat* (Woodruff, 1999), which a colleague and I created as a model for the Utah Writing Project (Grierson & Liebich, 1999).

*The Devil's Arithmetic* is a powerful book about remembering and honoring our past. In the novel as Hannah reluctantly opens the door for the prophet Elijah during her family's Passover Seder celebration, she is mysteriously conveyed back in time to a Polish village in 1942. In this place she is called Chaya, meaning "life." Strangely drawn to the family with whom she lives, Hannah is, however, confused by the blurring of boundaries that occurs in her mind between the future, where she once lived, and her immediate surroundings. On their way to her "uncle" Shmuel's wedding she, along with many vil-

lagers, is taken prisoner by the Nazis and transported in a crowded, airless cattle car to a concentration camp, where she experiences firsthand the horrors of the Holocaust. Hannah learns from her "aunt" Gitl that she is their "only link with the past. If something happens to us, you must remember. Promise me, Chaya, you will remember." This theme of memory woven throughout the novel provided a perfect stepping stone for this project, allowing Amy and Jacoy to talk with students about ways to use multigenre writing to explore their memories and heritage.

## THE RESEARCH BASE FOR MULTIGENRE WRITING

The multigenre format is highly flexible and can be adapted to many writing situations and purposes. Its positive effects in high school and college classes have been well demonstrated (Davis & Shadle, 2000; Elbow, 1997–1998; Grierson, 1999; Moulton, 1999; Romano, 1995, 2000), but with the exception of the recent book *The Multigenre Research Paper: Voice, Passion, and Discovery in Grades 4–6* (Allen, 2001), little documentation exists on the use of this form of writing with younger writers. How effective would multigenre research be at this

grade level? Are sixth-grade students capable of working with a variety of genres? This article follows Amy and Jacoy and their students during a month-long foray into this alternative form of writing, including their successes, failures, and advice.

Multigenre projects are organized around a series of writings that blend genres and alternative styles

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(Romano, 2000) into an artifact that is multilayered and often multidimensional, yet bound with a common theme (Grierson, 1999). Elbow (1997–1998) calls this melding of ideas and media *collage*. For instance, Kristine, an undergraduate student, chose to research farming in Idaho. As she refined her topic, she found a voice for her paper in

an imaginary farmer from the era of the Great Depression. Her writing was woven around the theme of hardship and presented as a series of “snapshots” of his life—journal entries, shopping lists, letters, a government eviction notice, and other memorabilia, most recorded with a carpenter’s pencil on paper scraps, including old almanac papers, packing slips, and brown paper bags. Her final project, bound with twine between two weathered shingles from an old barn roof, gave the reader a compelling view into the past.

The multigenre project can help students apply writing as a way to discover, read, evaluate, and organize information. They also learn that effective writing is done for a purpose, with a specific audience in mind.

Sixth-grade students, although familiar with basic report writing, often wind up with cut-and-paste last-minute efforts that lack voice and originality (Davis & Shadle, 2000). Would multigenre writing encourage these students to approach the task of writing in a new way? Because our newly adopted

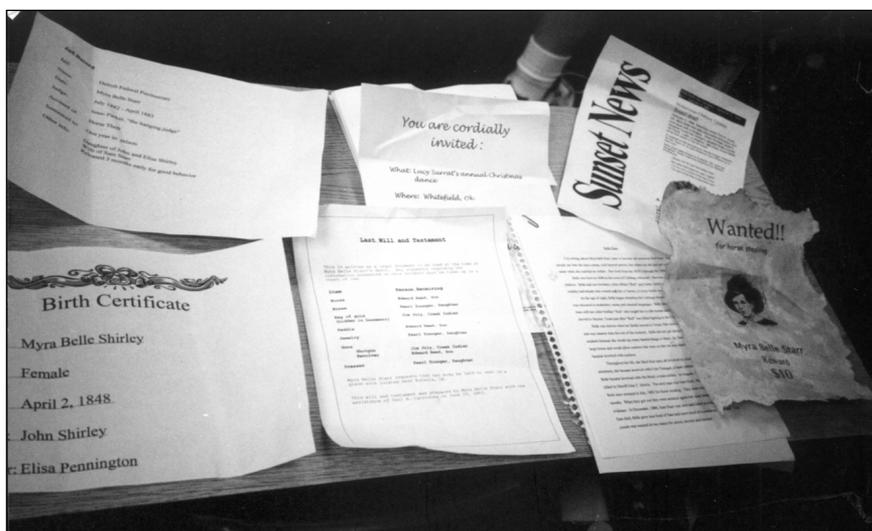
state core curriculum requires students to understand “functional, informational, and literary texts from different periods, cultures, and genres” (Utah State Office of Education, 1999), Amy and Jacoy thought that the format of a multigenre project could stretch the boundaries of informal research and provide a way to incorporate the study of multiple texts. We decided to use the springboard of Hannah’s experiences in *The Devil’s Arithmetic* to encourage their students to learn about their own heritage and to create original works that increased their confidence as writers and their understanding of the varied purposes of text.

