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May 10, 2014

Writing to Enjoy Reading in Nonfiction

My unit of study is focusing on non-fiction for young adults. I chose non-fiction because it seems to be the most influential type of literature. Yes, people of all age ranges, ethnic groups, and economical backgrounds use plenty of other genres like fantasy, fiction, science-fiction, horror, and various other genres to escape from reality. However, I personally feel that understanding the reality of the world through the eyes of others can dramatically affect the lives of those who read non-fiction. My primary goal is to break the mindset that non-fiction is not fun or is boring and just informative. Instead, I want to promote the adventure and passion that is incorporated in each piece of non-fiction. The center piece that I would like to use for my unit of study is *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin. The reason that I chose *The Fire Next Time* is because I feel that it is extremely important for these students, being younger, have a chance to understand the importance of appreciation.

Though *The Fire Next Time* is quite the impacting read, I would not jump into this book from the get go. Instead, I will use the book *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction* by authors Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz. This book gives thorough guidelines in developing a creative nonfiction writer. The reason I've decided to use a book that teaches how to write is because I believe that literature is appreciated more if the one reading it understands the different elements that are incorporated into each piece. The students will understand that the books they're reading aren't just words that form a story, but, the book that they're reading holds

a special influence from the author. The students will write several memoirs to help them find their voice in writing; memoirs are a unique way to express yourself in a manner where those who read it will be able to wield a piece of who you are. I feel that it is important for the students to experience different types of praise and criticism from their works; this will help them develop their own unique writing style. Inside of *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction* there are twenty-eight contemporary memoirs. These memoirs are not of great length, but, each of the memoirs holds a different story compromised of a specific writing style created by the author. Since these memoirs are so short it would give motivation for those who are not too fond of reading a break; I don't want to push the students away from reading by presenting them a book that is plentiful of pages. Alongside with each memoir, the students will be required to read the information presented about the author. I feel that this will help the student understand the depth of meaning to the memoir better.

Throwing the Bone: How to Grasp Their Interest

- The introduction is the most important part for these students. If the material is dry and boring then the entire lesson plan is of no use. With that in mind, I've pondered on the question "what is interesting for these students?" The answer that I came up with is that they are most infatuated with themselves and their social surroundings. Meaning, that if the material that is presented to them is relatable then the desire to read will be heightened. The best material to give them is their peer's work; their peers are who they associate themselves with every day. Although the students spend time together at school for about eight hours a day, what happens after the bell rings is of the unknown to the majority. Furthermore, understanding where a peer comes from (their background or

childhood) might supply answers to questions that may occur about their peers when writing about:

- Childhood memories
 - Tragic events that have happened
 - The funniest moments of their lives
 - Where their parents were raised
 - Cultural backgrounds
 - Places that they've traveled
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- Getting to know these variables of someone that you're close to is interesting. Being able to expand your stories through this writing gives your peers an idea of who you are. With this said the students will develop their own memoir that they will pass on to their peers. This assignment won't be graded on the way that it is written but the fact that effort was actually put into the assignment.

Fueling their Fire: How to Keep Their Interesting

- Giving positive feedback about their writing is essential. Letting the student know that their writing has potential will push the students into wanting to write more. By pushing the students into wanting to write more the desire to enhance their writing awakens. The most prominent way to learn how to write is by reading scholarly material. By reading material that is written professionally and well developed the adaptation to writing well will form. Also, by reading material that I well developed the comprehension for how that piece was written starts to birth the voice of these new writers.

- Once these students realize the worth of the material that is being presented to them, the matter of appreciation for literature will develop. By introducing the different varieties in writing elements that are presented in *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction*, the students will absorb the different writing styles that are used in the memoirs that are being read; by absorbing these different writing styles the students will develop their own unique writing voice.

