Whenever I think of tough guys I have had in my teaching career, I usually think of James Meachum. James, who fancied himself a mix between heavyweight boxing champion of the world and Ozzy Osbourne, showed up in my room after having been kicked out of two other schools in the district for fighting. By his third week, James had a nickname (usually an insulting one) for every student in class, had visited the assistant principal's office probably twenty times, and had yet to open a book.

At the time of James' transfer, my classes were reading To Kill a Mockingbird, but James would have none of it. Usually, the conversation would go something like this:

"Come on, James. To Kill a Mockingbird is a world-renowned book that has won all kinds of awards and prizes. Plus, you've gotta know it if you ever want to go to college."

"It's dumb, sir. I'm not reading nothin' about some stupid bird."

"The bird is just a symbol, James. It's not really about a bird at all. Besides, if you don't read it, you'll fail this class. You can't graduate from high school if you don't pass English."

"Big deal. I hate that book. I hate reading. I hate this stupid class."

The schools are filled with students like James who find little that interests them in the traditional offerings of books by authors who have been dead for decades (or even centuries) or in the stacks of adolescent novels that have survived the gauntlet of approvals from teachers, parents, principals, school boards, and librarians. A tough guy often finds absolutely nothing in print that appeals to him other than the sports page.

Teachers of English need to reach the tough guys out there, and they are probably not going to do it by prescribing another go at The Sound and the Fury. The problem is not so much that tough guys lack the brainpower to read: they simply do not want to.

Most teachers were not surprised when one National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report found that at all three grade levels assessed (4, 8, and 12), approximately half of the students reported reading 10 or fewer pages each day for schoolwork across the curriculum (Langer, 1990). Only about one in ten twelfth-graders said they checked out a book from the public or school library at least once a week. With a schedule that must accommodate school work, romance, participating in sports and extracurricular activities, watching television, hanging out at a game center in the mall, going to the movies, fooling around with friends, listening to music, and working part-time, adolescents claim they have no time to cram in a little reading, too. And when they finally manage some free time, they tend to choose the video store over the library.

In the 1988 NAEP study over one-fourth of the eighth grade boys said they rarely or never read in their spare time (compared to about one-tenth of eighth grade girls) and about one-fifth of the twelfth grade boys said they rarely or never read in their spare time (compared to about fifteen percent of the girls).
Researchers exploring the relationship between the reading habits of adolescents and various assessments of achievement have concluded the following: (1) The amount of time a student spends doing leisure reading seems to be highly correlated with his/her reading comprehension (Anderson, Fielding, & Wilson, 1988; Southgate, Arnold, & Johnson, 1981; Greaney, 1980); (2) A student who often reads books usually has a more extensive vocabulary and performs better on standardized tests than a student who rarely opens a book (Anderson, & Freebody, 1981; Fielding, Wilson, & Anderson, 1986); and (3) A book’s “interestingness” determines to a certain extent whether or not a student will read and understand it (Cox, 1991; Anderson, Shirey, Wilson, & Fielding, 1986; Matthewson, 1985; Asher, 1980; Asher and Markell, 1979; Asher and Markell, 1974).

The most popular young adult novels with students in classes that I have taught (or observed) have been these: Avi’s Wolf Rider (1991), Arrick’s Chernowitz (1984), Baldwin’s If Beale Street Could Talk (1974), Childress’ A Hero Ain’t Nothing But a Sandwich (1973), Crutcher’s Running Loose (1983), Cormier’s Fade (1988), Davis’ Vision Quest (1979), Duncan’s Killing Mr. Griffin (1978), Hinton’s Rumble Fish (1967), Irwin’s So Long at the Fair (1988), Lipsyte’s The Contender (1967), Myers’ Fallen Angels (1988) and Scorpions (1988), Kerr’s Fell (1987), Naylor’s The Year of the Gopher (1987), Nixon’s Secret, Silent Screams (1989), Paulsen’s Hatchet (1988), Robert Peck’s Arly (1989), Strasser’s Rock n’ Roll Nights (1982), and White’s Deathwatch (1972). However, even with a classroom library bolstered by these books, some teachers have had a difficult time getting tough guys to read. That’s where cool books come in.

