

## **It's Not Just Black and White...** **Exploring Non-White Culture and Experience in Book Clubs**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

When I entered Pennsylvania State University in August of 1990, I was one of the only freshman 101% sure of her major. Love to read, love to write, horrible at math: English major, definitely. My parents, however, were not exactly enamored of this choice. My mother herself had majored in English, and, true to her words, she was a teacher. “You do NOT want to major in English,” she insisted vehemently. “All you can do with an English Major is teach – believe me, I know from experience.”

As far as I was concerned, though, teaching didn't sound that bad. I have always loved school and all its trappings, and, as I grew up, I found I loved working with children as well. I loved the feel of long, cool pieces of fresh chalk in my hands and the sound the slim yellow cylinders made when I wrote on the green chalkboard in my mom's classroom at St. Vincent de Paul Catholic School. I loved the smell of the mimeograph fluid that wafted from the teacher's workroom and into the hallways. I loved banging erasers after school and emptying the pencil sharpeners. I even loved playing school at home, spending hours making my own grade book just like my mom's and entering fictitious names and made-up grades for each student in my “class.”

I also, however, loved the idea of working in television, so I decided to major in Journalism, with an emphasis in broadcast communications, and when I graduated, I began interviewing with CNN. I did phone interviews, submitted writing samples, and took editing tests over the course of several months, my confidence ever increasing. I was convinced that I, Mikey Keating, was going to be offered the opportunity of a lifetime— an entry-level copywriting position at CNN that paid \$17,400 annually. My parents, bedazzled by the prospect of their daughter working for CNN, promised to mail me food on a regular basis.

My fate with CNN was sealed, however, with three little words: Current Events Quiz. During my final phone interview, the Human Resources Manager I was speaking to informed me that a quiz in world news would be the final step in the interview process. Tragically, however, it seemed that in all my fervor to become a news writer at CNN, I had lost track of one tiny thing— news. At 21, although I really wanted to work at CNN, I guess I just hadn't found much time to actually *watch* it.

The quiz started, and I immediately felt more relaxed because I actually knew the first answer. She asked, “Who is the Speaker of the House,” and, with a smug grin I answered, “Newt Gingrich.” From there, the situation went downhill at breakneck speed. After she asked me the Speaker of the House question, she got on a roll with other congressional leaders, and, unfortunately, I had already used my one answer. The conversation went a little something like this:

HR Lady: “Who is the House Majority Leader?”

Me: “Newt Gingrich”

HR Lady: “Who is the House Minority Leader?”

Me: “Newt Gingrich”

HR Lady: “Who is the Majority Whip?”

Me: “Newt Gingrich”

The only other answer I knew I had right was one about O. J. Simpson’s house guest at the time of Nicole Brown Simpson’s murder. Kato Kaelin— nailed that one!

Needless to say, a few days later I was in receipt of my final rejection letter— a dog-eared, faded postcard from CNN letting me know that they wouldn’t be needing my services. I was devastated, but I had to move on— couldn’t live with my parents forever! Instead of journalism, I found myself working in the slightly less glamorous world of Corporate Communications.

After almost ten years in jobs that paid a lot of money but made me miserable, I finally decided that even the huge pay cut I was going to take would be better for me than crying every day before I set off for work. I started my teaching career as a long-term substitute at Walnut Bend Elementary on Houston’s West Side, taking over mid-year for a kindergarten teacher who had to go on bed rest due to her pregnancy. Mrs. Abel’s class and I had a great time that year, gluing and glittering, playing at centers, and even visiting the zoo.

The principal offered me a job as a second grade teacher at the conclusion of the 2002-2003 school year. Thrilled, I quickly set to work planning my first classroom, from the border on the bulletin boards to the books in the library. I was devastated, therefore, when, due to the passage of the famed No Child Left Behind legislation, the job offer was rescinded. I didn’t have enough coursework in my Alternate Certification Program yet to meet the newly-enacted standards set by NCLB. That June, I found myself jobless and in a panic.

Fortunately, though, there was an opening at the only other school where I had ever substitute taught...and I had made a very good impression on the most important individual on any school’s campus: the secretary! After two very quick interviews, I was hired as a sixth-grade literacy teacher at Sidney Lanier Middle School, which is located in the fairly affluent Montrose-Upper Kirby area of Houston. Lanier is a charter school and a magnet school for Vanguard Students with a very diverse and progressive staff and student population.

Statistically, Lanier has a student body of about 1360 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. According to HISD’s profiles for the 2003-2004 school year, student ethnicity can be broken down as follows: 43% White, 31% Hispanic, 16% African American, and 10% Asian. There has been a 0% dropout rate for the past five years, and an average 99% promotion rate during that same period of time.

