

## Teaching Books, Engaging Minds

TeachingBooks.net. Nov. 2010. TeachingBooks.net, LLC. 18 Nov. 2010.  
<http://www.teachingbooks.net/>.

*Samantha Wager*



On my first visit, entering the Teaching Books site—a multimedia resource database for K-12 literature—gave me the feeling I have upon approaching a multistoried bookstore: a rush of energy that could leave me weaving in and out of the aisles for hours, energized by the thrill of being engulfed in a forest of stories—if I didn't so quickly become overwhelmed by the options. Too often, I end up shuffling around the shelves, staring at the books without any idea of which ones I should bring home.

Teaching Books' home page notes that over twenty-eight thousand resources are available on the site, a number that will freeze my hand on the mouse if I think about it for too long. To the right of the main search bar sits a "What's New?" hyperlink, seemingly a promising way to inch into this ocean of resources. Yet, even this option leads to nearly seven hundred items. My first visit found me stumbling along the surface of the database, clicking on video and audio clips posted to page fronts, and being startled when a link launched me away from Teaching Books and into an author's home page. Even during this initial confusion, I knew that the great variety of materials on this site could aid instructors in developing dynamic, interactive courses that capture young students' interests—as long as there was a way for them to quickly learn how to navigate its depths.

Help did come through a brief film clip I found on the "Video Demos" tab—"General Overviews of TeachingBooks.net," narrated by the site's creator, Nick Glass. He describes this database as a "Google for reading and more," simplifying instructors' searches for resources and "changing the way [students] relate to the book[s]" they are studying. Glass especially emphasizes the thousands of interviews with authors and illustrators posted

to the site (under the “Author Programs” tab), arguing that when readers can “meet” the people behind the books, their relationship with the story often changes. According to Glass, hearing the artists’ motivations and inspirations for the books they create often enables students to develop a stronger connection with the story and gain deeper insights into the literature than they could do alone.

This point secured my interest in the site, since my own experiences as an instructor of freshman composition at Purdue University have confirmed to me the benefits of connecting author interviews to classroom literature studies, particularly when students have difficulty understanding a text. Naomi Shihab Nye’s collection of personal essays, *Never in a Hurry*, was especially challenging for my students to work through. They struggled with the writing style that was so different from anything they have ever read before—lyrical prose that links vignettes and personal reflections from Nye’s life. Frequently they commented that they could not find the point of her essays. Class brainstorming sessions about common themes among the essays seemed to ease some of the students’ confusion, but it was excerpts from an interview—specifically, Bill Moyer’s interview, one of the eight interviews Teaching Books has available for Nye—that aided my students the most. I gave them a handout with three portions of Moyer and Nye’s discussion and asked them to apply Nye’s explanations of her writing style to some of the essays they had read. While I still did not end up with a room full of Nye fans, in the end their responses, assisted by the interview material, did demonstrate a much better understanding of Nye’s work as the students addressed common points among her essays and even identified these themes at work in their own lives.

Teaching Books offers interviews in a variety of formats: video, audio, and print. Some of the links lead to interviews posted on external sites, while others are Teaching Books originals, often conducted in the author’s own homes or in their work studios, which enable students to see book creation in action. These materials alone make the database a worthwhile resource, yet there are even more items that add to the value of this expansive site, including book guides with lesson plans and discussion questions, audio clips of book readings (by the author or a full cast of performers), pronunciation guides for authors’ names, and links to authors’ own Web sites.

So how, then, do instructors pin down the resources that will best serve their students’ needs? The home page has a search bar that sorts queries by author, title, or subject—which is useful if an instructor has a specific book in mind to teach. But with over twenty-eight thousand resources available, it seems the most productive use of this site would be to identify new books that fit course curricula and interest young readers. The “Guided Search” page is helpful in designing parameters for this large-scale site exploration, with options to narrow the query by grade level, resource type (author program [i.e., interviews], book guides, book readings, author Web sites), format (video or audio),

special collections (Reader's theatre, Spanish language, Canadian authors, and Teaching Books original resources), and genre.

Instructors who seek to found their courses upon state reading standards, or to introduce their students to award-winning literature, can make use of lists such as the ELA Common Core Standards, Young Hoosier Book Award, Indiana Children's Book Authors & Illustrators, and US Award & Distinction. For those who want to develop reading assignments that focus on one particular theme or issue, there is also a thematic search option that sorts queries by grade level and subject. A search for secondary level books under the "English Language Arts" category brings up nearly eight hundred thematic lists, with topics ranging from various time periods and world cultures, to personal issues many students grapple with today, such as adoption, body image, dating abuse, divorce, or identity. In addition, there are thematic lists less conventional for academic instruction, including "Action Fantasy," "For Teens, By Teens," and others that recommend books based on past readings students enjoyed, such as *A Child Called It*, *Speak*, *Harry Potter*, or *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The addition of these nontraditional lists serve to make the database a promising resource not only for selecting course readings, but also for helping young readers identify books about topics important to them—topics that may keep them reading outside of school.

The site creators further seek to extend student use of literature by offering resources for subjects besides English and language arts. The "Curricular Uses" page offers tutorials for instructors on how to involve books and the site's supplementary materials in courses such as history, health, art, social studies, and science, as well as extracurricular book clubs and school libraries. The "Guided Search" option allows queries to identify books suitable for all of the previously mentioned subjects, as well as math, music, cultural studies, physical education, and Spanish. Granted, the site does need additional development in these nontraditional areas for literature use, because for some of the categories, particularly science and math, most of the resources noted are suitable only for elementary grades. What is available now, however, can certainly help students recognize at a young age the benefits of literature, creativity, and analytical skills beyond English class and pleasure reading.

In addition to resources that span across the curriculum, Teaching Books offers material for both contemporary and classic works. While many of the resources pushed to the foreground of the site's pages (filmed interviews, public reading and performances of literature, illustrators at work in their studios) focus on newly released books, there are also materials available for authors traditional to children's and teenager's education—Shakespeare, Nathaniel Hawthorne, T. S. Eliot, Jane Austen, and F. Scott Fitzgerald are just a few of those referenced on the site. The resources for these authors tend to be more limited than those posted for contemporary authors, which is understandable, since re-

corded interviews make up such a large portion of this site's material. One disappointing feature of the materials offered for these classic writers, however, is that "cheat guides" such as Spark Notes are almost always listed. Teaching Books does encourage student use of the site through school library programs, and perhaps this move is an act to draw children and teenagers to the database or an attempt to reach out to reluctant or struggling readers. It seems to me, however, considering the quality and innovation of much of the materials available on this site, that the creators of Teaching Books should be capable of more than just directing students to a resource that too often takes the place of reading the original book. Why not use this site instead as an opportunity to teach students about locating and evaluating quality sources and guide them to stronger supplementary materials that promote critical analysis of literature, rather than elementary knowledge of plot and characters?

The resources housed within the Teaching Books database can provide much assistance to instructors as they develop courses that engage students in active learning processes, though teachers will need to spend some time familiarizing themselves with the content and layout of the site to find the materials most useful for their students. While this database should not be the sole source of research and study information for students—particularly secondary students—I believe this site does provide a strong start for driving young learners to increase their insight and engagement with literary works in their academic and personal lives.

### About the Author

**Samantha Wager** is pursuing her master's degree in the English Department at Purdue University, specializing in young adult literature. Currently she is working on her thesis, which explores issues of self-identity and development in contemporary young adult fantasy books.