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Identity and Literature: Using Contemporary Realistic Fiction to Give Perspective to Adolescents

Rationale

Young adults are constantly faced with both academic and personal preassures; these preassures comes from a wide range of sources. Whether this preassure is being applied by parents, peers, teachers, or themselves, they often find themselves struggling to decide on their own what they believe to be right. It seems that many internalize this struggle, and on their journey to figure out who they are (and who they will be as an adult), they are too afraid o too proud to ask for guidance. Literature has endess benefits for humans, but perhaps the most important for today's adolescents is the affordance of this guidance. The genre of contemporary realistic literature selflessly gives young people the chance to receive guidance in a non-judgemental way; it has the ability to teach adolescents about the world, and more importantly, about themselves. Writers such as Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Homer have so much to teach about life and humanity, but many young adults have trouble relating to the setting of the works of these great authors; a reluctant reader may struggle with the language alone, and in turn they may quickly judge these works to be outdated and therefore unimportant. Writers of contemporary realistic fiction solve this problem by using settings which a young reader can relate to. Young readers can place themselves in a story, which gives them both a sense of familiarity and a sense of curiosity as to which paths characters will take. Inevitably, and perhaps

subconciously, adolescents will begin to think about what path they themselves would take in a given situation. This is exactly where a love of reading can begin for many students. A reluctant reader can notice a character trait, a location, or an event that he or she identifies with and with that simple recognition, a desire to read is ignited. Contemporary realistic fiction plays with this notion, drawing attention by using realistic (and recognizable) settings and characters. Great contemporary fiction, though, contains so much more than a great plot. Novels such as *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien and *I Will Save You* by Matt De La Pena contain thought provoking themes that do not explicitily teach a lesson about how to live life but instead provide ideas (thematically) for students to consider and make sense of on their own. Teachers can aid in this process greatly, both by presenting students with good material and by suggesting ways in which students can begin to analyze content.

My unit of study revolves around the notion and formation identity. A theme of identity sounds vague enough that it could be pulled out of almost any piece of literature if analyzed through the right lens, which could be a good or bad thing in a classroom. The novels I've chosen to incorporate in this unit of study address what it is that makes up an identity. An exceptionally wide range of students can find something in the included texts to which they can relate to, including English language learners, women, students with mental (or physical) handicaps, and so on. If given guidance through literature early enough, students will see that *they* are the ones in control of who they will become one day, regardless of the niche that they've been put in by an outside source.

My canonical centerpiece for this unit is Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried,* which I've chosen to pair primarially with Matt De La Pena's novel *I Will Save You.* Both of these texts contain great stories and realistic characters and settings. Though the plots of the two texts are

extremely different, the overall themes overlap, and I believe the two read back to back and analyzed together can convey important themes (and messages) to adolescents. Undoubtably, O'Brien's work is mature in content, but there is so much to be taken from the brutal honesty presented in his writing, even when fictionalized, his attitude towards the war and how it influenced him is remarkable. This links heavily to the theme of identity; O'Brien's emotional reactions to events and people that he has encountered have clearly shaped him, and this is exactly what the students will be learning about themselves during this unit. Their identities are not predetermined by their race or social class, they are shaped by how they react to events in their lives. Literature does not give them instructions for shaping themselves but instead prepares them for the good and bad of life, and when they experience these ups and downs, they have gained the knowledge that they are in control of their own reactions.

I also should note that I believe writing to be one of the best tools to help adolescents understand literature, so this unit of study also incorporates a lot of writing. Both *The Things They Carried* and *I Will Save You* are books that use the importance of writing within the text, so they open the floor to students doing writing of their own as they read. The summative assessment will be an analytical paper, but over the course of the unit students will be doing different types of short writing assignments. These assignments will be used as tools to further students' success as readers, promote their ability to think critically, and get them comfortable using academic language.

Introduction to Unit

To introduce this unit I am beginning the first day with the song "World's Greatest" by R. Kelly, which is available with a video online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WgcovIu3k9o. For EL students, or students who don't

identify themselves as auditory learners, I will provide the lyrics on a handout. [See lyrics on handout #1]. Immediately after viewing the music video, we will talk about the lyrical content and what is repeated most frequently. (We will also quickly review some vocabulary words such as metaphor, simile, hyperbole, etc. for ELLs or struggling students.) From here, without a template, the students will write their own "I Am" poems which can follow the frame of "World's Greatest" or be written however they prefer.

