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**A PLACE FOR READING: LEVERAGING MENTOR TEXTS WITH
MIDDLE GRADE RURAL WRITERS**

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Abstract

Mentor texts help teachers exemplify the style, structure, and elements of writing they desire students to emulate. This article demonstrates how rural fourth-grade writers reflected the place-based literature shared with them as part of a language arts enrichment curriculum in their own narrative fiction stories. Students also referenced literature outside the curriculum, showing the strong influence of reading on students' writing. As an extension of these results, the author offers a selection of high-quality contemporary middle grade novels set in rural places that teachers can share with students in various ways (e.g., book groups, independent reading, classroom read-alouds) to help them make personal connections to the language arts curriculum. Suggested novels are set in disparate geographic locations across the United States and include characters from different racial groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and familial structures in an effort to more accurately reflect the diversity in rural spaces than the stereotypical portrayals often found in popular culture. Prevalent themes from the novels include *confronting the past*, *resilience*, and *strong communities*; these themes are discussed in relation to their relevance to rural students.

Keywords: place-based, mentor texts, middle grade novels, rural

A Place for Reading: Leveraging Mentor Texts with Middle Grade Rural Writers

Teachers often use mentor texts to demonstrate the use of a particular writing skill or strategy they hope their students will attempt to incorporate into their own writing (McKay et al., 2017). In her *Units of Study on Primary Writing* series (2003), Calkins suggested teachers read selected books aloud during minilessons, drawing students' attention to the author's use of specific elements of writing they want them to imitate. Expanding that idea, Muhammad (2020) recommended "teachers should select mentor texts [that have] the potential to cultivate students'

skills, identities, intellect, and criticality” (p. 95). In other words, a carefully chosen mentor text can substantially influence students’ relationships with literacy, showing them how to use reading and writing to explore who they are and where they come from.

As part of a larger, federally-funded study aimed at increasing rural¹ students’ access to gifted education services (Promoting PLACE in Rural Schools [Azano et al., 2017]), researchers reimagined the existing CLEAR language arts enrichment curriculum (Callahan et al., 2017) to center a place-based pedagogy with the goal of increasing curricular relevance for students attending rural schools. Both the geographic surroundings and the community who share a place help shape a student’s sense of identity (Azano, 2011), and in essence, a place-based pedagogy is one that aims to enhance students’ connections to the curriculum by grounding teaching and learning in the places where students live or have lived (Gruenewald, 2003; Smith, 2002). Part of the curriculum redesign for Promoting PLACE involved weaving in mentor texts featuring rural settings researchers hoped would resonate with students who lived in similar places (Azano et al., 2017). Curious about the influence of the selected texts on students’ writing, I used data generated from the larger study to seek answers to the following questions:

- What evidence of the influence of mentor texts shared in a place-based language arts curriculum are present in rural fourth graders’ narrative fiction writing?
- What types of literature influences outside the curriculum are recognizable in students’ stories?

Before sharing my findings, I first describe other relevant research about the use of place-based literature as mentor texts. Then, I present the study and the different ways in which I found evidence of the influence of students’ reading— both within and outside the prescribed curriculum—in their narrative fiction writing. Finally, I turn to a discussion of middle grade novels, which are generally considered to be suitable for readers aged 8–12 (Maughan, 2018), with promising prospects for serving as place-based mentor texts for rural students.

Place-Based Literature as Mentor Texts

Discussing her extensive ethnographic studies of elementary writing practices, Dyson (2008) wrote, “as children participate in social activities involving text,” (that is, writing and presenting their written work within a classroom community), “they come to anticipate not only written language’s functional possibilities, but also locally valued ways of doing, being, and relating to others” (p. 191). As literature certainly helps shape a place’s culture (Bordieu, 1983), the sharing of place-based mentor texts holds immense promise for helping students understand the local values of their own communities—and their own identities within those communities—in the way Dyson described. In fact, in contrast with literacy programs intended to improve standardized test scores by providing scripted lessons to teachers that “erase” students’ culture

¹ There is no single definition for rurality agreed upon by rural scholars (Longhurst, 2021; Rasheed, 2019). Promoting PLACE used determinations made by the National Center for Education Statistics, which defines rurality based on proximity to metropolitan areas (NCES, 2020) to select participating districts. A fluid understanding of rurality is applied to this study; that is, students who are considered “rural” by any definition may benefit from this research.

