



"A *whole* novel?!"

By Sarah Richards (2007)
Westminster, CO

I'm a second year high school English teacher, so I was extremely happy to have the opportunity to teach a creative writing class this year. Most new teachers don't get that kind of luxury. As I was planning my classes, I remembered hearing about something called NaNoWriMo and decided that would be our unit for November. I didn't really know what I was getting into, but the experience taught me and my students a lot—especially about writing, for my students, and about *teaching* writing, for me.

I had been trying for the two months prior trying to impress upon my students the importance of letting all the words tumble out for your bad first draft, and then the equal importance of revising and crafting your work. Some of them were getting it, but a lot weren't. They felt that they should have perfectly-formed prose and poetry the first time it emerged from their pens. When I told them what we had to do for NaNoWriMo, about half of them looked excited and the other half looked like I had just told them that we would be skydiving the next day.

"A *whole* novel?!" many of them exclaimed.

"Yes," I replied, with as much poise as I could muster. "You will write a whole novel in a month."

"In a *month*?!"

It was rough going at first, but they plowed right on through. We spent most of our time in class just writing. I discovered Word Wars at the end of Week 2, and that helped many word counts rise. Instead of complaining every day, they started to enjoy it. Once I had a short lesson planned for the beginning of the day, and they didn't want to do it. "Can't we just *write*?" they asked me. I suppressed my grin (can't show any weakness in front of teenagers, you know) and told them, "Yes. Please do." I threw the lessons out and we just wrote. Even if it was bad. And even though a lot of their writing was terrible, it also had that shine that new writing has when it's fresh from a young writer's mind, uninhibited by self-doubt and a needy perfectionism. Finally, they were just writing.

Most teachers of writing know that this isn't all that writing is about. Craft is a huge, and possibly harder, part. But you can't craft if you don't have the rough, ugly slab of meat in the first place.

My final for the class? They have to write a book. Most of them, here in December, feel confident about it, knowing that even if they didn't finish their NaNoWriMo novel (and only 12% of my class did), they have a good chunk to work with already. And they all said they learned more about themselves as writers. Wow. Imagine that. A kid learning in school! Well, it's harder than it looks, but NaNoWriMo made it accessible and fun—and a great weight has been lifted from this teacher's shoulders!