

# Catching Tigers in Red Weather

*Imaginative Writing  
and Student Choice  
in High School*

**Judith Rowe Michaels**

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# Feeding the Imagination

## **Introduction, Draft A**

As teachers of English or language arts, we know what we mean when we say “creative writing”—fiction, poetry, drama, maybe creative nonfiction or personal narrative, too—the literary genres, or as some people say, “frills.” I heard that last word a lot growing up, when during dinner my father, the school music teacher, would fulminate over editorials in our small-town newspaper that attacked the school budget for wasting money on “frills” like music and art. “A new piano for the auditorium? A second music teacher? What do they think this is, a music school?”

That was the 1950s. Today, with the addition of state tests to the SAT, ACT, and AP exams, and the prevalence of scripted lesson plans, there is even less patience with “frills.” Like the other arts, creative writing is increasingly cut from high school programs or, at best, relegated to a minor that meets just a couple of times a week and is designed either for the specially gifted or the non-college-prep students. We’re told it doesn’t look impressive on transcripts and is viewed as an easy pass. When I began this book, in 2008, the Language Arts Literacy Standards in my home state of New Jersey expected graduating seniors to be able to write “a range of essays and expository pieces” and “a literary research paper” but made no mention of poetry, fiction, drama—or, for that matter, imagination. (While thoughtful distinctions have been made between *imagination* and *creativity*, I haven’t tried to pursue them in this book. For the purposes of writing

and for reflecting on writing, I think of imagination as an intuitive mental capacity and creativity as the partly conscious process that can transform the operations of imagination into art.) Interestingly, the writing achievement levels defined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the “Nation’s Report Card,” reserve the adjective *creative* for “Advanced” writing, while for “Proficient” writers the key adjective is *effective* and for “Basic” writers, *appropriate*. These distinctions seem to assume that we should expect creativity only of our very best writers, and that what is appropriate or effective writing need not possess any creativity—perhaps even that creativity isn’t always appropriate? And as most teachers discover, what we expect of a student is all too often exactly what we get.

What is the opposite of creative writing? **Un**creative writing? You can’t craft even a business memo or a set of instructions without first *imagining* your audience—*creating* in your mind a vision of their needs and assumptions; then you must listen, imaginatively, to your voice through their ears as you creatively weigh your words, and tighten and clarify, to persuade or inform those business colleagues. While few teenage writers thrill to the thought of creating memos or instructions, or the five-paragraph timed essay for that matter, they can develop good ears and sharp eyes for sentence structure, word choice, organization, even the semicolon, once their imaginations are fully engaged in shaping a piece they *want* to write. For many, that piece might be a story (a fictional narrative or a “true story”), a poem, or a short play—if their teacher offers them those choices.

In *Beyond Standards*, Carol Jago describes her initial skepticism when her ninth-grade son’s teacher allowed him to write an adventure fantasy: “James needed practice with essays. What was the point of his writing a juvenile adventure story?” But gradually, she sees how completely invested he is in the project, what unusual care he takes with the writing and what risks he takes with sophisticated diction and tone: “To my mind the tale was obviously derivative of the fantasy books he had been reading, but to James it was utterly new, a story never told quite this way before. As he put words to paper I noticed that he cared a great deal about getting them down just right. He would bound out of his room asking, ‘Now, what’s the word for . . . ?’ Going from a handwritten to a typed copy, he revised much more than I had seen him do for other assignments.” She begins to speculate: “The occasional creative assignment might be of value to a novice writer, especially in terms of fostering a positive attitude toward writing.” Her son’s story has, moreover, satisfied California Writing Standards 2.1 a–d. Thinking about her own tightly packed sophomore and junior English curricula, in contrast to her twelfth-grade creative writing course, in which

students “compose with delight,” Jago concludes that “in the pursuit of intellectual rigor, I had denied students this pleasure for the last few years . . . How much would it hurt to read one fewer book and instead write a story of their own?” (53–54)

### ***Introduction, Draft B***

*Catching Tigers in Red Weather* was inspired by a small student protest in my ninth-grade classroom—just one hand in the air, one kid asking, “Hey, Ms. Michaels, when do we get to write our own thing? I mean, free choice?”

