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Editors’ Note

Dear Wisconsin English Journal,  

This issue of the Journal is filled with materials for your students on multicultural literature and viewing the world through nonexist language. We’ve included guidelines for making good reading and writing selections. We also included reviews including teaching ideas and those of the outside experiences. We’ve been pleased with the Journal. We’re pleased with the Journal. We’re pleased with the Journal. We’re pleased with the Journal.

We’ve been pleased with the Journal. We’re pleased with the Journal. We’re pleased with the Journal. We’re pleased with the Journal.

In the spring issue, we’ll be discussing the processes and the production of the Journal in detail. We’ll be discussing the production of the Journal in detail. We’ll be discussing the production of the Journal in detail. We’ll be discussing the production of the Journal in detail.

Furthermore, if you have insights and ideas from the philosophies, strategies, and practices of those under our care, please contribute to our discussion by sending us letters of praise, stories, or ideas that might be shared with our readers. We look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes,

Your Editors
Editors’ Note

Dear Wisconsin English Journal Readers:

This issue of the journal features articles on selecting good reading materials for your students. Some of the pieces, such as Julie Monroe’s on multicultural literature and Daryl Salader’s on young adult fiction, give overall guidelines for making good choices within a specific genre. Some, like James Reichenberger’s on John Steinbeck, Connie Jonett’s on Shirley Jackson, and Carolyn Majak’s on Jacqueline Woodson give personal and critical reasons for reading a particular author. Bill Martin’s “Poetry Wars” makes a case for helping students “get into” poetry by choosing accessible works and employing comfortable discussion strategies. A variety of teachers have contributed short reviews including teaching strategies on their favorite individual classroom selections. We also include the report of the NCTE Commission on Literature; while the ideas here do not constitute official positions of NCTE or unanimous opinions of the Commission, they do offer challenging, informed points of view.

We’ve been pleased that many of you seem to be reading and enjoying the Journal. We’re pleased to receive contributions of essays and ideas from you–keep them coming! We’d also be pleased to hear from you in other venues: send us letters of praise, critique, or suggestion; give us suggestions for topics for future issues; respond to the pieces that you read here. Say hello to us when you see us in Milwaukee!

CALL FOR PAPERS
Spring 2001

In the spring issue, we’d like the opportunity to show off both the processes and the products of writing classrooms that work. If you’ve got writing assignments, writing strategies, writing philosophies, revision motivators, responding practices, and/or assessment models or strategies that help your students to produce work that you’re happy to get from them, share these with us. If you have insights about how or why to change our approaches to writing to meet changing expectations of the “real world,” share those with us. If you’ve got stories of how you changed reluctant writers into enthusiastic ones, awkward writers into graceful ones, or constricted writers into fluid ones, share those.

Furthermore, if you have some sample student work that has resulted from the philosophies, strategies, and pedagogies you embrace, send those along as well. But do include written permission from the students (and the parents of those under eighteen). We’ll be limited in the amount of space we can give to student writing, but we’d be pleased to display how good teaching practices result in great student writing.
Articles on these and related questions may be submitted to Ruth Wood at UW-River Falls, KFA 239, River Falls, WI 54022; fax 715-425-0657. If your article is accepted for publication, you will be asked to mail the editors a disk in Word or WordPerfect along with a final edited hard copy.


Fall 2001

Reading instruction seems to be increasingly driven by test scores, politicians are calling for reform in order to boost those scores, and teachers are often caught in the middle. What do you think? Is there a literacy crisis in this country? Are scores on standardized group assessments the best measure of our nation’s literacy? How do you teach reading? How do you assess the effectiveness of your instruction? In the Fall 2001 issue of the Journal, we will consider the nature of reading and reading instruction. Please consider making a contribution.


Ruth Wood and Anne D’Antonio Stinson, Editors

Selecting Multicultural Themes

Julie Monteith

America is in the midst of a demographic shift in which the present white European majority will be replaced approximately fifty years from now by persons from a variety of different cultures and races (Hurley, 1996; Moore, 1995). Multicultural classrooms celebrate the differences among people, and the settings are rich with stories and voices that are unique. It is possible to integrate multicultural themes into daily life experiences in the classroom. Julie Monteith is an example of a teacher who uses multicultural themes and perspectives to make her classroom a safe and effective place for all students.

Monteith’s classroom is characterized by a mix of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. She believes that reading and writing are essential parts of the learning process.

In selecting multicultural themes, Monteith considers the stories and perspectives that will best reflect the diversity of her students. She carefully selects literature that represents a wide range of cultures and experiences.

Monteith also emphasizes the importance of letting students learn about and explore different cultures. She believes that understanding and appreciating diversity is essential for building a strong and inclusive community. She encourages her students to ask questions and engage in meaningful discussions about their lives and experiences.

In conclusion, Julie Monteith’s approach to selecting multicultural themes is a model for other teachers. She demonstrates that by incorporating diversity and perspective-taking skills into the classroom, teachers can create a learning environment that is inclusive and respectful of all cultures. Through her commitment to multicultural education, Monteith is contributing to the growth and understanding of her students and the broader community.
Selecting Multicultural Literature

Julie Monroe, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

America is increasingly becoming a kaleidoscope of cultures. In approximately fifty years, combined minorities are expected to surpass the present white European-American majority (Bishop, as cited in Diamond & Moore, 1995). Multicultural literature is used in classrooms to acknowledge different cultures and ethnic groups and to meet the needs of all children. Implications for the classroom include developing harmony and understanding, perspective-taking skills, positive self-esteem, a sense of community, increased academic skill, appreciation of our pluralistic society, and comfort with assimilation. So how do teachers select appropriate multicultural literature to aid us in celebrating our diverse nation?

All good books have plots that interest and captivate their readers. The themes are meritorious but not preachy, the characterizations are well-developed, and the settings are richly described. In addition to these general guidelines there are more specific suggestions for multicultural literature.

Junko Yokota (1993) emphasizes that cultural accuracy is of utmost importance. This includes cultural accuracy of the broader picture as well as in the small details. Will the reader get the desired impression? Yokota cites Family Pictures (Garza, 1990) as being so authentic that many Mexican Americans say this could be their own family’s album. On the other hand, if accurate details are mixed with inaccurate ones, as in The Dwarf Giant (Lobel, 1991), quality evaporates. Rich cultural details should enhance and harmonize with the story rather than appear tacked on. For example, in Paul Curtis’s Bud, Not Buddy (1999) the daily life of one of the Hoovervilles during the Depression is an essential part of the book.

Yokota believes good multicultural literature also contains authentic dialogue and relationships. As in Monster (Myers, 1999), the dialogue and relationships between the characters are suspenseful, yet authentic. Yokota acknowledges that in Pacific Crossing, Gary Soto (1992) is able to demonstrate authenticity of both dialogue and relationships for Mexican-Americans and Japanese. On the other hand, Secret City, U.S.A. (Holman, 1990) has omissions of family, despite the fact that family is very important in Latino cultures. “The multicultural point seems to be that the story is of generic non-Caucasians” (160).

Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale (1992) value texts that are authentic, too. These authors compiled criteria for books about American Indians. In addition to the criteria discussed above, they emphasize that every nation has its own name and often several divisions within that nation. The Birchbark House (Erdrich, 1999) furnishes daily details of an Ojibwa girl’s life on Madeline Island. The book refers to the Ojibwa, rather than over-generalizing by calling the ethnic
group Native Americans or American Indians. Often times, literature oversimplifies and generalizes Native cultures rather than giving each nation their own culture, beliefs, dress, and language. Authors and illustrators having intimate knowledge of the Native people can write intelligently, sensitively, and without ethnocentrism. Cornelia Cornelissen’s Soft Rain: A Story of the Cherokee Trail of Tears (1998) is a captivating fiction supplied with specific cultural details and much dialogue written from a little girl’s point of view. The author’s great-great grandfather survived the Cherokee Removal when he was a small boy, hence, the inside knowledge.

Seale and Slapin ask the questions: Are the People respected? Would there be anything in a book to embarrass or hurt a Native American student? Are there stereotypes, loaded words, or racist adjectives? Native people are individuals in complex societies, not all looking alike as whites with brown faces. The roles of women and elders are also important.

Similarly, Judy M. Washburn (1997) provides evaluation criteria for reviewing booklists. She says stereotypes in print as well as in illustrations affect children's understanding of a culture. Good multicultural books show varied family life and lifestyles, while pictures show individuality for accuracy. Tallchief: America’s Prima Ballerina (Tallchief, 1999) is an interesting autobiography explaining how music and ballet influenced an Osage Indian girl’s life.

Washburn prefers that the present day culture be examined, with the emphasis on cultural groups in America today. There are several recent books dealing with bicultural topics. Remix: Conversations with Immigrant Teenagers (Marina Budhos, 1999) outlines cultural differences for several teens, while When This World Was New (D.H. Figueroa, 1999) for younger readers, demonstrates the fears and excitement of a new country, along with experiencing snow for the first time. Washburn feels that relevant stories are most interesting. Teachers might also consider the publication date. With time, attitudes change. Older books often contain distorted stereotypes. In Joseph Bruchac’s autobiography, Seeing the Circle (1999), he writes of his childhood and his present-day life as an Abenaki Indian. He includes many photographs to aid his story. Night Golf (Miller, 1999), a picture book that can easily be used with older students, traces the history of African-Americans in golf. Tiger Woods’s accomplishments are noted at the end of the book.

In addition to the previous criteria, Sandra Stotsky (1994), of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, suggests teachers take into consideration the advice of a local committee of parents, teachers, and possibly civic and political organizations; multicultural literature should reflect a diverse range of ethnic groups and opinions, and regional and local ethnic composition can influence selection of such books. It is logical that in Alaska, there may be an emphasis on the Inuit people, while in certain Wisconsin cities The Whispering Cloth (Shea, 1995) may be included to illustrate the Cambodian refugee struggle.

Stotsky also proposes that books about a few different ethnic groups be introduced each year. She mentions religious groups such as the Amish (An Amish Year, 2000, and An Amish Christmas, 1996, both by Richard Ammon) and the Shakers (A Day No Pigs Would Die, 1972, and A Part of the Sky, 1994, both

by Robert Newton Peck) or where moral codes are not necessarily hostie. Stotsky favors a balanced approach to the various European groups of people in this country that reflect what the story implies.

Another criterion is the inclusion of both male and female characters from each ethnic and racial group, a principle favored in Patricia Hubbell’s Maggie’s America (1990) about a Mexican family whose children’s often-held positions offsets their parent families in the stories.

Stotsky notes that Native Americans have their own cultural heritages, without an overemphasis on the American frontier. Farewell to Manzanar (1949) by John Tateishi (30). Exploitation.

Another criterion is the treatment of parents in the story. Some criteria from several sources that emphasize the importance of family, reflections, criticism, and misgivings. A核算, The Wind (Stampf & Ellington, 1997) is a touching girl’s pre-arranged marriage that shows restrictions on women in their own culture and the consequences. The childhood recollection of Robert Coles Freedom’s Children.

While the educators move toward multiculturalism, they must be prepared to break down stereotypes, present pluralistic and inclusive stories, and respect the attitudes and values (Ammon & Samuda, 1986).

The Upbringing of Children is celebrated in our society; however, it is crucial to be aware of multicultural literature and the stereotypes, pro-

1Editor’s note: In this quote, the last word is unclear.
by Robert Newton Peck). She stresses that teachers should avoid romanticizing Native cultures. Some nations lived harmoniously with others while some were direly hostile. Stotsky states that “Literary texts by and/or about members of indigenous groups in this country deserve a regular place in our curriculum, but not necessarily at every grade level and not to the exclusion of works about the various European ethnic groups, whose members constitute a far larger number of people in this country” (29). Furthermore, educators need to carefully check what the story implies; the plot and theme should not have a hidden meaning.

Another point Stotsky considers important is including literature where both male and female characters have contrasting positive and negative qualities or where moral confusion is addressed. This happens across all ethnic, religious, and racial groups. She cites *The Great Gatsby*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Harriet Tubman: Conductor of the Underground Railroad*, and *The Bad Seed*. She favors a balanced selection, so as not to present only one side of a culture. *Maggie’s American Dream* (Corner, 1989) which is about a two-parent, black family whose children experience racial discrimination but achieve professional positions offsets *The Women of Brewster Place* (Naylor, 1983), a story of single-parent families in a housing project.

Stotsky also values a curriculum that includes works where “white” Americans have the role of civic-minded individuals, as well as bigoted individuals, without an overdose of “white guilt literature . . . like *Ceremony* (Silko, 1986), *Farewell to Manzanar* (Houston, 1999) and *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison, 1993)” (30). Exploitation may cause a negative reaction toward ethnic groups.