(Eppley, 2011; Eppley & Corbett, 2012), place-based literacy practices have been shown to positively affect student learning (e.g., Bangert & Brooke, 2003) while adding curricular relevance (Azano, 2011).

Research directly related to the use of place-based mentor texts to encourage rural student writers is sparse, but several studies (Charlton et al., 2014; Ruday & Azano, 2014; Wason-Ellam, 2010) suggest that students are responsive to place-based literature. For example, a teacher and researcher worked to enliven the literacy learning of a group of rural Canadian third graders by emphasizing place (Wason-Ellam, 2010). After sharing multiple picture books that highlighted the beauty of the outside world, the adults brought students outdoors to explore their own community, then facilitated discussions about place and encouraged student responses in the form of art, poetry, and narrative writing. “Place, then, became the construction of stories that these learners told themselves that arose from frameworks of place-based identity, ideology, narrative tradition and imagination” (Wason-Ellam, 2010, p. 286).

In another study (Charlton et al., 2014), teachers from two British elementary schools each read aloud the picture book *My Place* (Wheatley & Rawlins, 2008), which depicts the same home once per decade for two hundred years. After discussing the changes across time, students drew maps of their own place and wrote accompanying stories. The researchers concluded participating in the place-based literacy project “allowed a more complex representation of [students’] place-related identities to emerge” (Charlton et al., 2014, p. 169).

Finally, Ruday and Azano (2014) described a week-long intensive writing course geared to prepare underprivileged high school students for success in Advanced Placement classes. After examining “Where I’m From,” George Ella Lyon’s (1999) poem about her rural upbringing, and contrasting it with Jay-Z’s (1997) rap song of the same name, students wrote their own poems about place. The authors found students’ sense of place, and the ways they did and did not feel they belonged in certain places, served as the backdrop for experiences that shaped their developing “inner identities” (p. 97), demonstrating how an approach to literacy rooted in place can show students “ways that writing is relevant to their individual struggles and identities” (Ruday & Azano, 2014, p. 95–96).

Promoting PLACE

One goal of the Promoting PLACE in Rural Schools project (Azano et al., 2017), from which data for this study were generated, was to study the influence of a place-based language arts curriculum on gifted rural students’ self-efficacy and achievement. Fourteen school districts located in areas deemed rural by the National Center for Education Statistics based on population density and proximity to urban areas were recruited to participate. All participating districts were considered “high-need” with at least 50% of students qualifying to receive free or reduced lunch based on family income. Districts randomly assigned to the treatment group received the language arts curriculum, adapted to incorporate place-based literature and assignments, which consisted of four units (Poetry, Folklore, Research, and Fiction) to be used with third- and fourth-grade students.

The Fiction unit on which the current study is focused was comprised of 17 lessons, each addressing a different literary topic (e.g., point-of-view, setting, characterization). Lessons usually included sharing excerpts from classic and modern children’s literature, discussing principles of writing, and allowing time for students to practice new skills in their own compositions. As described above, much of the literature included in the Fiction unit was chosen because of its representation of “authentic cultural experiences” (Hollie, 2018) taking place in rural spaces, an effort which aligns with the International Literacy Association’s (ILA, 2010) standards calling for teachers to “use literature that reflects the experiences of marginalized groups” (Standard 4, Element 4.2).

As the culminating project, students were asked to use what they learned across the unit to compose a narrative fiction story in any genre they chose. Over several days, students wrote, revised, and edited their work, checking it against a rubric to ensure the inclusion of required elements (e.g., cohesive plot with identifiable conflict and resolution, description of setting, clear point-of-view). Students were encouraged to be creative and “to use senses, emotions, and images to evoke connections between the text and the reader” (Fiction Unit, Lesson 2).

For the current study, I analyzed all 237 stories written by fourth graders as the culminating project of the Fiction unit, with careful attention paid to storylines and characters that shared similarities with the pieces used in the curriculum as well as other familiar literature. After multiple iterations, I arrived at the findings presented here.

Literature References in Students’ Writing

Although it would be impossible to recognize every time a student’s writing was influenced by something he or she had read, there were many times when traces of other fiction were clearly present in the stories. Students referenced or modeled their stories after fiction studied as part of the Promoting PLACE Fiction unit—both that which had been added to emphasize place and that which had been included in the original CLEAR curriculum—as well as other classic and modern literature.

