

Jessie Blackburn's

Jessie Blackburn - "My name is Jessie Blackburn and my literacy narrative is about my nine year old son Garland. Garland was in second grade this year and was always a very good reader and we just recently moved to Arkansas and, um, I've noticed in Garland this year he's gone from being a very good reader to being um, an exceptional reader, in fact he just won a trophy at the end of the school year for being one of the top readers in his whole school. So, um, but to get from that being a good reader to being an exceptional reader was sort of a, a critical moment for me as his mother, which it actually had very little to do with me and it had a lot to do with Garland and a particular book he was reading, but it was, it was a letting go for me that I had to do, I had to um, accept for him to sort of really fall into the, the book. And um, it came about because Garland's teacher, noticing that Garland had very few friends and was new to school and was kind of a, a very tender boy and he is, he's - we've um, intentionally raised our kids to know very little about violence in the world and um, they don't watch violent, um, cartoons or play violent video games and we spend a lot of time reading and playing cards and games as a family. We are very, um, uh, just traditional I guess in that sense, you know? We, we spend a lot of time as a family hiking and um, playing sports, but doing very little with, um, interacting with um, with actual media for one, but then also with um, kind of, you know, violent and sophisticated ideas that are fairly prevalent in our Western culture. Anyway, Garland came home from school one day and his teacher, as a um, gesture of um, kind of identifying with Garland and his sensitivities, and wanting to encourage him and just wanting to do something special for him, gave Garland a book that was a fifth or sixth grading reading level. Um, and it was a reading level that he could certainly handle and I think in fact that it pushed him beyond where he was at the time, but the thing that really, um, I think trapped Garland's um, imagination was the content of the book. And it was a book of uh, of uh, written from the perspective of a young slave boy, an eight year old slave boy which my son is eight, and it was his diary and he would stop uh, along the Underground Railroad and he would write in his diary at night. And so my son was reading these um, these dia-these journal entries of this little boy and he was journaling about his father um, being killed, he was journaling about his mother being separated from him, and his mother having to have a baby out in the field, and he was reading about his best friend being sold off from his mother and orphaned. And it was just really violent and traumatic material and Garland went from reading it privately on the couch while I was in the kitchen, to needing to read it next to me in the dining room at the table while I was still in the kitchen, and then eventually he needed to read it out loud to me. And I could see, sort of this book consuming him, but at the same time I could see for the first time ever, my son unwilling to put a book down. And so it was kinda this push-pull where I realized that, ok this is material that I really sheltered him from and these are ideas um, that I have um, postponed having to really get into with him. I wanted to keep him naive and, and um, just innocent as long as possible, um but I realized at that, at that moment that Garland was rea- that this book was doing something for Garland, that this book was feeding a part of him and it was um, enlightening him in a way that it was time for. And so he was asking a lot of questions and he would stop and ask me to define words and there were several

moments I would have to turn my back on him so he couldn't see me crying, you know, having to, sort of, break down that innocence in my son and, and educate him about things, I just, I wasn't ready for him to know about, but clearly he was. And um, anyway he finished the book and he keeps that book on his shelf in his, um, in his private spot where his brother doesn't have access to, and um, it's, he would anybody that it's his favorite book and it's, I think, the book the really um, propelled him into being the advanced reader that he is today. Um, but I, there, ever since has been a marked difference in my son, uh, in some ways good but in other ways, um, a loss of innocence has occurred. So that just, um, I guess a complication that comes along with literacy. Okay."

Interviewer - "What are the events you counted meaningful or significant to you personally? Why do you like this story? What makes it worth telling?"

Jessie Blackburn - "Um, well it's meaning, it's meaningful to me personally of course because it's about my son and about some, some of the um, sort of spiritual struggles that I had as a mother and, and the responsibility that I feel um, in terms of raising a compassionate human being and um, sensitive, especially because I'm raising two boys, I'm very concerned with raising my boys to, to be um, empathetic and compassionate people, but also to be patient and nonviolent people, um and sympathetic people. So it, it was a very poignant moment when I realized that while I'd been shielding Garland from these sort of violent, um, moments in our American History, in, in, just, you know, the history of humanity, um, I realized that even, even through those moments is his compassion and his sympathy and his empathy, um, growing and um, that, that, I can let go now, that he has, he now has, those, those seeds are planted they're there, because the way he read that story was through the eyes of a very compassionate soul. So..."

Interviewer - "How do you understand and interpret the impact of the event professionally? What can it tell you about teaching, learning, reading or composing?"

Jessie Blackburn - "Um, well, uh, I saw a little person go from being uh, someone who enjoyed reading to someone who uh, now hides with a flashlight under his covers to, to read, who um, will wake up earlier than anyone else in the family on a Saturday morning and go read. Um, and that is because there was that one book that allowed him to go from being someone who was reading for an assignment to someone who is reading for knowledge; reading for an awakening. And um, it has reminded me constantly to, it, to at least attempt those, those same reading moments for my students or to allow my students to, to, to, define what it is that they're, they're after, um, rather than importing some syllabus on to them, I, I've really um, learned from this experience with Garland to open up the classroom space to what it is, where, where are my students at that point in their lives, what do my students need to be reading about, now what I need them to be reading about. "

Interviewer - "How does your story position you vis-a-vis the others, parents, family members, peers or teachers and what significance does this positioning have for your literacy practice, values, and understandings?"

Jessie Blackburn - "Well, um, I mean, I guess just, in terms of my pedagogical approach to my syllabus now, in giving a little bit more freedom, well a lot more freedom. I've always, I've always, um, practiced sort of a feminist pedagogy as far as, um, displacing my, my power in the classroom and authorizing my students as much

as possible. Um, but that's not necessarily a common pedagogical approach, especially to freshman composition. And, um, so I think for my colleagues, when I see them teaching the cannon and I see them teaching, you know, the traditional, you know, 'Once More to the Lake', whatever, um, and I'm not necessarily assigning those pieces of literature or, I'm, I'm assigning, you know, a poetry section but then I say to my students 'What do you, How do you define poetry? What do you want to read as poetry? Show me how this is poetry and how this has, you know, poetic qualities and mechanisms. Um, there, there can sometimes be some, um, political division there departmentally, so I suppose how this has positioned me to others, um, in a good way, I think it's made me more sympathetic towards my students, it's made me closer to my son as far as, you know, really, um, watching him get off on a book, but it's, but I think it has, it has positioned me departmentally and politically within the field, or at least, you know, to my, my colleagues as someone who is more radical than, um, some of my more traditional department members."