Another professor, Yvonne Siu-Ruyun (1996) compiled a lengthy list of criteria from several sources. In addition to those formerly mentioned, she emphasizes the in-depth treatment of cultural issues and selections that invite reflections, critical analysis and response. For example, *Shabamu, Daughter of the Wind* (Staples, 1989) presents the conflicts of an eleven-year-old nomadic girl’s pre-arranged marriage, a harsh life in the Cholistan Desert of Pakistan, restrictions on women, and family obligations. Readers naturally look at their own culture and values when reading such books. The stunning account of childhood recollections experienced during the Civil Rights Movement in *Freedom’s Children* (Levine, 1963) also provides a floor for value clarification.

While there are various selection criteria for multicultural literature, all of the educators mentioned agree that the use of quality multicultural literature aims to break down stereotypes and promote an understanding of all people in this pluralistic and increasingly global society. The content in books does influence the attitudes and values of students, both about themselves and others (Kong & Samuda, 1986).

The United States is a mosaic of cultures. Our diversity can be celebrated in our schools through quality literature. Whatever criteria are used for multicultural literature, we can work to obtain harmony through elimination of stereotypes, promote understanding, develop perspective-taking skills, increase

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1 Editor’s note: Peck’s books have been criticized for misrepresenting Shaker practices.
students' self-esteem and academic performance, and encourage families and communities to appreciate one another. If our pluralism is used properly, it can be an asset.

References


Using Young Adult Literature in the Classroom
Daryl Saladar, Beloit Memorial High School

“Mr. Saladar, I’m going to write a book that makes absolutely no sense and make lots of money off of it,” said a Freshman Accelerated student in reference to Romeo and Juliet. This sentiment clearly seems to resonate among high school students who struggle through the academic rigors of a fine-tuned English curriculum. They find themselves drowning in a vortex of language they cannot understand. Surrounded by the’s and thou’s, an early form of their own language holds them at bay from comprehending mere plot. Consequently, they miss out on the bigger picture and then feel that they could not possibly relate to characters who may be “star-crossed lovers.” The teachers, meanwhile, already having been immersed in Shakespearian language, culture, and history (not to mention the countless times they have already taught the unit), question the intelligence and perseverance of today’s generation. A chasm is thus created between the teacher and student and, more importantly, between the student and the text.

Since change occurs from technology to values, it most certainly exists in the realm of literature. Donald R. Gallo writes:

> Because many of our students don’t have the same tastes and attitudes (not to mention experiences, world views, and genetic predispositions), as we had and have, if we hope to develop any interest in reading in the majority of our students—who are not at all like us—we ought to use different pieces of literature than we read at their age. (Monseau and Salvner, 1992)

Based on this, a case can be made for using young adult literature in the classroom setting. No one truly wishes to challenge the use of timeless works, such as Romeo and Juliet, in the classroom. However, when it comes to reading, new material must be introduced in the curriculum to breathe reviving air into the school, teachers, and most obviously, the students.

Most people will say that they did not enjoy their English class because of the reading. They found it to be quite boring. In 1973, Arthea Reed completed a survey of 250 high school students and found that, "More than 75 percent of the students indicated a strong dislike for reading and claimed they saw no purpose in it" (Reed, 1994).

Young adult literature helps to pique interest in reading because teenagers are able to relate to the characters and their situations. Reading about a gang banger on the streets of Los Angeles, as in Always Running: La Vida Loca, students can identify with a young man who constantly skips school and eventually gets into trouble more than they can with Hester Prynne, who must wear the letter “A” to signify her starting point, for it grabs a

Because these novels and their plots and characters differ from more traditional texts, they bring in an unfamiliar tone and perspective and address issues of a standard English class.

On top of all this, Reed’s survey found that the percentage of graduates was lower for students in Reed’s sample than the national average of 30.4 percent, which was 4 to 40 percent.

Meeting Their Needs When

Critics often feel that the issues of a standard English class are a challenge for a traditional student who is learning about fate, for example, or the home life as in A Parrot I Missed, but this is not the case for these students, and this need must be addressed. We must think about whether their reading habits, literature does address these students when they are with at this stage in their lives.

To begin with, there is the problem of their behavior and their characteristics. They quadruple their sensitivity to loud music. They drive around in jeans and T-shirts, clothes that don’t even cover their backsides, and if they put on clothes they like and wear them as much at school and forget all about it.

While this stereotyping is not always true, it almost becomes a norm for some. Teenagers do not quite like what they do, but they will affect the world in which they live; they are confident and grown up in a way that only teenagers can do to but themselves. In other words, they must go through their teenage stage. So they go ahead, testing and trying on clothes, and discovering if they are of this generation. They belong to their social group just as we do.

Young adult literature helps these students begin to understand and accept who they are in their search for identity. The characters of similar age and background can relate easily, knowing that the author, who wrote is a fellow student in their high school, went through the same things as they are. So they can identify with characters who are involved in social issues and have the same problems and concerns.
wear the letter “A” to signify her sin. Young adult literature provides an excellent starting point, for it grasps their attention in a manner they can easily relate to.

Because these novels are patterned after the lives of adolescents, often their plots and characters mirror more closely our students’ lives than more traditional texts, which distance the reader because they occur in an unfamiliar time or setting or are written in a more formal style. (Reid and Stringer, 1997)

On top of all this, after young adult literature was introduced to the students in Reed’s survey, not only did the demand to read more novels increase, but standardized test scores increased, student writing improved, and the percentage of graduating seniors electing to go on to college increased from 4 to 40 percent.

Meeting Their Needs Where They Are

Critics often feel that young adult literature does not address the proper issues of a standard English class. They think this genre may lack the depth and challenge for a traditional or “real” English class (Reed, 1994). Students should be learning about fate, for example, through Oedipus Rex rather than a tough home life as in A Parrot in the Oven. Teenagers, however, struggle with who they are, and this need must first be addressed in their lives before they can even think about whether their lives are decided by fate or choice. Young adult literature does address the issue of growing up, which teenagers need to deal with at this stage in their lives.

To begin with, teenagers are definitely a different breed. They are loud and obnoxious. They question. They rebel. They break rules. They listen to loud music. They drive too fast. They watch too much television. They wear clothes that don’t even come close to fitting and then dye their hair various shades and pierce their bodies. On top of everything, they socialize way too much at school and forget the real reason why they are here.

While this stereotypical description of today’s teenager does hold some truth, it almost becomes somewhat of a necessary role for young people. Teenagers do not quite understand themselves and, more importantly, how they will affect the world in which they live. They would love to instantly be fully confident and grown up, have a job, be independent, and have no one to answer to but themselves. In order to get to that step of being all grown up, however, they must go through the grueling process of finding out exactly who they are. So they go ahead, testing and muckling up the waters at school to find out which group they belong to.

Young adult literature helps teenagers understand that they are not alone in their search for their identity. Different novels demonstrate how characters of similar ages and situations exist. People and teenagers feel more assured, knowing that someone else is in the same boat they are. In addition to her survey, Reed, a former high school teacher, tells of a bright student who felt isolated because it was socially unacceptable to be intelligent. Consequently, the student stopped handing in papers. This particular student became en-
grosed in the novel *Summer of My German Soldier*. The main character in this novel felt her own isolation because there were few Jews in her hometown (Reed, 1994). The bright student is able to identify with the protagonist and thus feel a sense of comfort. Young adult literature can fill a need for many students, reducing their feelings of isolation by telling a story that they can relate to, that sounds familiar enough to reassure them of their normality (Reid and Stringer, 1997).

**Taking on Modern Issues**

The final reason for using young adult literature in the classroom has to do with modern controversial issues, such as gang warfare, drug addiction, and homosexuality that tend to raise the neck hairs on school board members, parents and even some classroom teachers. Critics feel that reading about such material only encourages and reinforces these behaviors.

Certainly, it appears as if young people today are making some careless choices. One needs to look no further than the Littleton, Colorado incident for evidence of that. Suicide, furthermore, is the third leading cause of death for 15- to 19-year-olds (Kaywell, 1994). Teenage pregnancy, in addition, continues to creep through schools at an alarming rate. There must be some explanation for such irrationality. Fingers then point in all sorts of directions from lack of parental guidance to music to video games. The support structure of role models for teenagers no longer seems to exist, and the schools are having to carry the weight.

With the steady erosion of family, church, and neighborhood, which traditionally passed down information and moral guidelines about sex, drugs, and crime, we see a reactionary influence from parents, teachers, and even students, who urge schools to fill that gap (Reid and Stringer, 1997)

Teenagers need to understand the issues, even if they are controversial. In order for them to make better decisions, young people, now more than ever, need to deal with the problems that surround them and they need to do so in a context which they can easily understand.

In *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, Nathan McCall recollects his younger years as a street thug. In a specific incident, he addresses the dicey and graphic issue of gang rape, which he calls “trains.” Such a topic certainly throws up a red flag for a school board member. McCall, however, does not seek to glorify these demeaning acts. Rather, he condemns them quite strongly. In fact, Nathan McCall goes deeper into the issue of gang rape and relates it to race:  

> It wasn’t until I became an adult that I figured out how utterly confused we were. I realized that we thought we loved sisters but that we actually hated them. We hated them because they were black and we were black and, on some level much deeper than we realized, we hated the hell out of ourselves. (Mc Call, 1994)

Surely, the style of young adult literature may be more simple. Traditional teachers will also argue that it presents no challenge. However, as Gallo

**Classroom Implications**

Currently at Beloit, several new novels are being brought to light. One that has come under fire by the school board is *Makes Me Wanna Holler* by Luis Rodriguez. Board members, on the other hand, the Rodriguez novel is not a suitably deep one in particular. Perhaps another could have been chosen. However, the book for themselves and the public to evaluate, perhaps?

Reviews have praised the book for being rich and poetic, a work of culture and fearless, and an instant classic. The students are being asked for approval for next school year.

There has been a trend in Beloit High School to use more and more of the percent of graduating seniors who are trying to make English more relevant, doing this exactly for them.

First and foremost is the matter of choices. The majority of students at Beloit is a blue-collar town. They will enter the workforce after graduation. Not many will enter the world much sooner than the students currently in the English classes. The students need better lives for themselves.

Secondly, teachers believe that knowledge from the past can be gained through reading. "Literacy and reading are fundamental to the quality of life and the growth of the mind. (Reid and Stringer, 1997)"
previously stated, times have changed. Teenagers need to understand the controversial issues in order to make better decisions for themselves and the world they will soon impact. They cannot bother with the more complex themes until they learn about the issues they encounter on a daily basis. In addition, avoiding controversial issues will only heighten the problem:

To my mind, the banning of controversial young adult problem novels serves to reinforce a most immoral precept: turn your eyes away from any problem too disturbing, too culturally unacceptable for comfort, or potentially subversive in the issues and questions raised. The danger I see in the attempt to stifle such renegade voices is that we’ll foster a generation with a shrinking or atrophied ability to discern, to evaluate, perhaps even to question. (LeMieux, 1998)

Classroom Implications

Currently at Beloit Memorial High School, even more young adult novels are being brought into the classrooms. Of course, some have recently come under fire by the school board. Two of the novels that have been scrutinized are *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, by Nathan McCall and *Always Running* by Luis Rodriguez. Board members approved the novel by McCall. On the other hand, the Rodriguez novel was pulled from the selection due to pressure from one member in particular. That board member felt that a “more appropriate novel could have been chosen.” Several teachers and students, conversely, have read the book for themselves and found it extraordinary. Critics could not agree more: “Reviewers have praised the book as an absolutely unique work, richly literary and poetic, a work of enormous beauty, a forceful story of triumph, as fierce and fearless, and an instant classic” (Day, 1997). *Always Running* will be resubmitted for approval for next school year.

There has been quite a push within the past few years at Beloit Memorial High School to use more young adult literature in the classroom. Only thirty percent of graduating seniors go on to college, so the English Department is trying to make English more practical and “down to earth.” The teachers are doing this exactly for the reasons previously discussed in this paper.

First and foremost, the teachers want their students to make better choices. The majority of the students will not be going on to higher education. Beloit is a blue-collar town, so a great number of students will go right into the workforce after graduation. That is fine. Because they will be a part of the real world much sooner than the minority who do go to college, teachers want them to be equipped with the ability to think before they act. The young adult novels currently in the English curriculum all deal with protagonists who have made better lives for themselves by making wiser decisions.

Secondly, teachers want to foster a healthy reading lifestyle. They do believe that knowledge is power, and an obvious method to access this power is through reading: “Literature is powerful, and we must use that power with care” (Reid and Stringer, 1997).
On Homeward Bound In Japan

James R. Reif, 46

Preface dedication:

Jazz from a former era reflected in the title of the age.

Steinbeck had been attacked in various ways for numerous reasons, all of which included Semitic, as well as writers who thought his language vulgar. "A.

There are coarse and brutal moments in life that are brutal...These are beautiful faith in the masses of nazis.