## UNCHARTED TERRITORY

Each time we try something unfamiliar, we venture into “new territory” (Romano, 1995). Although multigenre writing has proven to be a successful alternative to traditional writing on the college level (Grierson, 1999), Amy was initially apprehensive as to how this format would work with her sixth graders: “This project was a little intimidating at first because I had never done it before.” We agreed from the outset that this multigenre unit would be, as Jacoy stated, “a work in progress.”

Having a two-hour English block each day gave Amy and Jacoy a chance to read and discuss *The Devil’s Arithmetic* during the first hour and time for the multigenre writing projects in the second. They planned to tie the specific writing assignments to their discussions of the novel.

We defined our individual responsibilities during the project. Amy and Jacoy were to keep in close touch with me throughout the unit, to take detailed notes on their teaching experiences, and to record student



## Children's Literature That Utilizes Multigenres

Bang, Molly. *Nobody Particular*. (Holt, 2000).

- Newspaper clippings, letters, timelines, comic-book-style illustrations, maps, and photographs are used to chronicle the true story of one woman's fight to stop the pollution of bays in Texas.

Cole, Joanna. *Ms. Frizzle's Adventures: Ancient Egypt*. Illus. B. Degen. (Scholastic, 2001).

- Ms. Frizzle is off on a vacation to Egypt, but along the way she becomes a tour guide who takes her charges back in time to the days of the Pharaohs. See *The Magic School Bus* series for more books that feature multigenres.

Coulter, Laurie. *Secrets in Stone: All About Maya Hieroglyphs*. Illus. S. English. (Little, Brown, 2001).

- Woven into this account of how Maya writing was deciphered are fascinating facts about Maya culture, history, beauty tips, recipes, games, activities, folklore, and much more.

Dewey, Jennifer Owings. *Rattlesnake Dance*. (Boyd's Mills Press, 1997).

- Dewey shares three personal experiences with rattlesnakes. Information boxes within the narrative and drawings provide facts, maps, and Native American stories about snakes.

Hoyt-Goldsmith, Diane. *Celebrating Ramadan*. Photographs by L. Migdale. (Holiday House, 2001).

- A photo-essay introduces a Muslim American boy and the cultural and religious practices that accompany his observance of Ramadan. A brief history of Islam as well as recipes, maps, information about the religious observance, and a calendar are included. Other titles by this author feature American children of various ethnicities.

Kurlansky, Mark. *The Cod's Tale*. Illus. S. D. Schindler. (Putnam, 2001).

- A fascinating narrative combines with poetry, maps, timelines, recipes, diagrams, charts, and other genres to describe the life history of the cod and its impact on human history.

Martin, Jacqueline Briggs. *Snowflake Bentley*. Illus. M. Azarian. (Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

- A lyrical biography of a self-taught scientist who photographed and studied snowflakes is enriched by sidebars containing historical details of his life.

Murphy, Claire Rudolf. *The Prince and the Salmon People*. Illus. D. Pasco. (Rizzoli, 1993).

- A legend of the Tsimshians, a Northwest Coast tribe, is enhanced by black line drawings and annotated photographs of museum artifacts used by that tribe.

—Marilyn Carpenter

comments and behaviors. My role would be advisory. I would assist in planning the unit, continue to share materials, visit their classrooms when requested, and offer needed support. We were interested to know what the students would think about multigenre writing, so we decided that Amy and Jacoy would conduct individual interviews with students as the unit progressed, in addition to having each student complete an anonymous evaluation form at the end. Many students also voluntarily wrote journal entries on what they were experiencing.

