

Ever hear of William Shakespeare? Rueben has: Lori Wald

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Opinion

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Rueben wore the required white button-down shirt with a red necktie to designate him as a ninth-grader.

I encouraged him to pick a book from the box of books sorted by reading level. He had tested out at grade level four. He jiggered through the box filled mostly with books about sports figures or African-Americans of historical significance.

The book he chose, "[Animorphs](#)", was one of a series of books about a group of friends who had an ability to metamorphose from human to animal and back again. We stepped into one of the cleared-out closets furnished with a small table and two metal chairs, someone's idea of a private space where the boys would not be humiliated for getting extra help. I arranged both chairs on the same side of the table even though that meant our shoulders pressed

against the wall. I placed the book on the table between us and Rueben reluctantly opened it, turned to the first page and, after I asked, began to read aloud.

The grammar and punctuation in this book were unlike anything I had ever seen, and I have read lots of books. By the end of our session, Rueben had read probably less than 100 words. The text offended every literary sensibility.

Instead of quotation marks, for some insane reason, the writer used angle brackets. If you don't know what angle brackets are, that's because you have never used them, since there is never any reason to use them in a piece of literature. Before he left to go back to class, I asked Rueben whether he liked this book. "It's okay," he mumbled.

The following week I returned, and Rueben showed up as well. I grabbed his yellow folder with the book and his reading chart and we headed to our closet. Rueben started to read, haltingly.

After a few horrifying sentences and terrifying punctuation, I had an idea. In my purse was my iPhone and on it was an ebook of The Complete Works of William Shakespeare.

"We're going to do an experiment," I told Rueben. A few swipes on my phone and I had it. "Ever hear of William Shakespeare?"

Rueben nodded. "I guess." He was a boy of few words.

"Let's try an experiment. This is a play called Hamlet." I tossed the book aside and placed my phone between us. "I'll read all the scene descriptions and the names. You can read the dialogue."

I pointed, then read aloud: "[Act I, Scene I. Elsinore](#). A platform before the castle. Francisco at his post. Enter to him Bernardo."

Rueben's expression remained, as always, blank.

"Now, you read," I commanded.

"Who's there?"

"Francisco," I said my part.

"Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself," read Rueben.

I thought about stopping and explaining, but Rueben seemed willing to continue, so I announced the next speaker, Bernardo, and Rueben said, "Long live the king!"

A few weeks in, I asked Rueben if he understood what he was reading. He shrugged.

"Not really."

"Who was Hamlet?"

"The Prince of Denmark."

"What happened to his father?"

"He's a ghost."

"What about his mother?"

"She married his uncle."

We kept going once a week as many times as we could when school wasn't cancelled or there wasn't a football rally or a session of the Ohio Graduation Test scheduled. It was slow going, but that is often the way when reading Shakespeare.

Rueben was not worried about understanding every word and I never made him use a dictionary. When I couldn't define a word, I told him just that.

As we went along, I pointed out the lines we think of as cliches: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be." "This above all: to thine own self be true." At first, I thought he was joking when he said he had never heard of these phrases, but Rueben never joked. He never even smiled. We never did finish reading the entire play.

I returned to the same school the next year and was assigned a new student. This year, we got to go into the library and pick a book from the shelves, newly stocked through the efforts of some of the reading tutor volunteers.

Rueben was back, too, but this time he was assigned to a young businessman volunteer, the type of young man who carried a business card. He asked Rueben what kinds of books he liked.

"I don't know," said Rueben.

"What did you read last year?"

"Hamlet," said Rueben.

"Shakespeare?" His eyebrows rose. "That's really hard. I can't read Shakespeare."

For the first time, I saw Rueben smile.

Long live the king.

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