On Homeward Bound In Japan

I had told Eliza to listen to the "homebound instructor," a reference to "homeward bound" prompted to muse upon a people that showed little returning to the States, a people that showed little chest and choking out, yet showing his emotion by making me as the train sped a
On Homeward Bound Instruction, Koriyama, and Steinbeck

James R. Reichenberger, Elko School District

Preface dedication:

Jazz from a former era resonates through the walls of a Snack called Time in Domaecho in Koriyama-ken, Japan, where Chieko issues eggplant and libations to Yosh, Ritsuko, Fujio, and Kiyoko, who may, perhaps, step outside and harmonize to Mr. Honda's dog.

I want to preface my article with a brief discussion on Steinbeck. Steinbeck had been attacked on numerous occasions for his writings, and for numerous reasons, all of which left him to “wonder whether I may not have dreamed the things I saw and heard in the period of my research” (Parini 236). In the article “Censoring The Grapes of Wrath,” Samuel Sillen documents that Grapes was removed from all Kansas City and Buffalo, New York libraries; only one copy was delivered to San Francisco branch libraries where the instructions read: “You are going to receive one copy of John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath. You will not receive the book jacket or catalogue cards for this book, and it will not appear in the monthly bulletin. . . you will not receive any additional copies of this book. . . This book will not be kept on the open shelf.” (Donohue 5). Steinbeck was accused of Communist agitation, being pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic, as well as writing Jewish propaganda. His works are called obscene and his language vulgar: “A book is no place to put these words” (Donohue 4). To note, Eleanor Roosevelt was a strong defender of The Grapes of Wrath, stating, “There are coarse and brutal moments in the book, but . . . there are also coarse and brutal moments in life. . . . there are fine things in life which outweigh the brutal. . . . These are beautifully portrayed in a book whose effect is to renew our faith in the masses of mankind struggling under the most adverse circumstances” (Donohue 4).

On Homeward Bound Instruction, Koriyama, and Steinbeck

I had told Elizabeth about my recently acquired position as a "homebound instructor," and days later received a note from her which made reference to “homeward bound instruction.” An interesting twist; I was prompted to muse upon my homeward bound instruction, upon returning from Koriyama, Japan. Now, six years later, I reflect upon what I had been warned was a people that showed little or no emotion, and how Morita, when told I was returning to the States, didn’t show his emotion by burying his head into my chest and choking out, weeping, “No one like you!” Or Yoshiharu, not showing his emotion by running down the shinkansen platform waving goodbye to me as the train sped away. . . . homeward bound instruction.
In the States I developed an appetite for American prose. In a lust of patriotism I found myself in front of a rack of books by John Steinbeck. Perhaps a convergence of time, place, and frame of mind; what I unearthed was a treasure of unapologetic profanity and delicate sweetness, all of which resonated red, white, and blue. I found myself in paradoxical thought, not unlike Steinbeck in his introduction to Cannery Row:

Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream. Cannery Row is the gathered and scattered, tin and iron and rust and splintered wood, chipped pavement and weedy lots and junk heaps, sardine cannery of corrugated iron, honky tons, restaurants and whore houses, little crowded groceries, and laboratories and flop-houses. Its inhabitants are, as the man once said, “whores, pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches, by which he meant Everybody.” Had the man looked through another peephole he might have said, “Saints and angels and martyrs and holy men,” and he would have meant the same thing.

Contrary prosody. While in Japan I developed an observational quip, “a contradiction a day”; however, as I engaged into Steinbeck I found that he captured much of my Japanese experience in his very Western writing; such sweet incongruities! I recall Naoko, trying to explain herself to me and being frustrated at not being able to adequately do so, wildly gesticulating, exploded, “I can just feel smell!” Again, from the introduction to Cannery Row:

How can the poem and the stink and the grating noise—the quality of light, the tone, the habit and the dream—be set down alive? When you collect marine animals there are certain that worms so delicate that they are almost impossible to capture whole, for they break and tatter under the touch. You must let them ooze and crawl over their own free will onto a knife blade and then lift them gently into your bottle of sea water. And perhaps that might be the way to write this book—to open the page and to let the stories crawl in by themselves.

If stories “ooze” and “crawl,” how does one approach teaching the ooze and crawl? Moreover, how does one defend a non-conclusive conclusion like those of The Grapes of Wrath, Cannery Row, The Red Pony? Last semester my students were quite disappointed with the ending of The Grapes of Wrath; they were looking for a clean wrap-up, not an conclusion. I maintain that this is the artistry of the novel; literature is as often vacated as ended. The reader being left to ponder, process, and draw personal conclusions. As in this world, we are left feeling uneven, uncomfortable. No smiley-face sticker.

Makoto liked to talk to me about The Beatles. While working on an exercise which included a photo of a man holding a paper bag, he pointed and stated authoritatively, “Beatles.” Although momentarily at a loss, I soon met his mental leap and diplomatically explained, “No Makoto, ‘Paperback Writer.’” Understanding his honest error, Makoto, along with me, exploded into a mutual no-sound laugh spasm, where after twenty minutes, the first noise we made resembled two sperm whales coming up for air after an extended spell. The incongruity of us, student and professor, each other’s experience, especially, is a memory that one never forgets.

Ishmael sought The Log from the Sea of Cortez.

There is a certain melancholy in youth; emotion is so strong, so much honesty as a mask. A mask builds on the many years, passing the boat, down the duck-boats and skiffs, as he passed each one, and wondered why he left his boy, and another man or boy and feeling that there could have been an object that might pleased department, icchos, him—only on board.

Only on a word to Japanese friends, and my own used in The Sea of Cortez example, observation that Steinbeck had life in his readers. To bring.

Jay Parini, in his Webster in the June 12, 1990 issue concerning Steinbeck’s style, makes Steinbeck approach uncomfortable, uneven for the ice axe.” The seemingly sublime and the base, curiosity and sublime and the base? Everyone feeling smell, hearing tears.

References
Parini, Jay. John Steinbeck.
incongruity of us, student and teacher, each with a background so remote from each other’s experience, shut away in a little cell of learning, laughing uproariously, is a memory that oozes into my mind often.

Ishmael sought water as a “substitute for pistol and ball”; likewise, Steinbeck set out on the Sea of Cortez, and in the second chapter of The Log from the Sea of Cortez discusses boats:

There is an idea boat that is an emotion, and because the emotion is so strong it is probable that no other tool is made with so much honesty as a boat... A man builds the best of himself into a boat—builds on the many unconscious memories of his ancestors. Once, passing the boat department of Macy’s in New York, where there are duck-boats and skiffs and little cruisers, one of the authors realized that as he passed each hull, he knocked on it sharply with his knuckles. He wondered why he did it, and as he wondered, he heard a knocking behind him, and another man was rapping the hulls with his knuckles. . . . no man or boy and few women passed who did not do the same thing. Can this have been an unconscious testing of the hulls? . . . The observer thought that perhaps they and he would knock on any large wooden object that might give forth a resonant sound. He went to the piano department, icebox floors, beds, cedar-chests, and no one knocked on them—only on boats.

Only on a word boat can I describe my homeward bound instruction, my Japanese friends, and my conversion to Steinbeck sluced into an unlikely trinity. The Sea of Cortez example is the type of sensory-heightened idiosyncratic observation that Steinbeck, through literary demonstration (I assert), brings to life in his readers. To bring us more fully to life.

Jay Parini, in his biography John Steinbeck, quotes Harvey Curtis Webster in the June 12, 1954 edition of The Saturday Review in a critique concerning Steinbeck’s sequel to Cannery Row, Sweet Thursday: “Steinbeck is the most uneven excellent writer of our times.” It is this “uneven” quality that makes Steinbeck approachable, human, and often humorous. Perhaps the uncomfortable, uneven feeling is intended; as Kafka said, “A book must be an ice axe.” The seemingly incongruous subjects of Kafka, as with Steinbeck, the sublime and the base, can be reconciled. As a teacher, how does one merge the sublime and the base? Defend the feeling of unevenness as growth? Perhaps by feeling smell, hearing tears, tasting sound.

References


The Chills and Thrills of It All: *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson

Connie Jonett, Stratford High School

In a time when movies and television shows cater to the public by featuring accelerated plots and special effects, the competition between the printed word and visual media has become more evident. Given a choice, many people will choose two-hour visual stimuli over the lengthy habit of reading a book. Our fast-paced society almost fulfills Ray Bradbury’s predictions in *Fahrenheit 451* of turning away from the intrinsic value of assimilating information at a more casual pace. Competition for our students’ time is being felt in the high school classroom.

While I was looking for the “perfect reading material” for my junior English students and researching background information for “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson, Jackson’s gothic novel of horror and psychological suspense, *The Haunting of Hill House,* stimulated my curiosity. Stephen King, a personal favorite author who permits me to shiver when I want to read escapist horror literature, has deemed Jackson a “conscious inspiration” (Winter 50). I had discovered the bait—a contemporary American author (whom most students were familiar with either through his novels or the films based on them) who regards Jackson important enough to encourage his adopting something of her genre. He even quotes the first paragraph of Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* (1954) as an epigraph to his novel *Salem’s Lot* (King 13). “His narrative describes the Marsten House in like terms, treating it as a living, sentient structure—one that definitely is not sane: ‘It stared back at him with idiot indifference’” (Winter 44).

The genre of escapist horror literature has always intrigued me, in part because this type of literature is a contemporary extension of the Gothic novels written by American authors such as Poe and James. Particularly of interest is that Gothic/horror literature examines society’s defined perceptions of good/bad, right/wrong, or abnormal behaviors. This examination of standard, acceptable behavior prepares students for my unit on Jackson. Is what is right eternally right? Is murder ever right? What types of people seem to be victims versus antagonizers? Can one differentiate between weak and strong attitudes? How? Can a person become a victim to his or her own weakness? How? Why would a person choose to be a victim rather than take a stand? As a parable in the study of traditional, moral attitudes, “The Lottery” instigates strong classroom discussion as to why it was and still is challenged today.

Typical responses to reading “The Lottery” fall into three arenas. The most common reaction is repulsion that such a murderous sacrifice is made because of tradition—what has been shall always be, particularly since the justification for the sacrifice is pagan belief. “‘Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon’” (Jackson, *The Magic* 142). The second reaction is one typical of students who don’t wish to cc ing students to defin other. The final reserving happening today in c observations have b Students ge the ritual portrayed i confined to the one t some towns, there w needs to be address a member to death is w dear.

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Discussion Tessie Hutchinson d merely chance that h Surmers had made t office” (145)? Are w we change our futur examines one chara future. We shelve th

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*Hill House:* children play on the curtailed windows w *Hill House* is a somb ing air. Even the des faulty design which I seemed always in on
who don’t wish to commit or appear vulnerable: “This story is stupid.” Requiring students to define “stupid” forces them to align their beliefs one way or the other. The final response is one of indifference, to which I ask, “Can you see this happening today in our society?” This helps to facilitate sharing opinions once observations have been made.

Students generally ignore the fact that other communities participate in the ritual portrayed in “The Lottery.” The practice of an annual lottery is not confined to the one township in the story. The largely missed statement “…in some towns, there were so many people that the lottery took two days….”(137) needs to be addressed to make clear that the ritual habit of stoning a community member to death is widespread, and the price for living in these communities is dear.

I ask the students how this group mentality of “follow-the-tradition” is seen today. What practices in our worldly societies or histories demonstrate this attitude? The students easily identify groups of people who follow righteously and exclusively, who are intolerant of certain faiths for example, or of government control of certain forms of entertainment.

The final clue as to why this story is feared appears when an elder of the community challenges new ideas and speaks out in support of maintaining tradition. “It’s not the way it used to be,” Old Man Warner said clearly. “People ain’t the way they used to be” (145). Shedding the old in light of the new and different is always a frightening aspect for those content in their ways or concerned about control and security.

Discussion ensues regarding chance versus pre-destined fate. Was Tessie Hutchinson destined to be the intended sacrifice that year, or was it merely chance that her husband Bill drew the paper with the “black spot. Mr. Stuivers had made the night before with the heavy pencil in the coal-company office” (145)? Are we able to control our fate? Do we have a choice? How can we change our futures? The students are now ready to read a novel that examines one character’s choice in making decisions (or not) regarding her future. We shelf that question until we’ve finished the novel.

The Haunting of Hill House is in line with the macabre and psychological thrillers my students watch on the screen and a natural extension of Jackson’s writing talents. I begin discussion by asking for students’ interpretations of what constitutes a haunted house and what might give a house “an unsavory history” (King, Danse Macabre, 267). Students are able to share various tales of things heard or things experienced which caused apprehension. They discuss their personal intuition of when not to become involved, leading to more discussion and creating the mood for Jackson’s novel.