Following this silent writing period, students will be able to volunteer to share their writing. After the sharing, we will talk about the content of their poems. The discussion will begin with simple one word response questions, including:

- Did you include your place of birth?
- Did you mention your ethnicity?
- Did you mention your religious beliefs?
- Did you mention any of your achievements that you're proud of?
- Did you mention your family?

Regardless of the students' answers, this activity gets them reading, writing, and speaking within the first half hour of class. If students answer 'no' to all of these questions, it will open the floor to a discussion of what they *do* choose to include; this reveals what information they find important enough about themselves to write about. From this point, the discussion will move towards the overall theme of the unit, the formation of identity. Before talking about any of the unit's texts, they have already had the chance to begin thinking about how they identify themselves using individual pieces of information about their lives.

Following this discussion, I will introduce the first text, which is the emotional and canonical *The Things They Carried.* Introducing a text goes beyond handing out copies of the book; introducing a book means analyzing the title, the illustration on the cover, the author, and

the historical context of the story. To introduce them to Tim O'Brien briefly, I would offer another handout with relevant information on both O'Brien as well as *The Things They Carried.* [See handout #2]. At this point, students have not begun reading the text, but in the NPR interview excerpt, O'Brien says "The book is... applied to a bad childhood or a broken home. And these are the things they're carrying..." This quote will be the focus of the next discussion as well as the second writing assignment, which will be homework. [See handout titled "Homework samples"].

Mandatory YA Pairing

Following *The Things They Carried* I would dive into the novel *I Will Save You.* De La Pena's text is very different, yet many of the same themes are present in this book as well. De La Pena addresses mental illness and the formation of identity throughout the novel, and his use of the first person narrative works extremely well as it does in O'Brien's text. Both authors use their narrators to demonstrate the importance of writing, so this book as well would have many accompanying writing assignments. Though there are many other works that I will suggest for students during this unit, this book is mandatory. De La Pena was a reluctant reader himself, and students will be provided with an article written by the author [See handout #3] about his own struggles with reading as an introduction to this portion of the unit.

Suggestions for further reading of contemporary realistic fiction

After the First Death by Robert Cormier

This book presents multiple narrators, all of whom are struggling with their identities. Cormier uses these different characters to portray the different ways in which individuals decide

who they are. Just as in the previously discussed novels, the author of *After the First Death* again shows that it is not one element which makes up a person's identity.

Whale Talk by Chris Crutcher

This novel is one that I would recommend to any struggling or reluctant reader, regardless of the unit of study. Although identity is a main theme in this novel as well, there are many other aspects to it that make it a wonderful choice for an adolescent. Furthermore, issues regarding racism and discrimination are directly discussed in the text, which are issues that many educators shy away from, when perhaps Crutcher's attitude towards them gives the most insightful perspective on the subjects. In the book *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning* the author says of *Whale Talk* "[it] presents a number of teachable moments-experiences of diversity and the intolerance of diversity- to discuss with your students, especially in the context of character education" (Warner 125).

The Truth About Forever by Sarah Dessen

Dessen's novel has a young, female protagonist who experiences an unexpected loss followed by a break up with a boyfriend. The novel follows her and she tries to run from her experiences, and then as they begins to finally heal as she faces her feelings head on. This novel definitely has a theme of identity, and truly would be a great pairing in this unit, especially for a young female who is experiencing loss. Loss is a reality, and as O'Brien has illustrated it will be something that is carried forever, but the way in which it is dealt with is what defines one's identity.

Works Cited

De La Pena, Matt. *I Will Save You.* New York: Ember (Random House), 2010. Print.

Donelson, Kenneth L., and Alleen Pace Nilsen. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1980. Print.

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried.* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1990. Print.

Warner, Mary. *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story.* Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006. Print.

Homework Assignment #1

After reading the first of the stories in *The Things They Carried* (which is titled "The Things They Carried"), please write a short narrative about an event or string of events that have occurred in your life that have left you with an emotion to carry. This can be a happy or sad event. Keep O'Brien's NPR interview in mind while you write.

