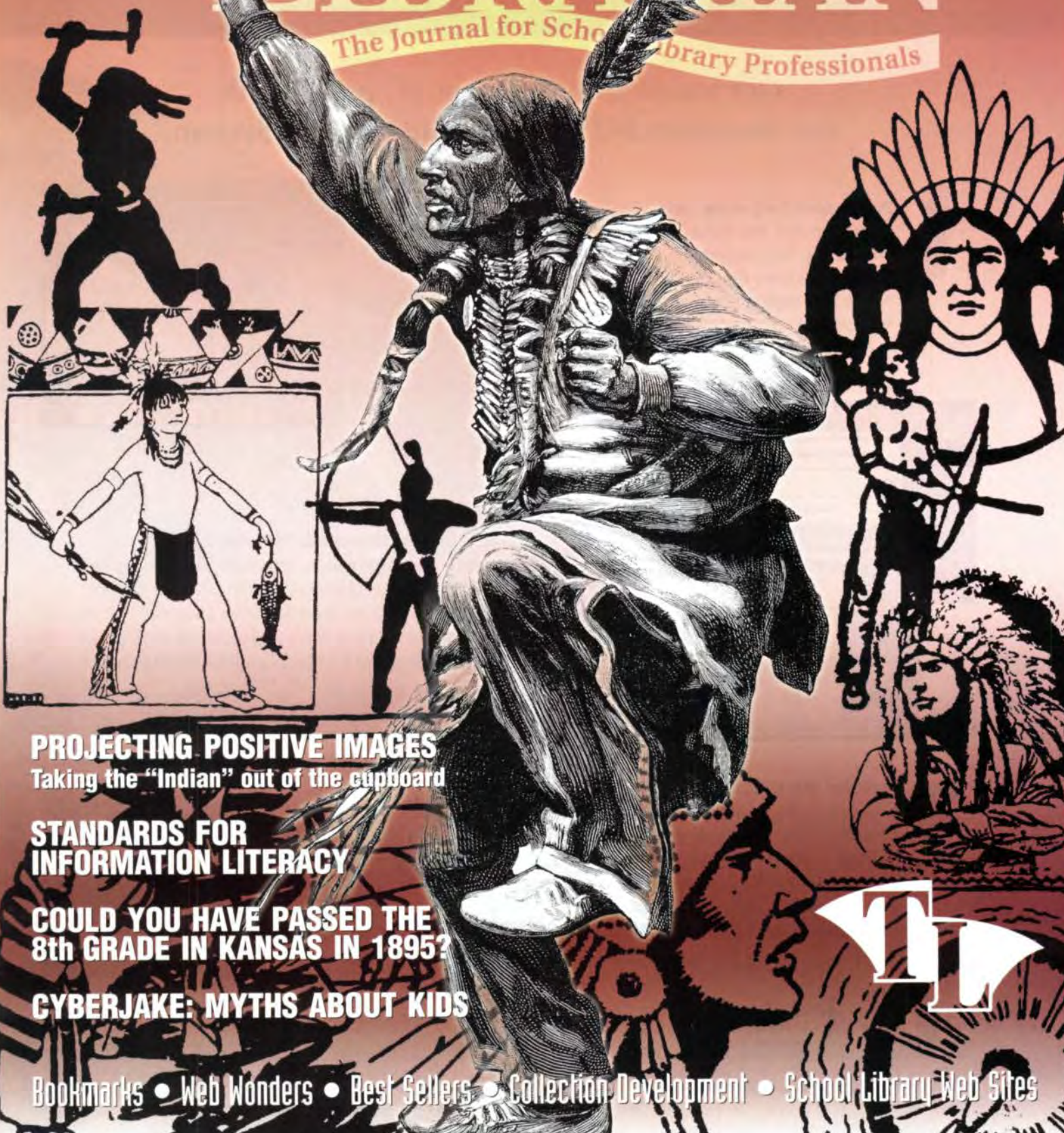


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The Journal for School Library Professionals



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Authors Talk About The Power of Language Words...Words...Words

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." So goes an old playground chant. However, the truth is that words *do* hurt. Words have the power to wound us, to make us cry. Words also have the power to make us laugh or to allow us to feel the pain of others. Words are extremely powerful. Why else do we read except to make that emotional connection with characters and events? That emotional connection to the book, to the characters, to the story, is an essential one.

Recently, I asked some of my favorite authors, nine authors whom I have profiled here over the past four years, to talk about the tools of their trade. No, not queries about what type of pencil they prefer or which word processing program they find most user-friendly. Instead, I asked these gifted writers to talk to me about the importance of words. Listen to the powerful voices as Paul Zindel (PZ), Joan Bauer (JB), Lee Bennett Hopkins (LBH), T.A. Barron (TAB), Chris Crutcher (CC), Jack Gantos (JG), Paul Janeczko (PJ), Mel Glenn (MG) and Jeanette Ingold (JI) create a veritable symphony of ideas and images with their words.

TL:

How aware are you, as you write, of each word?

LBH:

In writing poetry, words are particularly important. They must be tasted and not wasted. Words paint pictures in a reader's mind, so writers have to be aware not only of the word but of its sounds. Each and every word becomes an important step which allows the read to climb into the

text. Each word also builds upon the one preceding to finalize a thought.

PBJ:

I am very aware of each word as I write a poem, but at the beginning of the process that awareness may be fuzzy as I jot down ideas, feelings and impressions. However, as this blob of words slowly makes its way toward becoming a poem with rewriting and tinkering, the awareness sharpens. More than any other writer, a poet needs to look for the perfect word.