Academically, however, the student population is not quite as diverse – most are very high achievers regardless of race, creed, color, nationality, or gender. According to the Texas Education Agency, for the 2003-2004 school year, just under 900 of the 1362 students were enrolled at Lanier were in the Gifted and Talented program. In 2004, for example, 87% of sixth graders, 83% of seventh graders, and 90% of eighth graders met the standard (made at least the minimum passing score) on the TAKS Reading Test. Even more impressive, the Writing TAKS Test, administered solely to seventh grade students, was passed by 99% of the students who took it.

The students are not the only high achievers at Lanier, though. The school is also a professional development charter school, so teachers and administrators are challenged constantly

to find, to learn, and to train others in the “next big thing” in any given area of academia. Quite frequently, teachers from other schools both inside and outside of the district visit Lanier to observe and learn best practices.

The literacy department in which I work, in particular, has worked arduously with professional developers and attended Teacher’s College at Columbia University in New York City to learn how to implement reading and writing workshops in our classrooms. We even garnered a mention in literacy guru Donna Santman’s recently published book *Shades of Meaning: Comprehension and Interpretation in Middle School*. On page xviii of the acknowledgment section, Santman writes: “I am also blessed to have spent time in the classrooms of wonderful teachers across the country whose generosity and hard work have been an inspiration. I am particularly grateful to the teachers at Lanier Middle School in Houston... who took on this work with a fury and reminded me that communities of teachers working together can transform schools.”

Despite the overachieving student body and faculty, the longer I teach at Lanier, however, the clearer it has become to me that the majority of my students are only conscious of their own particular experiences, which, for the most part, are typically of the white, upper-middle class variety. I feel it is my job to make sure they learn otherwise.

## UNIT OVERVIEW

Statistically, Mexican Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans make up 90% of HISD’s student population. My school, however, does not fit this paradigm. Lanier Middle School, and more specifically the Vanguard Program in which I teach, has about a 50-50 ratio of whites to all other minorities. Most of my students are affluent, white, and, for the most part, unaware of other cultures and experiences. Their only exposure to non-white culture comes mainly from a steady diet of television, which means that most of them “know” Hispanic culture from watching George Lopez on ABC; African American culture, from hip-hop and R&B music videos and the *Bernie Mac Show* on FOX; and Asian American culture from ... well, since there are no popular shows or recording artists dealing with the Asian Experience, I would imagine most of my students know nothing about it at all, actually.

I am disturbed by this lack of cultural awareness in my students, and I feel it is really a responsibility of mine to help educate students on non-white cultures and experiences. A very effective way for me to teach my students about cultural diversity has always been to place as much “other” literature in front of them as possible. Over the course of the year I challenge myself to find culturally diverse texts to use as read alouds and other touchstone and mentor texts for my students. It is important for me to take the lead in this, as most of my students, if given the choice, would read only books that deal with white, middle-class kids who have lives pretty much like their own. For this reason, my classroom library has books by and about people of myriad religions, cultures, socio-economic levels, sexual orientations, and ethnicities. Similarly, many of my book club sets deal with similarly culturally diverse themes.

Reading culturally diverse texts in community serves myriad purposes. Most obviously, the text itself serves to educate the reader on different lifestyles, cultures, religions, etc. Additionally, within the framework of the book club, students are able to share ideas and interpretations with others. Further, reading texts with a book club often opens up the eyes of students to different ways of thinking and even living that otherwise they might not ever experience. Oftentimes the different perspectives, opinions and insights each member in the book club brings to each text based on diverse life experiences is as educational to other students (and myself) as the text itself.

In a book club, students are tasked not only with reading different selections, but also with making more of the book than what is on the page. This is called: “Looking for the Big Idea.”

The concept of a Big Idea can mean different things to different readers. Some readers translate “Big Idea” to “Specific Issue,” such as racism, classism, sexism, or family issues. Others prefer to look for a big idea in terms of a broader umbrella or “guiding question,” such as “Who has power in this text,” or “What is the author trying to say through this text?” Many different interpretations are valid, as long as the students can support their assertions with textual evidence.

This HTI seminar, “Exploring the Literary Landscape,” couldn’t be a better fit for what I want to teach in my class using book clubs. For this unit of study, students will be able to choose from a variety of books I have already determined lend themselves to this topic to read and discuss in community, or they may choose another book that they feel will fit with this topic.