Hill House is not a home with a generous background. No mortal children play on the flower-edged lawns or echo laughter through the chintz-curtained windows while wafts of Mother’s homemade apple pie drift outward. Hill House is a somber place, caught up in its own negativity and spirit-consuming air. Even the design of Hill House is dark and ugly. “It had an unbelievably faulty design which left if chillingly wrong in all its dimensions, so that the walls seemed always in one direction a fraction longer than the eye could endure, and
in another direction a fraction less than the barest possible tolerable length” (The Haunting of Hill House 40). In this octagon-shaped house “...every angle is slightly wrong” (105). I am quick to ask my students what octagon shape they see on a daily basis (a stop sign). What does this shape indicate (stop)? Why must you stop (danger)? The ground floor consists of “concentric circles of rooms” (100); windowless rooms exist within rooms, creating a sense of claustrophobia. Doors are designed to swing shut of their own volition, having been hung at such minute degrees as to cause their closing slowly and quietly. I require my students to close their eyes and visualize the house. What is it like to stand in a windowless room? What could this symbolize (no escape)?

Hill House carries with it a tradition of death, whether purposeful or accidental. Its “unsavory history” begins with Hugh Crain, the original owner of the home who built the house for his wife and two daughters. His first wife died minutes before she first set eyes on the house, when the carriage bringing her here overturned in the driveway” (75). The second wife died from a fall of an undetermined nature at Hill House, while the third Mrs. Crain died of consumption in Europe. The older daughter returned, took a village girl as her companion, and then died of pneumonia in Hill House. Challenged by the younger daughter who lost Hill House legally to her sister’s companion, the companion eventually committed suicide by hanging herself from the tower’s turret. The companion was the first to note that certain objects had started to disappear from the residence and accused the younger sister, who adamantly denied having any involvement with the missing objects. The final person who died at Hill House was the only male to do so. He “who tried to leave Hill House in darkness—[eighteen years earlier] was killed at the turn in the driveway, where his horse bolted and crushed him against the big tree” (67).

The female-dominated death scenario is not lost upon the students, who want to discuss this and why the male died while leaving in the darkness. It is important to highlight the places of death, particularly the big tree, which is where the main female character will arrive with clarity of thought in a flash second prior to her own death.

Students erroneously arrive at the conclusion that the never-materializing inhabitants are spirits of those who died with a connection to Hill House. However, the theory is invalidated when one of the main characters hears a “little soft sad cry, a little sweet moan of wild sadness. It is a child, she thought...I won’t let anyone hurt a child” (162). No recorded history exists of a child who had died at or was connected with Hill House.

The characters in the novel all represent various needs that students can identify either in themselves or in others. The readers first meet Dr. John Montague, who represents the observer and recorder of the events in Hill House. His purpose of bringing together candidates who have experienced paranormal events at some time in their respective lives is to validate his professional analysis of supernatural manifestations, giving credibility and solid evidence of the haunting phenomenon. Students see Dr. Montague as probably the sanest character, as he is able to hold on to reality better than the rest of the group. Is he less suspect because he is the least psychic of those who are pulled into the Hill House mentality?
Dr. Montague selects Eleanor because stones had rained on her parents’ house for three days after her father died (Eleanor is uncomfortable with mention of the event). Theodora is chosen for being able to identify unseen cards. Luke Sanderson was the fourth member of the group as Hill House was his future inheritance (the family insisted a member be present). Although Luke is not as medium-sensitive as Eleanor and Theo are, he does experience some of the paranormal events.

“Eleanor Vance, who is one of the novel’s four psychic investigators, is the archetypal Jackson heroine: apart from family oppressions, hatred, and jealousies, her life has been empty—for her entire existence she has ‘been waiting for something like Hill House’” (Sullivan 1035). The 32-year-old character has just completed one of the more tedious yet guilt-invoking responsibilities of life, having cared for her invalid mother for eleven years. She has no friends, as her mother needed round-the-clock care.

Eleanor’s need to be needed is a situation that students can understand. Her “turning inward instead of growing outward” and “interest in the self and fear of the self” (King, Danse Macabre 281) pinpoints weaknesses and strengths that humans have. Since my students are seventeen-year-olds, I ask them to envision sacrificing their own identity to spend the next eleven years of their lives caring for a parent who is virtually incapable of self-reliance. How would their plans change? How would their lives change? How would their attitudes change?

Because Eleanor’s life has been dull, she contrives an artificial past while in Hill House to feel more status with the other characters in residence. She needs to establish self-worthiness to others. Her personality evolves by telling little lies and getting defensive. Jackson declines to show more of Eleanor’s personality during her mother’s lengthy illness to demonstrate the stifling atmosphere Eleanor inhabits with no outside contact other than a distant sister, brother-in-law, and young niece. Human nature involves wanting to be accepted, a condition all students will understand. Eleanor feels that, finally, she is “the fourth person in this room; I am one of them” (Jackson 60). For the first time, Eleanor feels complete, because of her inner personality, not because of how she functions.

Theodora is the self-assured extrovert, the opposite to Eleanor. She establishes a good relationship with Eleanor, and they share a common dislike of Hill House. Through Theo, Jackson develops Eleanor’s character by bringing someone positive into her life. Theo has premonitions, intuitively stressing that Eleanor should go home. For Eleanor, home doesn’t exist. She cannot conceive of a future with freedoms. Classroom discussion diverts typically to any environment that tries to establish rehabilitation (i.e. the current American prison system). Can a caged bird learn independence? Will Eleanor need more than a friendly good-bye to live post-Hill House?

Although not immune to the events at Hill House, Theo demonstrates frustration at Eleanor’s willingness to be pulled into the obsession that Hill House wants her. Waiting for something and experiencing frustration at a friend’s weak behavior are both situations that teenagers are familiar with.
The fourth main character, Luke, was a petulant child who grew to have a "cattish instinct for self-preservation" (10). He is not like Eleanor in that he never knew his mother. Each envies what the other had. The relationship between mother and child is a recurrent theme. Can we feel guilty for everything, or does the relationship between child and mother need release and independence to be healthy? Did Eleanor ever find this freedom?

The foreshadowing in the novel is a strong and recurrent theme. "Journey's end in lovers meeting, she thought, remembering her song at last" (36). The phrase manifests itself in Eleanor's mind throughout the book. Mrs. Dudley's repeated warning, "We couldn't hear you, not even in the night" (39) is the caretaker's litany for each guest at Hill House. Even before it appears Eleanor will escape Hill House, students begin to urge her to leave due to the recurrent foreshadowing. While driving towards Hill House, Eleanor encounters old fair signs with the words: "DARK" and "EVIL" (19). Her first vision of the house causes her to reflect: "The house [is] vile... get away from here at once" (33).

Discussions between the four guests include sordid facts. All previous inhabitants left hastily (72). Dr. Montague feels "...the evil is in the house itself... It has enchained and destroyed its people and their lives, it is a place of contained ill will" (82). Being analytical, Dr. Montague continues, "I think that an atmosphere like this one can find out the flaws and faults and weaknesses in all of us, and break us apart in a matter of days" (124). At this point, students are able to conclude that it is Eleanor who will become Hill House's next victim. Why? She is "...unbelievably happy" (136), even after all of the bizarre occurrences. We discuss whether her happiness would be a normal reaction. What does her happiness signify?

The highest degree of "unsavory history" has to be Luke's discovery of a book written by the original owner of Hill House, Hugh Crain, for his daughter. Entitled "Memories, for Sophia Anne Lester Crain: A Legacy for Her Education and Enlightenment during Her Lifetime from Her Affectuated and Devoted Father," Hugh Desmond Lester Crain; Twenty-first June, 1881," the contents reflect a time period when admonitions were Biblically based and children were thought of as little adults. This scrapbook contains pictures glued in from old books and lessons pertaining to humility; eternal damnation (along with painted snakes embroiling the message); Hell (complete with a burnt pagoda); Heaven; and the Seven Deadly Sins, including gluttony, lust, pride, sloth, and envy. Hugh Crain's closing signature in blood causes a stir in the classroom.

The nursery is the heart of the home and the most neglected room of the house. It emanates a distinctively cold temperature (120). Eleanor hears a crying child. Is this noise symbolic of Eleanor's own lost young adulthood? Is Eleanor trying to recapture eleven years of her own life?

Written messages that appear on the wall are specifically addressed to Eleanor—"Help Eleanor come home" (146). Mrs. Montague and her assistant, Arthur, make a singular appearance, using automatic writing to communicate with the dead. Since neither character knew Eleanor, Theo, or Luke prior to the experience, the message of a child... "Neill, Eleanor, Nell stivering, and an in sense of the haunt..." (215), her when the house speaks more like the house wants his only time anything wake-up is identifiable. What makes House spiritual haunted visible ghosts exude walking outside the Eleanor was the or Theo saw something house. Other than smell, and Eleanor indicators that son Because teaching of The Hill philosophies. Inev It are unusual incidents areja vu, or unexplained. The use c refers to as if it were that characters have is actually evil or that fulfills those House is evil as we more susceptible to.

The film students who had discuss comparisons effects and Hollyw often happens who writers crucified J ances permitted book instead of b being a caretaker depending on her as a future caretaker. From the characters become children, not the...
experience, the message Mrs. Montague receives is indeed chilling. It is a message of a child wanting its mother. The child names itself with purpose—"Nell, Eleanor, Nellie, Nell, Nell to go home" (192). Crashing sounds, the house shivering, and an invisible animal pacing in the hall (198-203) contribute to the sense of the haunting. Eleanor witnesses visible foot impressions being made in the grass (215), hears her name being called, and feels acceptance into Hill House when the house speaks directly to her (226). She behaves erratically, becoming more like the house’s non-living residents. She cannot leave, for she believes the house wants her (238). Of her one-week stay, Eleanor concludes, “It’s the only time anything’s ever happened to me. I like it” (242). Her psychological make-up is identifiable again to the students: we all need to belong.

What makes this novel of interest to the students is the fact that the Hill House spiritual inhabitants never appear in the popular guise of recognizable, visible ghosts except once. Eleanor saw a ghost picnic while she and Theo were walking outside the house in the dark. The students are quick to point out that Eleanor was the only person Jackson describes as actually seeing the picnic. Theo saw something behind them that caused her to run swiftly back to the house. Other than that incident, the loud noises, temperature variations, a bad smell, and Eleanor’s experiencing something holding her hand are the only indicators that something is physically present.

Because of certain religious beliefs that students might have, the teaching of The Haunting of Hill House must be done with respect to their philosophies. Inevitable questions emerge. Does one believe in ghosts? How are unusual incidents explained? Has anyone ever experienced premonition, déjà vu, or unexplained feelings? How was the experience explained?

The use of a planchette (similar to a Ouija board that Mrs. Montague refers to as if it were a person) for automatic writing and the psychic experiences that characters have should be addressed in a discussion of whether the house is actually evil or whether the characters bring psychological needs to a place that fulfills those needs. The author doesn’t so much examine whether or not Hill House is evil as whether or not mentally and emotionally unhealthy people are more susceptible to negative influences.

The film The Haunting appeared in theaters the summer of 1999. Former students who had read Jackson’s novel contacted me after viewing the movie to discuss comparisons and contrasts. The general feeling was that the special effects and Hollywood rendition of Hill House were spectacular. However, as often happens when a book is converted to film, my students felt the screen writers crucified Jackson’s novel. The book was superior in that the hidden nuances permitted more reflection. Eleanor needed to identify herself (in the book) instead of becoming maternal as she is in the movie. That she never liked being a caretaker is evident in the book. She came to hate her mother for depending on her and sapping her youth. The movie designates her primary role as a future caretaker to the ghostly inhabitants of Hill House.

From this discussion came the view that most Hollywood female characters become heroines by assuming maternal behavior (i.e. save the children, not the world) as demonstrated in Terminator II, the Alien series, and
Lost in Space. The movie presents Eleanor as this maternal savior to deceased, trapped children. No tortured children or minors who needed to be saved appeared in the book.

Had my students not read the novel, most of the obvious details and gleaning inferences would have been lost to them. A novel's details become lost when replaced with the next special-effects movie. My students felt more empowered after reading the novel as the cognitive process of reading evoked personal connections and interactive imagination. Movies require passive involvement. The novel The Haunting of Hill House leaves itself open for non-closure, demonstrating one of the finest aspects of literature available to readers.

References


Jacqueline Woodson has also written Sunday Best (1997), a novel about a family who must confront the issue of slavery. The novel includes “Slipping Away” and “Staying Out of the Rain,” which highlights the pain and struggle of being a slave.

Jacqueline Woodson's first novel, Last Shot, was published in 1990. Over the years, she has written several other novels, including 13 Fevers (1993), which deals with the topic of racism.

Though the intended audience for these novels is children, Woodson has also written the novel Sticks (1990), which is geared towards young adults. The novel explores the issues of poverty, crime, and gang violence.

Jacqueline Woodson has been a significant influence in literature for young people. Her stories and characters have been praised for their authenticity and ability to capture the experiences of children and teenagers.

