

Shutta Crum

## Lexical Lust: An Ink-slinger's Confessions

At the age of nine, I began a clandestine love affair—with a dictionary. Since then, there have been many. Some I have loved more deeply than others. Though I don't consider myself promiscuous, I admit I can't remember what some of them looked like. However, no one forgets a first love.

That first dictionary was rescued from an inferno. Every summer, our elementary school was cleaned, and burnables were carried out to a three-sided incinerator. My friends and I would wait for the custodian to go back in for another load, and then we'd dart through the open side and root around for treasure—before he returned to set it ablaze.

One summer, I burrowed into the pile and found the dictionary. Its cover was gone, as well as part of the "A" section. I didn't care; it had gossamer-thin pages beribboned with the finest lettering. Perfect for playing school or library!

I had that dictionary for years, for there were few books in our house. Times were especially tight when Dad was laid off or the auto factories were closed for changeover. And the dictionary came in handy, unless I needed to look up "aberrant" or "afflatus." Thus began my love of words on paper.

I had not known there were so many words! My parents' educations were limited—Mom read magazines and an occasional novel; my father's spotty fifth-grade education left him a nonreader. A great number of the words in that dictionary would never be spoken in our home.

Yet others spoke them. Others wrote with them. I stroked the dictionary and wondered, "Why can't I use some? Who would stop me?"

I adored that dictionary. And though I could not name it at the time, what made me giddy with desire was power—the democratizing power of language. Anyone could use these words, even a *shop-rat's*\* child.

Other thrills awaited me. I grew older and experienced thesauri. Call me kinky (off-beat, bizarre, strikingly unconventional), but to this day when I open a thesaurus, my pulse quickens.

I'm an ink-slinger now. I write picture books, novels, poems, magazine articles, grocery lists, and notes to my husband. On my shelf are dictionaries:

*Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, *Cajun Dictionary*, *Dictionary of Bible and Religion*, *Firefly Visual Dictionary*, and *How to Talk American*. I keep thesauri close at hand—my first Americanized edition of the *Original Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*, the odd *Highly Selective Thesaurus for the Extraordinarily Literate*, and my prized single volume of the *Dictionary of Slang & Its Analogues* by Farmer & Henley.

However, none of these compare to a more mature liaison I formed with a thumb-worn, gallant thesaurus—*Soule's Dictionary of English Synonyms*. It was "Designed as a Guide to Apt and Varied Diction by Richard Soule" in 1871. My copy was published in 1961. Its pages are golden-hued with nobility, its spine operated on often. Yet it never fails to satisfy.

It travels with me. In airplanes, I trust it to keep me from thinking about falling out of the sky. In hotel rooms, I fall asleep with it. At home, it awaits my pleasure. My husband understands. Years ago, he handed *Soule* to me while I polished a college paper. That was when I looked into the eyes of a man confident enough to love me despite my lexical proclivities. I knew I would marry him, because his name is penciled on *Soule's* title page.

This obsession still manages to surprise. Recently, while clearing my parents' house after their deaths, I stumbled upon it—my wounded first love. I knelt beside it and gently lifted its torn pages. Mom had kept it all these years. It had once been a fine *Webster's*.

And so I confess that for me, even online hot-shots like the *Urban Dictionary* or the democratically compiled *Wikisaurus* can't compete with the headiness I feel for my bosom companions, my comrades—my gentlemanly *Soule* and my waif of a *Webster*. Forgive me this long billet-doux. I am love-muddled. One day, I naively snatched a world of words from an incinerator's flame and learned that "The fire which enlightens is the same fire which consumes."\*\*

\*an auto-factory worker

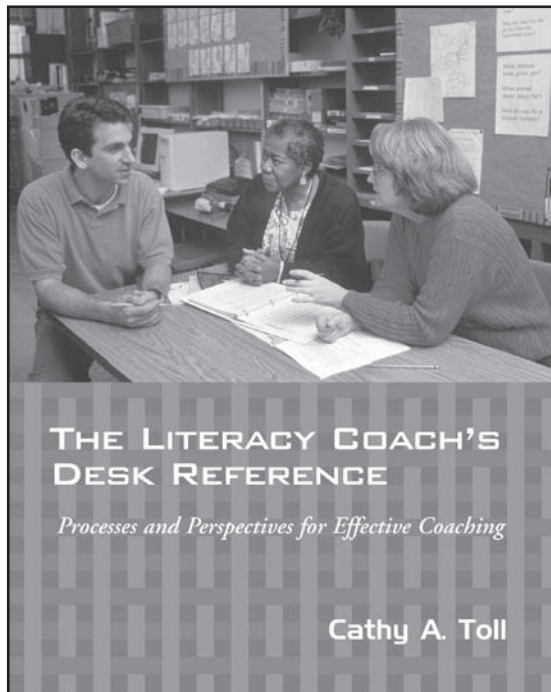
\*\*quote from *Frederic Amiel*

**Shutta Crum** is an author, retired children's librarian, and educator. She lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

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225 pp. 2006. Grades Pre-K–12. ISBN 0-8141-2968-4.