The Trained: Writing With a Voice

- After reading the various types of memoirs, the students will be given the assignment to write another memoir. They must write a memoir that is different from the first one. With this memoir the students will be asked to write as descriptive as they can; this will reveal to me which students have developed their voice. After I've been convinced that all students developed their voices then I will be able to introduce *The Fire Next Time*; after the students have their own voice, this will show me that their comprehension level for reading is at the level that I feel will be comfortable to grasp the different concepts that James Baldwin incorporates in *The Fire Next Time*.

The Treat: Reading the Masterpiece

- Now that the class understands the importance in the element of writing, *The Fire Next Time* will be a respected as we read. Since the students will know what their voices and their classmates voices sound like on paper, depicting the tone of Baldwin's essays will be at hand to comprehend. This is important because the students will understand the

method that Baldwin uses to create this masterpiece. They will also learn the importance of history and the significance of the material that Baldwin uses as he writes.

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. *The Fire next Time*. New York: Dell, 1963. Print.

Perl, Sonda, and Mimi Schwartz. *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction*.
Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Print.

Texts and Summaries covered in the Unit

Andre Aciman, *Out of Egypt* – the author, now an American grows up in a hilarious Jewish family living in exile in 20th century Egypt.

Max Apple, *Roommates* – a wise curmudgeon of a grandfather shares the author's room, physically and spiritually, for 104 years , and beyond.

Russel Baker, *Growing up* – a funny and poignant account of a lazy boy with a pushy mother growing up during the Depression.

Peter Balakian, *Black Do of Father* – a New Jersey boy grows up in the silences of his family's memories of the Armenian Holocaust – and sets out to uncover what happened.

Kim Barnes, *Out of the Wilderness* – a coming-of-age memoir about a daughter's struggle to find herself in a Pentecostal household in Idaho – and what it takes to leave that life.

Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* – a story that spans three generations of women in one Chinese family: the first, a concubine: the second, an ardent Maoist; the third, a freedom-seeking writer who leaves China to better understand all of their lives.

Nien Cheng, *Life and Death in Shanghai* - One woman's struggle to survive the Cultural Revolution in China with dignity and still save herself and her family.

Jull Ker Conway, *Road from Coorain* – a moving account of a childhood in the Australian outback and how a family, intent on doing everything right, struggles and often fails.

Cathy N. Davidson, *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* – an American goes to Japan to teach English for a year and brings back wonderful cross-cultural insights.

Magda Denes, *Castles Burning* – a Hungarian family survives the holocaust in hiding and then spends two years as displaced persons in post-war Europe.

Helen Epstein, *Where She Came From* – a look at three generations of Jewish women from Eastern Europe and the legacy they bequeath to the writer, their American-born descendent.

Lucy Grealy, *Autobiography of a Face* – a book of courage about coming to terms with issues of beauty when you've had cancer of the jaw as an eight-year-old.

Donald Hall, *String Too Short to Be Saved* – one of our leading poets and essayists describes summers on his grandparents' New Hampshire farm, detailing portraits of New England life and values.

Patricia Hampl, *A Romantic Education* – a quest to discover family roots in Prague, Czechoslovakia, and the surprising connection to past and present that can emerge on such a journey.

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* – a book about the legacy of the past on a Chinese-American girl who grows up in California

Primo Levi, *Survival at Auschwitz* – a look at the human spirit and what it takes to survive the most inhumane of conditions, told by a survivor who became one of the key writers about the holocaust.

Bret Lott, *Fathers, Sons, and Brothers* – a wonderful Entrée into everyday family life told from a male perspective about fathers, sons, and brothers.

James McBride, *The Color of Water* – a young man's story of growing up in Harlem, one of 12 children of a white Jewish mother and a black father; told in two voices; one the son, one the mother.

Fran McCourt, *Angela's Ashes* – a coming-of-age story set in Limerick, Ireland; it's the rhythmic voice that makes this story of family love and dire poverty so powerful.

Sue Miller, *The Story of My Father* – a daughter's struggle with her father's Alzheimer's disease that offers comfort to anyone struggling with parental loss.

