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If They Don't Learn the Way You Teach, Teach the Way They Learn

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**If They Don't Learn the Way You Teach,  
Teach the Way They Learn**

**Jacque McTaggart**

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## SOMETHING STINKS AROUND HERE

After ordering a bagel, juice and coffee, I opened the morning edition of the *Birmingham News* and placed it on the table in front of me. If something monumental had happened between the prior evening's six o'clock news and now, I wanted to know about it before giving my first presentation of the day. Many teachers like to start their day with the newspaper, and I figured the Alabama State Reading Conference attendees were part of that norm. I didn't want 500 IRA members discussing some late-breaking news item that I knew nothing about.

I scanned the front-page headlines and determined nothing new had happened during the night. The Democrats were still blaming the Bush administration for taking the country to war, the Bush administration was accusing Democrats of not supporting the troops, and the entire nation was mourning our latest combat casualties. On to page two.

Uh, oh. The caption of an Associated Press article not only caught my eye, it jumped off the page and grabbed me by the throat. The caption, printed in VERY large print, said, "Iowa teacher recommends *Walter the Farting Dog*." And I was that Iowa teacher.

I closed my eyes and envisioned a state patrolman standing on the Mississippi river bank, waiting for me to cross the bridge. He was holding a placard that said, "Mrs. McTaggart, you have angered educators across the nation and you have embarrassed our state. You are no longer welcome here. The fine people of Iowa do not condone the use of socially unacceptable words, and we do not allow that kind of language

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in our schools. You'll have to find a different place to hang your teacher's hat."

As it turned out, probably because the information in the *Birmingham News* article was accurately reported and adequately explained, there was no patrolman at the Iowa border. And strangely, there was only one "Walter-related" email in my Outlook Express. It came from Glenn Murray, a name that was unfamiliar to me. The note began with, "To a lady of obvious culture and impeccable taste."

I learned a lot about Glenn Murray in the months that followed. He is a native of Nova Scotia, a twenty-year educator, former adviser to the Canadian Minister of Education, and a key player in the Reading With Rover project - a program whereby therapy animals are used to encourage reluctant young readers. Murray reportedly carries a box of books with him at all times, reading to children wherever he goes. And...Glenn Murray is the coauthor, together with William Kotzwinkle, of *Walter the Farting Dog* and the five sequels that follow.

**Rationale:**

No rational educator condones potty-mouth vocabulary, and very few tolerate it – stipulations that I wholeheartedly endorse. I certainly did not allow my students to say the word "fart," or any other socially unacceptable word. So why do I endorse books like *Walter the Farting Dog*, *Everyone Poops*, *The Day My Butt Went Psycho*, and *Winchell Cuts the Cheese*? Read on.

Books such as *Little House on the Prairie*, *Sarah Plain and Tall*, and hundreds of others are meant to evoke an emotional response. Girls savor these books and can't get enough of them. Guys hate them. If we want to hook boys onto reading and reel them into the wonderful world of books, we must switch our bait. Boys like books with short chapters, humor, suspense,

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fantasy, and gross stuff that make them feel as though they're reading something a tiny bit perverted.

In a 2005 interview with Michael Shaughnessy of EdNews.org., Glenn Murray said...

"These days, it's about hooking the attention of kids. Their world is filled with ...forces and distractions, competing for their attention. Comedians and satirists have long known that you can hook attention with laughter, and then quickly slip in some thoughtful ideas... about patience and tolerance, about making the best of a bad situation, and about never losing hope. That's what Walter's all about."

Unlike Walter, some "smelly" books do not have examples of turning things around, of turning liabilities into assets, or making the best of a bad situation. But they all catch kids' attention, and they all prompt boys, and quite a few girls, to pick up a book and read.

**Precautions:**

Before you introduce a book that has socially inappropriate vocabulary, there are certain precautions you must take – unless you're willing to forfeit your job and/or your reputation as a quality educator.

- Clear your plan with the school principal. Explain your rationale, describe how you will communicate with parents, outline the way in which you will introduce the book, and discuss appropriate discipline measures for the student who "slips" and uses an unacceptable word in the school setting.
- Send an informational letter home to parents *before* you introduce the book. Explain your purpose, discuss your rules, and enlist their cooperation. If parents understand what you are doing and why you are doing it, they will be

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your biggest advocate and your strongest supporter. Seize the opportunity.

