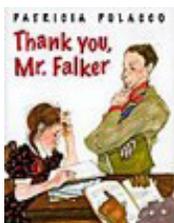


## Teachers and Mentors in Literature

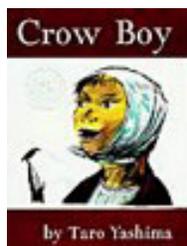
Almost everyone has a favorite teacher, one with whom they have a special connection. What makes certain teachers memorable? Is it their enthusiasm, their high expectations for each student, or their way of truly seeing each individual? In his book, *Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer says: “Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students learn to weave a world for themselves.”

One of the foundations of the Open Circle is the importance of adult role models and the positive impact they have on students. This article describes some exemplary teachers and mentors who happen to be characters in children’s books. Each of these fictional adults demonstrates social and emotional skills, such as listening empathetically, respecting differences, and fostering mutual respect. In doing so, they form meaningful connections with their students and make a positive difference in their lives.



***Thank you, Mr. Falker***, by Patricia Polacco. Philomel Books, 1998.

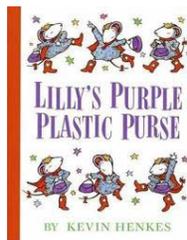
Many teachers find it hard to read aloud *Thank You, Mr. Falker*, Patricia Polacco’s picture-book tribute to her elementary teacher, without reaching for a box of tissues. The story is based on the impact one special teacher had on the author’s social, emotional, and academic life. Polacco’s book describes an artistically gifted child, Trisha, who struggles with reading. When Trisha’s classmates call her “dummy,” she starts to believe them. Fortunately, Trisha encounters a teacher who understands her challenges, as well as her talent. Thanks in part to the intervention and encouragement of a caring teacher, Patricia Polacco has been able to share her writing and illustrations with readers everywhere.



***Crow Boy***, by Taro Yashima. Puffin, 1976.

*Crow Boy* features a teacher, who, like Mr. Falker, recognizes and respects a student’s unique abilities and challenges. Chibi is misunderstood and bullied by his classmates. His compassionate teacher, Mr. Isobe, restores Chibi’s dignity and self-confidence by encouraging him to demonstrate his artistic gifts.

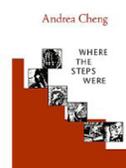
*“Our new teacher was Mr. Isobe. He was a friendly man with a kind smile...he was amazed to find how much Chibi knew about all the flowers in our class garden. He liked Chibi’s black and white drawings and tacked them up onto the wall to be admired.”*



***Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse***, by Kevin Henkes. Greenwillow Books, 1996.

In *Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse*, Lilly describes her beloved teacher, Mr. Slinger, with one word – “Wow!” Mr. Slinger can do no wrong, until Lilly breaks a classroom rule, and she has to temporarily surrender her beloved purple purse. Mr. Slinger’s firm but fair response to Lilly’s behavior allows her to come to school the next day with her usual enthusiasm and self-respect in tact:

*“On the way home Lilly opened her purse. Her glasses and quarters were inside. And so was a note from Mr. Slinger: It said: ‘Today was a difficult day. Tomorrow will be better.’”*



***Where the Steps Were***, by Andrea Cheng. Front Street Press, 2008.

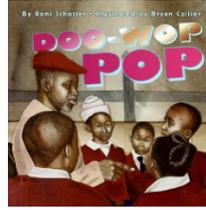
*Where the Steps Were* is a group portrait of some resilient students and their teacher. Miss D. helps her third graders navigate the tumultuous last year

of the Pleasant Hill School, which is scheduled for demolition. Miss D. tends to the daily social, emotional, and academic needs of her students. She is as passionate about teaching the history of the Civil Rights Movement as she is about making sure everyone feels connected to the class and to each other. Woven through the story, told in a series of poems, are examples of Miss D.'s compassion and respect for her students.

*“Miss D. says, ‘Anthony, what would I do without you?’ Nobody ever said that to me before. “*

*“When I get to school it’s still dark. Me and Miss. D. sort the crayons and test the markers.”*

*“Dear Ms. D. We are very sorry we were bad when you were sick. We hope you never get sick again. Sincerely, Kayla, Carmen, and Dawn.”*



***Doo Wop Pop***, by Roni Schotter. Amistad, 2008.

*Doo Wop Pop* stands out among books about adults who change students' lives because of the unconventional character in the role of mentor. Mr. Searle is a school custodian who uses his unique talent – Doo Wop singing – to build community and self-confidence among a group of shy students.

When Mr. Searle teaches some students to sing harmoniously as a group, their feelings of connection, confidence and competence soar. As the children sing together for the first time, one student notes:

*“We sing, we do our moves. Mr. Searle nods. He approves! I close my eyes, I hear the blend – each of us singing, each a new friend. One sings low, One sings sweet. When we sing together, we can’t be boppa beat!”*