After years of watching and listening to male nonreaders cruise the shelves of the library looking for a book, I have learned that a tough guy utilizes certain criteria in selecting a book worthy of his attention. A cool book must possess at least some of the following characteristics: (1) a decent title, (2) a cover that will not embarrass the person carrying it around (machismo is favored, but a sophisticated-looking book is okay too), (3) medium to large typography, (4) some photos or illustrations, and (5) a sufficiently high gross quotient (that is, at least a modicum of sex, violence, and nasty incidents told in intricate, sickening detail somewhere in the story).

While the number of pages in a book might play an important role in the selection processes of some slow readers, I have been surprised frequently by students who fearlessly take on enormous volumes in a subject area that interests them. In fact, there seems to be some prestige in carrying around a thick book from class to class.

Perhaps the biggest boon for any book in the eyes of a tough guy is its film tie-in -- was a film going to be made about the book, had one been made, could one be made? A few years ago, one of my friends had her eleventh grade remedial and regular English classes tackle the 501 pages of The Firm (1991) while the film was in production. She insisted that it was the one book that every one of her students actually read.

The first time I used a cool book in one of my classes, it was with James Meachum. I was frustrated. James had just screamed a particularly vulgar obscenity at me for disturbing his sleep during class, and I held him after for a few minutes. When the room cleared, I pulled Piri Thomas' touching autobiographical account of battling drugs, crime, and gangs in New York City, Down These Mean Streets , from my desk drawer and handed it to him.

"You need to keep quiet about this. Seriously," I said. "This book has been banned in a lot of schools, and I probably shouldn't be giving it to you."

"*%!@#, look at how big it is," James said, flipping through the book. "356 pages!"

"Yep, 356 pages. That's 356 pages of cursing, sex, and violence. Is it too hard for you, James?"

James lifted the book in the air like he was weighing it. "Just between you and me, okay?" I said.

Two weeks later James got into yet another fight and was transferred to an alternative high school. When he came by my room to check out, he asked if he could keep the book. Encouraged that such a comment might indicate that James was reading, I told him, "Of course, but you have to write to me and tell me what you thought about it." Although he never wrote me back, I did run into James some ten years later at a shopping mall. I remember the moment vividly.
"Hey, remember that book, that Thomas book?" was what he said after "Yo, teach!"

"Yeah, I remember. I never got it back," I said.

"One of the best books I ever read," James said laughing. "I read all the time now."

Many of the books that I suggest for tough guys may not be considered great works of literature. But motivating some complacently literate students to open a book and read the printed page requires guerrilla tactics. The function of a cool book is to provide the initial step in getting a tough guy to read. Great literature can come later.

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Fiction


Block, Lawrence (1982). Eight Million Ways to Die. 296 pages, small typography, no photos. Matt Scudder, private eye, ex-alcoholic is the detective for today. Tougher than Hammer, but more humane than Marlowe. Block has written several books in the Scudder series. (Also see books by Ross McDonald, such as Blue City). Film (1986), rated R.


Eastman, Charles (1969). Little Fauss and Big Halsey. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 163 pages, large typography, loaded with photos. A great screenplay about two motorcycle riders who journey from race to race in hopes of getting the big payoff (which never materializes). Film (1970), rated R.


Gent, Peter (1973). North Dallas Forty. Signet Books. 294 pages, medium typography, no photos. A view into professional football's steamy side, written by the former Dallas Cowboy. Film (1979), rated R.

Goldman, William (1974). Marathon Man. Dell. 268 pages, small typography, no photos. A brilliant student and runner discovers that his brother worked for the CIA. After his brother is murdered, the student becomes entangled in his brother's troubles. Film (1976), rated R.


investigates a gruesome murder that white men can't seem to understand, let alone solve. No film.