The books I have selected for use in this unit of study range from books suitable for fifth to seventh grade-level readers to those students who need more of a challenge. The books I have selected at this time include: *The Circuit* by Francisco Jimenez; *Breaking Though* by Francisco Jimenez; *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros; *Buried Onions*, by Gary Soto; *Parrot in the Oven (Mi Vida)*, by Victor Martinez; *Barefoot Heart*, by Elva Trevino Hart; *Hunger of Memory*, by Richard Rodriguez; *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston; *Red Scarf Girl*, by Ji-Li Jiang; *When My Name was Keoko*, by Linda Sue Park; *Finding My Hat*, by John Son; *Chinese Cinderella*, by Adeline Yen Mah; *Bad Boy (A Memoir)*, by Walter Dean Myers; *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ but a Sandwich*, by Alice Childress; *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright; *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, by Maya Angelou; *Persepolis I* and *Persepolis II*, by Marjane Satrapi; and *Behind the Mountains*, by Edwidge Danticat.

During this unit of study, a lot of work will be done by the students in reading and discerning the author/text’s treatment of issues, but the teacher will be responsible for laying the framework for this student work using mini-lessons that demonstrate how to *find* issues in a text, *talk* about issues in a text, *talk long* about issues in a text, *connect* issues in one text with issues in another text and *compare/contrast* an author or text’s treatment of issues with another author or text’s treatment of the same/similar issue (s), and, ultimately, *write* about each of these things. The work in book clubs would prepare students for the end product of the unit of study, which will overlap both the reading and writing classes: a literary analysis essay based on a particular text’s treatment of a particular issue.

## **BOOK CLUBS IN THE CLASSROOM**

But what strange world was this? I concluded the book with the conviction that I had somehow overlooked something terribly important in life. I had once tried to write, had once reveled in feeling, had let my crude imagination roam, but the impulse to dream had been slowly beaten out of me by experience. Now it surged up again and I hungered for books, new ways of looking and seeing. It was not a matter of believing or disbelieving what I read, but of feeling something new, of being affected by something that made the look of the world different. (Wright 249)

Making literacy (and possibly school in general) relevant to contemporary teens is a huge challenge facing educators today. To this end, I have been fortunate in my (albeit brief) teaching career to work with some of the country’s foremost literacy teachers and researchers at Columbia University’s Teachers College. These visionary teachers have given not only me, but thousands of teachers across the country and around the world insight into methods that really work—approaches to teaching literacy that empower students to find meaning and relevance for themselves.

Through book clubs, students are able to delve deeply into books in a community of readers in order to discover and discuss experiences and issues facing many different types of people. If executed correctly, book clubs can improve not only literacy skills such as reading stamina and

comprehension, but also can deepen students' understanding of the world around them and, in the most ideal situations, cause them to act.

One of the advantages of having book clubs in the classroom is the idea of choice. In my classroom, I allow kids not only to help select the members of their club but also to select the books they read from a wide collection of texts. I also allow them to bring in books of their own choosing if they wish, provided I have approved them as appropriate for book club use.

There are many different ways to break students up into book clubs. Some teachers advocate putting students together based on reading levels, while others use a random mix of students to ensure diversity. In my classroom, where choice is key to student buy-in, I allow the students a direct role in the process of club selections.

Very simply, I have them write me a letter detailing the following: who they would like to work with and why; who they would NOT like to work with and why; what they hope to get out of the experience; and, finally, a list of prospective books they would like to read once they get in the club. Allowing kids choice of members works not only in terms of giving them true ownership of their clubs, but also encourages them to make careful decisions—I impress upon them that it might not be wise to work with their best friends if their best friends are the kids who are constantly forgetting their supplies or getting off-topic during class.

For these letters to be of value and benefit in creating diverse, effective book clubs, it is very important to provide examples of what the letter should look and sound like. If left up to their own devices, many students will simply provide a list of their friends (whom they want to work with) and their foes (whom they do not want to work with). I would, therefore, write my own letter to use as an example, and then show the students this letter on the overhead. As a class we would specifically name the items included in my letter, thereby creating a concrete list of expectations for the letter.

If carefully introduced, modeled, and guided, these letters foster the creation of truly powerful and effective clubs. One particularly well-written letter I received this year read as follows:

Dear Ms. Keating,

Four people that I would love to work with are Carol, Kristen, Heidi and Samantha.

I would love to work with Carol because she is really flexible with what she reads, she's easy to work with, and she's always prepared. I also know that because she's easy to work with, there won't be a lot of arguments. I would love to work with Kristen because she tends to read the same books that I like and is pretty much always prepared. She's also in my GSG so I know that I'd work well with her. I would also like to work with Heidi because she's easy to work with and I know that she doesn't talk too much or too little. Finally, I'd love to work with Samantha because she's read a lot of the books that I want to read.

Two people I don't think I'd work well with are Chelsea and Diana. I wouldn't work well with Chelsea because she reads *a lot* faster than me and she likes to be in charge. I wouldn't like to work with Diana because she was in my book club last year. We often had trouble finding books and she's very quiet. There has to be a long silence before she'll chime in.