- Before introducing *Walter* or a similar book to the class, have an up front, come-to-Jesus discussion about acceptable and unacceptable words. Tell them you expect they will laugh at the crude word they are about to hear, and that's okay. They may want to check the books out and read them again, and that's fine. But you will not – under any circumstances – allow them to use crude, uncouth words in conversation, and you have asked their parents to enforce these same regulations at home.

*We have to make kids want to read before we can make them read what we want them to.* The following books make kids want to read. Get your principal's support, convey your purpose to parents before you introduce this type of book, and then go for the gold.

*Bubble Homes & Fish Farts* by Fiona Bayrock and Carolyn Conahan.

This recently released nonfiction science book has only one page (near the middle) that uses the word "farts," but the title sucks boys in. The title also motivated me to buy the book, and I'm glad I did. My ten-year old grandson is on the autism spectrum and he absolutely loves it!

*Dog Breath* by Dav Pilkey.

"There once was a dog named Hally, who lived with the Tosis family. Hally Tosis was a very good dog, but she had a big problem."



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*Everyone Poops* by Taro Gomi.

This book, originally published in Japan, covers poop from elephant to mouse, whale to snake, giraffe to child.

*Farley Farts* by Birte Muller.

First published in Switzerland, this book recounts the airborne adventures of Farley when he doesn't allow nature to take its course.

*Grossology, Grossology and You, Animal Grossology* – three books by Sylvia Branzai.

Boys of all ages fight to read these books.

*Hands-on Grossology* by Sylvia Branzai, illustrated by Jack Keely.

This book of “really gross science experiments” allows youngsters to create such substances as fake wounds, phony poo, s’not snot, and fake edible barf.

*I Have to Go* by Robert Munsch, illustrated by Michael Martchenko.

The focus in this Canadian book is on a little boy who creates problem after problem despite claiming that he doesn't have to go to the bathroom.

*Little Lord Farting Boy* by Scootchee Turdlow and Patti Argoff.

Arty the bear is one of the nicest, smartest boys at school. He's good at everything he does, including sports, schoolwork, and drawing - but there's just one small problem. Arty farts.

*Pee-ew! Is That You, Bertie* by David Roberts.

Another “smelly” book that delights kids and makes parents groan.

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*Rough Weather Ahead for Walter the Farting Dog* by William Kotzwinkle.

Walter makes his third appearance in yet another unapologetically silly picture book, this one dedicated to "everyone who's ever felt misjudged or misunderstood."

*The Adventures of Captain Underpants* by Dav Pilkey.

This series, which includes episodes such as "The Attack of the Talking Toilets," takes George and Harold, two adventure-writing boys, through the experience of seeing their principal, Mr. Krupp, turn into a superhero that dashes around in his underwear. This is one of those books that I didn't allow my first graders to read when I was teaching full time, but would if I could do it all over again. I wish I had not been quite so righteous "back then" because I know I missed some opportunities to turn boys on to reading. I hope you won't make the same mistake I did.

*The Day My Butt Went Psycho* by Andy Griffiths.

This book and its sequel, which originated in Australia, tell the story of a brave young boy and his crazy runaway butt.

*The Dirty Cowboy* by Amy Timberlake, illustrated by Adam Rex.

When a cowboy finally takes a bath, his own dog doesn't recognize him without the stench, and the resulting battle leaves the cowboy both naked and once again dirty.

*The Gas We Pass (The Story of Farts)* by Shinta Cho.

Both informative and blunt, the book provides young readers with solid facts as well as plenty to snicker about, including some sage advice ("Don't hold them in - pass that gas!") that will send parents everywhere running for the air freshener.

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*Walter the Farting Dog* by William Kotzwinkle and Glenn Murray.

Walter becomes an unlikely hero when a blast of his gas leads to the capture of burglars. This is the first of the series, and in my opinion – the best.

*Walter the Farting Dog: Banned From the Beach* by William Kotzwinkle and Glenn Murray.

*Walter the Farting Dog: Trouble at the Yard Sale* by William Kotzwinkle and Glenn Murray.

This time Walter is at a yard sale, but Father can't sell anything, because Walter drives away the customers.

*Winchell Cuts the Cheese* by Taylor Lee and Peter Van Dijk.  
Another Pork 'n Beans book that begs to be chuckled at.

*“Let go of your attachment to being right, and suddenly your mind is more open. You’re able to benefit from the unique viewpoint of others, without being crippled by your own judgment.”*

- Ralph Marston

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