

She's Just Not That Intuit



"Strong readers are drawn to certain books because they can tap into situations, events, and story lines that feed their intuition."

ROBIN OVERBY COX

The only real valuable thing is intuition.
—Albert Einstein (n.d.)

I've been at this thing called education for more than a couple of decades now, and I am pretty sure Einstein hit the nail right on the head. Let's talk about this little topic in light of what's happening to today's readers, in today's classrooms, and in today's libraries.

A READER WITH A SIXTH SENSE

Meet Avery. She has a sixth sense about what's important in life. She can winnow like no one I've ever met. Creative, talented, and busy, give her a pile of books and she'll cut to the one that nurtures her soul and tickles her fancy. She's eleven and she reads way above her "grade level." She makes choices about what she reads using an invisible little tool called her "intuition." It's hard for her to articulate what makes her choose that book, that genre. As she enters the story, there is a knowing inside her. She doesn't know *how* she knows—she just does. She culls the good from the not-half-bad using a tingling and personal decision-making process.

But watch how others try to interrupt that process when she goes to school. She has to finish the text in a certain amount of time; she's directed to read books at a prescribed reading level; she even has to take a "test" when she's done to prove that she's ingested the story with a modicum of understanding. She makes a million little decisions as she reads that help her understand. But the rigors of the educational system want to tamper with that process and focus on assessment instead of growth. It makes me want to scream, "Leave her alone!" She does not need our "guidance" to become a strong reader.

THE ON-CUE READER

Now look at Ashlynn. She's living on borrowed time when she's sent to the li-

brary or the bookshelf during "learning centers." She's got fifteen minutes to intuit. Book in hand, reading strategies and skills in tow, she's having a great deal of difficulty translating and choosing what to read, so much so that she wanders or plucks; choosing what to read is difficult. When I look at less powerful readers like Ashlynn, I want to know: Has the process of learning to read suppressed one's ability to take what is needed from the book in hand? Is intuition primitive or buried?

Struggling readers like Ashlynn, whose skills are still developing, tend to demonstrate a lack of self-esteem and are mired in self-doubt when it comes to deciding what to read. They have perceived boundaries when it comes to books; the inability to read well is the great inequality. Along comes an instructional reading system or reading motivational program designed to get Ashlynn to read more words at this Lexile or reading level, "dot color," or shelf. Well-intentioned educators and librarians tell her to read sequentially—read this book, then that book, then the next one. Take a quiz or assessment every step of the way.

She might even be awarded points or grades for her progress with new pencils, a set of reading dog tags. What does this approach do to this reader's intuition? What decisions does she make about how she reads, listens, or solves problems? Conditioned to read on cue, how does this approach change the decisions she makes?

THE PROBLEM SOLVER

Finally, meet Joaquin. He's the tinkerer who learns by doing, not reading about doing. Solving problems (making) is what builds the bridge between thinking about thinking and reading. He doesn't know it, can't articulate it, but he has a growth mindset. He's an experimenter. He believes he can do anything. He's like a miniature John Dewey in our libraries and classrooms, using an internalized design process that stimulates his quest for information and ideas. Makerspaces give him authentic learning opportunities, and reading achievement as well as reading improvement—all natural byproducts. We can foster this nonlinear intuitive process by providing the tools; the rest is up to him.

THE READER STRUGGLING

Avery and Joaquin have accomplished a lot in their reading and doing. They have picked up on patterns of story, behavior, dialogue, and design and don't even realize that through their engagement they're moving from novice to expert in many understandings. But Ashlynn, not so much. Because she's struggling with the mechanics of reading, it's taking her longer to construct meaning, and fewer patterns are being reinforced in her reading practice. Her

freedom to read has been usurped by the effort *required* to read. She does not see herself as a reader or a doer. Yet we know that if she is allowed to continue to plug away, intuition will build.

But therein lies the rub. So many children become frustrated and give up. I work with them every day. They have a belief that reading is mysterious and confounding and have an unspoken understanding that their peers have found a key that eludes them. They worry that they will never figure it out. By third or fourth grade, they have quit worrying; they've begun to make decisions about how powerful or un-powerful they are as readers. Those decisions worry me.

Their body language speaks volumes. They drift; they poke; they wander. Sometimes they goof off with their peers or props. I find Junie B. Jones pairing with Arthur on the bottom shelf. Screensavers will show up that were never installed. Shelf marker sword fights will break out. Some of these are symptomatic of readers who are at a loss. While I want them to persevere and want to support them in the process, they are not going to do what I want them to do because they have already decided that they don't know how to read. I know that if they keep practicing with a vengeance, they will eventually master the patterns and techniques that lead to independent reading, and they will be free to pursue it.

For Ashlynn, I want her reading practitioners to guide and inform her practice early and often. Didactic teaching and guided performance will habituate the scope and sequence of reading until the process is more pleasant than painful. At that point, I believe her intuition will build in its

spontaneity, and she'll take off. But *guide and inform* are a far cry from *dictate and mandate*.