Five books that I'd like to read are *Razzle* by Eileen Wittlinger, *Night* by Elie Wiesel, *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech, *The Westing Game* by Ellen Raskin, and *Chinese Cinderella* by Adeline Yen Mah.

I hope you really consider my suggestions. You rock!

Erika V.

This letter helped me to create a very effective book club group which, although all-female, featured students of very diverse cultural backgrounds (one member was Asian American, one was Mexican American, and one was African American). It also fostered a sense of ownership among the members because they had a hand in the club's formation.

Once the letters are collected, students can be grouped. It is important to try to have diverse and heterogeneous groups—groups that will most likely have differing opinions and perspectives on topics and issues. There are always a few students whom no one wants in their groups, but this can be overcome by using good judgment and approaching another group to see if they will accept one more member. Students are almost always up to the challenge of accepting a new member, especially if they are pleased with their group and feel they have helped create the club in the first place.

When students are grouped, there is then a question of whether students should have specific roles and responsibilities within the book club or if they can work without them. If I have a group of students that is not very familiar with clubs, I would definitely have them use specific roles in the group, at least for the first few meetings.

There are many different roles that would be appropriate in book clubs. Harvey Daniels' book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* provides an extensive list of roles and role sheets for use by book club members. Some of these include the summarizer (prepares a summary of reading), researcher (digs up background information on any topic related to the book), "word wizard" (notes and looks up unfamiliar words), and the questioner (writes up questions for the group to answer). As the groups get more familiar with the structure and dynamics of the book club, members might decide they want to forego role assigning, but there are some clubs that will keep the roles because they like the structure they provide.

Daniels cautions, however, about allowing clubs to become dependent on roles and pre-made role sheets. He writes, "Once they have experimented with this assortment of roles and had a few successful group meetings, you can phase the role sheets out, replacing them with a reading log. After all, the goal of literature circles is to have natural and sophisticated discussions of literature—and once that is happening, you want to remove any artificial elements immediately" (100).

Once the students are grouped in clubs, they can go about the business of selecting a book to begin reading together. For this unit of study, the books they can choose from are a little smaller than usual, because all of them MUST contain Non-White cultural issues, and most of them are memoirs. A good starting collection would include the following:

### **Mexican-American Experience**

*The Circuit*, by Francisco Jimenez

Reading Level: Elementary – Junior High

Length: 112 pgs

ISBN: 0826317979

This autobiographical book explores the life of Jimenez and his family, who crossed into the United States illegally from Mexico to earn money as migrant workers. While in this country,

Jimenez developed a passion for reading and learning and also became acutely aware of prejudice and ignorance.

*Breaking Through*, by Francisco Jimenez

Reading Level: Elementary – Junior High

Length: 208 pages

ISBN: 0618342486

The sequel to *The Circuit*, this continuation of Jimenez's memoirs follows his family's successes, failures, laughter, and tears following their return to the United States after being deported in 1954.

*The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros

Reading Level: Elementary – Junior High

Length: 110 pages

ISBN: 0679734775

This collection of vignettes from well-known Mexican American writer Sandra Cisneros is almost a staple in most classrooms today. Each carefully crafted vignette tells the story of different inhabitants of run-down tenements on Mango Street in the Hispanic section of Chicago.

*Buried Onions*, by Gary Soto

Reading Level: Junior High – High School

Length: 147 pages

ISBN: 0064407713

This book, while not a true autobiography, reads like one. It is the story of Eddie, who struggles to make ends meet without resorting to drugs, crime, and violence that many of his childhood friends have resorted to.

*Parrot in the Oven (Mi Vida)*, by Victor Martinez

Reading Level: Junior High – High School

Length: 216 pages

ISBN: 0064471861

Victor Martinez won the National Book Award for this book, which chronicles the struggles of 14-year-old Mexican-American Manny Hernandez, who struggles to gain the respect of his family and his peers in a neighborhood in which the only true way to gain respect is to become a member of a gang. Manny tries to resist this way, but his alcoholic father, unreliable brother, and clueless mother certainly don't make his battle easy.

*Hunger of Memory*, by Richard Rodriguez

Reading Level: upper-level Junior High – High School

Length: 195 pages

ISBN: 0553272934

In this collection of controversial essays, Rodriguez explores various aspects, both positive and negative, of his experiences from early childhood to middle age as a Mexican American in California. Rodriguez's views on issues such as affirmative action and bilingual education tend to place him at odds with many people of Latin American descent, which makes this book provocative and ripe for discussion.