Literature from the Curriculum

Evidence of the influence of mentor texts shared in the curriculum is present across the stories. For example, *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (1865) was featured in Lesson 1, and five student stories included similar elements. First, much like Alice falls through the rabbit hole, Ruby falls for three hours into “some type of mystical land” in a story called “Off to Australia.”² Similarly, Kloe, from “Magic is Real,” is guided by a bunny when she discovers herself to be in a magical world, much like Alice is guided by the White Rabbit in her tale. When Alice drinks the potion she finds in her story, she becomes tiny, and in two students’ stories, characters come across strange potions with instructions to drink them. In “Kate, Kane, and Lora,” the three siblings who drink the potion are teleported home, and the boy who drinks the potion in “The Potion” starts talking backwards. Finally, “The Pond” is about Izzy, who, like Alice, is reading a book beside a pond when she pets a “weird bug” (reminiscent of the hookah-smoking caterpillar

² Most of the story titles were student-generated, but I assigned titles to several stories that were originally untitled.

from the Disney version of *Alice in Wonderland*; Geronimi, 1951), and is immediately transformed into a cat. Much like Alice, Izzy is relieved to wake up from a nap and find the experience had all been a dream.

An excerpt from *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeline L'Engle (1962) was studied in Lesson 9, and two stories seemed to incorporate aspects of the classic novel in their work. First, the star of “The Trouble Maker,” Tiana, has messy hair, difficulty fitting in, and a tendency to act out, all characteristics of Meg Murry, the protagonist of *A Wrinkle in Time*. Similarly, “Lost Land” features three brothers and a sister discovering their long-lost father is the king of an alien planet, a situation in which Meg and her three brothers find themselves in their story as well. “Haunted Museum,” in which a group of friends helps save classmates who had been turned into statues and trapped in the basement of a museum, shares similarities with *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* by E. L. Konigsburg (1967; Lesson 5), which is set primarily within New York City’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. Additionally, “The Turn on the Bullies” is the story of Bob, a clever, kind boy whose family moves frequently and who is confronted by bullies at his new school. In the novel *Hoot* by Carl Hiaasen (2002), which was discussed in Lesson 6, a very similar character, Roy Eberhardt, faces the same challenges.

Three “survival” stories were very similar to Jean Craighead George’s *My Side of the Mountain* (1959), a novel featured in Lesson 6 which includes detailed descriptions of a boy’s wilderness adventures. Three fairy tale stories share plot points with the Brothers’ Grimm fairy tale, *The Queen Bee* (1886), studied in Lesson 11. In all three *Queen Bee* stories, just like the original, the protagonist encounters three or four “roadblocks” (e.g., wolves, snakes, bees) on a journey through the forest, and the virtue of one character in each story is revealed by the kind way in which he or she treats the animals.

Literature from Outside the Curriculum

As described above, students’ writing contained many references to works that were part of the Promoting PLACE curriculum, but because the stories also made frequent references to classic and modern works of fiction not included in the curriculum, findings support other research indicating that talented writers tend to be avid readers (Garrett & Moltzen, 2011; Olthouse, 2014). For example, two classmates wrote stories set in the fictional world created by Rick Riordan in his popular *Percy Jackson* series (2005–2011), which itself borrowed characters from Greek and Roman mythology. In “The Attack on Olympus,” a group of young people attends Camp Demigod, a camp for burgeoning gods and goddesses, and ends up leading an epic battle against mythological monsters. In “The Monster Attack,” the same cast of characters attends Camp Apollo together, where they work to prevent Pandora’s Box from opening. The children who wrote these stories were undoubtedly fans of *Percy Jackson*, and their deep knowledge of the characters and settings of these books suggests they have spent ample time reading them outside of class.

As one might expect, this group of rural fourth-grade writers also seemed very familiar with the *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling (1997–2007). Three stories were actually Harry Potter “fan fiction” (the characters in the stories were the actual characters in the series, but the writers

imagined new experiences for them). Other stories featured teleportation through fireplaces, dementor-like figures with “souls darker than pitch black night,” and giant spider-monsters, all elements appearing in *Harry Potter*. Of course, students may have become familiar with *Harry Potter* by watching the movie adaptations, but the book series is highly popular among middle grade readers.

