

Reading aloud: Moments of Grace

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [June 17, 1998](#) issue

The name of the ship on which Joseph Cinque and his fellow slaves rebelled against their captors was *Amistad*, which is the Spanish word for “friendship.” I had seen the movie and the opera, but it wasn’t until I read the new children’s book *Amistad Rising* that I came across this bit of information, which adds an ironic touch to the story of the slaves whose quest for freedom was eventually affirmed by the American legal system. Cinque’s name, by the way (another piece of information available in this book), was not really Cinque--the name his Spanish captors gave him--but Singe.

Singe, or Cinque, was from the Mende tribe in Sierra Leone, West Africa. Veronica Chambers’s book about him would be a good “read aloud” book for families to share this summer. From what I know of third- and fourth-graders, I believe it will hold their interest. It has a plot with dark moments and a courageous hero.

Amistad Rising has, as a story should, a compelling opening: “Stand here with me on the shores of New London, Connecticut. Feel the cool breeze of the Atlantic Ocean on your face. Feel the dirt beneath your feet; this land is far from ordinary. It was here, upon this very spot, that Joseph Cinque set foot in America, bringing with him a group of renegade slaves and leaving his mark on history.

“This is a story about the changing winds of fortune, about a man who was born free, was made a slave, and battled nations to be free again. It is a true story. And like so many stories, it begins not on land, but at sea.”

Amistad Rising includes large, colorful illustrations by Paul Lee that children will want to study. Still missing, unfortunately, as is the case with other renderings of the *Amistad* story, is any reference to the important role the Christian faith played for the abolitionists who took up Cinque’s cause, supported his legal struggle, found a Mende translator for him and eventually arranged for his passage home to Africa after the Supreme Court ruled in his favor. In fact, the abolitionists who helped Cinque were the founding figures of the United Church of Christ.

Such details can be filled in by parents. Reading this book aloud to one's family, or even to oneself, is a good way to absorb the power of the written word and also to discover some of the darker and brighter spots in American history.

I was reminded recently of the importance of reading aloud when John Irving came to town to read from his new novel *A Widow for a Year*. Asked about his writing method, Irving confessed that he doesn't feel he has actually completed a page until he is satisfied with how it sounds when read aloud. The section he chose for his Chicago audience happened to be one I had just finished reading, so I was familiar enough with it to realize that in the reading he deleted one sentence. I assume he thought it needed editing (too clinical, would be my guess), which suggests that Irving continues to polish his work even as he reads the published product.

Irving said that when he first began as a novelist--*The World According to Garp* was his first major success--he was an English teacher and wrestling coach. These two day jobs left him limited time for writing. Now that he no longer needs outside work--*A Prayer for Owen Meany*, *The Hotel New Hampshire* and *A Son of the Circus*, among other novels, have left him more than adequately compensated--Irving says he follows a discipline of writing at least a page a day, sometimes two or three pages, and on very rare occasions, ten pages.

Irving is such a compelling story-teller that it is hard not to rush through *A Widow for a Year* to discover just how he will bring closure to the complex and interwoven story of Ruth Cole, a four-year-old girl whose mother, Marion, deserts her because she is afraid to risk loving and losing her child. (Two of Marion's older children were killed in an automobile crash.) The fragility of love is a theme to which Irving constantly returns; indeed, his characters can be divided between those few who are willing to risk becoming vulnerable in loving others and those who are so fearful of love that they close themselves away from authentic human connection.

I am rereading--at times aloud--some of Irving's earlier novels, absorbing them almost as poetry, sometimes a page at a time, in order to savor the careful manner in which he unfolds, through his trademark attention to factual details, poignant stories of endearing, eccentric characters like Owen Meany (whose voice sounds like the squeal of a mouse) and Dr. Farrokh Daruwalla, who conducts research on dwarfs in India in *A Son of the Circus*.

Readers of Irving will want to listen for those unexpected and often unnoticed moments of grace that his characters experience, moments that illumine and empower when one least expects them to do so. Irving also enjoys word play, such as in the scene in *The Hotel New Hampshire* in which a dog named Hope survives a shipwreck, allowing Irving to remind his readers that “Hope floats.”

Through carefully crafted plots, Irving makes connections that resonate. In *A Widow for a Year*, he connects the novel’s opening and closing scenes (more than 500 pages apart) with a sentence so ingenuous and satisfying that it would be downright sinful to give it away.

In an interview, Irving identified a passage in *A Widow for a Year* that summarizes “what this story’s about.” Ruth Cole, the novelist in the story, reflects: “Ruth knew she’d been lucky. My next book should be about fortune, she thought: about how fortune and misfortune were unequally distributed, if not at birth, then in the course of circumstances beyond our control; and in the seemingly random pattern of colliding events--the people we meet, when we meet them, and if or when these important people might chance to meet someone else. Ruth had only a little misfortune. Why was it that her mother had such a lot?”

It helps to know, as Irving told his Chicago audience, that he never starts a novel without having a clear vision of its final pages. He says he must know precisely how the book will end in order to construct his narrative. Some writers insist that they are guided by the characters, who sometimes take over the story from them. There is something godlike in Irving’s novels; he knows how the story will end, he just doesn’t know how the specific “colliding events” will interact. What he does know, however, is that these events will reach the ending he already has clearly in mind.

And this, Irving seems to be saying, is also true in life. We never know which “colliding events” to expect on our journey. But when we arrive at the end of our personal stories, we will discover that, all along, we have been in the hands of the author of the story.