

A Novel Idea

A Letter to My Sixth Grade Class

I've considered myself a writer since I was 15 years old. As I approached 50, twelve years ago, it dawned on me I still hadn't written anything. Just as a teacher teaches and a plumber messes with toilets, a writer should write. Right?

Back then my four children were teenagers with healthy appetites so it was clear that I could not give up my day job. No, my day job had nothing to do with toilets. I was a sixth grade teacher, a teacher of math, history, reading and writing.

One day while driving my teenagers to piano lessons and soccer practices, I had an "aha" moment. Why not teach the writing process to my students by having them read a story I was trying, but failing, to write? Why not let them criticize it and me and help me find a way to tell that struggling story to its intended audience, young people just like them? The story had a title, Impossible Dreams, and a heroine, Eileen Romanowski, but little else. Finishing it seemed like an impossible dream.

The dream arose from my love for the game of baseball and my two daughters. Raising girls, even today, is to know that life, not a game, has a different set of rules for girls and that those rules are not fair. My words wouldn't change the world, but I knew I had to try anyways.

I also knew about Charles Dickens, who wrote his novels in weekly installments printed in London's newspapers. Everyone in mid - 19th century England, from chimney sweeps to Queen Victoria, waited excitedly for each new episode. I thought I could write Impossible Dreams that way, too. My audience wouldn't be an entire nation but a classroom of 11 and 12 year olds. Instead of Charles Dickens, they'd get me. Instead of *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield* they would read the adventures of a girl, Eileen Romanowski, and her impossible dream to play little league baseball with boys in 1967.

Eileen's story would not take place in London, England but would be set in Holyoke, Massachusetts, my hometown. I have a love / hate relationship with Holyoke. That's not right; actually, there's no longer anything but love. Oh, when I was a young man I hated the place. All I could see were the decaying factories, the old men feeding pigeons in the park, a city with its best days long gone. Now I know that my young life in that hardscrabble, working class town made me the man I became.

Motivated to end my 35 year drought, I wrote the first few chapters, episodes really, and brought them into my classroom. At that time I knew the general premise of Eileen's story but I only had a vague idea where it was going and no clue, whatsoever, how it would get there. I wasn't worried though. My class had motivated me to start the ball rolling and maybe they would help me finish.

I started the fateful class by telling my kids about Charles Dickens. I hoped they wouldn't answer me with "Bah Humbug!" I said that I had discovered a current novel and that I would like to reveal it to them in weekly installments but only if they were interested. I did not divulge the name of the author; they didn't even ask. "Are we going to be tested on this book, Mr. Walkowicz?" was their only question.

I passed out the opening chapters and waited for the verdict. I wasn't patient. For some reason I had placed the future of this book in the hands of 20 preteens. What was I thinking?

What were they thinking? When they were done reading it, I asked them to write a reaction, to answer a few questions. *Do you like it so far? What do you think will happen next? Would you like to keep reading it? Don't you agree that the author must be a genius?* I collected their responses and granted them a five-minute break to use the bathroom down the hall, to get a drink of water, to create their customary havoc, anything to remove them from the room so I could end the suspense. What did I learn? If you ask kids for criticism, you'd better be ready to get criticized.

The first kid had very definite tastes in literature and Impossible Dreams didn't satisfy them. He wrote, "I like books about war, high fantasy and stuff. My favorite books have lots of killing in them. Is that going to happen in this book? I don't think so. End of story."

It didn't get better with the second critique. "Why do so many books have to be about sports?" a girl wondered. "I hate sports. I do not want to read another sports book!"

To use a sports analogy, the losing streak continued. "This story seems like it will be kind of emotional," observed a boy. "I'm not really into books about feelings." I was striking out. A few more comments like these and the game would be over.

Then it changed. One positive paper followed another and another and by the time I had read them all, I wanted to call the office and ask for a substitute so I could go home and work on the next couple of chapters. I was encouraged that most of the girls in my class seemed to identify with the protagonist, Eileen Romanowski. "It's

about time we read a book about a girl,” wrote one of the girls. “Too many books are about boys. I can’t wait to read about a girl who is just as good as the boys.”

It was time to confess to the girls and boys in my class that I was the author. They didn’t seem too impressed. One boy asked, “So, Mr. Walkowicz, you’re Eileen Romanowski? Isn’t that kind of weird?”

Another one said, “Will you be like dedicating this book to us or something?”

A student raised her hand. “You won’t believe this,” she said. “I love baseball and I play baseball with boys all the time and sometimes they do act funny about it. Well, during the break time, I went to the school library and I asked the librarian if she had Impossible Dreams. I couldn’t wait to find out what happens. She said she never heard of the book but that it sounded like a good one and that she’ll try to get it for me.”

That student had no idea what she had just given me. Inspiration. Enough inspiration to end a 35 year drought.

The drought over I did indeed finish Impossible Dreams. Sort of. Oh, it had more errors in it than a thousand little league baseball games, but the book unveiled itself week after week. Some weeks were weaker than others but we finished the very week that summer vacation began.

What did my students learn? Just as I hoped, they learned that writing is work, very hard work. I learned that my kids were much more excited about starting summer vacation than finishing the book. I also learned that my work with Impossible Dreams had not ended.

Summer started and my novel, our novel, ended up in a closet in the classroom. I guess I wanted a summer vacation, too. Like too many dreams, it was ignored and then forgotten.

Twelve full years later and still lucky enough to be teaching sixth graders, I am bringing back Impossible Dreams for another “at bat”, a new season. I am hoping my new students, you, will be part of my team. More of you play soccer or lacrosse than baseball, but that’s okay. 1967, the year the story is set in, is now 50 years back, back in the time when your grandparents were children. Still, I continue to value the wisdom of young people.....you! I hope you’ll help me.

My plan is to treat the original Impossible Dreams as a rough draft. You know that drill. I will do the work, yes, hard work on it. I’ll clean up the worst of its errors

and then, in the spirit of Charles Dickens, present it in weekly episodes for your inspection, suggestions and criticism.

What do you think? The students, you, will be able to grade me, the teacher. You'll meet Eileen Romanowski, Joey Mitchell, Tank Arbuster, Mike "the Microphone" Milkiewicz and the rest of the characters from 1967 and help me help Eileen realize her dreams. You can write her story with me. You can give your teacher homework.

Play ball!