Several young writers, all girls, wrote stories about a matriarchal dragon kingdom in which female dragons battle for queenly rule, reflecting the *Wings of Fire* children’s book series (Sutherland, 2012–). The author of one such story provided a helpful hint to me as researcher by including a note at the end of her story: “Note—This story [was] inspired by *Wings of Fire*.” One dragon story, “Dragonwings,” is about a group of dragons who discover a plot to kill the ancient Queen Seastar while doing “historical research” at the Altar of Darkness. To thwart the plan, they travel back in time and warn the queen. In “Mystic Plains,” Queen Sandune decides to execute several dragons whom she fears will try to overtake her throne, but spares Soar, a trusted advisor, who nevertheless ends up betraying her. Incidentally, four of the writers who appropriated elements from *Wings of Fire* were in the same class, which suggests a literacy culture in which students shared or recommended books.

Four stories were especially reminiscent of fairy tales that were not part of the Fiction unit. “The Gray, Shaggy Dog,” for example, is a retelling of *Cinderella*, except that the fairy godmother role is fulfilled by the gray, shaggy dog for whom the story is named. Two stories, “Magic Is Real” and “The Elegant Girl,” share similarities with *Beauty and the Beast* and *Snow White*, respectively, and “Piggy People” is a twist on *The Three Little Pigs*. In “Lost in Australia,” just like Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* (Baum, 1900), Ruby finds herself in a magical world and must travel to see a wise old character, the Wizoala (a cross between a wizard and a koala), in order to get home. “Oz Meets Voldemort” is a fan-fiction mash-up of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1997–2007), with Dorothy and Voldemort as protagonist and antagonist. Three stories (“Lost Land,” “Lost in a Random World,” and “Family Always Comes First”) are reminiscent of C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–56), primarily in that characters walk along, then suddenly find themselves in a different—sometimes snowy—world. Finally, the way the formerly-rich princesses in “The Meaning of the Necklace” have to work in the fields among “common” people shared similarities with three separate Bible stories about Ruth, Joseph, and the prodigal son, in which once-wealthy figures find virtue in more meager, work-filled existences.

Middle Grade Novel Suggestions for Rural Readers and Writers

In the Promoting PLACE project (Azano et al., 2017), teachers used excerpts from classic and contemporary literature to teach language arts concepts, and many of their students emulated the writing of these mentor texts, some of which were added to a previously-existing curriculum because of their emphasis on rurality and place. Students also showed signs of having read other works outside the curriculum, further demonstrating the influence of reading on students’ writing.

In an extensive content analysis of these data for another project (Kuehl, 2020), I found that after having been taught to understand place as a valuable part of their identities through the reading, writing, and class discussions embedded in the curriculum, students explored place-related identity concepts in their writing. As such, even though students did not necessarily reflect *only* the mentor texts selected for their place emphasis in their own writing, the fact that students reflected mentor texts *in general*, combined with evidence from previous research (e.g., Azano, 2011; Charlton et al., 2014; Donovan, 2016; Ruday & Azano, 2014; Wason-Ellam, 2010) demonstrating the importance of connecting language arts instruction to rural students' sense of place, suggests that rural students may respond positively to the sharing of place-based literature as mentor texts. Therefore, I am devoting the remainder of this article to sharing a set of middle grade novels set in rural places that I believe are likely to resonate with rural students.

However, it is important to note that rural culture is not a monolith (Ruday & Azano, 2019), and the wide variety of stories written by students living in the same general geographic region demonstrates the diversity found within and among rural communities. For example, although no other students wrote stories with themes of race, it was the primary focus of “Blue-Eyed Girl,” a story about a child who feels out of place because she is the only person she knows with dark skin and blue eyes. Meeting other people who share these traits (presumably long-lost relatives) improves the girl's self-confidence, and she affirms her racial identity in the final lines by exclaiming, “I am proud to be different, I am proud to be here, I am proud to be African American!” In many rural communities, racial tensions certainly exist (Wuthnow, 2018), and this study suggests creative writing can be a vehicle for helping students explore how these tensions play out in their own lives.

Recently, author Jason Reynolds was appointed National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, and in a television interview (CBS News, 2020), Reynolds shared his desire to highlight the experiences of people living in mostly-Black rural communities, which he declared to be overlooked when the educational needs of rural people are discussed. Reynolds's middle grade novel, *As Brave as You* (2017), a Coretta Scott King Book Award honoree, is an example of a text set in a mostly-Black rural community that has the potential to dismantle racial stereotypes and to inspire rural students as writers.

Cognizant of moving towards Reynolds's goal of diversifying rural students' experiences with literature, I have assembled a list of high-quality middle grade novels that depict life in a variety of rural places and feature protagonists representative of multiple cultures (Table 1).