TAB:

Extremely and not at all. That's because writing comes together from both sides of the brain: the rational, directed side and the free-wheeling, creative side. As a result, a writer needs to be aware of every little detail, including every single word, as well as the overarching flow of the story. Of course, he also needs to remain open to the surprises that rise up from the subconscious.

JB:

I work in first person, so each word is critical to me in creating an authentic voice for my character, I work at both the word level and the sentence level simultaneously. I spend time reading sentences out loud to see if the voice stays consistent. Sometimes, just taking out a word and replacing it with another can make a huge difference.

TL:

What do you do, then, when the right word eludes you?

JL:

I have a string of them every word that occurs to me at the moment and then I get on with things having

faith that a better choice will pop up sometime. And, it usually does when I am doing dishes or taking a shower. Also, I view my word processor's thesaurus as a blessing right there with spell check.

LBH:

A thesaurus is to a writer what paints and palette are to an artist.

MG:

If the word or line escapes me, I'll wrestle with it, like a word alligator, and then if it's no go after a struggle, I'll just get up and walk away.

PZ:

I check the computer's thesaurus and other thesauri and reverse dictionaries. I check books of metaphors and lists of my favorite words. I keep lists of all kinds of words: action words, delicious words, adolescent words. All kinds of singing, dancing stupendous words.

CC:

In the initial writing, if the right word eludes me, I am very approximate, only worried about reminding myself of the word I'll need. In the editing process, though, I find myself with thesaurus in hand. I heard John Irving say once, "I'm not much of a writer, but I'm a hell of a re-writer." My sentiments exactly plus I get to put myself in the same sentence as John Irving.

TL:

How do words help you create an effect or a mood?

JL:

I do my revisions within a draft in a kind of rolling sequence, starting each morning by reading aloud the previous couple of days' work. That's when I hone in on the effects of

individual words and passages. When a word is jarring because it's inappropriate to a character or situation, or when a description doesn't go beyond what everyone knows anyway, then the writing needs work. I think that what you strive for is writing that creates a mood or effect so well that it doesn't call attention to itself.

CC:

I used to think that everyone did a thing I've done since I can remember: see letters and words in colors, textures and hues. Certain letters of the alphabet are lighter or darker in my head, wetter or drier, lighter or heavier. The same is true of words, though often words are more than the sum of those letters because of their sounds. That's as close as I can come to how words help to create an effect. There is a visceral feeling I have about almost every word. In the end, I read my work aloud to myself to see what the overall effect is.

TAB:

Words create moods in many ways, not just by the choice of words but also by their placement, timing, voice, and even their absence. Every word, I believe, contains powerful magic. To release that magic, a word needs to be touched, embraced, by both sides of the writer's mind. Then, (and here is the magic part) those words can do the same for the minds of readers.

TL:

How do you know when you have it right?

JG:

Usually, when I am exhausted. I put 20-30 rewrites into my work. Of course, I also have many mental and gut checklists: is the action complete? Is the emotional and intellectual depth of the character fully realized? Does every word fulfill its purpose? The work is finished when your highest standards are met. No vague holes in the logic, no sags in the action.

MG:

Writing for me is similar to what melody is for a musician or composer, more than a collection of notes or words. When I get it right, I know it. It's like the sound of a ball on the bat, and it feels right. There are tools I use instinctively—irony, alliteration, humor, imagery; they all help me to create what I want.

PBJ:

Mark Twain once observed that the difference between the right word and the almost right word is like the difference between lightning and lightning bug. That sentiment is particularly appropriate in a poem where language must be compact and intense. When I find the right word, a smile might cross my lips or my heart might toss in a couple of extra thumps.

TL:

How can teachers and librarians help children find their words?

JG:

Have them read good books aloud, especially contemporary poetry and prose. No student is driven to find the right word if all right words produce are tired, old works that do not relate to them. Kids can be encouraged to get a journal and write some each day. They should be taught to be fearless of what they write, to make friends with other people who think reading and writing is something to pursue.

JJ:

Tell kids to listen to people talk and learn to recognize what makes a person's voice unique. It is the key to dialogue, and in the larger sense, the key to a narrative voice, to that sound which identifies a character in the book so strongly that a reader cannot get it mixed up with any other. Students also need to write and to write for themselves. Paper or a hard drive is a great place for capturing what interests them, for examining their thoughts, and for experimenting.

MG:

As a teacher, I do have creative writing classes, and I can teach the "notes"—the words, sentences, structure, plot and the like. Teaching "melody" is a much more difficult thing. It seems to me that the best thing I can do as a teacher is to provide the room (both physical and emotional) to let students learn their own melodies.

CC:

Kids can tell stories in *any* way they want to, not necessarily writing but just putting stories together. A big part of writing is not only what one says but also how it is received. To a budding writer, *any* kind of storytelling is training.

JB:

Get practical. Ask kids to think about the feelings of what they're trying to write. Sad, happy, embarrassed, stressed, angry, irritated? String some words together to describe those feelings. Attach a character to them. Teach kids to think through ideas.

TAB:

Practice! The more chances someone has to write the more the craft becomes a familiar friend. Although, like any craft, it's always possible to learn and to get more proficient, there is also an increasing sense of mastery. And there is another benefit: when someone puts into writing a feeling, an observation, or an experience—it becomes that person's own. Forever.

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