*Barefoot Heart: Stories of a Migrant Child*, by Elva Treviño Hart

Reading Level: Junior High

Length: 236 pages

ISBN: 0927534819

This memoir follows Elva Treviño Hart's transformation from the desperately poor daughter of Mexican migrant workers to a six-figure-earning executive to a successful Latina author.

In the story she describes the feelings of loneliness, alienation, and worthlessness that plagued her childhood and part of her early adulthood.

### **Asian American Experience**

*Farewell to Manzanar*, by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston

Reading Level: Elementary – Junior High

Length: 203 pages

ISBN: 0553272586

Author, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston was only 7seven years old when her father was arrested and sent to a prison camp in North Dakota on suspicion of being a Japanese spy and the rest of her family uprooted from the San Francisco area and forced to live at the Manzanar Internment camp along with 10,000 Japanese Americans. This book details the struggles the family endured while living in the camp as well as the bittersweet emotions upon their release from internment.

*When My Name was Keoko*, Linda Sue Park

Reading Level: Junior High – High School

Length: 196 pages

ISBN: 0618133356

Newbery-Award winning author Linda Sue Park draws upon the recollections of her own family's experiences in this novel, which details the lives of Sun-Hee and her family during World War II in Japanese-occupied Korea. During this time, Korean can only be spoken in private homes, never in public, and icons of Korean life, such as the flag and other symbols are forbidden. The Japanese Emperor even decrees that all citizens must take Japanese names, and Sun-Hee becomes Kaneyama Keoko.

*Red Scarf Girl*, Ji-Li Jiang

Reading Level: Junior High – High School

Length: 285 pages

ISBN: 0060275855

Ji-Li Jiang was twelve years old in 1966, the year the Cultural Revolution began in China. This was a time of fear and suspicion in China, when friends and sometimes family members could turn in people they believed to be disloyal to Chairman Mao. Both her father and uncle were detained on false charges, leaving their families anxiously waiting for their safe return, which in many cases during that era never came.

*Chinese Cinderella: The True Story of An Unwanted Daughter*, Adeline Yen Mah

Reading Level: Junior High –High School

Length: 203 pages

ISBN: 0440228654

This book is set in Shanghai and Hong Kong. Because her mother died in childbirth, Adeline Yen Mah's family considers her a curse. When her father remarries, life gets even more difficult for Adeline and her siblings, who must live in the shadows of their spoiled step brothers and sisters.

*Finding My Hat*, John Son

Reading Level: Elementary – Junior High

Length: 184 pages

ISBN: 0439435390

Although this book is not a true memoir, the author's note lets the reader know that many of the scenes are indeed autobiographical. This book follows main character Sun-Jin Park's life in 1970s America after emigrating to the U.S. with his parents from Korea in search of a better life.



## **African American Experience**

*Bad Boy, A Memoir*, by Walter Dean Myers

Reading Level: Elementary – Junior High

Length: 206 pages

ISBN: 0439823196

Myers is the well-known and well-respected African American author of young adult novels such as *Monster*, *Hoops* and *Fallen Angels*. His memoir recounts his coming-of-age in 1940s Harlem, where he says he was known as a “bad boy” from a very early age.

*A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, by Alice Childress

Reading Level: Junior High – High School

Length: 150 pages

ISBN: 0698118545

This work of fiction explores the struggles of young men growing up in Harlem. It is told from several different perspectives, ranging from Benjie, the main character, an African American high schooler who becomes addicted to heroin, to Walter, Benjie’s pusher, to Nigeria Green, a militant African American teacher at the same school.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, by Maya Angelou

Reading Level: Upper Junior High – High School

Length: 304 pages

ISBN: 0553279378

This book, the first in Angelou’s five-volume autobiography, chronicles her difficult and life-shaping early life in 1930s America, from when she was sent to live with her grandmother in Arkansas until her early adulthood in California.

**Black Boy**, by Richard Wright

Reading Level: Junior High – High School

Length: 384 pages

ISBN: 0060929782

In this lengthy memoir, Wright recalls his earliest days growing up in the brutally racist South where he lived with his staunchly religious grandmother and mother after his father deserts the family for another woman. Wright is parceled from one relative to another when his mother takes ill until he finally escapes the south for Chicago and a life of his own.

## **Miscellaneous Experience**

*PERSEPOLIS: The Story of a Childhood*, by Marjane Satrapi

Reading Level: Upper Junior High – High School

Length: 153 pages

ISBN: 0375422307

*PERSEPOLIS II: The Story of a Return*, by Marjane Satrapi

Reading Level: Upper Junior High – High School

Length: 187 pages

ISBN: 0375422889

These autobiographical graphic novels follow Satrapi’s trials and tribulations first as a rebellious adolescent girl growing up in Iran during the 1970s, during a period of extreme civil unrest and then following her move (without her family) first to France and then to the United States.