Table 1.

Recommended Middle Grade Novels Set in Rural Places

Title	Author	Pub. Year	Rural Setting
<i>As Brave as You</i>	Jason Reynolds	2016	Virginia
<i>Belle Prater's Boy</i>	Ruth White	1996	Virginia
<i>Free Verse</i>	Sarah Dooley	2016	West Virginia
<i>Gone Crazy in Alabama</i>	Rita Williams-Garcia	2015	Alabama

<i>Kira-Kira</i>	Cynthia Kadohata	2004	Georgia
<i>Last in a Long Line of Rebels</i>	Lisa Lewis Tyre	2015	Tennessee
<i>Return to Sender</i>	Julia Alvarez	2009	Vermont
<i>Ruby Holler</i>	Sharon Creech	2002	(location not specified)
<i>Savvy</i>	Ingrid Law	2008	Nebraska/Kansas border
<i>The Exact Location of Home</i>	Kate Messner	2017	(location not specified)
<i>The Parker Inheritance</i>	Varian Johnson	2018	South Carolina
<i>Three Times Lucky</i>	Sheila Turnage	2012	North Carolina
<i>You Go First</i>	Erin Entrada Kelly	2018	Louisiana and Pennsylvania

In the following sections, I share how these novels address themes of history, resilience, and community, all of which I found present in students' stories during the more detailed examination mentioned previously (Kuehl, 2020).

Confronting the Past

A few of the stories written by the fourth-grade students in the Promoting PLACE project described or hinted at problems in a family's past that explained how the characters arrived at their current situations. One exemplary story, "The Vengeful Twins," accomplished this with the inclusion of a flashback scene in which the reader learns that the main character's evil behavior stems from the pain she felt at having been separated from her twin brother when they were children. In the same way, the protagonists in some of the recommended novels discover things about their family's past that helps them understand present-day tensions among family members. For example, *Belle Prater's Boy* (White, 1996) takes place in 1953, after Gypsy's Aunt Belle disappears without a trace from her home deep in the mountains near Coal Station, Virginia. Gypsy's cousin, Woodrow, comes to live with their shared grandparents in town, next door to Gypsy. The cousins become fast friends, and Gypsy learns that some hurt in Aunt Belle's past—specifically, having been passed over by her former beau, Gypsy's deceased father, in favor of her beautiful mother, Love—may have had something to do with Belle's mysterious disappearance. Meanwhile, repressed memories about the circumstances surrounding Gypsy's father's death surface, and the two cousins support each other while trying to find a way to heal and move forward.

In *As Brave as You* (Reynolds, 2016), ten-year-old Genie and his older brother, Ernie, travel to their grandparents' home in rural Virginia while their parents try to work through a difficult time in their marriage. Genie has never met his grandfather before, and he is shocked to discover that "Grandpop" is blind. During their stay, Genie bonds with Grandpop, but seems to realize his use of alcohol to cope with his disability and the death of his other son contributes to the troubled relationship between Genie's father and grandfather:

He wondered what was in Grandpop's cup. That vinegary smell sure wasn't sweet tea. As a matter of fact, he didn't really wonder what it was at all. He knew exactly what it was. That smell . . . reminded him of Ms. Swanson, the drunk lady who hung out at the Laundromat back home. (Reynolds, 2016, p. 86)

One Crazy Summer (Williams-Garcia, 2015) shares a similar premise with *As Brave as You* in that Delphine and her sisters pay an extended visit to their grandmother, Big Ma, and their great-grandmother, Ma Charles, in rural Alabama during the summer of 1970. While there, the girls learn that a decades-old feud between Ma Charles and her sister, Miss Trotter, who lives in the same community, stems from a troubling family secret. Long ago, their grandfather had run away from slavery and married a Native American woman. Some of the couple's 11 children looked more "Indian" while some (like their father) looked "colored." Unfortunately, their father's older brothers sold him as a slave. Later, Miss Trotter apparently claimed Native heritage on the U.S. census, which Ma Charles found to be an outrageous and unforgiveable denial of their Blackness. Additionally, the girls realize they are also related to the same White sheriff who terrorizes the family in his night-time rides with the Ku Klux Klan, further complicating their understanding of their own racial identity.