“Good Books”: Part 2

Almost ten years after the publication of the ALAN Review, Jacqueline Woodson has released a new novel, Maizon.

Woodson has a talent for weaving together characters and events to create a compelling narrative. In Maizon, she introduces Maizon and Margie, two best friends who attend Blue Hill High School, a private, elite school in New York City.

The novel explores the challenges and experiences of these two girls as they navigate the pressures of being high schoolers. Maizon and Margie are forced to confront the reality of attending a school where they are the only African American students.

Maizon, played by Margaret Qualley, is a strong and determined character. She works hard to fit in and find a sense of belonging at Blue Hill.

The second half of the novel focuses primarily upon Maizon's struggles and experiences as she tries to find a place for herself at the school.

Maizon's character represents the struggles of minority students in predominantly white schools. The novel serves as a reminder of the importance of diversity and representation in literature.
Jacqueline Woodson and a Few “Good” Stories

Caroline G. Majak, University of Wisconsin-Eau-Claire

Jacqueline Woodson, a featured author at the Middle Level Luncheon at the National Council of English Teachers Convention in Milwaukee, published her first novel, *Last Summer with Maizon* (1990), when she was a mere twenty-six years of age. Over the past ten years, she has published nine other novels. Though the intended audience of these novels is primarily middle level students, Woodson has also published a notable picture book, *We Had a Picnic This Sunday Past* (1997), illustrated by Floyd Cooper, and one adult novel, *Autobiography of a Family Photo* (1994). She was editor of *A Way Out of No Way: Writings about Growing Up Black in America* (1996). Additionally, *Am I Blue? Coming Out from Silence* (1994), a collection edited by Marion Dane Bauer, includes “Slipping Away,” a short story by Woodson. Finally, her most recent novel is *Miracle’s Boys* (2000).

Jacqueline Woodson has been quite busy and productive during the years since her first publication. She has demonstrated repeatedly that she understands children in the middle years. This article provides an overview of the ten novels that Woodson has written for middle level students.

“Good Books”: Part I

Almost ten years ago, I reviewed Jacqueline Woodson’s first book, for the *ALAN* Review. It was obvious then, and remains true even now, that Woodson has a talent for telling an engaging story about the dynamics of friendships and family relationships. In *Last Summer with Maizon* (1990), readers are introduced to eleven-year-old Maizon Singh and Margaret Tory, who are best friends who live in Brooklyn. Maizon has applied for a scholarship to attend Blue Hill, a rather exclusive private school. While waiting for the results, Maizon and Margaret try to make the best of their summer together, vowing that things will not change between them, even if Maizon is accepted at Blue Hill. The prospect of losing her best friend is just one of the challenges Margaret must face; she must also cope with and adapt to her father’s death.

Maizon is accepted at Blue Hill. The girls say their good-byes, and Margaret feels the loss. Encouraged by her teacher, Ms. Peazle, Margaret finds solace in writing and discovers she has a talent for writing poetry when she enters and wins a poetry contest. While Margaret is developing an identity separate from the one she had when Maizon was around, Maizon is learning to adjust at Blue Hill.

The second book of this trilogy, *Maizon at Blue Hill* (1992), focuses primarily upon Maizon’s adjustments at Blue Hill Preparatory School where only five of approximately 200 girls are black. Maizon struggles with her own identity at Blue Hill, rejecting the notion that she should only associate with the black
girls at the school. After three months, however, she decides to leave and return home to Madison Street, Margaret, her Grandma, Ms. Dell, and Hattie.

In *Between Madison and Palmetto* (1993), the third book of this trilogy, Maizon returns to Madison Street. Margaret and Maizon are enrolled in Percy School, a school for the gifted, but things have changed between them. Maizon has developed a friendship with Caroline, and her father has re-entered her life after years of absence. Meanwhile, Margaret grapples with anorexia and has a boyfriend named Bo. The tensions between Margaret and Caroline ease, while working together on a play written by Margaret. In the end, Margaret and Maizon find that they have room for others in their lives, but they still vow to be “friends forever.”

This Trilogy represents what Woodson calls her “good” books. She considers them her “good” books because they are about friends and family.

“Good Books”: Part II

If one uses Woodson’s definition of “good” books as books about friends and family, then all of her books are “good,” for they are all about friends and family. I believe that Woodson is trying to make a distinction between books that are generally viewed as acceptable for children and those that are a bit more controversial.

African American and gay, Woodson states, “As a black writer in the predominantly white world of children’s books, I have to acknowledge racism as well as homophobia” (quoted in *Children’s Literature Review, LIX*, 197). While friendships and families remain the focus of her works, Woodson’s mission is to write stories that challenge the stereotypes of people of color, women, and gay people. The books that follow focus upon issues and relationships that might be considered quite controversial. These Woodson books include storylines about teen pregnancy, sexual abuse, and sexuality. They involve friendships across racial and/or religious lines, and some characterizations develop around interracial relationships.

*Dear One* (1991) begins with a revelation by twelve-year-old Feni, who states, “One thing I learned from Rebecca is that when people talk about fifteen-year-olds who are pregnant, they never mention anything about the look in the girl’s eyes” (I). Rebecca, a pregnant teenager from Harlem, is beneficiary of the good will of her extended family which includes Catherine, her mother’s college friend, Catherine’s daughter, Feni, Marion, who also went to college with Rebecca’s mother, and her partner, Bernadette. Feni’s life is a charmed life to Rebecca; she has lots of advantages that Rebecca can only dream about.

Initially, Feni finds it hard to accept Rebecca into her life, but with the support of all of the women in their lives, Feni and Rebecca develop an important bond and positive senses of self-worth.

Woodson is not shy about tackling other sensitive issues such as sexual abuse. While Woodson is not explicit in her description of the sexual abuse, two of her books revolve around this sensitive topic. In *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* (1994), Marie tells primarily of her relationship with Lena. Marie, who is African-American, is a popular, middle-class student at her school. Her father is a professor. Marie blacks and whites have ver the absence of both of their her father, and Lena’s moth friends, Lena confides in M believes that her father is b must promise not to tell any a trace, and Marie is not an Lena (1999), the s story. She tells how she an their father’s abuse. Their mother’s people live, hopin Chautacey. Ohio, both girls might be safer. As they hit are trying to get to the hosp:

Traveling south, I, She is sad that she left with from the safety of Miz Lily expresses her and her father decided that Lena and her s her father.

Some of Woodson endings. Others are not qui *Notebooks of Melanin Sun* ( In From the Notebooks of A Melanin, has to come to gri him she is in love with a wh Staggerlee (Evangeline) ha feel different just because o deceased grandparents. Sh un easiness is the fact that S grade, she kissed Hazel. W When her cousin, Trout (T) much in common including the sand on the beach, “Sta and maybe they won’t be gr When Trout finally writes, ends the book with Stagger were both waiting. Who would they become? : If You Come Softly bittersweet love story, fille cally. Jeremiah (Miah) and in the hallway at their new s cautiously and slowly towar white and Jewish. Miah is a
father is a professor. Marie meets Lena who is white and poor at school where blacks and whites have very little to do with each other. The girls are united by the absence of both of their mothers, Marie’s mother having abandoned her and her father, and Lena’s mother having died. When Marie and Lena become friends, Lena confides in Marie that her father has been molesting her. Lena also believes that her father is beginning to molest her younger sister, Dion. Marie must promise not to tell anyone. Then one day Lena and Dion disappear without a trace, and Marie is not sure what has happened to them.

*Lena* (1999), the sequel to I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This, is Lena’s story. She tells how she and younger sister, Dion, are running away to escape their father’s abuse. Their destination is Pine Mountain, Kentucky, where their mother’s people live, hoping that this will be a safe haven. Before leaving Chauncey, Ohio, both girls cut their hair short to look like boys, figuring they might be safer. As they hitch rides with truck drivers and others, they say they are trying to get to the hospital to see their mother and new brother.

Traveling south, Lena remembers the kindness of Marie and her father. She is sad that she left without saying goodbye. When she finally calls Marie from the safety of Miz Lily’s home, Marie is relieved to hear her voice. She expresses her and her father’s concern for the girls and their safety. It is finally decided that Lena and her sister will return to Chauncey to live with Marie and her father.

Some of Woodson’s books, such as *Lena*, have “happily ever after” endings. Others are not quite as predictable. Two such books are *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (1995) and *The House You Pass on the Way* (1997). In *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*, the main character, thirteen-year-old Melanin, has to come to grips with how he feels about his mother when she tells him she is in love with a white woman. In *The House You Pass on the Way*, Staggerlee (Evangeline) has always thought of herself as different. She doesn’t feel different just because of her parents’ interracial marriage or her famous deceased grandparents. She has just always felt different. Contributing to the uneasiness is the fact that Staggerlee is unsure of her own sexuality. In the sixth grade, she kissed Hazel. With the kiss, she experienced a strong sensation. When her cousin, Trout (Tyler), comes to visit, they discover that they have much in common including uncertainty about their sexuality. As Trout wrote in the sand on the beach, “Staggerlee and Trout were here today. Maybe they will and maybe they won’t be gay” (81). At the end of summer, Trout returns home. When Trout finally writes, she announces that she has a boyfriend. Woodson ends the book with Staggerlee still unsure: “Waiting, Staggerlee thought. They were both waiting. Waiting for the moment, this season, these years to pass. Who would they become? She wondered. Who would they become?” (99).

*If You Come Softly* (1998) (probably my favorite novel by Woodson) is a bittersweet love story, filled with the innocence of first love; yet it ends tragically. Jeremiah (Miah) and Ellie meet quite by accident, bumping into each other in the hallway at their new school, Percy. From that moment on, they move cautiously and slowly towards each other. He is African American and she is white and Jewish. Miah is an only child, whose father, a famous movie director,
and mother, a well-known author, are separated and waiting for their divorce to become final. Ellie is the youngest (the "accident" baby) of her family, and her siblings have been away from home for some time. Ellie's mother has walked out on the family numerous times, only to return again, always leaving Ellie unsure of whether she will stay or not. Further, Ellie is unsure if she even cares anymore whether her mother stays. Miah and Ellie are aware that others notice them and look to friends and family for support. Miah consults his biracial friend, Carlton, and Ellie confides in her sister, Anne. Anne, who is lesbian, is not empathetic. Instead of being supportive, she says to Ellie all of the horrible things that their mother had said to Anne about her lesbian relationship. Ellie is crushed. However, the relationship between Miah and Ellie continues to grow. Ellie meets Miah's mother. Then, Miah is to meet Ellie's parents, but tragedy strikes.

If You Come Softly explores an interracial relationship between two high school students. While Ellie is identified as Jewish, Woodson makes no attempt to interweave this dynamic into the special relationship that Miah and Ellie develop.

"Good Books": Part I, Again

In her recent release, Woodson returns to the family story, centering around the relationship of three brothers: Lafayette, Charles, and Ty'ree. In Miracle's Boys (2000), the brothers' parents are deceased. Their father died from hypothermia after rescuing a dog from a frozen pond, and their mother, Milagro ("miracle" in Spanish), died after she was found in a diabetic coma. Twelve-year-old Lafayette and his slightly older brother Charlie live with their older brother, Ty'ree. Although Ty'ree had the opportunity to go to college, he gives it up to try to keep his family together.

Lafayette calls his brother Charlie "Newcharlie." It is a name he has given to describe how Charlie has changed since returning from Rahway, a juvenile detention center. Lafayette longs for the old Charlie, who was sensitive and caring, while Newcharlie is a thug. Newcharlie even blames Lafayette for their mother's death. To help Lafayette cope with the change in Charlie's behavior, Ty'ree explains that some of Charlie's actions are a result of his not being present for the death of either of his parents. Both Ty'ree and Lafayette had been with one of the parents before the parent died, but Charlie did not have a chance to say goodbye to either parent, and he is bitter. When Charlie is beaten up by a gang, the brothers begin to work on healing together.

Some Final Thoughts:

Over the past ten years, it has been interesting to read stories about the family and friends that Jacqueline Woodson has created. Although her books are what might be called "quick reads," they are packed with issues to discuss with students. While the families rarely consist of the traditional mom, dad, two children, and a dog, the stories are engaging and enlightening. I expect that for years to come Woodson will continue to write "good" books for middle level students that will encourage them to examine and explore the dynamics of families and friendships. Will they be controversial? Some will... probably.

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Poetry Wars

Bill Martin, Westlake High School, Austin, Texas

Every year it is the same. Even last year when I thought the students were ready to follow me anywhere, ready to stand on their desks and call me Captain, even then, as soon as we got around to studying poetry, it all broke apart; we descended into conflict. Poetry wars—that’s what I call it. I get angry, they get contentious. They seem to become suddenly stupid. I seem to become suddenly obsessed with control.