*Behind the Mountains*, by Edwidge Danticat

Reading Level: Junior High – High School

Length: 224 pages

ISBN: 0439372992

This first person narrative is told from the point of view of Celiane, a thirteen-year-old Haitian girl. She recounts her family's experiences emigrating to New York City from Haiti to join their father, who fled the country five years earlier.

Once the groups are assembled and the books are selected, all that's left to do is launch the unit – which can certainly seem a daunting task. It's really not that difficult, however, if you begin with a series of mini-lessons on *how to be* in a book club, followed by a series of mini-lessons on *what to do* in a book club. This way, students know early on what is expected of them in the book club, and then more instructional time can be devoted to helping them get more out of the texts they are reading and to helping them craft a literary essay from their book club work.

Because my students are seventh graders and the entire literacy department at Lanier has book clubs in the classroom, I would probably not need that many lessons on *how to be* in a book club; conversely, most of my lessons would focus more on increasing the depth and complexity of the clubs' conversations in order to ensure a focus on issues across texts. A large component of this work will involve writing about reading in order to explore issues more fully. The series of mini-lessons in this curriculum unit is aimed at supporting more insightful and thoughtful work within the book club to ensure the same kind of work quality in a literary analysis essay.

## **LESSON PLANS**

As stated earlier, the lesson plans included in this curriculum unit would be aimed at helping students create their own literary analysis essays. They will be using the work they are doing in their book clubs to help them to develop a thesis for these papers, find text evidence to support this thesis, and, finally, to write the paper itself. The first several mini-lessons might go as follows.

### **Lesson One: Stopping and Jotting**

#### ***Teaching Point***

Powerful readers find issues in their texts by stopping and jotting ideas as they read.

#### ***Materials Needed***

Short excerpt from a culturally diverse text such as one of the books discussed earlier in this unit, copies of that excerpt for the entire class, overhead of the excerpt, Reader's Notebook

#### ***Mini-Lesson***

This lesson, of course, is based upon the assumption that kids are already well-versed in *how book clubs go* and would be the first in a series of lessons aimed at getting kids to read their texts with a more critical eye in search of issues. For the lesson, I would select an excerpt from a text that I know has several issues that will be easy to identify.

One text I have used in the past is *The Briefcase*, by Walter Dean Myers, which is part of the compilation *Twelve Shots: Outstanding Short Stories about Guns*, compiled by Harry Mazer. This short story, although not a memoir, tells the compelling tale of a young African American bicycle messenger in New York City who feels looked down upon by the more upscale and urbane blue-collar people (both black and white) who ride the same subway he does each day on the way to work. When he finds a gun, he seems to have found the answer to his problems, and the rest of the story is spent waiting to see whether or not he uses the gun to take out his anger and frustration on the subway patrons. Because the story very obviously takes on the issues of

race relations, socio-economic class and gun control, it is a good fit for this set of lessons. There is also the added bonus that it is by Walter Dean Myers, one of the authors included in the book club sets in my classroom. Oftentimes after hearing *The Briefcase*, students cannot wait to pick up another piece of Myers's writing.

For this lesson, I would explain to the students that a lot of times there are issues hiding in our texts that we might not think about when we first start reading, and that one of the ways we can find those issues is by stopping and jotting. I would place an excerpt from *The Briefcase* on the overhead and also give a copy of the same excerpt to the students. I would then begin reading the excerpt aloud, stopping in a few places at pre-determined spots in the text to think aloud and jot down ideas or questions I am having about the characters, text, issues, connections, etc. right onto the overhead.

The things I jot would just be simple statements or phrases, for example: "This kid seems to have a chip on his shoulder because he thinks everyone's looking down on him," "He talks in slang," and "I think there might be a lot of violence in his neighborhood because they don't think it's a big deal a kid got shot on the street."

After reading a few paragraphs and jotting a few things down, I would have the students continue the work a bit more on their own copies of the excerpts, and then during independent work time encourage them to use the "stop and jot" strategy when reading book club books. Students could then discuss this work with their clubs during their next meeting. At the end of this class, students should place the excerpt in their Reader's Notebook, because they will be using it for the next few lessons.

## **Lesson Two: Taking Inventory**

### ***Teaching Point***

Powerful Readers take inventory of what they have written down using the "stop and jot" strategy from previous class.

### ***Materials***

Same overhead and copies of excerpts from previous class, including the information that was "jotted" down, Reader's Notebook.

### ***Lesson***

At the beginning of this mini-lesson I would refer to the previous mini-lesson, reminding students of what we did previously. I would say something along the lines of: "Last class, we learned that sometimes there are ideas hiding in our text that we have to find, and that one way we can get to those issues is by stopping and jotting." I would then move into the new work of this mini-lesson, which would involve looking back over what we wrote, and determining if there are any issues lurking in the text that this work uncovered.