Twelve-year-old Louise Mayhew, protagonist of *Last in a Long Line of Rebels* (Tyre, 2015), learns her huge house in Grey County, Tennessee, built by her ancestors over 150 years ago, is at risk of being destroyed as a matter of imminent domain. Her parents cannot afford to pay the money needed to save their house, so they may have to move away from Grey County. When Louise and her friends learn about an old rumor that gold was hidden on the property during the Civil War, they begin an investigation that leads to a very unpleasant discovery: Louise's family had once owned slaves. Devastated, Louise confronts her dad about not having told her sooner:

"It's my family. I should know the truth about it."

"You're right. But the truth isn't very pretty, is it?"

"No." I shivered in the heat. "And it makes me feel so bad." (Tyre, 2015, p. 139)

Little by little, Louise and her friends uncover clues that lead them to the diary of her namesake, the original Louise Mayhew, who had been a staunch supporter of the Confederacy, and Louise grapples with what that means in light of a present-day racist decision affecting her friend, Isaac, who is Black.

Finally, in *The Parker Inheritance* (Johnson, 2018), when 12-year-old Candice's parents separate, she and her mother move to her grandmother's home in Lambert, South Carolina to wait out renovations to their house in Atlanta. Abigail Caldwell, Candice's grandmother, was the first Black city manager for Lambert before her passing two years earlier, and she became the town's laughingstock when she had some tennis courts dug up in search of buried treasure. In the attic, Candice finds a cryptic letter to her grandmother from a wealthy benefactor who promised a donation to the town and a reward for the finder if anyone could solve the letter's mystery. With her new friend, Brandon, Candice spends the summer chasing clues, and in doing so, they discover some long-buried truths about the city's racist past.

In each of these stories, readers make discoveries alongside the child protagonists, who are generally naïve narrators who may or may not understand the full picture by the story's end. Mental illness, for example, seems to partially explain the behavior of Grandpop in *As Brave as You* and Aunt Belle in *Belle Prater's Boy*, though that is not explicitly stated in either book. And,

while many of the stories offer young readers the chance to learn how historical racist structures are the causes underlying some of the tension within rural communities, the authors stop short of depicting racial violence that may be developmentally inappropriate and potentially traumatizing for middle grade readers (Barker, 2013).

Resilience

Like many of the fourth-grade writers' stories (e.g., the princess sisters who graciously accept their new roles as field workers in "The Meaning of the Necklace" and the boy who learns how to stand up to bullies in "The Turn on the Bullies"), the books I selected depict characters who show resilience in the face of adversity. For example, Sasha Harless, the protagonist of *Free Verse* (Dooley, 2016), was being raised by her older brother, a firefighter in their West Virginia coal mining town, but when he dies in the line of duty, Sasha is placed in foster care. Sasha is loved and nurtured by her caretaker, Phyllis, but when everyone realizes the family next door is kin to Sasha, she moves in with them: her newly-discovered cousin, his unfriendly wife, and their three young children. At school, Sasha joins a poetry club where she learns to express her grief and uncertainty about the future in verse. This poem is an example from when she is too sad and anxious to speak:

"Anthony Tries"

And tries and tries and tries

to get some words out of me.

I try, too, but they will not rise

from down in the depths of me. (Dooley, 2016, p. 285)

In *Ruby Holler* (Creech, 2002), twins Dallas and Florida have been moved around from one foster home to another their whole lives. They finally land in the safe and loving home of Sairy and Tiller, an older couple who plans to take each of them on separate adventures before settling into life in Ruby Holler, the beautiful place where they raised their own four children. Not believing they can trust the unconditional love shown by Sairy and Tiller, Dallas and Florida plan to run away.

When there is a full moon in Ruby Holler, as there was on the night that Dallas and Florida left the cabin, the purest silver light makes everything above and below look soft and rich, like velvet. The birds sit quietly in the trees, and all the other creatures seem to move more gently, as if their feet are padded by cotton. . . . They wound their way down the hill and moved slowly along the bank, picking their way over stones and around bushes until Florida said, "Wait. Stop."

"What's the matter?"

"I don't want to leave," Florida said. "I like it here. Nobody ever treated us this good before, and nobody's probably ever going to treat us this good again." (Creech, 2002, pp. 267-268)

The twins had come to realize that Ruby Holler, with Sairy and Tiller, is where they truly belong.