Mary Morris, *Nothing to Declare* – a travel memoir about the stress of leaving America to live alone for one year in San Miguel, Mexico.

Ann Patchett, *Truth and Beauty* – an honest portrayal of the competition and rocky friendship between the author and her fellow writer Lucy Grealy.

Richard Rodriguez, *The Hunger for Memory* – a look at what is lost and what is gained when a working-class, Spanish-speaking child adopts English and moves into mainstream American life.

Lauren Slater, *Welcome to My Country* – an examination of the relationships between psychotherapist and her schizophrenic patients told with understandings by someone who has known mental illness firsthand.

Abraham Verghese, *My Own Country* – the story of an American-trained doctor from India who travels to Tennessee to treat AIDS patients.

Bruce Weigl, *The Circle of Hanh; A Memoir* – an account of how being a young soldier in Vietnam shaped the life of a poet and man.

Geoffrey Wolff, *Duke of Deception* – a boy gradually finds out that the father he adores is a self-destructive con man. A great companion piece to brother Tobias Wolff's, *The Boy's Life*. You see the same family from two perspectives, a rare treat in memoir.

Tobias Wolff, *The Boy's Life* – After the family splits up, one son and mother leave father and brother behind and head west for a fresh start and a new identity that keeps eluding them.

Example of Memoir

The Move

SLAM!!! I jolt my head out of my sleeping bag and a combination of sensations envelope my eleven year old mind into confusion; the frigid and sticky air is scented with the lumber of our fort, the intense light illuminating from the magnum flashlight stings my eyes after being in an abyss of darkness, and the uproar of the hatch door forces its way into the belly of the wall. But it's one sound in particular, a voice, that instantly makes all that which resides inside my chest quake, like the Earth from thunder. It's my pops as he yells, "Where are they!"

A few days prior to the ass beating of a lifetime, my family had just arrived to Disneyland. It's funny how the "happiest place on Earth" becomes one of the most disgusting memories in your mind's vault – all because of the goddamned sunshine.

The sun was dripping its rays into my eyes. People who aren't from California would consider this the "perfect weather." But to a Californian, it was just another hot-fucking-day. My pops had told me to come with him to get drinks for the family, so we walked across the asphalt jungle. How great is this? My own pops is finally starting to like me... or so I thought.

Being from Washington State you either love the sun or hate it. I preferred to have that blanket of clouds constantly covering that damned sun. Being in the raining rays of sunlight, it's only natural for one to arch their eyebrows and look like NWA's Ice Cube. But I guess my pops and I weren't on the same page. He interjected "Why aren't you happy?" as a statement and as I looked at him with the sun spitting into my eyes, he hit me with a jab to the stomach. At this moment the old man made me feel like Roy Jones Jr. being uppercut by Mike Tyson. I felt the wind being forced out of me and gasped for air like an old man wheezing. My knee hit the

ground as gravity increased from the lack of oxygen. I looked up at him and asked him “What the fuck was that for?” This was my first time cursing in front of my pops. However, I didn’t really give a shit. Being struck out of nowhere would put any pre-teen, with teetering hormones, in a pissed off mood. I was more than pissed off though: I was engulfed by the hate that had manifested from all the years of being his little punching bag. This trip was the only time that I was finally able to bond with my siblings; I wasn’t considered the “little bitch” – I never wanted to have anything to do with the trouble that they were getting into, because as a result of their fuck up, I was the one that got the ass whooping. – I stood up and felt the eyes from all those who strolled by gazing in the heated circumference of my pops and me. Those eyes had an infinite fixation like the vultures that soar over a lion’s fresh kill. I never felt so in control. I thought to myself, “What’s he gonna do now? There’s no way that he’d hit me in public.” For that moment in time, I had won. However, that didn’t mean that it’d be forgotten. The next three days I held my head real high. Although, I never did “act out” because good behavior had been engraved into my very persona from all the years it was beat into me. Besides, the look in his eye churned my stomach. It was worse than when I was eight and he made me watch “The Exorcist” before I went out trick or treating.