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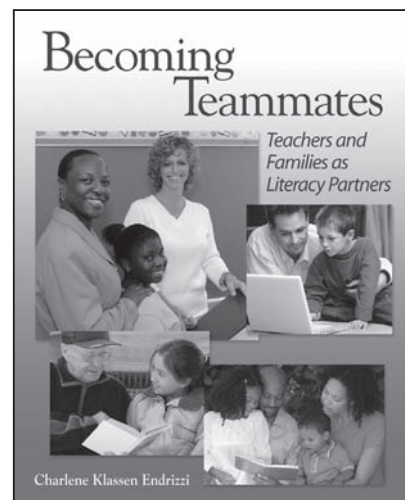
Endrizzi recognizes that family-school partnerships are a complex undertaking and offers suggestions for three phases of implementation.

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Endrizzi challenges teachers to take an active role in developing partnerships by considering a myriad of ways to build bridges of understanding with their students' first learning partners. 245 pp. 2008. Grades K-6. ISBN 978-0-8141-0273-2.

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*Foreword by Deborah Brandt*

*Afterword by Edmund J. Farrell*

*Reading the Past, Writing the Future* celebrates NCTE's centennial by emphasizing the role the organization has played in brokering and advancing the many traditions and countertraditions engaging literacy educators since the organization was chartered in 1911.

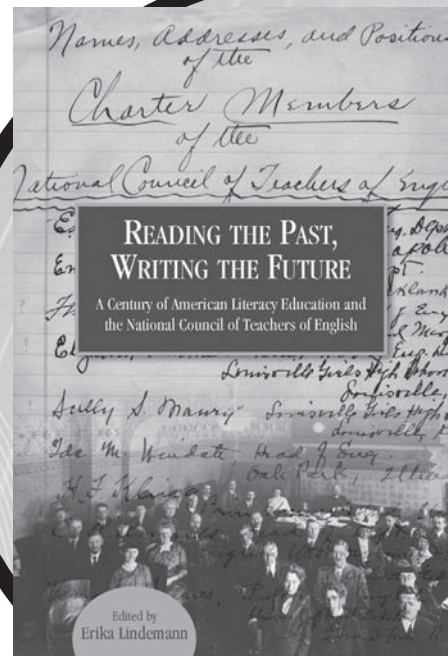
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This rich and thoughtful history of our discipline and organization is for every teacher of the English language arts and English studies who wonders where we've been, how we got where we are today, and where we all might be traveling as literacy educators in the 21st century.

505 pp. 2010. K-College. ISBN 978-0-8141-3876-2.

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131 pp. 2008. Grades 3-8. ISBN 978-0-8141-3500-6.

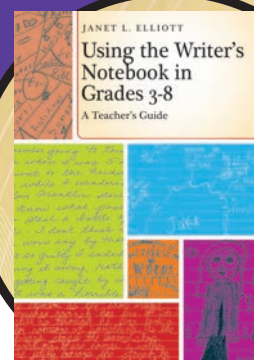
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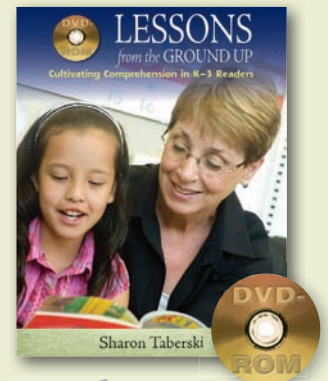
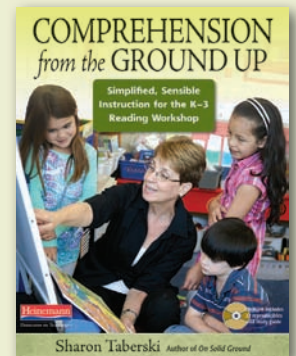
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