Amy related: "I saw the multigenre vision clearly in my head. Transferring that vision was the most difficult part, . . . explaining it to students and their parents. [They] are just used to the traditional research paper." As teachers they were invested in this process and wanted to transfer their enthusiasm to the students. Knowing that choice was integral to investment, Amy and Jacoy encouraged their students to contribute to the structure of the project. Most students were delighted with this opportunity to direct their own learning and will-

ingly gave suggestions. One student's response to the question "which genre was most fun to create?" reflects his appreciation of having choices: "My postcard because it let me expand my mind and let me do my favorite thing, draw."

### QUESTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

To introduce the concept of multigenre, Amy and Jacoy kept "mystery boxes" on display in their classrooms for several days. Anticipation was high as students tried to guess the contents. One boy readily admitted that he had "sneaked a peak inside."



KNOW	What I want to find out	How will I find out	What I learned
Thomas Angel great, great ect. uncle designed SLC temple, st. George ect. sis. married Brigham young and was 1st or 2nd wife bro. is my great grandpa	full name; who married; kids; who 1st-2; was ht a big guy like rest of family; personality; all the temples designed; when he joined church? something ordinary he did. Bro. name, sis. name	Journal Internet History on temple Speech for gravesite. Family gravesite church history genealogy	

Figure 1. KWHL Organizer

in the “How I will find out” column with possible sources of information, including visiting the actual gravesite, searching genealogical records, and looking through old journals. Jacoy relates, “they really had to dig for information at home and school, and when they found something, there was often a verbal celebration right there in the library.” As Tiffany discovered, looking beyond the obvious made the students feel like detectives, searching for clues in unexpected places.

**CREATIVITY AND ORDER:  
FINDING A BALANCE**

Organization and documentation of multigenre projects are complex tasks. While some writers need little guidance in an open-ended task such as this, others need a series of step-by-step goals in order to feel comfortable. I am constantly reminded of Scott, who, although he enjoyed the final outcome, struggled with the creativity and self-

monitoring required of this process (Grierson, 1999). We discussed the problem of remembering and recording sources of information. To address these issues and minimize the potential

loss of sources (we have all experienced the wadded up remnants of paper dug out of the pocket of a newly washed pair of jeans), we devised checkpoints along the way, including a “Facts Sheet” with a list of basic questions that each student needed to answer about his or her ancestor by the project’s end and a “Rationale Card” for recording the name of the genre, why the student decided to write in that genre, and the source for the information (Figure 2). Because sixth-grade students are just beginning to learn about creating bibliographies, they were asked to use three different sources, although many chose to include more.

Although we wanted to offer as much choice and independent work time to the students as possible, Amy and Jacoy knew that this project needed guidelines. They posted a basic schedule of when assignments needed to be completed and handed out a rubric to assess the final projects. Each genre would be graded on the following criteria: the rationale; how well the

**Rationale Card**  
(Be sure to attach this card to your project.)

Name: Philip Harding Genre: invoice/receipt

① What does this genre tell us about the person you researched? He worked at a motel and was good in business.

② Where did you get this information? From A family history book

③ Why did you choose to present the information in this genre? People in Motels sent people who stayed there an invoice

(You may write on the back of the card if you need to.)

Figure 2. Rationale Card for a Specific Genre

student followed instructions; overall neatness, spelling, and mechanics; authenticity to the time; uniqueness and depth of information; and appropriate choice of genre for the information presented. Even with checkpoints, some students had difficulty organizing their time. One student noted that the “project should be shorter, not so much writing.”

After completing their initial research, each student was invited to turn in a plan that included the genres chosen to illustrate the stories of the ancestor’s life. The students could write in as many genres as they wished but had a minimum requirement of four short genres, two longer genres, and two alternative or art responses. A sample plan by Tiffany indicates that her initial choices included the creation of an

Internet home page, an interview, and a book cover (Figure 3).