Finally we’d arrived home on a Friday evening around 5’clock after a long quiet drive. It only took us an hour to unpack the trailer and all of our clothes from our luggage. My older brother Branden had convinced our “precious” little brother Bradley, the “cute little baby,” to ask our parents if we could sleep in our fort in the backyard. With no hesitation my pops said “Of course Bradley.” Bradley’s a year younger than I, making him the youngest of us siblings. My father cherishes him the most: To this day Bradley is confined to the concrete walls of Oregon State Penitentiary, but that doesn’t stop my father from seeing him every weekend.

At this time Branden and my older sister Cathy bolted up the stairs. In my curiosity I slowly walked up the stairs to see what they were up to. In my head I was thinking “these niggas are too old to be that excited about sleeping in the fort.” So I sneaked around the corner of the room so that I could hear them talking. All that I could make out of their conversation was that they were sneaking out after Bradley and I fell asleep. I popped into the room after they said that. They both looked at me blankly. They knew that I’d heard them. My face flushed red as I asked them not to do whatever it is that they were going to do. In reply Branden said “shut up Ben.” I wasn’t going to snitch or anything because that’s not how I did things. On a normal day of them doing something fucked up, I’d preach my soul out to them that it was a bad idea. Not today. Today I wanted to feel love from my siblings. I wanted to feel like I was one of them. So I kept my mouth shut and walked over to my room to get my green sleeping bag and Game Boy.

We are all laying down in the fort now. Our fort was made by Branden, Bradley, Pops, and me. It was the most precious thing all of us had made together. The fort stood a little bit under two stories. Bradley and I climbed up the ladder, through the hatch, turned on the light, and rolled out our sleeping bags. Bradley and I laid on the yellow mat in the corner that was the size of a full mattress. After everyone was tucked in Branden turned off the fluorescent light on the ceiling. As I was dozing off, I said faintly to Branden and Cathy, “Please, don’t go.”

My father yelled “Get your ass in the house!” In the haze of waking up Bradley climbed down first with his blanket in his hand and I followed down after him. The moment my foot left the ladder my father slapped me to the concrete ground. The weeds that broke through the concrete slabs tickled my cheek and I thought to myself, “nigga you should’ve pulled these weeds up.” I pushed myself up from the ground and jogged my ass into the house hoping that I

wouldn't be caught in the line of fire again.

I walked through the dining room and into the family room; I always loved the smell of the family room; (I don't quite know how to explain this smell, but everyone has a distinct smell of their home.) Bradley and I sat on separate ends of the grey couch. This couch was real comfy; it was a plush-corduroy couch that had three cushions, all which were worn in by the ass of each child as we played our Nintendo consoles for countless hours.

My mom was standing in the hallway waiting for my pops to come inside. Pops came around the corner into the family room and swung fists like a pendulum to the left and right side of my body. I curled into the fetal position and put my arms up to guard my head. I had the idea that this was going to stop after a couple of seconds but like a clock this berserk pendulum didn't miss a swing. I looked over at my little brother and all he could do was watch me. There was no expression on his face. Then, I looked over at my mom hoping that the woman would come over and pull pops away from me, but she stood there and stared through us. I thought to myself "What did I do wrong?" over and over again. I finally turned numb; a combination of the pain being inflicted by my father's strikes slowly severed all emotions and feelings towards my family. "Why am I always the outcast?" I thought and then I started to cry silently as I asked myself "Why doesn't my family love me?"

My mother finally snapped out of whatever daze she'd been in and pulled pops off of me. She told Bradley and me to go upstairs and go to sleep. I ran upstairs and jumped up into my bunk bed. I didn't whimper or snifle because I didn't want Bradley to think I was a bitch. I continued to cry silently to sleep. The next morning, my mom woke me up telling me that I have five minutes to pack because we're leaving.