“But you’ve had lots of choices already,” I say indignantly. “I always give you more than one topic to choose from. You had three for your *Catcher in the Rye* response in Holden’s voice, and four for the “*Master Harold*” . . . and the boys monologue, and you could write on anything at all for your “in the zone” description, and—”

“Yeah, but—Ms. Michaels, don’t take this the wrong way or anything—those were all your choices. When do we get to write whatever we want?”

Heads are nodding vigorously. More hands are going up.

It’s the day before Thanksgiving, almost time for the school assembly. I think fast and say, “How about the day we get back from vacation?”

“Yup. Sounds good,” says Carlos.

And then I begin to wonder what I have let myself in for. Stories full of spaceships and weaponry, with interchangeable stick figures for characters? Sentimental poems full of clichés about broken relationships? Swords and sorcery. Vampire romance. Bad Writing. Is this going to be even remotely worthwhile? Pedagogically responsible? I know the research, and my past experience confirms it: guided choice good; free choice bad. I’ve been guiding their choices: a, b, or c. Now they want to invent their own alphabet? Besides, how can I hold conferences on so many different kinds of pieces? How will we assess them? Grade them? And how much time will this take away from what we’re actually supposed to be doing next—Sophocles and more drill on avoiding comma splices? These aren’t honors kids; we don’t track. They’re a mix, some coming up from our own heterogeneous eighth-grade classes and about one-third from various junior high schools around the area.

Cautiously I ask, “So Carlos, what do you want to write?”

He gets a dreamy look on his face. “Those old movies. Tough guy detective and blonde babes. And how stupid the way they talk always is. How they say the same clichés all the time. Film noir.” He rolls the *r* dramatically.

Whispers run around the room. “What’s film noir?” “He just said what it was, dummy.”

“You mean you want to write a satire, Carlos? A parody?”

“Yup.”

This definitely sounds like something Carlos could pull off, and it would be fun to read—which is a very big plus. I have to admit I’d never have thought to offer the students satire as an option. I once developed a senior-level satire course, but after teaching it for a couple of years I got frustrated with (1) having almost no girls sign up and (2) having to explain “what’s so funny” all the time.

Now I’m wondering whether anyone else in the class besides Carlos has an idea—even a clue—about what they’d like to write.

“Let’s open our writer’s notebooks and take the next six minutes to brainstorm: What would you write if you could choose anything? Or what would you write about?”

Then I wonder, should we have made a list together first of genres—haiku, memoir, profiles, horror stories . . . ? But most of the class is already starting to write.

Six minutes later we go around the room hearing ideas.

Meade: “My dad and I saw this movie, where these two guys’ job is to pull a lever if they’re given a signal from headquarters, and it would fire these totally destructive weapons. And one of the guys is fine with that, but the other’s starting to think he couldn’t do it. But in the movie you don’t get inside that second guy’s head, so I’d like to write his story. I can talk about it with my dad over Thanksgiving.”

Jacqui: “I’m going to write about my grandmother’s funeral and how it was for me. I’ve been wanting to do this for months now, but there’s been so much homework.” (Ouch! I know just how she feels. Lines for a poem have been tugging at my sleeve for the past month.)

Alex: “Definitely a war story. That’s my favorite. In Russia. This officer’s beginning to have doubts about Communism, and he’s going to get in trouble.”

Maxime: “A story about Maxime the great—how he can do all these cool things and how wonderful he is.”

Adam: “Something about running. I think it’ll be a group of poems, but kind of like our ‘in the zone’ piece. Lots of images.”

Sydney A.: “I don’t know, let me think some more, oh, well, about auditioning for the eighth-grade musical last year. But I don’t know how to write it.”

