

TEACHING SHAKESPEARE

Kevin Long and Mary T. Christel, *Column Editors*

A teacher shares his young adult novel on learning to love Shakespeare and speaking his language.

Giving Birth to *That Shakespeare Kid*

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“To the great Variety of Readers. From the most able, to him that can but spell: There you are number’d.”

These words appear in the front matter of the *First Folio* (Moston), the 1623 collection of Shakespeare’s thirty-six plays. Two friends of Shakespeare, Heminges and Condell, wrote that introduction to let the world know that this book and these plays were for *all* people, not just your honors or Advanced Placement students. Really.

What, then, do I say when a teacher tells me, “Shakespeare is too hard for my students,” or “But you don’t know my kids”?

My response is simple: take time to slowly ease your students into Shakespeare’s language with some fun—but calculated—activities. Begin with single words, move to lines, then short speeches, then longer ones, and finally, full

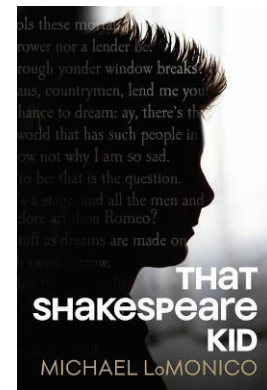
scenes. Encourage students to uncover for themselves what’s going on in this line or that passage or that scene. Trust your class and eventually you will have success.

After teaching Shakespeare to thousands of students and teachers in my career since 1968, I grew tired of seeing dumbed-down, made-easy versions in so many classrooms. What could I do to reach teachers and their students about reading the real stuff?

BIRTH OF PETER MARLOWE

Shortly after retiring from secondary school and while teaching English language arts methods to preservice teachers at Stony Brook University, I had the idea: I would write a book to help both students and their teachers. It would be a young adult novel that would demystify the problems students have with early modern English, such as funny verb endings, the pronouns *thee* and *thou*, unfamiliar words, and unusual sentence structure.

And suppose this book had an original plot filled with humor, adolescent issues of confidence, a bit of bullying, and teenage



love? Thus, *That Shakespeare Kid* was born.

The premise: a curious young boy named Peter Marlowe, reaching on a high shelf to fetch his mom’s *Riverside Shakespeare*, falls, hits his head, and is knocked unconscious. And—here’s the silly part—when he awakes, he can only speak lines from Shakespeare. Yes, it’s a goofy premise, but that approach is common in young adult novels and renders it appealing to kids.

Once he discovers his condition, Peter texts a classmate (soon to be girlfriend) named Emma, and she speaks in plain English for him with his family, his teachers, and his friends. Peter’s mother struggles with his use of Shakespeare’s language in a routine

breakfast conversation without benefit of Emma's "translation":

"By the way, how do you feel this morning? I know you had quite a scare yesterday."

"Ay, 'twas a rough night."

"But you feel OK to go to school?"

"All shall be well."

"Well, sit down and eat your breakfast. I made bacon and eggs, your favorite."

"I thank you. I am not a man of many words, but I thank you." (14)

The book is full of Peter's Shakespeare lines, such as "Good morrow, father," when he wakes up and "But soft, methinks I scent the morning air" to his friend at the bus stop.

Oh, and at a baseball game he shouts, "Hence! Home . . . get you home" to the guy rounding third base.

Then, when he is sent to the school psychologist, Peter says, "Full of scorpions is my mind."

His comments befuddle and amuse those he encounters, though Peter does get his fifteen minutes of fame among his schoolmates, leading to a video that goes viral, a local newspaper article, and an appearance on a national morning TV show.

THAT SHAKESPEARE GUY

Before going further, let me explain how I became "that Shakespeare guy" in my own school. After attending my first NCTE conference in 1985, I received a mailing about the Teaching Shakespeare Institute sponsored by the Folger Shakespeare Library and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

I had no idea what either of these organizations was. But at that point in my career, I was in a funk. I didn't know what I was looking for, but attending that conference and getting that mailing convinced me that this might be it. I filled out the application, wrote the essay, and was shocked that I was accepted.

