
Battle of the Books:

Middle School Reading Motivation

by Frances Mallison

April 16, 1991. Win or lose, tomorrow is the big day for Battle of the Books in Pitt County. All the necessary supplies are packed and waiting, and there is just enough time to reflect on how I got myself into all this excitement in the first place.

Almost two years ago, in a rather low point in my seven years as a middle school media coordinator, I was talking to Frances Bradburn of the East Carolina University Media and Teaching Resources Center about my concerns regarding our media program. She asked if I had ever heard of Battle of the Books. Since I had not, she gave me a written history of the program and a reading list for the next school year. After reading about what was involved, my first reaction was that I already had too much to do. Our middle school library was preparing for Circulation Plus on top of all the usual library responsibilities and lessons for language arts classes. I reread the philosophy of the program:

The purpose of the Battle of the Books program is to encourage reading at the middle school level. Students are exposed to quality literature representing a variety of literary styles and viewpoints by prominent authors in the area of young adult literature. The game format creates interest and excitement in reading.

Through the fun and excitement of the competition, students improve reading skills, mature in their choices of reading materials, and acquire a broader knowledge base. Even during the height of the competition, students and coaches should remember that the goal is to READ, not necessarily to win!!

Between that philosophy and Frances Bradburn's enthusiastic recommendation that Battle of the Books was such a wonderful public relations tool, I was moved to present the program to our eight language arts teachers. They were very polite and thought it sounded wonderful, but they had their hands full with nine preparations each day and a new textbook adoption.

What should I do? Any program that encouraged students to read from a list of recommended books and invited their competitive spirit was bound to be worth pursuing, even if I had to do it solely as a library-sponsored activity.

In the meantime, the 1989-90 school year had begun, and I decided I would introduce the program to begin in the fall of 1990. I called the new Region I Media Coordinator, Brenda Lewis, to find out more about Battle of the Books. No one in Region I had ever participated before, but she had heard good reviews of the program from other regions.

In February 1990 I received a letter from Betsy Barnes, Media Coordinator of Franklin County Schools, asking me to be on the new statewide North Carolina Association of School Librarians (NCASL) Battle of the Books Committee. When I explained my novice position, that I had never participated in Battle of the Books on a school, county, or regional level, she stated that was

acceptable to her, so I realized I had better get organized. Our library ordered multiple copies of the twenty-four books on the 1990-91 list, and I went to my first state committee meeting in June 1990.

NCASL was taking over the promotional sponsorship from the State Department of Public Instruction. Several major decisions regarding philosophy and procedure had to be made. The manual needed revision; funds needed to be solicited in order to purchase the plaques, medallions, and certificates for the spring regional competitions; and assignments to write questions needed to be made. I felt quite overwhelmed, but I was willing to help with state, regional, county, and local school events and procedures.

I read a few of the twenty-four books during the summer, but I realized what a task lay ahead. Perhaps other Pitt County librarians would be more willing to participate in Battle of the Books if we all worked together to share the writing of questions for school practice and competitions.

Gwen Jackson, Region II Media Coordinator, presented a workshop at our August regional meeting, and those who attended from Region I were put on a mailing list to receive any Battle of the Books promotional ideas. Four Pitt County middle schools decided to participate, and those four, as well as some others interested for a future year, helped read the books and write about twenty-five questions per book to be shared among the schools in the county. Also included were interested teachers and teacher assistants in these middle schools. Questions were typed in a certain format, and sets of copies were made for each school. These copies were sent to me, and I distributed them in late winter to all the schools who had participated.

On the student level, the whole Battle of the Books idea was introduced to my media classes by playing a simulation game using fairy tale questions and answers just as Gwen Jackson had done at her workshop. The students loved the idea. The list of books was laminated and placed above a bookshelf where copies of the books were kept. Lists were available for students, also. Many teachers added these books to any recommended reading lists they already had in place.

The students started reading. A sign-up notebook was made available for record keeping. Then the pressure was on me to start reading. My intention was to book talk each of the books to all classes. I finished in February with a lot of help from my friends — fellow teachers, assistants, and even a few students!

I even persuaded an interpreter for a hearing-impaired student to be an assistant coach. Linda Miller was always asking for good books to read, so naturally I began recommending those on the Battle of the Books list. In her job as interpreter, whenever her student was taking a test or working at his seat, she was able to read a book rather than just sit. She has been a most enthusiastic

asset for our school team.

Student reading continued. In February I sent a letter to each student who had signed up in the recording notebook. All were invited to meet together each week during our club activity period. The program was explained further, and we began using the practice questions. Students were urged to read as many of the books as possible, and individual tallies were made each week. The approximately forty students were excited and motivated!