A student will say, “Isn’t poetry a chance to let your imagination run wild?” and another will say, “Poetry can mean whatever you want it to mean, isn’t that right?” When I object to these ideas, they mutiny. They are ready to fight. “How can anyone know what the poet really meant?” “How can you tell us an interpretation isn’t right?” “Only the poet knows what this means, so we can give it whatever meaning we want, and it can’t be wrong.”

All this within ten minutes. I’m already in a bad mood. They are angry and resistant. And we haven’t even looked at a poem yet.

I could, of course, retreat and work with poems that are easy, poems that deal with ideas that the students already have in their heads, poems which are in the “ne’er so well expressed” category: chicken-soup poems about the value of friends or how everything happens for a reason. I could do this; there is certainly nothing inherently wrong with such poetry, but one of my goals is to read with my students, poems that will change our minds, poems expressing ideas we don’t already have in our heads.

I have to admit that I feel I’m battling some previous teaching. I don’t know whether it is the result of direct misinstruction or misunderstanding of valid instruction, but somewhere students have learned these attitudes. They are telling me things that they have heard before; I can sense it by the conviction in their voices. These attitudes are part of the mythology of the English classroom for them. It is part of how they expect instruction to proceed and what they expect to go unquestioned.

It seems strange that although they complain vehemently about overanalyzing, they will, at the same time, insist on looking for deeper meanings before the literal content has been decided. They are the ones who want to go too deep too fast, not me. They want to find symbols before constructing images, to see abstract ideas before they understand the narrative base, and yet they accuse me of “overanalyzing” when I ask them to pay attention to a shift from male to female pronoun or to an important modification of a noun.

A Conversation with a Colleague

I went for a drink with a fellow teacher to talk this over. I told her I was trying to model for students how to approach a poem by working with them on a

Thoughts about this Co

I went away from teaching poetry, wondering why poetry that is easy enough is easily accessible isn’t whole reason for writing use of language so that The strangeness of the poem relates to human’s loneliness and purpose obvious. I said that I discuss. I didn’t war ever reading the poem.

The Idea of Modeling

Is there any better paraphrase at the bottom which I have worked on poetry—studying poetry—trying to say,” but is inst
poem we were all equally unfamiliar with... myself included. She objected; she
didn’t see any point in my talking to students about a poem I hadn’t studied
prior to the discussion. I said I was modeling how to approach the poem, how to
make tentative meanings and revise them and reject them and eventually to come
to something whole. She said it’s the teacher’s job to lead students, not to go
down to their level and “flail around” with them. I said it was not just flailing;
there was a system of sorts. I always try to establish some base of meaning—
observational meaning is what I call it—before attempting the interpretative
meaning (or meanings). I said that if we were reading Frost’s “Acquainted with
the Night,” for example, I would ask students to tell me things about the poem
that no intelligent person could disagree with. I would tell them to say things
that seemed obvious: the person in the poem is walking at night, he is walking
alone, he doesn’t talk to or look at the watchman, it is a watchman not a police-
man, he walks to the outside of the city where there are no more lights, he looks
at an illuminated clock but the time has no meaning for him. She said why not
tell them the observational meaning and get on with the discussion of how the
poem relates to human experience. Why not move immediately to a discussion of
loneliness and purposelessness instead of spending time on what seems so
obvious. I said that I didn’t want to use the poem just to bring up a topic for
discussion. I didn’t want to end up with a discussion we could have had without
ever reading the poem.

Thoughts about this Conversation

I went away from this talk wondering why I feel so committed to
teaching poetry, wondering whether I should just skip poetry next year or do
poetry that is easy enough so I won’t have disputes. My friend says poetry that
is easily accessible isn’t poetry. And I agree with this. I think it is true that the
whole reason for writing poetry rather than prose is to break away from expected
use of language so that the writer can express thoughts which are unexpected.
The strangeness of the presentation is essential because the content represented
is strange. To me this means that we should be teaching students how to get to
a poem (by modeling for them how to read a poem) rather than telling them
what’s in a poem and then discussing that content. My friend says class
engagement is going to come from the discussion of the issue that the poem
raises. She is right about this, but I say why use the poem to raise the issue if
the poem is not going to guide the discussion. After reading “Acquainted with
the Night,” I don’t want to have a general discussion about loneliness; I want to
discuss the special kind of loneliness which makes the time “neither wrong nor
right” for Frost.

The Idea of Modeling

Is there any benefit in working through the poem instead of reading the
paraphrase at the bottom of the page or supplying students with a paraphrase
which I have worked out in advance? I have often told students that reading
poetry—studying poetry—is not an attempt to figure out what “the author is
trying to say,” but is instead an attempt to enter into a conversation with what
the author is saying. Once we have “figured out” the poem, the work is just beginning. We then need to consider how this poem represents life in a different way and how we can challenge and perhaps change our way of thinking about life by thinking about this poem. “Acquainted with the Night” might challenge us to pay attention to and talk about our feelings of alienation. It might challenge us to value them as part of the texture of human experience.

I do not want to get stuck on the first step of reading: getting from printed text to a meaning; I am convinced that there is much more to the study of poetry than that. But I don’t think we can take shortcuts either. Poetry reveals meaning in the experience of working through a poem; the text gives us an experience which makes the meaning we receive different. Is it worth the frustration that I face each year trying to lead students who don’t want to follow me toward some understanding of how to work through a poem? Why not just give them the meaning, as my friend suggests, and pick up our study at that point?

The Benefits of Study

I have always considered it a cardinal consideration when approaching any curricular obligation in English instruction that we are not preparing students to be English majors. The harsh reality is, after all, that many of our students will never read poetry again once they no longer have to. At least they will not read any poetry which cannot be understood easily and immediately. So if the instruction we give them makes them hate poetry or makes them stereotype poetry as language which is incomprehensible, we have done no one any good. We have just made it more likely they will never look at poetry beyond the classroom. In this sense pushing them to work through difficult texts seems counterproductive.

On the other hand working through the poem is a way of knowing it intensely and personally. Reading the summary first, I will never know the poem in the way I will if I work through each word’s place in relation to the whole and work through a series of revisions to my reading as I come to realize how the poem is working. Also, by working through the poem I might be faced with difficulties which are obstacles in my head and which, once I realize how they are preventing me from reading correctly, might be torn down or adjusted so that not only this poem but my life experience becomes fuller. I may also, in working through a difficult poem, experience the challenge and thrill of going into a strange context and finding my bearings. I might learn not to overlook and misread as a way to dismiss and protect myself from what is new to me. I might overcome my impulse to reject what is unfamiliar—not just in poetry but in life.

It might be that I customarily think of a long walk at night as a time to get my feelings sorted out or to find solace in the beauty of the night sky. Being “acquainted with the night” might sound to me like a privilege or an honor. In reading the Frost poem I would have to reassess my feelings about night walks. I would have to consider a different kind of aloneness which makes time irrelevant and which makes human connections seem inaccessible and to a certain extent undesirable. Furthermore, I might have to reevaluate the type of person who is having such feel pitted or a loser in life, I poem would enlarge my course involves. I would to “do something about recognizing these feelin

Learning to kn a new way, learning to i is it realistic to think th: outcomes?

Beyond Poetry

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But the more I violations, school polic friendships the more c from text to meaning a aesthetic ones. I am no its capacity to motivate value as instruction in in thinking. The discu discussion is instructic engaged, disciplined, a intellectual, for reading the foundation of the sym.

It is the discu look for especially in c suggest (as many do) t sun” (Sonnet 130) tell: beautiful on the inside suggests that this won for evidence in the tex to me, is successful di grade probably going poem. I don’t think it person to consider soc practice in critical que contrast, if students a woman who is descri love poetry, they will

We can teach through the teaching t deal with the issues of about these issues or
who is having such feelings: the narrator does not seem to be a person to be pitied or a loser in life, but a person of self-awareness and dignity. Perhaps the poem would enlarge my sense of the spectrum of feelings which human experience involves. I would have to consider whether the person in the poem needs to "do something about his problem" or whether he is living more fully by recognizing these feelings.

Learning to know a text personally and intensely, learning to see things a new way, learning to revise thinking—these are worthy goals for instruction; but is it realistic to think that classroom study of poetry can really produce these outcomes?

**Beyond Poetry**

I think it is realistic. And I think it is important. Poetry can certainly be justified on aesthetic grounds. And it should be taught as an aesthetic reading experience.

But the more I talk with students about the issues in their world (traffic violations, school policy, race, sexual orientation, justice, consumer culture, and friendships) the more convinced I am that it is worth struggling through poetry from text to meaning and on to personal relevance for reasons other than just the aesthetic ones. I am convinced that the value of poetry reading goes far beyond its capacity to motivate further reading of poetry. It is important even beyond its value as instruction in reading a difficult text. The study of poetry is instruction in thinking. The discussion of poetry—and what I am proposing requires discussion—is instruction in rich conversation, guided by a text. Such talk that is engaged, disciplined, and open-minded is, I believe, the best basis for all that is intellectual, for reading, for writing, for viewing, and for examining values. It is the foundation of the skills needed for life, especially life in a democracy.

It is the discussion that counts, not the particular poem used. What I look for especially in discussion is willingness to rethink. For a student to suggest (as many do) that Shakespeare's "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" (Sonnet 130) tells us that even someone unattractive on the outside can be beautiful on the inside, and for a second student to question whether the poem suggests that this woman is unattractive, and then for the first student to look for evidence in the text and agree that there really isn't any such indication—this, to me, is successful discussion. I give both these students high marks, the better grade probably going to the first student who changed his way of reading the poem. I don't think it is unrealistic to think that such conversation prepares a person to consider social, political, and personal issues and gives valuable practice in critical questioning, use of evidence, and adjustment of thought. In contrast, if students are told by a teacher that the sonnet is about a beautiful woman who is described without the exaggerated comparisons of conventional love poetry, they will learn only that poetry requires explanation by authorities.

We can teach intellectual conversation and interactive critical thinking through the teaching of poetry. And we can give students skills they need to deal with the issues of their personal worlds. We will do this not by reading about these issues or offering solutions to the problems students face, but by
teaching students how to converse and learn from conversation. We can do this if we teach poetry the right way—as the discovery of meaning through critical, evidentiary thought.

The Causes of Conflict and the Ways to Avoid It

I'm still struggling and learning, of course. But I persist. I have learned some things from my struggles with teaching poetry. I know where some of the hostility comes from in these "poetry wars," and I have decided on some techniques to disarm the opposition, some proposals for truce, some initiatives to put forward in working toward peace. The wars arise for many reasons. If I can be conscious of where the students' contentiousness comes from, I can help them overcome some of their resistance to serious talk about poetry.

1. Wars arise because students feel lost. This is the hardest thing to confront. It is hard because it may seem like the solution is to make things easier, more comfortable, by using texts which are effortlessly accessible—or else to let students do what they want with the poem, to let their imaginations go ahead and "run wild" with a poem which is, then, nothing more than a collection of interesting words and images. It is easy, of course, to understand why students feel lost: they are in foreign territory. But I don't want to answer this discomfort by metaphorically hustling them into the American Embassy or the nearest Hilton. They should be given the support they need to put up with the discomfort until they get used to the strangeness. They need to learn how to approach a difficult text; they need to learn not to be afraid of it. They need to learn that feeling lost is part of the experience. Sylvia Plath's "The Night Dances" could be domesticated by presenting it as an example of striking word choice and startling images ("A smile fell in the grass/ Irretrievable!") But through questioning, reconsideration, and a refusal to accept the first possible explanation, we can work through observation to some beginnings of meaning. What could no intelligent person disagree with? What fingers could be found to start toward understanding? I will freely tell students that I'm lost too, but I add that I'm not afraid of being lost.

2. Wars arise because students value the answer and not the process. Obviously the best texts to study are those which require an intellectual stretch but are still—eventually—within reach. The process is, however, the same whether the text is too easy, too hard, or just right: we work through it together and we develop skill in the process of reading and revising our readings of complex texts. The process is the subject of the study: we learn how to talk about a poem together. I have recently stopped giving students individual grades during discussions; now everyone gets the same grade. I give credit for sticking with the topic, rather than for brilliant remarks. I talk too. I don't leave them to "flail" alone—I flail too. And there is no quiz on the "correct" meaning at the end of our study. It is like talk at a dinner table. No competition, just group interchange. Achieving truly open interchange takes time. There is no magic remedy for the feelings of inadequacy and impatience which this type of discussion brings forth. It is, however, worth the effort.

Students are, for the most part, unfamiliar with the idea of discussion as exploration rather than consensus-finding or decision-making. To many students a successful discussion is "dances" referred to in the other students agree that I less value in a discussion—think of the "you" in "The as less desirable because closure. I consciously refer to how brilliant. I figure that The comments congratulate which speculate in spite of indicate to the group that important comments are, conversation will reward good conversation.

3. Wars arise because students don't. They really believe that gratulate changes of mind all, a definition of learning we have learned somehow. I make a very big things differently. (I really, feel like admission students are going to learn "Acquainted with the Nl the "luminary clock aga always before read it as a solitary object, "against temporarily convinced." clock on a public building didn't tell the time in the the "time was neither wr changed reading and the learned from this was an poem might be, but rather any poetic text.

