

# Foreword

**A**s I read *Rigorous Reading: 5 Access Points for Comprehending Complex Texts* by Nancy Frey and Doug Fisher, I kept searching for a metaphor or literary allusion to capture my stance toward this wonderful book. Several candidates came to mind . . .

## ▶ **Forewarned Is Forearmed**

This emphasizes the idea that Nancy and Doug are giving readers fair warning about what’s coming up for teachers with the Common Core as the new sheriff in town.

## ▶ **Knowledge Is Power**

The connection here is the idea that Nancy and Doug operate from the principle that if teachers want to get ahead of the CCSS curve in curriculum, teaching, and assessment, then knowledge is the ultimate—indeed, the only—resource they can rely on. The more teachers know about comprehension and composition, the better equipped they—and hence their students—will be to handle the curves of the Common Core.

## ▶ **Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue**

I landed on this traditional bridal apparel advice to emphasize the idea that in this book, as in all their books, Nancy and Doug (a) build on the past (the old) on their way to the future (the new), (b) incorporate elements of the work of others in their practices (something borrowed), and (c) make us aware of the dilemmas and constraints (the blue) that are always around to push back in the face of reform. But the blue piece seemed a little pessimistic for a Frey and Fisher book, for Nancy and Doug are nothing if they aren’t optimistic about our collective and individual power as teachers to make a difference. Finally I settled on a variation of the apparel advice, one that is a little more upbeat:

## ► **Something New, Something Old, Something Borrowed, Something Bold**

This variation was a perfect fit. The new, the old, and the borrowed are surely there, but it's the bold that captures the essence of the book. This is a bold book, especially among the set of books offering advice about what to do in the wake of the Common Core. Many of us, myself included, are being circumspect about how enthusiastically we should accept new ideas like close reading, the staircase of text complexity, and productive failure. But Nancy and Doug have found a way to embrace these new ideas while maintaining their consistently strong commitment to meeting the individual needs of students and respecting the professional choices of teachers.

### **Something New**

No question, it is their embrace of key elements of the Common Core implementation (close reading, upping the ante in text complexity, and productive failure) that is both *new* and *bold*. A whole chapter is devoted to how to do close reading well, including a lot of advice about crafting questions that require readers to “stay close to the text.” I especially like the fact that they are clear about the idea that close reading does not equal literal, factual comprehension. They illustrate how to ask inferential, author's craft, comparative (across multiple texts), and critical reading questions that, along with literal, *all* require close reading of the text to generate a plausible answer. If teachers follow the advice here, they will end up with a balanced diet of text-based reading activities. Frey and Fisher rightfully point out that many of the abuses of the personal response probes that dominated the '80s and '90s resulted in interesting, engaging discussions in which the text was conscientiously avoided by everyone, including the teacher. This abuse, which I like to call wallowing at the trough of prior knowledge, deserves to be corrected to ensure the text plays a strong evidentiary role in all discussions, even those focused on interpretation and application. Frey and Fisher offer good advice about how to make this happen.

They also point out that a group of readers could traverse the text with many close readings. One might focus on a clear explication of the basic elements of a story or the key ideas in an explanatory text. A second might focus on author's craft, noting the various tools, like word choice or rhetorical frames (problem-solution or conflict-resolution), that authors use

to shape the way readers understand text. The notion of second and third reads is a powerful tool for deepening and sharpening student understandings of text.

### Something Old

In the process of focusing on the new world of the Common Core, Frey and Fisher do a great job of showing us how and why to deploy pedagogical tools that have become “old friends.” Nowhere is this more evident than in the chapters on how to help students meet the challenge of reading of *even more* complex text than has been required of them in the past. Frey and Fisher show us how to use strategy instruction to equip students to manage the “clunks” of comprehension. They point out that much of the scaffolding that will allow students to meet complex texts where they are comes quite naturally from the collective expertise that is available when we all put our heads together in a collaborative reading activity. They further advise us that engaging kids in episodes of productive failure (e.g., trying to make sense out of really difficult texts) ought to happen in joint ventures rather than individual activities. The idea here is that when we “suffer through the experience together,” we learn things from it, like that strategies can help us when the going gets tough, or that we can succeed in the face of imminent failure, that the resources of the group are greater than those available to any member of the group. They also find a place for routines of independent reading and individualized reading as key elements in supporting students on the staircase of text complexity, pointing out that ultimately students need to meet the text complexity challenge on their own.

### Something Borrowed

Frey and Fisher books are good examples of intertextuality. They have a real knack for building on the theoretical perspectives and practical ideas that pervade the field and putting their own signature on them. That is part of what makes their texts so accessible to the rest of us. We encounter variations on themes that are at least partially familiar to us. But let me be clear: their work, their voice, is clearly Frey and Fisher’s own unique contribution to the field; it’s just that we can find many access points within that unique voice—professional pillows to land on if you will. It’s a gift to be able to write like that. There are lots of examples of borrowed ideas in this book. To highlight a few—elements of different versions of guided and shared reading, emphasis on the importance of read-alouds (especially in doing close reading with younger and less independent readers), focusing on the

purpose of the text (although they certainly bring a new twist to purpose setting), and a sensible and pared down approach to strategy instruction.

### **Something Bold**

I already made the claim that much of what is new is also bold: their approach(es) to close reading and generating text-based questions, their suggestions for embracing a big increase in text complexity and productive failure, and their modifications of the role that we expect prior knowledge to play. But it is also bold of them to assert that there are roles for some variations of guided reading, personal response, and strategy instruction because we see so little talk about these practices in the implementation materials that have emerged in support of the Common Core.

### **► Something Balanced and Centered**

One of the characteristics of the body of work that Frey and Fisher have brought to the field is that it is so centered in classrooms and schools (they write for teachers who work for kids and their families) and so balanced in terms of ALL of the goals of a truly comprehensive reading curriculum. This book is no exception to that characterization. It is both balanced and centered. Its genius and its unique contribution are in bringing the balance and the centeredness to this new game in town—the Common Core, with so much potential to decenter us and upset our equilibrium. Their advice will help us meet these new challenges while we maintain our balance, our center, and our commitment to the students and families who depend upon us to become ready for what life beyond school brings us, be it college, career, or just everyday life.

*—P. David Pearson*