The next question was how to decide on a team of twelve members, knowing that only six could participate at one time. There were no logical divisions of class teams or natural groupings. We continued practicing, and all interested students took a quiz on the books. Results from oral questions, number of books read, and the quiz determined the top twelve participants in mid-March. A demonstration of several rounds of questions was presented to all the sixth grade language arts classes in an assembly, with our team members playing against each other. The language arts teachers were impressed with the knowledge and enthusiasm of the team members.

Many of the team members continued to read in the three weeks before the county competition. It was determined that each of the team members would participate in at least one round of questions; however, those who had read and retained the most information would be allowed to compete if our team made it to the final round.

It was wonderful to see the positive self-image development in individual students. One eighth grade media helper decided he was going to be on the team from the beginning of the school year, and he worked consistently all year to read all twenty-four books on the list. One seventh grader became interested very late and read about half the books, but he retained details amazingly well. A couple of students who were shy and unassertive developed more self-confidence. Several students saw an opportunity for themselves to succeed at an extracurricular activity. They would even be recognized at Awards Day at the end of the school year! The program was an upbeat image-booster to reading itself and to all involved!

The day of the competition purposefully fell in the middle of National Library Week. Promptly at 9:00 A.M., an enthusiastic group assembled in a conference room at the Pitt County Schools office building. In addition to the teams and coaches, the assembly included family of team members, county office personnel, and other invited guests. The students were nervous and excited, but they were also well prepared. The spirit of competition was keen, keeping everyone on the edge of their seats right down to the last round.

All of the planning, reading and hard work was worthwhile. Those who participated caught the enthusiasm. Many people were involved, willing to help and giving of their time and talents. From our professional-looking programs and scoreboard

to our volunteer moderator, timekeepers, and scorekeepers; from the donated refreshments and the donated plaque for the Pitt County winner to the excellent publicity and videotaping, the logistics of the competition were very well-coordinated. Everyone involved came through with their designated responsibilities. Several middle school librarians observed the competition; hopefully, they will be a part of the action next year!

For my own part, I tried to keep in mind the overall philosophic objectives of Battle of the Books. Reading at the middle school level *was* encouraged. Students were exposed to quality literature, classical as well as modern. This exposure to a wide variety of reading choices broadened the knowledge base and awareness of the world for these students. In addition, students worked together as a team, forming new relationships and learning cooperative skills.

Achievement of these goals is evidenced by the following comments of a parent to the editor of *The Daily Reflector*:

[Battle of the Books is] a most impressive and reassuring demonstration that good things are still happening in the public schools.... The material these children had mastered represents the best in classic and contemporary American literature ... I am very grateful for this kind of forum, in which children are rewarded and recognized for intellectual accomplishments. Our schools should encourage more low-cost, high-return programs like the Battle of the Books, History Day, and the Geography Bee in which students are allowed to experience team competition, display individual achievement, and inspire school spirit in a field of endeavor other than athletics.²

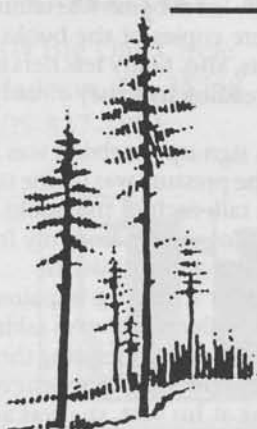
Coincidentally, the theme for National Library Week for 1991 was "Read, Succeed." Each of the approximately fifty students who participated in the Battle of the Books in Pitt County exemplified success. All who participated were winners; there were no losers. Our team was especially proud to place second in this worthwhile competition.

Was the outcome worth all the effort put into the event? The morning after the competition, an excited sixth grade class came to the media center asking, "Do you have the book list for Battle of the Books for next year?" What a pleasure it was to have that list ready to hand out! The 1992 Battle of the Books reading list is already available, as is the manual which tells you how to get started, from your regional media coordinator or from the Battle of the Books Committee of the NCASL.

References

¹Battle of the Books Committee, NCASL, *Battle of the Books Regional Manual*, page 2.

²Franceine Rees, "Don't Forget Successes," *The Daily Reflector*, April 23, 1991, page A-4.



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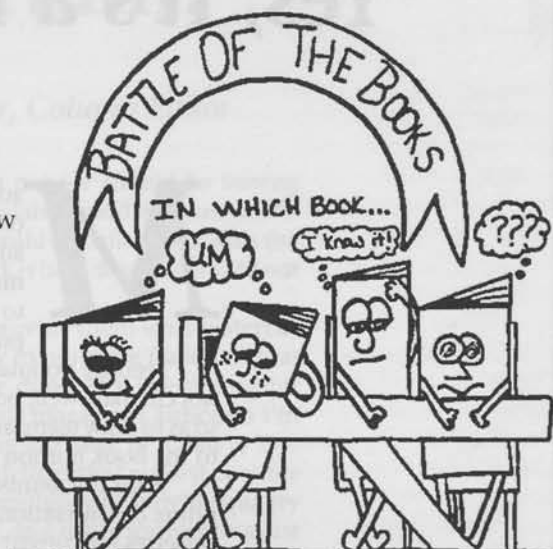
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NCASL Battle of the Books 1992 Booklist