4. Wars arise because assessment and a complex process rather than brilli process which "one-up" remarks that shut every rewar rewards aggression. An unrelentingly encourages non-competitive conver

5. Wars arise because students are eager to get their comm
a successful discussion is one in which one student suggests that the “night dances” referred to in the title of Plath’s poem are just random dreams and all the other students agree that that makes sense and the discussion is over. They see less value in a discussion which questions how it would affect our reading if we think of the “you” in “The Night Dances” as a husband or a lover. They see this as less desirable because it doesn’t seem to advance the discussion toward closure. I consciously refrain from congratulating summary comments no matter how brilliant. I figure that the feeling of coming to clarity can be its own reward. The comments I congratulate are the ones which seek clarification, comments which speculate in spite of uncertainty, comments which make connections and indicate to the group that there is a need for more thinking. These are the important comments because they keep the conversation going. A good conversation will reward the effort put into it. Students have to learn to value good conversation.

3. Wars arise because students feel changing their minds is a sign of weakness. Students don’t see the difference between conversation and debate. They really believe that to change their minds is to admit a deficiency. I congratulate changes of mind and tell students that “changing your mind” is, after all, a definition of learning. We don’t come into the classroom to show off what we have learned somewhere else; we come to learn, to make changes in our minds. I make a very big deal of changing my own mind when I start to see things differently. (I realize when I do this that it is hard to admit. It does, indeed, feel like admission of failure. But changes of mind have to be valued if students are going to learn from talk.) I remember during a day of discussing “Acquainted with the Night” that I had by second period been convinced that the “luminary clock against the sky” could be the moon even though I had always before read it as a literal clock. Students had pointed out that it was a solitary object, “against the sky” and at an “uneartily height,” and I was temporarily convinced. By fourth period, however, I was back to reading it as a clock on a public building; a student had pointed out that if the moon-clock didn’t tell the time in the first place then there was not much point in saying that the “time was neither wrong nor right.” The following day I discussed my changed reading and the reasons for it with the earlier classes. What students learned from this was not so much what the correct reading of this particular poem might be, but rather how to go about reading, rereading, and reconsidering any poetic text.

4. Wars arise because students think a classroom discussion is an assessment and a competition. Even when the grading is designed to reward process rather than brilliant comments, even when I discourage student comments which “one-up” other comments, still students love to make brilliant remarks that shut everyone else up. The culture rewards winners; the culture rewards aggression. All I can do is be supportive of those who catch on and unrelentingly encourage those who don’t catch on to see the value of non-competitive conversation.

5. Wars arise because students are impatient. The talk gets too thick. A good discussion is actually not full of talk. A discussion in which everyone is eager to get their comment in, where ideas are flashing back and forth across the
room, where students can hardly hold in all the things they need to say sounds wonderful to us as teachers—fired-up students actively involved. It seems like the type of discussion we want in our classrooms. But it isn’t. It shouldn’t be. When the comments become too thick there is no time for thought. Only the students whose ideas come quickly to their minds can participate and even these students will be unlikely to change any ideas during a “thick” discussion. The conversation needs a leisurely pace, with comfortable silences, repetitions of comments, revisiting of the text, restatements of ideas. Engagement shouldn’t be frenzied engagement. Students love to talk, but they need to learn to think and leave time for thinking.

What I’m attempting is a change of student attitudes, a major change. It is not surprising that students learn slowly and constantly backslide to the comfortable trenches of their instincts. But I’m hopeful, and I’ve seen progress. There is less antipathy as I gain more understanding of what is at stake. And as the conversations get better, I become more committed to this project.

The process of reading and revising reading through talk is a very potent one. It is modeled on the type of dinner table conversation which few of our students know. It is this conversation which teaches thinking, not just about poetry, but about any of life’s “difficult texts.” I have met with resistance in introducing this type of conversation but I overstate it to call it a war. And the more understanding I have of the difficulties students face and the insecurities students feel when we begin reading an unfamiliar poem, the better I will be able to place myself with them rather than against them. We will be able to talk together in a serious way about serious ideas. And that is the whole point.

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Book Reviews

Rick Whaley,


Does an author’s historical accuracy and responsibilities might pub Columbus, to the sensibility Native American (and all)
I worked in Milw fifth grade Intermediate B One of the books selected It tells the tale of a young Americas. Most of the ur offensive.

While most of th century ship, there are nu the “natives” they “encou conduct, the issue of Col seriously, either directly / Columbus plans native men were detained Spain as servants” (46). I to Africa and spoke of the

The enslaved Ta first welcome of Colomb Europeans so much as aw their island (59). The Can judge) are portrayed as he (50 and 69-70).

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Rick Whaley is co-author, wit Against Racism and For the r 1999. He is also a paraphrased
Conrad, Pam. *Pedro's Journal: A Voyage with Christopher Columbus* August 3, 1492-

Does an author of children's fiction have any responsibilities to historical accuracy and moral fairness in plot, setting and characters? What responsibilities might publishers have, especially in the controversial case of Columbus, to the sensibilities of Native American and non-Native children and to Native American (and all) educators?

I worked in Milwaukee public summer school (1999) in the fourth and fifth grade Intermediate Reading classroom using the Literature Circles model. One of the books selected for small group Literature Circle was *Pedro's Journal*. It tells the tale of a young cabin boy on Christopher Columbus's trip to the Americas. Most of the urban children found the fantasy fascinating. I found it offensive.

While most of the story deals with Pedro's adventures on a fifteenth-century ship, there are numerous and inappropriate references to the culture of the "natives" they "encounter." While Pedro is offended at some of Columbus's conduct, the issue of Columbus enslaving the Taino is never dealt with seriously, either directly or in the background story of the adventures at sea.

Columbus plans to "take six back to Spain" (39) and "five more young native men were detained, and word is they will be converted and taken back to Spain as servanis" (45). Imagine if Peter had been a cabin boy on a British ship to Africa and spoke of the enslavement of Africans this way.

The enslaved Taino are not discussed as a distinct culture, and their first welcome of Columbus is not presented as hospitality to the very lost Europeans so much as awe of the godlike visitors. They even offer Columbus their island (59). The Caribe culture that fights Columbus (rightly, one would judge) are portrayed as head-hunters, frightening to the young boy and the crew (50 and 69-70).

Columbus was, of course, only after riches—gold and slaves—and this is acknowledged somewhat in the story: Columbus is "obsessed with gold" (63).

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Rick Whaley is co-author, with Walt Dessotte, of *Wolleye Warriors: an Effective Alliance Against Racism and For the Earth*, New Society Publishers, 1994; Writers Publishing Coop., 1999. He is also a paraprofessional focusing on reading in Milwaukee Public Schools.
The historical record is that Columbus cut off the hands of the Taino for not bringing him gold fast enough and he then hanged the Taino in sets of thirteen to honor Christ and the twelve apostles. These facts alone offer good reason not to include any school material about Columbus; however, if this fake first-encounter story is included in a curriculum, the teacher must take on this tragedy honestly and accurately.

In fairness, Pedro is torn about “the taking of the Indians” (48) and recognizes his captain’s meanness and deceit to his own crew (13), and Pedro is critical of Columbus “looking pompous and arrogant” (51). Pedro is embarrassed by Columbus’s treatment of the Indians, but wouldn’t a child feel more than just embarrassment at watching an act of another race being mistreated? Pedro’s only other embarrassment is over the lack of clothes the indigenous people have. This clothing difference is not explained in any cultural way. While Pedro makes it back to Europe and his mother safely, the natives (slaves) “huddle in terror” on the ship, and nothing is said of the slaves’ fate in Europe. The overall impression to me, however, is that these events are not treated with the appropriate gravity, even if it is a child’s narrative. What are children who read such a story supposed to think about “detaining” other peoples?

In the back of this Scholastic book, the author says she wrote the book for entertainment, not for historical accuracy. Yet the themes dealt with are hardly light ones to be presented with little respect for truth or used merely as plot points for the cabin boy’s story. Certainly it’s not much to ask someone with the ability to write well in the children’s adventure genre to choose a premise more carefully. Why can’t publishers and school systems choose from the wealth of Native American writings (Michael Dorris’s Morning Girl, a wonderful first-encounter story written from the perspective of a young Native child, for example) bearing in mind the very clear historical standards on this subject?

Pedro’s Journal hardly stands alone as a poor choice on the part of Scholastic editors. Much controversy arose last year over their publication of two books of historical fiction, one about a Lakota girl at Carlisle Indian School and one about a girl on the Navajo Removal walk. Beverly Slapin remarked “But in the guise of trying to educate, what Scholastic is actually doing—in both My Heart Is on the Ground and The Girl Who Chased Away Sorrow—is continuing to whitewash the Native experience and continuing the historic campaign of extermination, only this time in books for children.” It shouldn’t be too much to ask that Scholastic develop a relationship with Native American educators and authors before they choose which books to publish.

References


**Marti Matyska, Menominee Indian High School**


Don’t all students go through a stage in life when they want to build a world of their own, free of adult influence? Isn’t that why, as youngsters, we enjoyed reading about the Boxcar Children making their way alone, or Huck Finn escaping Jackson Island, or, better yet, Karana surviving on the Island of the Blue Dolphin? *When the Legends Die* by Hal Borland has the same appeal. It’s written at the ninth-grade reading level and works with both middle and high school students. In this novel an eleven-year-old Ute boy survives on his own, living with nature, making an orphaned bear cub his brother. This Edenic life style is the hook that pulls my students into the story of Thomas Black Bull. Then the story line deepens into a man’s search for his identity.

*When the Legends Die* is divided into four parts reminiscent of the symbolic influence of the number four to Native American people. The novel forms a circle returning to its beginning. In the first part, the child, named Bear’s Brother, learns about the old ways from his parents. Then he is forced to attend a boarding school; there he is called Thomas Black Bull, and the old ways diminish. As a man he enters the violent world of the rodeo arena where he denies his Native American heritage and calls himself Tom Black. In the final section of the novel, he returns to the mountains, and there Thomas Black Bull reclaims his name and rediscovers his identity. He has come full circle, but he has changed significandy.

An activity that works well with this novel is one I learned at a workshop from a veteran teacher. It’s a gimmick to analyze characterization. Here’s the assignment: We often present ourselves differently on the outside than we are on the inside. Choose a character from the novel. Take a paper bag
or a box; decorate it on the outside to show what others are allowed to see about your chosen character. Then add items to the inside of the bag or box to demonstrate what this person is like on the inside. There are many interesting characters in *When the Legends Die* who lend themselves to this assignment: an alcoholic cowboy who needs love, a Mexican who steals from his friend in an attempt to be helpful, an Indian man working against his own people but yearning for the old ways, and, of course, Thomas who has many facets to his personality. My students present their bags or boxes orally to the class, and I always learn something new about the characters in Hal Borland's novel, *When the Legends Die*. 

**Chris Van Hooft, Marion High School**


I have never had as much success teaching a novel as I have had with Larry Watson's novel, *Montana 1948*. In an elective senior English class of primarily reluctant readers (non-college bound), the book was a hit.

The book is relatively short (only 176 pages), and it reads very quickly, but that is not its major appeal. The moral dilemmas presented in the text are complicated by family relationships, and the lines between right and wrong, good and evil are forever blurred. This leads to wonderfully rich discussions about decision-making, morality, and family relationships.

The story centers around two brothers; one is a sheriff in a small Montana town, and the other is the town's only doctor. When the sheriff learns that his brother has been molesting Indian women, he begins an investigation; but when an Indian woman is murdered, there is no turning back.

I really knew the book had an impact on my students when I asked them not to read beyond a certain page so we could predict what would happen next. The following day everyone, 100% of the class, had read well beyond the assigned pages. They couldn't help themselves. In addition, several students "confessed" that it was the only book they had actually read, cover to cover, in high school.

**Greg Koelker, DeSoto High School**


When I first listened to Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* being narrated on "Chapter a Day" on public radio one summer,
I reserved a copy at the local library and finally got to read it that winter. I was enthralled with this relatively contemporary woman’s autobiography of almost “epic” proportions.

When I assigned the book as class reading, it received the usual groaning and grumbles about being “too long” or “do we have to read the whole thing?” However, as the students started to read and get into the memoir, their mood changed; I actually saw junior boys reading in study halls, and several have told me that it was the only book they ever read from cover to cover! Parents, whose children talk to them about the story, often call and ask if they can borrow a copy over the summer, and several Vietnam vets have offered to come and talk to my classes after reading their children’s copies.