The word *intuition* in its Latin form is *intuir*—knowledge from within. A child who intuits is not using a conscious thinking process. He's operating in both his subconscious cognitive and affective domains; his thinking is not on purpose. It's speedy quick and effortless, with millions of little observations as he engages with story. Instinctive feeling prevails over conscious thought. It's a beautiful thing.

Driven by this internal power source, a child's intuition alerts him to danger, excitement, and intrigue and is nuanced in such a way that I can't interject my opinion without risking the loss of that child's intuitive process. Strong readers are drawn to certain books because they can tap into situations, events, and story lines that feed their intuition. Their insight is intensely private. We don't have the right to interrupt.

The child who understands how to exercise intuition can read and engage powerfully with the world around him. He can predict the next action or event in a story. He imagines what will happen before it does, and his thoughts lead to surprise, disappointment, or delight. He knows or wants to know what the dog knows, what the bear will do, where the train is going. He can sense tension ahead, may illustrate a page before turning it, and can preempt the author's last sentence with one of his own.

In an academic world that is scripted, prescribed, and standardized, intuition is kind of like a child's last freedom. In the wilderness of a child's imagination, intuition is rudder and sail. Intuition must be stimulated,



preserved, and protected if it's going to endure. We want children to enter a book and experience it firsthand. A huge surge in vocabulary flows through this exploratory process. The reader becomes word wealthy. Through experiencing other's thoughts, feelings, and emotions, children learn to develop their own intuition; insights they may share with us if we are paying attention. Reading ability has everything to do with how meaningful and how well an emergent reader meets up with text. As an educator, what happens next matters.

IT CAN'T WAIT

We can't wait for struggling readers to reach third or fourth grade, much less middle school. Early literacy is essential. It's where the rubber meets the road. We must provide infants, toddlers, and prekindergarten students with print-rich environments and experiences. If we wait until the struggle persists, we have waited too long and the doors to intuition begin to close. The signs are familiar: That second grader who still can't decode. The third grader who has only developed a basic sight vocabulary, no more, no less. The first grader who wants to move to second grade but is retained to repeat the same curriculum a second time. The learner starts to decide what he knows and doesn't know. Intervention is critical, not simply to build a reader but to build a thinker.

Children who are intuitive exercise an ability to predict outcomes, consequences, and results. Without trying, they are building their knowledge base and moving from naiveté to strength. In Massimo Pigliucci's book *Answers for Aristotle* (2012), we find scores of ex-

YA FICTION

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Levine, Gail Carson. **The Lost Kingdom of Bamarre**. HarperCollins, 2017. 400p. \$17.99. ISBN: 9780062074669. Grades 5-8. As far as Peregrine knows, she was adopted by Laktis from another Lakti family, one of the ruling class of the Bamarre kingdom. She's grown up with all the advantages of wealth and power, and excelled at her training in the warrior arts. She also loves poetry, an oddity in a Lakti girl. But that makes sense when a fairy informs Perry, to her shock, that she was born into the poetry-loving Bamarre servant class. She starts to recognize the injustice towards the Bamarre, natives who were subjugated after welcoming Lakti refugees. Perry also questions the Lakti dedication to war and expansion. Where does she fit now, in the kingdom, in her adoptive family, and in her biological one? Her courage and spirit of adventure lead this heroine to unexpected places and dangers in this absorbing fantasy.

Watson, Renee. **Piecing Me Together**. Bloomsbury, 2017. 272 p. \$17.99. ISBN: 9781681191058. Grades 7 up. Jade, the engaging narrator of this excellent contemporary novel, makes collages as a hobby. She brings together elements that others might consider ugly and turns them into art. So, too, in her own life, she's trying to make sense out of different pieces and learn to speak up for herself. At home, Jade's strong-willed mother works long hours to make ends meet. At her private school, Jade's a scholarship student, one of the few Blacks there. Although a strong student who tutors others, Jade doesn't fit in socially. Now a junior, she finally makes a school friend, a white scholarship girl who also takes the city bus to school. But issues around racism threaten the friendship. Jade learns to voice her opinions to those around her, including the wealthy, well-meaning female mentor. It's a pleasure to be with Jade as she figures things out, making mistakes but always persisting and often, to her surprise, succeeding.

Weston, Carol. **The Speed of Life**. Sourcebooks Jabberwocky, 2016. 329p. \$16.99. ISBN: 9781492631347. \$16.99. Grades 7-10. Sofia, 14, deeply misses her mother, who died a year ago. Sofia misses her warmth, love, and motherly advice. Sofia begins anonymously emailing a woman named Kate who writes a national advice column and who visited Sofia's school. Sofia receives kind, helpful answers to her sometimes embarrassing questions. What Sofia doesn't realize is that her father, who attended Kate's talk for parents, has started dating her. When the romance grows serious, Sofia gets to know Kate and Kate's hostile teenage daughter, Alexa, which expands and complicates their lives. Sofia's genuine voice infuses humor and serious emotions into the narrative that covers a year of big changes in her life.