To do this, I would, on the overhead once again, read over what I wrote the last time we met. While reading over what I had written, I would be thinking aloud for the students, explaining issues I see in my work. Basically, I would be trying to take the sentences/phrases I had written last class and trying to capture their meanings in one or two words.

For example, where I had written, "This kid seems to have a chip on his shoulder because he thinks everyone's looking down on him," I might think aloud, "Okay. I see here that I wrote down, 'This kid seems to have a chip on his shoulder because he thinks everyone's looking down on him,' at this point in the text, and then I wrote down how he uses a lot of slang, so I'm thinking that he might be poor or maybe not that educated, and he feels inferior. That makes me think that socio-economic status or "rich vs. poor" might be an issue in this text." Then, using

another overhead, I would show the students how to record those ideas using a double-sided list in my Reader's Notebook. Following is how the beginning of such a list might look:

| Issue                                    | What in the text makes me think this  |
|--|---|
| Socio-economic status<br>(rich vs. poor) | Pg. 7: "You coming home from work and everything and you tired and you don't need nobody just dissing you for nothing, right? You a bike messenger don't mean you ain't people."  |
| Race relations                           | Pg. 8: "Can't you turn that radio down some?" he says. This guy is tall and brown skinned and carrying a briefcase like he think he somebody."<br><br>Pg. 8: "Half the people around us was white and that's why I think he dissed me. You know, some brothers like to diss black people in front of whites. That's how they get they thing off." |

I would have the kids copy this list into their notebooks, and then give them some time to see if they could add to my list using their own stop and jots from the prior class. We would then add those to this list on the overhead and in their notebooks. I would encourage the class also to use this strategy to take inventory of their jottings from previous work in their book club books as well.

### **Lesson Three: Writing Long about an Issue**

#### ***Teaching Point***

Powerful readers write long about an issue they find in their texts.

#### ***Materials***

Same overhead and copies of excerpts from previous class, including the information that was "jotted" down and the subsequent list of issues generated, Reader's Notebook.

#### ***Lesson***

This lesson is aimed at getting students to do more thoughtful work about a particular issue they have found in a text they have been reading as a book club. Many times, by reflecting their texts through writing, students gain greater insight into a particular issue. Writing about an issue or an author or text's treatment of this issue can also allow students to explore more deeply their own feelings about it.

For this lesson, I would again remind students of work we had done in previous classes finding and naming issues in our texts. I would then refer to the list of issues I had created the previous class on the overhead and model thinking aloud for the students what issue I might want to develop or explore more deeply. I would then write for the students a sample entry in my Reader's Notebook about a particular issue. This entry could go one of two ways. One way, which is probably easier and might be better at this early stage of the unit, would be to just write personal thoughts or experiences on a particular issue.

An alternate entry might involve taking an actual quote from the text and writing about how that particular quote made the students feel about a particular issue. This entry would be a bit more complex than the first entry discussed, as it would require students to find textual evidence to support their ideas about an issue.

It might make sense, depending on the length of the unit, to make use of two different class periods to do this lesson. During the first lesson on writing about an issue, you could simply write about an issue and your personal feelings about it. In the second lesson, then, you could take this concept of writing about an issue deeper by adding text evidence to support your ideas about what the text might be saying about a particular issue. This usually proves more difficult for students as it requires that they think critically about a text's message as opposed to simply stating a personal opinion about something.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Guide to forming, managing, and assessing student book clubs.

Santman, Donna. *Shades of Meaning: Comprehension and Interpretation in Middle School*. New York: Heinemann, 2005.

This book tells how to run a rigorous and successful reading workshop in a middle school classroom.

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1998.

Wright's recollections and reflections on growing up black in violently racist 1920s Mississippi.

### Supplemental Resources

#### Literacy Reference Books

Bomer, Randy. *Time for Meaning: Crafting Literate Lives in Middle and High School*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1995.  
Insight into making literacy instruction meaningful for young adults.

Calkins, Lucy McCormick. *The Art of Teaching Reading*. New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, 2001.  
Calkins, one of America's leading literacy educators, explains the rationale behind teaching literacy in a workshop format, and shows how to do it.

Tovani, Chris. *I Read it, But I Don't Get it: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers*. Portland: Stenhouse Publishers, 2000.

Advice and lesson suggestions to help young adults develop reading and comprehension skills.

#### Student Books

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

This book, the first in Angelou's five-volume autobiography, chronicles her difficult and life-shaping early experiences in 1930's America.

Childress, Alice. *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*.