The reading level of When Heaven and Earth Changed Places is not terribly difficult, although it is structured as a flashback with a tendency to jump about a bit. The Asian way of speaking, as if the past were the present, is confusing to some students, but the potential for discussion and composition is rich with possibilities. I have students keep a reading log, do journals in class, and do a multi-genre research paper-presentation on some topic related to Vietnam. Now that young people have a renewed interest in the 60’s, I am able to consider a variety of topics. This book has it all: a compelling heroine and story, action, sex, violence, history, war, love, hate, politics, life lessons, and more. However, since there is some vulgar language and a graphic sexual assault it may not be appropriate for younger students.

Mrs. Hayslip, who lives in California and is director of the East Meets West Foundation, has at least two follow-up novels that several of my students have found and read. One student wrote to Hayslip and received a long letter and a package of Hollywood promotional and historical material for the movie, Heaven and Earth starring Tommy Lee Jones, that is roughly based on several of her books (this movie uses composites of some of the characters to create a fictional G.I. and has nudity, violence, and some unnecessary excesses—I don’t show it.)

There is an ever increasing number of Vietnam literary resources. Some I use are: Carrying the Darkness: The Poetry of the Vietnam War (W.D. Ehrhart, ed.), Going After Cacciotta (Tim O’Brien), Monkey Wars (Deborah Blum), and A Life In a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam (James R. Eber). Of course there are a multitude of possible Vietnam videos.

There are any number of thematic ways to approach this novel. Here are some that came from my students in a post-reading brainstorming session: growing up with hardship, war is hell, nothing ever stays the same, cruelty is never on just one side of a conflict, the struggle to survive and lead a normal life is universal, life isn’t always fair—usually not even close, people from all over the world have the same needs and dreams, people will fight and die for a cause/freedom no matter what the cost.

The number of possible research and writing topics is limitless. The following is a sampling: Vietnamese customs, art, folklore, family structure, religion, funeral practices, respect for the dead or spirits, importance of roots; contemporary Vietnamese government, economic situation, education, living
conditions, communism; French occupation, POW’s, MIA’s, Kent State, why Americans were in Vietnam, Chicago 7, East Meets West Foundation, Vietnam Restoration Project, farming in the middle of a war, using red dye to save yourself from rape, children’s role in family life, man’s role in marriage, how to catch rats, arranged marriages, and polygamy.

Sarah Halasz, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater


Sacajawea, by Joseph Bruchac, and The Birchbark House, by Louise Erdrich are young adult novels written by American Indian authors. Both books are beautifully written, and I would highly recommend them for use in the middle school classroom. Sacajawea could also be easily incorporated into a secondary school curriculum. The Birchbark House might also be selected as a read-aloud book at the intermediate elementary level.

Sacajawea is a well-crafted work of historical fiction, told in alternating points of view from the perspectives of Sacajawea and Captain William Clark. They are sharing their story with Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, a child of seven winters. He is the son Sacajawea bore during the epic journey, The Corps of Discovery, when she was only sixteen. In the author’s note at the end of the book, Bruchac asserts that he attempted to be true, even regarding dialogue, to the large volume of journals kept by the various members of the group, and that Sacajawea’s narration includes events described through a Native American’s eye.

The novel starts with Sacajawea’s account of her capture by the Hidatsa (Minnetaree) when she was eleven. Clark begins his tale by describing the letter he received from Meriwether Lewis in 1803 regarding Thomas Jefferson’s plan for westward exploration. From there the two recount the many adventures and hardships they endured across the plains, mountains, and rivers of the West, all the way to Fort Clatsop on the Pacific Coast.

Each chapter told from Clark’s perspective begins with an actual excerpt from his journal relative to the content of the chapter, while Sacajawea’s chapters begin with traditional tales, either from her own people (the Shoshones), or other nations encountered along the way. Bruchac varies his writing style to create a feeling of authenticity from both narrators. I will mention a few examples which demonstrate both Indian and non-Indian views chronicled in this book.

Upon being captured by the Minnetaree, Sacajawea recalls being shocked by their harsh manners, and speculates that perhaps they had been influenced by the white Down-faced people, due her original name, Bird scoffs at the white manners. How could men themselves in battle? L: policies; they refused to trade battle axes. While allowed to fight any long

The book reveals useful to the explorers, excellent navigator and found, she used driftwood to build a granary, edible, round, white roof of white leaves sewn to the tree, these men was peace among the tribes she was a harbringer of an apprehensive about the Clark’s account of Americans and the Native Americans not to whip a custom to strike those whom than to take away him. Another interesting cult black slave who accompanied them to this man, of I enjoyed this t praise its worth. Their Indian cultures within it.

The Birchbark of Omakayas (Little Frog) of the mid 1800’s. Called I Woodpecker) by the Ojibwa in the Apostle Islands, off particularly enjoyed rea camping on that island. This novel gives Anishinabe and also po man’s encroachment ha Ojibwa year on the isla harvesting and feasting winter, and celebrating a spiritual encounter with her with a unique “pow
influenced by the white traders, which her people referred to as the Upside-Down-faced people, due to their bearded faces and balding heads. She tells of her original name, Bird Woman, being changed by the white men to “Jancy.” She scoffs at the white warrior chiefs telling the Indian warriors not to fight other nations. How could men become leaders if there was no chance to prove themselves in battle? Later, she points out the irony in the captains’ trading policies; they refused to trade guns and powder for corn, but they were willing to trade battle axes. While the Americans were telling the Indians they were not allowed to fight any longer, they were still making battle axes for them.

The book reveals many of the ways in which Sacajawea was infinitely useful to the explorers, aside from being a translator among nations. She was an excellent navigator and guide. In one instance, when there was little food to be found, she used driftwood to dig through the soft earth along the riverbed and broke through a granary made by harvester mice stuffed with a large mound of edible, round, white roots. She referred to the white men’s journals as “bundles of white leaves sewn together, with strange markings on them.” Sacajawea’s value to those men was immeasurable. On many occasions she helped negotiate peace among the tribes they encountered. As a young woman with a small child, she was a harbinger of peace to many of the Indians who may have been apprehensive about the white men’s approach.

Clark’s accounts also included many cultural conflicts among the Americans and the Native tribes. In one example, the Otoes pleaded with the white men not to whip a man who had tried to desert them; it was not the Indian custom to strike those who did wrong, even children. It was better to kill or exile him than to take away his dignity in a public beating. They did it anyway.

Another interesting cultural phenomenon for the Natives was the sight of York, a black slave who accompanied the crew. Many Indians reacted with fear or curiosity to this man, often trying to rub the blackness off his skin.

I enjoyed this book so much, I could probably write a book myself, praising its worth. There is MUCH to discover about both Indian and non-Indian cultures within the pages of Sacajawea.

The Birchbark House, by Louise Erdrich, is told from the point of view of Omakayas (Little Frog), a young Ojibwa girl growing up on Madeline Island in the mid 1800’s. Called Moningwanaykaning (Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker) by the Ojibwa, this island is the largest of what are now known as the Apostle Islands, off the coast of northern Wisconsin in Lake Superior. I particularly enjoyed reading this book, because I spent two days and nights camping on that island when I attended the Red Cliff Pow Wow.

This novel gives firsthand insight into the traditional lives of the Anishinabe and also poignantly illustrates the devastating effects the white man’s encroachment had upon them. Omakayas provides a picture of a typical Ojibwa year on the island, from the building of a birch-bark house in the summer, harvesting and feasting on wild rice in the fall, living in a cedar log house for the winter, and celebrating spring with maple-sugaring camp. Omakayas has a spiritual encounter with two bear cubs in the woods, which ultimately provides her with a unique “power.” She also adopts an injured crow as a pet, which
protects the family from mice and unwelcome spirits. Along the way the white
people, or “chimookoman,” invade their way of life and bring the deadly smallpox
virus. Two characters in the book die from the disease, and Omakayas spends a
great deal of time nurturing her family back to health.

Erdreich eloquently brings the characters to life, including Omakayas’s
mother, Yellow Kettle, and her siblings: her older and beautiful sister Angelina,
her annoying little brother Pinch, and her infant brother Neewo, whose life is
taken by smallpox. Other significant characters include her father Dey-Dey, who
is often gone on long journeys on the fur trade business, and Old Tallow, a gruff,
powerful, and fiercely independent woman with a pack of dogs. At the end of the
book it is revealed that Old Tallow rescued Omakayas as an infant from Spirit
Island, where she was the sole survivor of a smallpox epidemic brought by the
white man. (On an interesting aside, I am now reading Erdreich’s novel Love
Medicine and have found obvious correlations between some of the characters
in each of these books.)

There is a lot to be learned from this novel regarding Ojibwa customs
and also regarding human nature. Reading the book was both an enriching and
humbling experience for me.

I believe that both of these novels, especially Sacajawea, could be
incorporated into an effective inter-disciplinary unit in a school setting. I plan on
sharing them with my middle-school students, in hopes that they will gain an
insight that I gained from reading them—by exploring the fascinating cultures of the Native Americans, as well as offering an opportunity to re-examine their own culture and its impact on other cultures.

**Diana Mitchell, Sexton High School, Williamston, Michigan**

Jago, Carol. *Nikki Giovanni in the Classroom.*

Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers


Paperback. US$12.95.

*Nikki Giovanni in the Classroom* by Carol Jago pulsates with the life
and exuberance of Giovanni’s work, draws us into the heart of her poetry, and
shows us ways to use her work in our classrooms. With Jago’s approach,
students are not merely studying Giovanni’s poetry, they are experiencing her
poems. They will never forget her style nor the poetic devices she uses to create
powerful impact because they are invited by their teacher to walk around inside of
the poems. Students are led to touch them, to measure them, to see how
they’re put together, to look closely at their interworkings—to KNOW from the
inside out what gives her poems such power as they seek to bring that power to
their own poetry.

Jago’s approach makes us want to be in her classroom, working with
students as they explore poetry and then create poetry of their own. Because
Jago does so many amazing things with Giovanni’s poems, students develop a

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deep knowledge and understanding of her work. They experience her poems by reading them, talking about them, writing in response to them, using her works as writing models, and performing the poems they created from her models.

Giovanni's work informs their own as they grapple with meter, rhythm, metaphor, and language: her work provides the center that they refer back to.

To achieve this high level of engagement, Jago builds on what her students bring to class—in both experience and interest—and respects her students as learners. The "show-don't-tell" approach she encourages in her students' writing is also evident in her own teaching. She "shows" by plunging students into the poems through her careful selection of the poetry she brings to class, through her passion for language, and her curiosity about what makes a good poem tick.

Interspersed throughout this short book are helpful teaching hints such as "remember, REQUIRING students to answer these questions could probably make them hate the poem forever." She recognizes she is teaching real teenagers and doesn't expect them to be something they are not. She doesn't blame them for being who they are, but works to involve them through what she knows of their lives and their interests; theirs is a joyous coming together.

This book, with fifteen Giovanni poems, several excerpts of her essays, and the added bonus of many students' poems written in response to Giovanni's work to use as models, has everything a teacher needs to teach this poetry and involve students in writing their own poems. You are ready to teach Giovanni as soon as you have read this book!
Report of the Commission on Literature

Michael Moore, National Council of Teachers of English

1. Multicultural literature (MCL) is a trend noted by this Commission over many years. This issue was visited again by the 1999 Commission with continuing and additional concerns. When MCL is discussed, it is usually about selection and appropriateness for readers. However, a larger concern is whether or not teachers are dealing with multicultural issues when they teach. Is there a tendency to teach MCL using time-honored strategies that reduce the literature to a series of reading routines without dealing with the multicultural issues and themes? How careful are we with our language when teaching the literature of other cultures? Teaching MCL has the power to transform each of us by making us sensitive to language and issues, yet to what extent is this a valued outcome by our schools and our society? Have we won the MCL wars or are we doing the same thing with MCL that we have done with traditional texts without exploring cultural issues, and have we reduced MCL to the same routines we use with all literature? Is MCL starting to be seen as the literature of victimization? Finally, when reading MCL, we must be aware of both our literal and cultural assumptions.

2. The notion of an NCTE Booklist has been discussed widely by this Commission. The current proposal by the task force appointed by Sheridan Blau has suggested a national book club with three or four books selected each year. The Literature Commission backed the proposal unanimously. It should be noted that the Literature Commission has been behind the discussion of such a club for quite some time and has offered sessions sponsored by the Commission at past conferences.

3. We question the growing influence of the English AP examination and its effect on the high school English curriculum. We have noted at least one state, South Carolina, using the exam for its own accountability and having all of its students take the exam. Additionally, what inroads has MCL made in the English curriculum? Is high school literature instruction affected by college reading lists? We feel that close, critical reading is at the heart of literature teaching and that schools and teachers should feel free to choose what literature will enable her/his learners best.

4. Finally, writing and literature projects have been around for decades. To what extent have these projects impacted instruction? We feel it is time to assess the impact of these various practices and determine their effectiveness. Our fear is that, in spite of knowing better, many in our profession feel powerless to teach any way other than the traditional way in which they themselves were taught.
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