Jacob: "I want to go on with the utopia I showed you in my notebook last conference. I've started adding appendixes about the countries outside the one I've made up, but I need to get back to the actual story and see what's going to happen to the main character."

Emma: "Maybe about ballet, how I love doing it. Or maybe . . . some poems. Love poems."

A.J.: "Tennis! Me and Federer."

Samantha: "Oh no, A.J., I want to write about tennis. You did that last time." (If Sami, who's always missing school for tournaments and is the county's number 1 player, can actually write about her love-hate relationship with the game, this would be a real breakthrough. She's one of the least experienced and weakest writers in the group.)

A few students have no ideas, so I urge them to think about it over vacation, but I'm amazed at the number who seem to know exactly what they want to write. Next day, somewhere between turkey and pies, I find myself thinking: You could build the whole year's curriculum around this project. But it's too late now. . . .

## *Commentary*

These drafts, A and B, plus several more that ended up in the trash, I've written over the course of four days, sitting at the laptop or brooding in the kitchen as I fixed dinner or trying out individual sentences in my head during my afternoon run. I'm always worrying about first impressions. Will I sound like someone you'll want to stay with, for a few more pages at least? Who are you? Is anybody out there? Would a little dialogue reel you in? Or are you more of a "just give me the facts" sort? What do I want to do here—amuse you? Persuade you? Introduce myself? Establish a thesis? Inspire trust?

Yes.

So in this instance, I use both drafts. Two introductions to the introduction. A break with "the conventions." I want to include voice A, which uses "we" and "you" and offers a line of argument bolstered by research and by my experience as a writer. But I also want voice B, which will dominate in this book—a voice that makes its points through the presentation of classroom scenes in student voices, along with the recording, in first person, of my intentions, mistakes, revisions, and reflections as a teacher. As I drafted, trying out both voices, I found myself considering how I might offer them

to my own students as samples of a writing process that goes beyond the traditional mantra of draft-revise-edit-publish, or even beyond what some writing textbooks call “global revision.” Good writing is hard. But it’s also play. I’m suddenly picturing our kindergartners outdoors at recess, playing hard. They’re very reluctant to stop. The other day I saw a group of them fully engaged in covering a stuffed animal with petals they’d collected from a flowering bush: “We’re having a funeral,” one told me. I watched as wiggly five-year-olds formed a circle and stood quietly, no teacher present.

Writing can engage you more completely than you expected when you first sat down with a phrase or image or line of dialogue; you’re surprised when you look up at the clock. Your creative imagination may have enticed you into trying on two different voices for your introduction, weighing their possibilities, and perhaps interweaving parts of both. Making a dialogue. Or a collage. Or just using both in their entirety. Risking hell for breaking the rules. Gradually, if you form the habit of reflection, you realize your best writing has involved constant creative choices as you listened to your thoughts, imagined various ways you could express them, and, at some stage, imagined how your readers would hear them. Good writing is by its nature *creative*.

### *Motivation: Writing as Art, No Matter the Genre or Purpose*

All very well for admissions officers and test-makers and government committees to expect teenagers to respond “proficiently” in twenty-five minutes to a quotation they’ve never seen, for an audience of speed-reading adults counting up pieces of “supporting evidence.” But just how should we, the writing teachers, motivate our students to learn the skills for this peculiar task? And is this what writing proficiency means?

From my own experience as a writer and teacher, I would say this: Arghhhh. No, seriously, we should help kids learn to enjoy writing for itself, to approach it as an art like music or Web design or moviemaking that engages their individual imaginations and lets them say something that matters to them, that has some of the power of their favorite books. (Even if those were their favorites back in fifth grade, after which some kids stopped reading.) Then they will learn, gradually, to care about everything that makes a writer proficient in any genre: word choice, sentence rhythms, organization,

choice of details and evidence, pacing, research techniques, titles, beginnings and endings, the correct incorporation of quotations.

