HIDDEN GEMS: Looking at the Beauty and Brilliance in Student Writing and Knowing How to Name What is There the Way Writers and Artists Might

Six Places to Learn How to Name the Gems in Student Writing

* Your Own Reading
* Reading groups that meet to discuss literature
* Your Own Writing
* Writing classes in poetry, fiction, journalism, playwriting…
* Writing groups that meet to discuss members’ work
* Book reviews, literary criticism, blurbs on fronts and backs of books

A PROTOCOL FOR READING TEXTS (Published Texts and Student Texts)

1.) Respond initially to what this text says to you. (what it reminds you of in your own life; what it makes you think/wonder about…; what surprises you; what pleases you aesthetically).

2.) Point to a place where you think the writing is “good.” A place that you might wish you had written yourself!

3.) Describe (try not to label with Literary Terms) what the writer is doing.

NEW WAYS TO NAME and TEACH…

VOICE

1.) Your writing voice is so comfortable—when I read it, it’s like you are sitting with me at the kitchen table, keeping me company.

2.) Your writing voice is edgy and jumpy—I couldn’t even put your piece down! I can almost hear the narrator of a cops and robbers kind of movie when I read your piece.
3.) Your writing voice has a melancholy feel to it, as if you are writing in front of a window on a grey, rainy day.

**VOCABULARY or WORD CHOICE**

1.) Your words make me want to get up and dance! They’re all bouncy and jivey and sizzling hot.

2.) Sometimes you use the most unusual words, they pop right out of the story, like the last popcorn kernel that pops open and surprises you.

3.) Your words sound so quiet and soothing, like a lullaby.

**ORGANIZATION**

1.) Your piece has momentum. The music and rhythm of your sentences carries me through so that I never get bored or distracted.

2.) The architecture of your piece is so thoughtful of the reader! You used to have a kind of spindly little building that might have fallen over. But now you have made it grand and solid. You’ve added many floors and put in these elevators (transitions) that help us move more easily.

3.) The tension in your piece is palpable and sensuous. I feel my stomach drop right here, I’m so nervous…scared…anxious…angry…for the character.

“**GOOD” WRITING OFTEN CONTAINS THESE QUALITIES and CAN BE THOUGHT OF AS LINES OF GROWTH for INDIVIDUAL WRITERS:**

---Honesty
---Wide-awakeness to the world
---Feeling of discovery, a freshness
---Humor
---Unusual formulations “not the way to say it” (Milan Kundera)
---Clear thinking
---Multiple perspectives, empathy
--Metaphor, simile, extended metaphor
--Strong visual, aural, tactile images
--Evokes place
--Music in sentences (prose) or lines (poetry)
--Purposeful repetition
--Sense of storytelling
--Complicated character(s)
--Build up of tension (“Slowing down the hot spot.” Ralph Fletcher)
--Developed narrative scenes where characters move, talk, and where something happens to move the plot forward
--An ear for the way people talk
--Control of TIME
--Sense of mystery, of opening questions that have no immediate answers
--Deep, sophisticated, perhaps unorthodox ideas
--Respect for Reader (understands and anticipates readers’ questions & needs)
--Window on the Writer: (unique personality, purpose, intelligence, humor)
--Genre Knowledge
--Fluency of ideas and language
--Control of TONE
   (sarcastic, morose, ironic, “macho,” light, urgent, languorous, elegant, violent, tender…)
--Control of LANGUAGE
   (vibrant, colorful, playful, lyrical, tentative, spare, old-fashioned, searing…)

A Brief Bibliography of Books that Discuss the Craft of Writing
Bomer, Katherine. Writing a Life: Teaching Memoir to Shape Meaning, Sharpen Insight, and Triumph Over Tests. & The Journey is Everything: Teaching Essays that Students Want to Write, for People Who Want to Read Them.
Calkins, Lucy, et. al. Units of Study in Writing, 3-5.
Heard, Georgia. For the Good of the Earth and Sun. (Poetry)
Fletcher, Ralph. LIVE Writing: Breathing Life Into Your Words. & A Writer’s Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within You.
Lindner, Rozlyn. The Big Book of Details.
Portalupi, JoAnn & Ralph Fletcher. Teaching Qualities of Writing.
Ray, Katie. Wonderous Words.
Giff, Patricia Reilly. Write Up a Storm with the Polk Street School.