In the two-hour block Amy and Jacoy had for language arts, the first hour was spent in reading and discussing the novel, the next in individual research and writing. Publishing materials and art supplies, including old pages from planners, colored papers, markers, and glue sticks, were gathered and placed where students had easy access. Jacoy relates that “spontaneous sharing sessions would begin in different places around the room” and interrupt writing. “The students were not just showing each other their completed genres. They were explaining them in great detail.” Amy and Jacoy decided to include a five-minute period at the end of class when they asked, “Who found something interesting today?” Always, at least half

of the hands in the room would go up. Sharing provided an incentive for continued student engagement.

## PUTTING MEAT ON “THEM BONES”

The process of writing multigenre puts meat on “them bones.” Although students collect facts, it is not until they begin to write about these facts from viewpoints or alternate genres that the facts come alive. In multigenre, facts are fleshed out by the specific genres that are selected. For instance, Katie chose an imaginary best friend named Sarah to convey information about her great-grandmother’s early years in the late 1880s in Black Rock, Pelorus Sound, New Zealand. Even the requirement of multiple drafts caused surprisingly little resistance as most students determinedly struggled to gain control of new genres.

An important issue to address was why certain genres work best to convey specific facts. Jacoy writes, “As we delved into the ‘creating genres’ phase of the project, I noticed a problem. Many students were just choosing a genre at random for the information they had found. I stopped them . . . and did a little mini-lesson about picking a genre for the information they’d found.” These short five- to seven-minute lessons were generally effective. Katie subsequently chose her genres to depict specific aspects of Sarah’s life, including her birth (a birth certificate), childhood (a letter from a friend), marriage to ‘the perfect man’ (a note to her mother), and her death (an obituary), in a way that a standard biographical report might not have conveyed.

Selecting an appropriate genre provided one teaching opportunity. Learning the particulars of what comprised specific genres provided

The image shows a handwritten student plan on lined paper. The title is "My Plan" with "My" and "Plan" underlined. It is divided into three sections:

- Short written:**
  - ✓ 1. Home Page
  - 2. obituary
  - 3. birth certificate
  - 4. e-mail
- Long written:**
  - ✓ 1. Journal entry
  - 2. Interview
- Arts:**
  - 1. SCRAPBOOK PAGE
  - 2. BOOK COVER

Figure 3. Initial Plan for a Student Project

another. One student wrote that he had difficulty with “Doing a doctor’s report, ’cause what are some scientific doctor-saying words?” Rachel, who researched Florence Nightingale, said that it was confusing “transferring notes and facts into genres. It was hard thinking of a good way and making it the right size like one page.”

Amy and Jacoy also realized that the variety of choices they had offered to their students meant that few would be working on the same genre simultaneously. They elected to work with their students on a small-group or one-to-one basis, using mini-lessons to answer questions and model how genres were constructed. This flexibility was time-consuming but worthwhile. First, they worked together to analyze the genre, the social context in which it would be used, and how it was constructed. What information did an obituary have to include, for instance? How would a telegram be set up and worded? As students worked together, they were able to make joint decisions on what each genre should look like. Then Amy and Jacoy asked students where they thought information could be found to complete the written example. After choosing texts, Amy and Jacoy led their students through the steps of how to read different types of text in order to locate pertinent details, take notes, and organize information.

Resultant examples of these genres were posted on a bulletin board for future reference. We were amazed by the possibilities that interested sixth-grade writers. Students came up with many more genres than the teachers had originally anticipated. Katie typified the students’ growing awareness of genre as she shared her writings, including a birth certificate, a letter about a near-fatal shark attack, and even a list of

things that might have been packed for her great-grandmother’s voyage from New Zealand to America.

## A TIME FOR CELEBRATION

On the final day of the project, the excitement of sharing was tempered with relief at completion of what seemed to the sixth graders an immense undertaking. One student wrote: “Turning them in, it makes you feel like a huge weight has been taken off your shoulders.” Special care had been taken by many students to make aspects of the projects as “authentic” as possible, including burning the edges of pages to give them an antique appearance. Students had to pull their projects together with a theme, but only a few projects came in binders. Most students chose to exercise their creativity. Boxes and suitcases, a “time capsule” made of an empty cardboard tube, a doll with a trunk, and even a set of saddlebags enriched the atmosphere.