They will also gradually develop, with sufficient guidance and practice, the capacity to reflect on writing, their own and others'. As they reflect, they will make more discoveries, bring to a conscious level what they've been trying out by instinct, and begin to internalize criteria that will help them to make good creative choices in *all* the writing they do. Without my prescribing the five or six now-standard criteria for writing assessment, my ninth graders arrived at these criteria and more through consensus and in their own words, after discussing one another's drafts in relation to books we read and to older students' work. Given time to explore a range of genres through both reading and writing, and some carefully planned opportunities for choice, students can learn to "play hard" at writing and thereby become more proficient. More important, as they make choices, "make their mark" on the page, create pieces they're proud of, they discover that they care about reaching out to an audience, about reshaping their work with that imagined audience in mind. They begin to do what Katherine Paterson, author of *Bridge to Terabithia*, has said is our fundamental task as human beings—exercising our imaginations in order to seek connection with others. She goes on to conclude, "It follows then, that the basic task of education is the care and feeding of the imagination" (60). Success at this "basic" task is impossible to measure and doesn't appear in any published list of "standards" that I've seen, but it's worth considering.

When Brent Staples, writing in the *New York Times*, exhorts schools to produce the writers "required by the new economy," trained to write "clear, concise communication, which all business people want to read" (qtd. in Slouka 34), I find myself thinking, Okay, clarity and concision are fine, but as a teacher of the art and craft of writing, I'd like to help produce not only future employees in the global economy but also imaginative friends, siblings, lovers, neighbors, grown sons and daughters, and parents of imaginative teenagers. Given this task, how many scripted lessons, usage drills, and practice tests have we time for?

### *The Free-Choice Writing Project*

So the summer after we had muddled our way, at Carlos's behest, through the free-choice writing project, I sat in an empty classroom with a stack of

writing folders and took stock. Initially, I'd been amazed that so many of these students knew what they wanted to write. A few changed their minds partway into the project, and a few needed me to talk them through some options. But I think we'd done enough varied writing assignments in the fall and shared our work with enough enthusiasm that by Thanksgiving the confidence and sense of ownership were there. Kids seemed comfortable with one another and eager to write something for the class to read. But for two or three weeks during the project, I'd had to watch for teachable moments in which to improvise mini-lessons. It seemed as though every day I was searching for strategies that might work across genres: the concept of pacing, for instance, of where the story or profile or poem or parody needed to be speeded up with summarizing, or where a moment needed to be slowed down, "cracked open," as Ralph Fletcher says, with details. It felt like I was continually holding conferences, sometimes with the story group or the nonfiction group, sometimes with one individual, in class and out of class, face-to-face and online. I sensed I was learning, along with my students, but I didn't have time to figure out exactly *what*. Finally, the day before winter break, I handed out the class anthology and we held a celebratory read-aloud.

Almost every student said in his or her assessment the following June that this was the best experience they'd had all year. They ranked it right up there with learning fight techniques from visiting actors and staging the brawl in *Othello*. Many of them commented that having a teacher take their choices seriously enough to give three weeks to the writing project was part of what made it "awesome." One boy said his previous teacher had assigned a short story to be written in only one night, so he'd never gotten to figure out an ending. I was surprised he'd even gotten that far, but I sympathized with his teacher's desire to cram in one more genre. My student said it seemed as though his eighth grade had spent all year writing essays arguing for and against school uniforms.

Most of the students said they'd worked harder on this piece than they'd ever worked before in English class—that making it good really mattered because it was their own and because they wanted their friends to like it. I remembered that in most cases their revisions had been "global," not just a matter of correcting some misplaced commas. But I also remembered how hard it was for them to connect their free-choice writing with the writing they'd done earlier that year—to build on their past experience. My fault:

whatever scaffolding they'd had was accidental, assignments created in response to the books we were reading—a dialogue between two characters, a page written in Holden Caulfield's voice, an informal response to a few poems, a paragraph interpreting the ending of Fugard's play "*Master Harold*" . . . *and the boys*. Good assignments, but maybe I'd focused on them too much as *reading* responses and not enough as lessons in the craft of *writing*.