Homework Assignment

After reading the chapter titled "On the Rainy River" (pages 39-61), write a one page response the ending of the chapter. Questions to frame your response:

- Was the narrator a coward?
- Should he have been embarrassed by his emotions?
- Does going to war have to change your opinion of war?

Homework Assignment

Watch the video on the PBS website, http://video.pbs.org/video/2365436403/. O'Brien says he "Came home from the war… shattered by it all. Everything that I had grown up believing about myself and my country and the world I lived in had been turned upside down, like going down a rabbit hole." Have you experienced an event that has changed the way in which you view the world? The way you view yourself? Additionally, how did O'Brien cope with these feelings? Would his method of coping give you any comfort? Why or why not?

“World’s Greatest” by R. Kelly

I am a mountain,
I am a tall tree, oh
I am a swift wind
Sweeping the country

I am a river,
Down in the valley, oh
I am a vision
And I can see clearly

If anybody asks you who I am, just stand up tall, look 'em in the face and say

I'm that star up in the sky
I'm that mountain peak up high
Hey I made it, hmm
I'm the world’s greatest

I'm that little bit of hope
When my back's against the ropes
I can feel it, hmm
I'm the world’s greatest

I am a giant
I am an Eagle oh
I am a lion
Down in the jungle
I am a marching band
I am the people oh
I am a helping hand
I am a hero

If anybody asks you who I am, just stand up tall look 'em in the face and say

I'm that star up in the sky
I'm that mountain peak up high
Hey I made it, hmm
I'm the world’s greatest

I'm that little bit of hope
When my back's against the ropes
I can feel it, hmm
I'm the world's greatest

In the ring of life,
I'll reign in love (I will reign)
And the world will notice a king (oh, yeah)
When all is darkness,
I'll shine a light (shine a light)
And the mirrors of success reflect in me (Me)

I'm that star up in the sky
I'm that mountain peak up high
Hey I made it
I'm the world's greatest.

Source: http://www.metrolyrics.com/the-worlds-greatest-lyrics-r-kelly.html

NPR interview excerpt with Tim O'Brien

"O'Brien wrote parts of *The Things They Carried* 20 years after his service in Vietnam. 40 years since the war, he still carries it with him. 'I carry the memories of the ghosts of a place called Vietnam — the people of Vietnam, my fellow soldiers,' he tells host Neal Conan. 'More importantly' he continues, 'I carry the weight of responsibility, and a sense of abiding guilt.'
But O'Brien carries joyful memories, too, 'the friends I made, the conversations at foxholes where, for a moment or two, the war would seem to vanish into camaraderie and friendship.'

Still, the memories of near-death moments remain the most vivid. 'There's something about being amid the chaos and the horror of a war that makes you appreciate all you don't have, and all you may lose forever.' Those things range, for O'Brien, from 'the sublime, your parents, down to the petty — a Big Mac, and a cold Coke. When you're really really thirsty and you're drinking paddy water, the mind will lock on a can of cold Coke the way your mind might, you know, back in high school, have locked on a pretty girl.'

O'Brien never anticipated the universal appeal his story would have among young people. They 'bring such fervor to it that comes from their own lives, really. The book is... applied to a bad childhood or a broken home. And these are the things they're carrying.'"

Source: http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125128156

“Sometimes the ‘Tough Teen’ is Quietly Writing Stories”

An Article by Matt De La Pena

A few years ago I did an author visit at an overcrowded junior high school in a rougher part of San Antonio. I write young adult novels that feature working-class, "multicultural" characters, so I'm frequently invited to speak at urban schools like this.

As is often the case, the principal and I talked as the kids filed into the auditorium. The student body was mostly Hispanic, he told me, and over 90 percent qualified for free and reduced lunch. It was an underprivileged school, a traditionally low-achieving school, but they were working hard to raise performance.

The principal then pointed out a particular student, seated near the back. "That one's a real instigator," he told me. "But don't worry, we'll remove him if he starts acting up. It wouldn't be the first time Joshua blew an opportunity like this."

As the librarian introduced me to the school, I studied this kid. Joshua. He was bigger than everyone else. He had neck tattoos and a shaved head. He kept smacking the kid next to him in the back of the head and laughing. A nearby teacher shushed him.