Downham, Jenny. **Unbecoming**. Scholastic, 2016. 384p. \$17.99. ISBN: 9780545907170. Grades 9-12. In this unusually rich novel set in England, seventeen-year-old Katie gets to know her grandmother, Mary, for the first time. Katie's overworked, controlling mother, Caroline, has long been estranged from the grandmother for reasons unknown to Katie. But now Mary is slipping into dementia and needs a place to stay before social services can place her in a nursing home. Katie's mesmerized by Mary's love of life and her stories about her unconventional past including her unwed pregnancy with Caroline. The past slowly comes to light, along with the reasons for Caroline's anger and hurt. Meanwhile, Katie's worried about her attraction to girls, which has led to rejection by friends and uncertainty about a new girl she's met. Vivid characters and luminous writing explore issues of secrecy, memory, betrayal, sexuality, and family in three generations of women in this outstanding novel.

amples of what happens when neuroscience and philosophy collide. Those who study both disciplines comment on the role of intuition in intelligence, as well as in our lives. This is illustrated in a quote based on the work of Bob Samples as he interprets Albert Einstein: “The intuitive mind is a sacred gift, and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift” (Quote Investigator, 2013).

We get gifts every year, all year long, in the form of intuition shared and bared in new literature or old literature that’s rediscovered. These gifts are lavish for intuitives. One peek at our 2017 Newbery and Caldecott lists reveals a bountiful harvest by and for intuitive readers. Kelly Barnhill’s *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* (2016) requires youngsters to balance hope, heartbreak, sorrow, and wonder in order to discover their own power. Heartbreak, honor, and hope collide in Ashley Bryan’s *Freedom over Me* (2016). A dragon, a holy dog, and cheese compel empathic intuitives to gulp, gasp, and laugh in *The Inquisitor’s Tale* by Adam Gidwitz (2016). And it’s the intuitive reader who will glean the most from Annabelle’s struggles in *Wolf Hollow* by Lauren Wolk (2016). Perhaps Javaka Steptoe’s *Radiant Child* (2016) most gracefully illustrates how a young reader may exercise his intuition as we leaf through the powerful collages in this work of art. These award winners provide rich opportunities for all readers but especially for sentient intuitives who inhale books crafted especially for them. For these readers, intuition fills in the gaps, revealing as much about what is on the page as what is not.

THE LIBRARY: INTUITION LABORATORY

The library or learning commons—as a laboratory for fostering intuition as well as creativity—is more than books on a shelf or databases via icon. It’s more philosophy than place. A depository of intuition, today’s library offers readers a bridge between the known and unknown, the charted and uncharted, the seen and unseen. A collaborative library environment and quality collection with a mindset turned toward engaging intuition in unique and personal ways builds not just a reader but an expert. The brain’s ability to pick up on recurring patterns the more we’re exposed to a particular domain of activity—reading, for example—will develop not just intuition but literacy as well. For Avery, Ashlynn, and Joaquin, it’s all about the journey, not the destination. Aching hearts, superpowers, psychic abilities aside, the power of thinking without thinking about thinking is an intensely personal ride, a sacred gift they can give themselves and share with us if we’re lucky.

REFERENCES

- Barnhill, K. R. (2016). *The girl who drank the moon*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Young Readers.
- Bryan, A. (2016). *Freedom over me: Eleven slaves, their lives and dreams brought to life*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
- Einstein, A. (n.d.). BrainyQuote.com. Retrieved from <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/alberteins165188.html>
- Gidwitz, A. (2016). *The inquisitor’s tale, or, the three magical children and their holy dog*. New York: Dutton Children’s.
- Pigliucci, M. (2012). *Answers for Aristotle: How science and philosophy can lead us to a more meaningful life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Quote Investigator. (2013, September). *Exploring the origins of quotations*. Retrieved from <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/09/18/intuitive-mind/>
- Steptoe, Javaka. (2016). *Radiant child: The story of young artist Jean-Michel Basquiat*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Wolk, L. (2016). *Wolf hollow: A novel*. New York: Dutton Children’s.

Robin Overby Cox was born in Augsburg, Germany, but calls College Station, Texas, her home. With a BS from Florida State University, Tallahassee, and an MA from Tampa’s University of South Florida, she continues to serve in public school classrooms and libraries, deriving her inspiration from people and places that symbolize courage, freedom, and diversity. She collaborated with wounded warrior Shilo Harris to write *Steel Will: My Journey Through Hell to Become the Man I Was Meant to Be* (Baker Publishing Group, 2014).