Fictional story of 8<sup>th</sup> grader Benjie's attempts to kick a heroin habit and make the "right choices" in 1960's Harlem.

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.

Series of vignettes set in Mexican-American inhabited tenements in Chicago.

Danticat, Edwidge. *Behind the Mountains*. New York: Orchard Books, 2002.

First person account of a teenage girl's emigration to New York City from Haiti.

Hart, Elva Trevino. *Barefoot Heart: Stories of a Migrant Child*. Tempe: Bilingual Review Press, 1999.

Elva Trevino Hart chronicles her life from her earliest years as an impoverished migrant worker's daughter to successful Latina author.

Houston, Jeanne Wakatsuki and James D. Houston. *Farewell to Manzanar*. New York: Bantam Books, 1973.

Wakatsuki details her family's life in the Manzanar Internment Camp in Long Beach, California from 1942 – 1945.

Jiang, Ji-Li. *Red Scarf Girl (A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution)*. New York: Harper Trophy, 1997.

Jiang's memoir of growing up during China's bloody and tumultuous Cultural Revolution from 1966-1969.

Jimenez, Francisco. *The Circuit*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001.

Memoir of a migrant worker growing up in California in the 1940's and 1950's.

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Sequel to *The Circuit*; further adventures of Francisco Jimenez and his family following their return to the United States from Mexico.
- Mah, Adeline Yen. *Chinese Cinderella: The True Story of an Unwanted Daughter*. New York: Laurel Leaf Books, 1999.  
Adeline Mah's family considers her bad luck after her mother dies giving birth to her in 1940's Shanghai and Hong Kong.
- Martinez, Victor. *Parrot in the Oven (Mi Vida)*. New York: Harper Trophy, 1996.  
Story of fourteen-year-old Manny Hernandez coming of age in the gang-riddled streets of L.A.
- Mazer, Harry, editor. *Twelve Shots: Outstanding Short Stories about Guns*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Books, 1997.  
Collection of contemporary short stories dealing with guns and gun-related issues. Authors include Walter Dean Myers, Chris Lynch and Richard Peck.
- Myers, Walter Dean. *Bad Boy – A Memoir*. New York: Scholastic Books, 2001.  
Memoir of an award-winning author's life growing up in Harlem in the 1940's and 1950's.
- Park, Linda Sue. *When My Name was Keoko*. New York: Clarion Books, 2002.  
Fiction. Story of Sun-hee and her older brother Tae-yul growing up in Japanese-occupied South Korea during World War II.
- Rodriguez, Richard. *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. New York: Bantam Books, 1982.  
In this collection of controversial essays, Rodriguez explores various aspects, both positive and negative, of his experiences from early childhood to middle age as a Mexican-American in California.
- Satrapa, Marjane. *Persepolis I*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2003.  
This autobiographical graphic novel chronicles Satrapa's coming of age in the tumultuous 1970's in Iran.
- . *Persepolis II*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2004.  
Sequel to *Persepolis*.
- Son, John. *Finding My Hat*. New York: Scholastic Books, 2003.  
John Son's semi-autobiographical story of his family's adventures in the United States after emigrating from Korea in the 1970's.
- Soto, Gary. *Buried Onions*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997.  
Fiction. Story of nineteen-year-old Eddie, a Mexican American trying to make it on his own in the barrios of Fresno.
- Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1998.  
Wright's recollections and reflections on growing up black in violently racist 1920s Mississippi.

Itâ€™s black and white. Thereâ€™s right and wrong. â€” Joe Wurzelbacher 4. Life is about the gray areas. Things are seldom black and white, even when we wish they were and think they should be, and I like exploring this nuanced terrain. â€” Emily Giffin 5. Life is not black and white; there is some gray nuance to it. â€” Pilou Asbaek 6. There are infinite shades of grey.â€” You just wear black and white, what could be better? One less thing to worry about. â€” Anderson Cooper 29. Law in Ukraine is not black and white; it is shades of gray. â€” Brandon Webb 30.â€” â€” Ted Grant 41. Books bring alluring colors to our mundane black and white world. â€” Caleb Reese 42. It is not that Shakespeareâ€™s art is in technicolor and fancy, and that real life is black and white and tedious. Nowadays, it is an established subject on US campuses, spanning some 400 programmes, departments and institutions.â€” He argues against the "provincialism" of US black studies, and in his books *The Black Atlantic* and *Against Race* he explores the transnational identity forged by blacks in Britain, North America and the Caribbean.â€” "That diversity raises different questions." Brazil is challenging simple black-white racial categorisation, Small says, chiefly the so-called "rule of hypodescent", under which everyone who is partly black is defined as black.â€” There has already been a fall in black and Hispanic enrolment at institutions in California, where a state-level measure outlawed affirmative action several years ago.