Savvy (Law, 2008) and *You Go First* (Kelly, 2018) both center around the worry felt by their respective protagonists when they are each faced with their father's sudden hospitalization. In *Savvy*, Mississippi "Mibs" Beaumont is the third child in her family to turn 13, the day on which she expects to receive her "savvy"—a special gift or power bestowed upon each family member on their thirteenth birthday. Yet when Mibs should be focused on discovering her savvy, her father's unexpected health crisis sends her, with her siblings and a few unlikely friends, on a wild bus chase through the Nebraska/Kansas countryside they call home, and Mibs discovers it is her own resilience that is her true strength. In *You Go First*, when Lottie's father is hospitalized, she struggles with guilt in remembering times she had been less than kind to him, while at the same time trying to manage her feelings of rejection after the recent dissolution of a long-time friendship. Unexpectedly, it is her "virtual" friendship with Ben, who lives far away in rural Louisiana, that pulls her through. The two friends connect online to play Scrabble, but have never met in person. Eventually, they end up talking on the phone:

"Actually, I think I have news, too."

Ben leaned back in his chair. "You go first."

"Well . . .," said Lottie. "I don't know. Never mind. It's stupid."

"No it's not."

"How do you know? I haven't even told you yet."

"If it's news to you, then it isn't stupid." (Kelly, 2018, p. 163)

Ben is himself dealing with both the bewildering surprise of his parents' recent separation and the constant stress of having to fend off a school bully, and the connection with Lottie helps him feel less alone as well.

In *Kira-Kira* (Kadohata, 2005), which takes place in the 1950s, Katie and her family are Japanese immigrants who move from Iowa to rural Georgia where some of their extended family members are setting up roots as workers in a chicken hatchery. Katie's parents work hard to save money to move from their cramped apartment to a house, especially when Katie's older sister, Lynn, becomes very ill with lymphoma. As the family strains to reconcile their Japanese heritage with life in the small-town south, they must also come to grips with losing Lynn. This scene reveals Katie's disparate thoughts as she gazes out the window of her new bedroom, knowing her sister may not survive the night:

We lived below what Georgians call the gnat line, meaning all the gnats in the world lived in town with us. My uncle claimed that more bugs lived per square mile in southern Georgia than anywhere in the state. Even in winter there were bugs.

Here are the things I saw:

1. The tire store—through the window, I saw tires piled inside.

2. A lonely tree outside the store.
3. The gray sky.
4. A crow sitting on the giant tree.

I cried and cried. For a while as I cried I hated my parents, as if it were their fault that Lynnie was sick. Then I cried because I loved my parents so much. Then I didn't feel like crying anymore. (Kadohata, 2004, pp. 198–199)

Finally, *The Exact Location of Home* (Messner, 2017) depicts the way 13-year-old Zig and his mother, a waitress and nursing student, fall into homelessness when his father's child support payments stop coming. Without a stable place to sleep and do his homework, Zig starts to slide at school and feels too embarrassed to tell his best friends what is going on. As a kind of resistance to the situation he is helpless to resolve, Zig becomes fixated with geocaching, a GPS-guided scavenger hunt where coordinates and cryptic clues lead him from one exact location to the next. When his GPS device is stolen out of his bag at the homeless shelter, Zig feels truly lost.

Characters in each of these stories, as well as those in many of the stories authored by the fourth-grade writers (Kuehl, 2020), endure the struggle and uncertainty of feeling displaced. In some cases, their living situation actually changes as they move from one place to another; in others, it is the loss or potential loss of someone close to them—someone who helps shape their sense of home and place—that leaves them feeling unsettled and out-of-place. Still, with the support of those around them, they find ways to keep moving forward.

Strong Community

Many of the fourth-grade writers' stories featured strong communities that pulled together in times of need. *Return to Sender* (Alvarez, 2009) takes place in a small farming community in rural Vermont. During a time of economic hardship, some of the town's dairy farmers resort to hiring Mexican workers, many of whom may not have the legal right to work in the United States due to extremely restrictive immigration laws. At first, some members of the community gather to protest against bringing Mexicans into their midst, but when the Cruz family, whom many in the town have grown to love and respect, face deportation, local citizens rally around them. Mari, the Cruz family's oldest daughter, receives touching letters from her classmates after she learns her family will be returning to Mexico, including this note from her teacher:

As you can see, Maria, you left behind many friends at Bridgeport. We hope for the best for you and your family. Always remember that you have a home in our hearts, no matter where you are. Friendship knows no borders! (Alvarez, 2009, p. 283)

Similarly, in *Last in a Long Line of Rebels* (Tyre, 2015), when Isaac, the athlete most deserving of the town's football scholarship to the University of Tennessee is passed over because of the racist actions of his coach, community members join together in protest and raise money to allow Isaac the chance to play as a walk-on his first year.