As Hannah discovered in *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, examining our own history is “like turning a camera lens” onto the past (p. 155). As they uncovered facts and created their genres, history came alive for many students. Haylee records: “I researched my great-great grandma. The cool thing was that she was the first person in Provo. They had crossed the Mississippi River. Her brother was killed by the Indians and was the first person to be buried in the Provo cemetery. The projects were fun to do because you got to draw the people and do other things besides just writing a big long paper.” When the teachers handed out the anonymous questionnaire at the end of the project, one student wrote: “It was, fun, interesting, and educational.” Numerous comments reflected the students’ growing understanding of genre, including Philip’s deceptively simple telegram, packed with information (Figure 4). Amy and Jacoy were elated. The

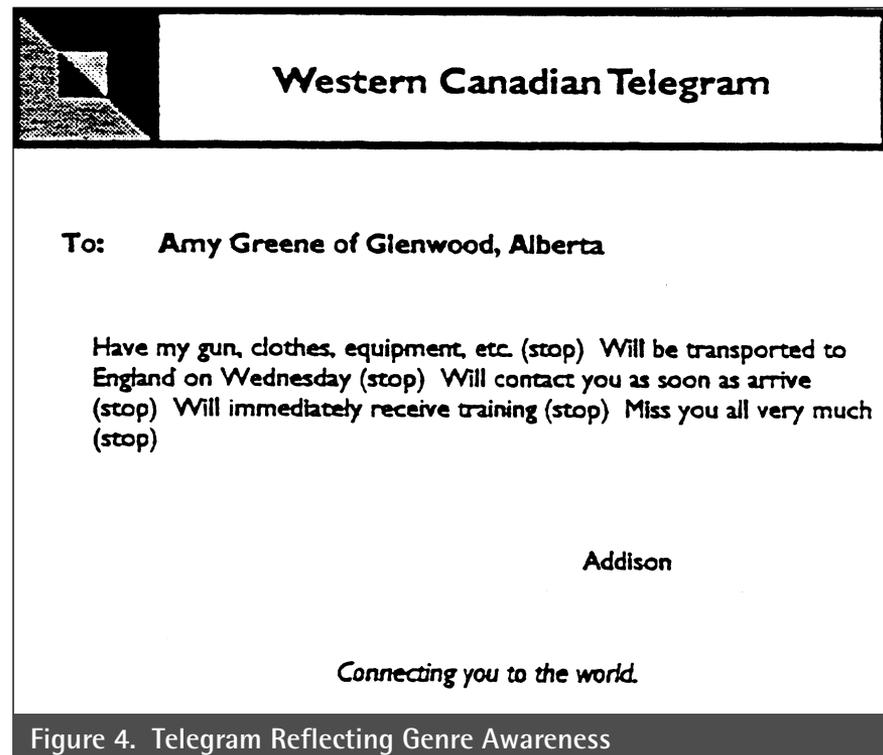


Figure 4. Telegram Reflecting Genre Awareness

completion rate was the highest that they had ever experienced for a project. Out of Amy's 100 students, 99 completed the project and turned it in.

Multigenre writing allowed the sixth graders to explore new ways of thinking and expressing themselves. For instance, along with her written genres, Mandi exhibited creativity in her research on a great-great uncle, who "lived in Germany, and . . . wore a wig," by fashioning a doll complete with long johns. Research and critical problem-solving skills were manifested in the creation of genres. Brian spent an entire class period constructing a train ticket to show

got to go up to Salt Lake during Spring Vacation and look at the buildings he designed. He did tons of buildings . . . and I got to see all of them. I also got to use the information from my multi-genre project for a Utah studies class project where we had to research a pioneer." Students were often candid in their self-evaluations. Sam, who had researched his grandfather, narrated: "It was an ok project. My grandpa died when my dad was only 16. For this project I was able to interview my dad and I got to find out things about my grandpa." Yet this student also divulged that he enjoyed "finding out my history." He had created

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how far Einstein had to travel to his home upon being expelled from school. Brian conferred with his teacher, Amy, and then consulted an atlas to calculate the distance. He "tried to determine the approximate time he would have purchased a ticket to return home."