As I returned to the possibility of building an entire course around this project, I tried the idea out on some colleagues. "Why not give them more time to learn skills, and move the free choice up to June? It could be your final exam," my department chair suggested. But I already had in place a final exam that served as a good culmination of the full year's work. I liked the idea of making the free-choice writing project be a climax to the first half of the year—something exciting to look forward to and to learn from afterward.

Scheduling the project that early meant I would have to plan my opening units very carefully. I'd need to make a more conscious effort to build up the students' writing repertoire of genres and skills—and heighten their awareness of what they were learning—so that they'd be prepared to handle whatever type of piece they chose. This meant more reflection on their writing, from them and from me. Maybe it meant fewer discussions of the literature. (Could I cut out one book? I'd have to ask the English grade 9 teaching team.) I would try to create more of a studio atmosphere, as Donald Graves recommended so many years ago—make more class time available for actually drafting and responding to one another's drafts and for learning to read as writers—using the class texts and one another's writing as models. The literature would have to become more than just the illustration of English grade 9's journey theme. I would share my own writing more often in rough draft, let students watch me struggle with choices and surprises along the way, let them see me cross out, rethink. Graves reassures us: "Teachers don't have to be expert writers to 'write' with the children. In fact, there may be an advantage in growing with them, learning together as both seek to find meaning in writing" (43).

I couldn't change the theme or texts for grade 9 English—"the personal journey," as viewed through two novels, three plays, a month of poetry, and some contemporary essays; and anyway, the theme felt right for ninth graders, kids who are so aware of being in a new place, making a new start. It offered good opportunities for writing in different genres. I liked the Essential

Questions our teaching team had created, too: How do we get to know one another on our journeys? How do we get beyond first impressions, first assumptions? When do you think the rights of the individual should take precedence over those of society or over the law—if ever? What beliefs or rights would you risk standing up for, and what might these risks entail? How does your private self differ from your public self? To what extent do you feel your sense of who you are is changing? How much is it shaped by your age, race, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation? By family and environment? What are your views on fate versus free will? What are your sources of power? Of courage? In what ways have fear, jealousy, love shaped your life? Consider the archetypal heroic journey in relation to your own: Who and what have been your mentors, monsters? Any quests? What thresholds have you crossed so far?

I liked this material. It all related to the personal journey of becoming a writer, of exploring one's voice through making choices. I just had to refocus to make the texts and questions serve our writing needs more fully. Oh dear, and it was already mid-August!

### *A Description of Catching Tigers*

*Catching Tigers in Red Weather* describes the subsequent writing curriculum that I designed for the first half of the year, from September to late December, and how my ninth graders and I carried it out. I take my title from Wallace Stevens's "Disillusionment of Ten o'Clock," because the poem celebrates color, risk, imagination, and originality and, I think, implies that these qualities may be found in unexpected places. A student who's never written an essay he liked may suddenly catch fire when he discovers a poem by Mark Doty that speaks to him; he may even go on to create a vivid, authentic poem of his own, just as Stevens's "old sailor, / Drunk and asleep in his boots / Catches Tigers / In red weather." All the conventional people asleep in their houses and wearing white night-gowns "are not going / To dream of baboons and periwinkles," let alone of catching tigers. The poem calls up old sailor wisdom: "Red sky at night, sailor's delight. Red sky at morning, sailors take warning." All of us—teachers and students—who care about the adventure of writing, or are learning to care, find ourselves sooner or later encountering both danger and delight as we sail off to catch our

tiger. We learn that sometimes we must trust intuition, or the unconscious, or plain old luck and let the conventional logic that makes outlines and follows rules go to sleep for a bit. We discover the power of the unexpected—the night-gowns that are “purple with green rings.”