The tiny town of Tupelo Landing, North Carolina, plays a very big role in *Three Times Lucky* (Turnage, 2012). As a baby, Moses “Mo” LoBeau was found adrift after a hurricane, and the Colonel who saved her now raises her in Tupelo Landing with Miss Lana, a woman with a strong sense of dramatic flair, where they take turns running the local diner. By way of introduction, Mo shares, “The Colonel and Miss Lana are the closest thing to family I’ve got. Without them, I wouldn’t have a home. I probably wouldn’t even have a name. I am bereft of kin by fate” (pp. 2–3). The diner is the gathering place for all the town’s out-sized characters, including Mo’s best friend, Dale, his car-racing older brother, Lavender, and Mr. Jesse, the grumpy fisherman who is found dead near the beginning of the novel. Mo and Dale are proprietors of their own detective agency, and as they work to uncover clues to the murder mystery that entangles more victims by the day, the quirky residents of Tupelo Landing come together to protect one another and solve the case.

In a similar way, Coal Station, the setting of *Belle Prater’s Boy*, is a place where generations of residents raise their families together and know each other’s comings and goings. In one scene, Gypsy’s Mama hosts the annual garden party, “the social event of the season” (White, 1996, p. 125) that serves to welcome the young women who have reached the “marriageable age” of 18 “and could be included in all the right gatherings with the other women who had a certain social standing in town” (p. 126). In another scene, Woodrow holds court at a weenie roast for all the local schoolchildren, telling story after story to entertain the crowd. In *Savvy*, the more conservative members of the town don’t quite know what to make of the eccentric Beaumont family, but they step in to bring food and offers of help during Poppa’s hospital stay. In *As Brave as You*, community members gather at the weekly flea market where Genie’s grandmother sells her freshly-picked peas, and people seem comfortable with one another despite, or perhaps because of, their various eccentricities. In *Free Verse*, Sasha feels all alone after the death of her brother, and because she cannot bear to hear more bad news about someone else she has grown to care about, she runs away when there is a report of another accident at the local mine. When members of the community search high and low to find her, she comes to realize she matters to the people who share the place she calls home. It is her cousin, Hubert, who comes to claim her at the police station after she is found:

Hubert has crossed the room to me in two steps and put his arm around me. I don’t know if he’s touching me in anger or relief until he kisses the top of my head. “Sasha,” he says. “God Almighty. . . . You scared me, little lady,” he says.

I can’t bear the kindness in his voice. (Dooley, 2016, p. 179)

Though rural places are not all the same, a strong sense of community often characterizes the social interactions in small towns (Azano, 2011; Eppley, 2015). Books featuring groups of people who support one another and who know each other’s families across generations may spark recognition in young rural readers. In turn, experiencing these familiar relationships in mentor texts may show rural students that the people they know and experiences they have in their own communities might make for wonderful subject matter about which to write.

Conclusion

There are countless ways for teachers to help rural students find meaningful place-based literature. Like in Promoting PLACE, they can share excerpts from books such as the ones discussed here to teach various reading and writing concepts. They could choose these novels for class read-alouds or small-group book studies, providing opportunities to discuss the important issues surrounding place within the classroom community. They could simply recommend these books to certain students (for example, children interested in car racing may especially enjoy *Three Times Lucky*), or they could plan to give a weekly book talk, spending a few minutes at the beginning of class “advertising” place-based books students can find in the classroom library. And while this list provides a running start, I recommend rural teachers pay attention to the Whippoorwill Awards for excellence in rural youth literature (see <https://whippoorwillaward.weebly.com>) and consult with their school librarians for more ideas.

This article has focused on literature intended to resonate with students because of its similarities with the places where they live and work: essentially, it has focused on the “mirror” aspect of Bishop’s (1990) famous “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors” metaphor, which urges educators to ensure students can see people like themselves in texts. However, with consideration for the “windows” component, I want to encourage teachers to think beyond the local and to show students how to connect with place concepts—resilience, history, community—in stories set in far-off places as well. Reading texts featuring people who lead very different lives can help children recognize and affirm the common humanity inherent in all of us. Doing so can not only help enhance students’ writing, as these fourth graders’ stories have shown, but it can also increase students’ connectedness to the language arts curriculum and help them discover more about their own identities relative to place.

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