What followed was an inspirational four weeks in Washington, DC, discussing how to teach Shakespeare with 40 teachers from across the country and learning from world-class scholars, performance leaders, and master teachers. But the heart and soul of that program was Peggy O'Brien, the finest teacher I have ever met and worked with. She gave us the inspiration and the confidence to change the way we taught Shakespeare, and eventually, how we taught all literature. Following that summer, my connection to the Folger continued and included working with Peggy and a group of teachers on a series of teaching guides titled *Shakespeare Set Free*. And that evolved into workshops at NCTE conventions and full-day teacher professional development programs around the country, where I met so many teachers.

MRS. HASTINGS

But let me get back to Peter and Emma, because here comes the subversive part—my real goal in writing the book.

In her two-day introduction to the Shakespeare unit on *Romeo and Juliet*, Peter's well-meaning teacher, Mrs. Hastings, used her

tried-and-true approach to teaching Shakespeare. Using all the charts and details found in the school's English literature anthology, she lectured about Shakespeare's life, how he married Anne Hathaway because she was pregnant, who his children were, how one of them, named Hamnet, died, what the Globe Theater looked like, how the theater burned down, when Shakespeare died, and other Shakespeare trivia.

The kids were *so bored*.

But then Emma, via a clandestine text from Peter, asked, "Will this stuff about Shakespeare and the Globe actually help us understand *Romeo and Juliet*?"

Mrs. Hastings became momentarily speechless. She admitted that it wouldn't directly help them understand the play, but that it was important to know. When Emma, again through Peter, asked why it was important to know, the teacher was stumped. After the bell rang, she told Emma that it was a good question and she would think about it over the weekend.

When class began on Monday, Mrs. Hastings announced that she had decided to try a different approach.

"We're not going to just read Shakespeare; we're going to perform Shakespeare!" she said.

This was followed by groans from the class, but that all ceased when the students started throwing words at each other from a three-column insult list. Hilarity ensued.

Emma said to Tyler, "Thou hideous, rump-fed clotpole!"

And Tyler replied with “Thou greasy, evil-eyed minimus!”

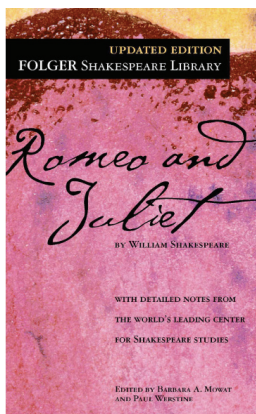
Kayla said to Ayesha, “Thou jaded, hunch-backed nut-hook!”

And Ayesha replied, “Thou saucy, sour-faced dogfish!”

When the class had settled down, the teacher asked them how they liked it. Peter replied, “*O wonderful, wonderful, and most wonderful! and yet again wonderful.*”

A series of active, performance-based approaches, nearly all based on the methodology used at the Folger, excited the class and culminated in a lively school performance of *Romeo and Juliet*.

I made Mrs. Hastings’s classroom a model of what an ideal Shakespeare unit might be, beginning with students speaking simple words, then single lines, and eventually full scenes, all leading



to a school performance festival. This is the strategy I used when teaching Shakespeare, and it was the strategy that Mrs. Hastings would use in Peter’s class.

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When the book came out, I received invitations from teachers to visit their classes to discuss the book, read a few passages, and answer questions. I met with classes both in person and virtually, in several states, and in the US Virgin Islands.

I loved these visits, as the students had such good questions: “How did you come up with this plot?” “Where did you find all the lines?” “Were these characters based on real people?” (they were) and even “Did this really happen?”

We tossed words and shouted insults. And in many of my visits, where the students owned their

copies of the book, they wanted me to autograph them.

Recently, I made a slight update to *That Shakespeare Kid*, a boy who hasn’t aged since 2013 but now lives in a different time. I switched the messaging app, substituted TikTok for YouTube, made the class more diverse and inclusive of all students, and updated some expressions. I also decided to change some real people who appear in the book, especially the two Matts: Matt Harvey, the former pitcher for the New York Mets, and Matt Lauer, the former anchor of the *Today Show*. Here’s a hint to all you would-be novelists—don’t use real names of celebrities if you want your book to endure.

Now, nearly ten years after creating Peter Marlowe in *That Shakespeare Kid*, I still love what he did for me and what he continues to do for English language arts teachers across the country. 

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