*Catching Tigers* demonstrates ways to give *all* students experience in creative writing within the context of a standard literature curriculum (my class is not an honors group) and how those genres that they study as texts but are rarely taught to write—in particular, poetry and the fictional and personal narrative—give them access to strategies that can enliven all their writing, including the analytical essay, with its emphasis on argument and persuasion. I try to bring this process to life for you through classroom scenes so that you can hear actual discussions and conferences; watch how theater games, debates, and music prepare these varied learners to write; observe students and teacher creating assessment criteria together for specific writing assignments; visit the Writing Center; and see student pieces take shape. Important parts of this weave are the voices of writers and teachers I’ve learned from, along with my own reflections and lesson planning process as I try to break down the traditional barriers between creative and academic writing, between one genre and another, and search for their commonalities. Throughout, I’m trying to help my writers make connections as they experiment with various genres—to discover, for example, how imagining and creating a fictional character’s voice relates to envisioning and fulfilling a reading audience’s needs. Both require empathy, not just specific writing skills. Both necessitate the shaping of language—imagery, sentence structure, sound patterns, paragraph coherence, line breaks, the subordination of evidence to idea or argument. They involve the workings of both reason and imagination, of heart, body, and mind.

It’s important to me that *Catching Tigers* proceed by “showing” as much as by “telling.” When, as a young teacher in the 1970s, I discovered the firsthand accounts by visiting writers in the New York City schools (Kenneth Koch, Philip Lopate, etc.), I thought, “Oh, that’s what a class of student writers sounds like when it catches fire.” Much later, I read poet Georgia Heard’s *For the Good of the Earth and Sun* and listened hard to the students she wrote about: “By reading it out loud, you feel the meaning of the poem,” a third grader tells her (7). I listened to Heard reflecting on a particular lesson she was in the midst of teaching: “It always moves me when kids leave the stereotype of what they’ve been taught about poetry and come up with

their own definitions. ‘Songs with no music,’ I say. ‘That sounds like a great way to describe a poem.’ I let that one sink into me” (15). And just recently, I listened to Jeffrey Golub in *Making Learning Happen* as he re-created “one of those messy lesson-planning efforts” to show us “a more realistic picture of how lesson-planning often proceeds” when you “can’t provide ready answers to the four basic lesson-planning questions” (103). I don’t want books that just tell me what to do, even when the ideas sound good or are grounded in the latest pedagogy; I want to see those ideas taking shape and being tried out in real classrooms.

So while my specific texts, assignments, and assessment criteria are all present, *Catching Tigers* is designed as a series of invitations, not a set of directives. Readers can decide which invitations to accept by seeing and hearing the preparation and process for each writing assignment. To emphasize the value of following the stream of classroom talk and activities, I’ve used headings to focus on the key ideas they illustrate; I realize that most of us are reading—dancing, juggling—as fast as we can. Where my reflections look back to assess how far the class has come and then look ahead to figure out where we should go next, I head these passages “So Far/What Next?” For each writing assignment, I describe:

1. My rationale for the assignment—in particular, what new choices it offers the students, why I position it at this point in the course, and what strategies and skills it is intended to teach
2. The related class texts, the role of writer’s notebook, class discussion, use of models, the drafting process, mini-lessons, the creating of assessment criteria by students and teacher, peer response or student-teacher conferences or conferences with an older writing mentor, revision, and sometimes “publication” (a reading, a performance, a class collection)

The book includes samples of students’ work in various stages, as well as some of their self-assessments and reflections. I also explain and demonstrate the workings of our school’s student-staffed Writing Center. In the epilogue, I include the texts of the second part of the year and several of the main writing assignments, including the Shakespeare essay (on *Othello*) and the final exam project. I also discuss how my students’ writing discoveries and skills measure up against the Common Core State Standards for writing.