Author	Title	Publisher
Alcott, Louisa M.	<i>Little Women</i>	Little, Brown
Banks, Lynn Reid	<i>Indian in the Cupboard</i>	Avon
Bauer, Marion	<i>On My Honor</i>	Clarion
Burnett, Frances	<i>Secret Garden</i>	Lippincott
Cooney, Caroline	<i>The Face on the Milk Carton</i>	Bantam
Frank, Anne	<i>Diary of a Young Girl</i>	Doubleday
George, Jean C.	<i>My Side of the Mountain</i>	Dutton
Greene, Bette	<i>Summer of My German Soldier</i>	Dial
Hamilton, Virginia	<i>Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush</i>	Philomel
Konigsburg, E. L.	<i>From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler</i>	Atheneum
L'Engle, Madeline	<i>A Wrinkle in Time</i>	Farrar
Lewis, C. S.	<i>The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe</i>	Macmillan
London, Jack	<i>The Call of the Wild</i>	Macmillan
Merrill, Jean	<i>The Pushcart War</i>	Harper & Row
Newman, Robert	<i>The Case of the Baker Street Irregular</i>	Atheneum
Newton, Suzanne	<i>I Will Call It Georgie's Blues</i>	Viking
Paterson, Katherine	<i>The Great Gilly Hopkins</i>	Crowell
Paulsen, Gary	<i>Dogsong</i>	Bradbury
Peck, Richard	<i>Remembering the Good Times</i>	Delacorte
Speare, Elizabeth	<i>The Sign of the Beaver</i>	Houghton
Spinelli, Jerry	<i>Maniac Magee</i>	Little
Stevenson, Robert L.	<i>Treasure Island</i>	Scribners
Taylor, Mildred	<i>Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry</i>	Dial
Voigt, Cynthia	<i>Izzy, Willy-Nilly</i>	Fawcett



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With the exception of *The Reader's Adviser* and *The Reader's Catalog*, reference books tend to cite chiefly historical works. For materials about contemporary activities, both descriptive and prescriptive, take a look at "witchcraft" and "satanism" in the *Subject Guide to Books in Print*¹⁰. Although you can't always judge a book by its cover, particularly when you can't see it, you can find a few clues in its title. If you're looking for prescriptive (how to do it) books, words such as "handbook" and "workbook" are excellent clues. Another thing to notice is the name of the publisher. Publishers' names, such as "Magickal Child" and "KABEL Publications" under "witchcraft," and "Hells Kitchen" and "Feral House" under "satanism," suggest presses specializing in, and probably espousing, their subject matter. Publishers' names, such as "Good News," "Crossroads Ministries," and "Glory Ministries" under "satanism" suggest presses with a different point of view. You may also find other publishers with less colorful names, such as "Carol Pub Group," who publish witchcraft-related materials.

Before ordering any books from presses with which you are not familiar, send away for their catalogs. Not only will you be able to find out just what they are selling, you will also have their backlist. As in *Books in Print*, the reading level is sometimes given in parentheses, a handy guide when looking for YA-level materials.

After looking through reference books and *BIP*, look up the titles you have chosen in the appropriate year of *Book Review Digest*¹¹. Double-check in the subject index under "witchcraft" and "satanism" for any books you may have missed. Not every

book worth buying makes it into the mainstream review media, however. This is particularly true for small, specialty presses or for books on controversial subjects. Thus the only description that you will find of some materials will be in their publisher's catalog, a resource that may not be objective, but can certainly be revealing. Remember to find out your vendor's returns policy before ordering anything you're not sure of.

Selecting materials on witchcraft and satanism is no different from selecting materials for any other subject. Define your collection needs; know your access policy; investigate the subject; and turn to standard reference tools. Listed on page 84 is an annotated bibliography of titles selected from the sources cited. Remember: look before you leap.

References

¹*Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1987), 15:415-28.

²*Encyclopedia of Religion*, 417.

³*Man, Myth, and Magic: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology, Religion, and the Unknown*, ed. Richard Cavendish (New York: Marshall Cavendish Ltd., 1985), 9:2477-78.

⁴*World Book Encyclopedia* (Chicago: World Book Inc. 1989), 21:373-75.

⁵*Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1986), 25:92-97.

⁶*Junior High School Library Catalog* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1990).

⁷*Senior High School Library Catalog* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1988).

⁸*The Reader's Adviser* (New York and London: R. R. Bowker Co., 1988), vol. 4.

⁹*The Reader's Catalog*, ed. Geoffrey O'Brien (New York: The Reader's Catalog, Inc., 1989).

¹⁰*Subject Guide to Books in Print* (New York: R. R. Bowker Co., 1990-91).

¹¹*Book Review Digest* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1990).