Houston, James (1971). The White Dawn . Signet. 266 pages, small typography, some maps and drawings. In 1896, three survivors of a shipwrecked whaleboat must adjust to Arctic culture after they are rescued by Eskimos. Film (1974), rated R.


Marc, Karen (1984). Tuff Turf . Signet. 139 pages, large typography, no photos. Morgan, a preppy high schooler from Connecticut, falls in love with the girlfriend of the leader of the Tuffs (a gang) and must face the unpleasant consequences. Film (1985), rated R.


Ponicsan, Darryl (1973). Cinderella Liberty . Bantam. 182 pages, small typography, no photos. A navy man's records are lost -- he can't be discharged, return to his ship, or be paid. So, he fools around and marries a prostitute, and inherits a family. Film (1973), rated R.


Walton, Todd (1978). Inside Moves . Signet. 217 pages, medium typography, no photos. Two friends, a Vietnam vet and an aspiring pro basketball player, meet regularly at Max's Bar, talk about their dreams, then do their best to make them come true. Film (1980), rated R.

Webb, Charles (1963). The Graduate . Signet. 160 pages, medium typography, no photos. Twenty-two year old Benjamin's life seems boring until he gets into squabbles with his parents, has an affair with a long-time friend of his parents (Mrs. Robinson), and begins courting Mrs. Robinson's daughter. Film (1967), rated PG.

Wheeler, David (1989). No, but I Saw the Movie: The Best Short Stories Ever Made into Film . Penguin. 412 pages. Large typography, no photos. A collection of short stories that inspired films such as High Noon, Bad Day at...
Nonfiction


Aubranner, Brent (1987). The Vanishing Border: A Photographic Journey Along Our Frontier with Mexico . Dodd, Mead & Company. 175 pages, large typography, many photos. A compelling combination of statistics (over 400,000 illegal immigrants are apprehended every year in the San Diego sector, alone, although immigration officers there estimate that 4,000,000 more escape capture), interviews, and personal experience.


Cohen, Daniel (1979). Famous Curses . Dodd, Mead and Co. 127 pages, very large typography, many photos. Genuine, famous curses that have been placed on unfortunate individuals throughout history.


Gardner, Robert (1992). Crime Lab 101: Experimenting with Crime Detection . Walker and Company. 120 pages, large typography, many drawings. Reveals how science and technology are used to solve crimes. Contains several explanations of how some actual crimes were solved.


Maas, Peter (1975). King of the Gypsies. Bantam Books. 210 pages, medium typography, some photographs. A book about gypsies living in America, much in the same fashion that they have been living for the past two hundred years. Fascinating, but some Romany scholars absolutely loathe the book. Film (1978), rated R.

Marston, Elsa (1986). Mysteries in American Archeology. Walker & Company. 113 pages, medium typography, many photos. Covers a variety of topics including "Who really discovered America?"

Mooser, Steven (1980). Into the Unknown. J.B. Lippincott. 116 pages, very large typography, loaded with photos. Contains nine stories about persons who have had experiences with UFOs, a woman with ESP, a person who claimed to have been reincarnated, and other strange events that someone out there claims to be true.


Bibliography


Asher, S. "Topic Interest and Children's Reading Comprehension." In R. Spiro, B. Bruce, and W. Brewer (Eds.)
Few late teen-agers are reading many books. A recent summary of studies cited by Common Sense Media indicates that American teen-agers are less likely to read “for fun” at seventeen than at thirteen. The category of reading “for fun” is itself a little depressing, since it divides reading into duty (for school) and gratification (sitting on a beach towel), as if the two were necessarily opposed. “All the people in the world who want to study French literature can do so,” Matt Bevin, the governor of Kentucky, said. “They’re just not going to be subsidized by the taxpayers like engineers will be, for example.” The luckiest of the children fall out of parents’ arms into preschool. In the good ones, books are read aloud, valued, expounded, held up for kids to enjoy.