Because I believe in the importance of teachers writing alongside their students and sometimes sharing their drafts or processes, several chapters begin with some writing of my own that relates to that chapter's focus—a poem and the journal entry from which it grew, an email exchange, an assignment I tested out before giving it to my class—along with a commentary about what writing this piece teaches me that I can share with my students. Several chapters begin with work by a student and one with a journal entry by playwright Athol Fugard.

### *Some Recommendations*

I know that many of us are hesitant to teach the writing of stories and poetry, perhaps because we've never written in these genres ourselves, or we're not sure how to assess them. As a poet, I'm still feeling my way with fiction, but I'm finding it an exciting adventure, and I can recommend some books that have helped me.

For those of you who teach in a particularly prescriptive school district, Rebecca Sipe's book *Adolescent Literacy at Risk? The Impact of Standards* offers helpful descriptions of ways that innovative teachers have worked and can work together within a school to develop curricula that are true to best practices while working within a standards-based framework. Carol Jago's *Cohesive Writing* is another useful book in its illustration of how preparation for high-stakes testing and showing teenagers how writing can be a way to learn about themselves need not be mutually exclusive agendas.

*Catching Tigers* offers simply one teacher's design, one individual effort to move high school writers toward and beyond proficiency by appealing to their creativity and their growing desire for independence. It's an effort that grows out of what I know many of us are struggling to do, and I know this from listening to teachers' voices online, in books, and at conferences: to teach not just the test, the skills, or even the standards, but the student. The kid who wants to write a parody of a movie, a song lyric for his band, a piece about being at her grandmother's funeral, a rave review of vampire books, a poem about a friend killed in a car crash, a description of a Civil War battle, a fantasy with talking animals—or the kid who doesn't know what he wants to write and just needs some help in finding out. I hope in

this book you will find ideas you can adapt to your own classes, ideas that will help you continue our struggle to care for and feed the imagination as we guide students to write—not just proficiently but creatively.

All good writing is creative. But it's easy to forget this when writing is used mainly as a tool to assess reading comprehension and writers are judged by how well they conform to prescribed standards of "proficiency." Teacher-poet Judith Rowe Michaels describes how she refocused her ninth-grade English course to help students explore writing—their own and the assigned literature—as an art form with the same potential for creativity as, say, Web design, filmmaking, or music. Expanding their writing repertoire, students discover that to be memorable, a poem, essay, or story requires imagination, a sharp eye, a tuned ear, an engaged but open mind, and an interest in language, structure, and pace. As they draft, students create class criteria for revising, assessing, and grading each new piece and gradually realize they are all in training to catch their "tiger"—a free-choice, three-week writing project.

How Michaels's students engage with their free-choice project, incorporating lessons learned from writing in response to literature, illustrates the importance of creativity to writing in all genres. If you're looking for ways to motivate your young writers, this book is a doorway into the classroom of a master teacher who invites all of us to rediscover what reading and writing should always do—stretch our imaginations.



"[This book] is about teaching adolescents to write with control and abandon, to deepen their understanding of how language and genre work, to write with the eye of a reporter and the heart of a novelist."

—Tom Romano, professor of English education, Miami University, and author of *Crafting Authentic Voice* and *Zigzag*

"To read *Catching Tigers in Red Weather* is to be reminded of what can happen when teachers—and their students—have the time, the respect, and the colleagues that fuel good work. So a book that might have been about the private world of imaginative writing turns out to be about a very public issue: equity. It urges us to ask, 'Could it be that imagination is becoming a luxury good in contemporary America?' When will teachers and students everywhere have what was possible at Michaels's school?"

—Dennie Wolf, author and independent scholar

"[This book] reminds all of us, in the midst of state adoption of new standards and assessments, of the important role of creative writing in the development of composition skills and attitudes."

—Bruce Penniman, National Writing Project teacher-consultant and author of *Building the English Classroom*



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