Sixth graders had varied and generally positive experiences with this multigenre writing project. "I didn't know anything about my ancestor, Truman O. Angel, before I started the project," writes Tiffany. "I thought it was interesting learning about how he went back to England to study the buildings and learned about English architecture and then came back to design his own buildings here. I talked to my mom and all my family a lot during the project, and my grandma who gave me the information. My family thought it was really cool when I'd tell them things because they didn't know anything about him either. I

an entirely new set of memories for himself as he tried to live vicariously in his grandfather's shoes.

The positive effects of multigenre writing extended to less-motivated students, some of whom had struggled all year with turning in assignments. Jacoy states that one student became "so excited, he completed his project ahead of time. . . . His interest and success in the multigenre project gave him the confidence he needed to feel that he's good in English." Both teachers were surprised at the way multigenre caught the imagination of several of their "difficult" students. Amy recalls one student who "did his project on a famous surfer and loved it. He completed the entire project during class time." Amy continues, "His project was not great, but every piece of it was his own individual work. It was very gratifying to watch him care about an assignment." On the final day, he shared his surfer project with

two equally restless classmates. As Amy states, "For about ten minutes, all three of my rowdiest boys were completely engaged in . . . something academic—a conversation about their projects. I . . . captured that one on film!"

Of course, not all projects were commendable, nor were all student reactions positive. The remarks "it was boring," "too much work," and "a waste of time" typified students whose imagination Amy and Jacoy did not manage to capture this time. We are concerned with finding ways to reach these reluctant writers. Yet sometimes a negative remark was indicative of growth, as with Rachel, who expressed her internal struggle with learning about genres and the multigenre format: "It was frustrating trying to find things to put into the different forms of writing and find which would be the best genre for the information. My mom helped me with thinking of good information. She helped me put it all together on the computer. I had to check out a lot of books. . . . It was hard for me to pick which genres to use and I didn't know there was so many different kinds of writing before doing this project. I didn't even know what a genre was!"

## LEAPING PAST BOUNDARIES

A colleague once said you never get teaching completely right. On reflection, there are things that Amy and Jacoy intend to change as they learn more about multigenre writing. As teachers, we continue to stretch beyond our comfort zones—the boundaries of habit. When we met after the school year, one major area that Amy felt was a "missed opportunity" was making more direct ties to the novel. Although they began the unit hoping to tie the daily reading of the novel closely into their writing assignments, the genres

## Reading Expository Texts

The May 2002 *Voices from the Middle* is an excellent resource for further professional reading on supporting students in reading and understanding expository text. The authors in this themed issue provide a range of practical ideas:

- Harvey Daniels suggests ways to use expository text in literature circles.
- Jim Burke provides note-taking tools to help students retain information.
- Janet Allen provides tips for helping students learn difficult content vocabulary.
- Laura Robb discusses the use of multiple texts on the same topic.
- Chris Street gives comprehension strategies to use with difficult text.
- Marshall George pairs fiction with expository text to examine issues of social justice.

Kathy G. Short

often took on a life of their own. We subsequently discussed how well-written novels contain multiple scenes that provide natural lead-ins to differing genres, such as a journal entry or a telegram. These scenes, however, must be identified in advance. Amy and Jacoy have determined that in future projects, these scenes will become pivotal points for their writing assignments.

Deep in the middle of another school year, Amy and Jacoy have centered this year's multigenre projects on two novels, *Holes* by Louis Sachar (1998) and *The Giver* by Lois Lowry (1993). Still energized by the results of their first multigenre writing unit, they continue exploring a growing list of possibilities. Multigenre writing helped most of their students grow as researchers, thinkers, and writers while they developed a fundamental understanding of the different purposes for which text can be used. One student explained that the word genre is now "stuck in his head." Jacoy noted that this project "exceeded the usual 'school' boundar[ies] and leapt into other areas and moments of [students'] lives." The learning seems to be ongoing. Amy was thrilled when Katie stopped her in the hall to say, "Hey, Ms. Anson! Remember that ancestor 'thingy' that we did? I'm using what I learned in another class!" Rivka's words to Hannah in *The Devil's Arithmetic* have rung true for these sixth-grade students: "As long as we can remember, all those gone before are alive inside us" (p. 113). When thoughtfully used, multigenre writing offers teachers a meaningful way to explore literature and incorporate the principles of good writing, including the uses of alternative genres. Amy and Jacoy agree that they have not found another model that creates such enthusiasm and energy for writing among their students.

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