I started my talk by describing my own early struggles in school. I was nearly held back in second grade because I "couldn't read," which shattered my confidence. For a long time after that experience I viewed myself as unintelligent — and the most difficult definition to break free from, I told the students, is self-definition.

Joshua began to pay attention.

Even though I was a reluctant reader in junior high and high school, I found myself writing poems in the back of class. Secret spoken-word-style poems I never shared. They were about girls, mostly. And my neighborhood. And the confusion I sometimes felt about growing up racially mixed. I wasn't able to express myself the way I truly wanted to, though, until I was introduced to multicultural literature in college that led to me falling in love with books.

After the session, Joshua came to the front of the stage and asked to speak with me in private. He told me he was born in a prison and that he'd been held back in school. Twice. He didn't belong in junior high anymore. It made him feel like a loser. But he wanted me to know that he wrote stories sometimes. About San Antonio gangs. When he asked if I'd be willing to read the one he'd just finished, I told him I'd love to. "But you'll have to get it to me quick," I said. "They're about to shuttle me to the next school."

He sprinted off toward his locker on the other side of campus.

The librarian told me she was stunned as we both watched Joshua disappear into the halls. It was the first time she'd seen him engage in *anything* school related.

A few minutes later he was back with thirty typed pages. He was sweating and out of breath. He handed me his story and told me I was the first person he'd ever let read his writing. I gave him one of my books in return, and we shook hands. He called me "sir."

That night I read Joshua's words. They were beautiful. And ugly. And sad. They were full of heart. This Mexican kid, who was a thug, who was not pretty and felt like he was too big for his grade, too old — he had all these feelings he didn't know what to do with. So he wrote them into stories.

Owning One's Creativity

This is not an isolated case. A surprising number of teens I meet in rougher schools around the country find refuge in novels and creative writing. It's not always the usual suspects either, the high achievers. Sometimes it's the second-string point guard on the basketball squad. Or the girl bused in from a group home. Or the kid who's twice been suspended for fighting. The one constant I find? Many of these teens — especially the ones from working-class families — do their reading and creating in secret.

Young-adult author John Green has done an amazing job mobilizing a generation of readers and writers through his "nerdfighter" campaign. Kids from all around the country shout from the rooftops that they love to read and learn and make art. One day Mr. Green will undoubtedly win a MacArthur Fellowship, or something similar, for the groundbreaking online community he's created (as well as for his fiction). But not every kid is able to own his or her creativity in this way. In many working-class neighborhoods, the "nerdfighter" label just isn't gonna fly. Self preservation won't allow for it. I'm sensitive to this because it's the way I grew up, too.

I'm ashamed to admit this, but I didn't read a novel all the way through until after high school. Blasphemy, I know. I'm an author now. Books and words are my world. But back then I was too caught up in playing ball and running with the fellas. Guys who read books — especially for pleasure — were soft. Sensitive. And if there was one thing a guy couldn't be in my *machista,* Mexican family, it was sensitive. My old man didn't play that. Neither did my uncles or cousins or basketball teammates. And I did a good job fitting myself into the formula.
But there was something missing.

Becoming Whole

My world changed the day professor Heather Mayne sought me out in the middle of campus during my sophomore year in college. "I was rereading this last night," she said, holding out a book for me, "and I thought of *you*."
"Me?" I took the book and studied the cover.

"You." She made me promise to read it before I graduated. "And when you finish," she said, "come talk to me. That's all I ask. Deal?"

That gave me 2 1/2 years. "Deal," I told her.

I took the book with me on our next basketball road trip, to New Mexico State. The night before the game I cracked it open and read the first 10 or 15 pages. Why'd she give me this book? I wondered. It wasn't any good. The narrator couldn't even speak that good of English. This was usually when I'd toss a

book aside, telling myself it just wasn't my thing. But that wasn't an option in this case. I needed to find out why my professor had connected me to this one specific book.

By Page 50 or so, I started caring about the character. She had a really tough life, far tougher than anything I'd experienced, and I tried to put myself in her shoes. The broken English which seemed awkward at first, became poetic. I read a third of the novel that night and went to sleep.

After our game the next day, which we won on a buzzer-beater, I hustled back to my hotel room to continue reading my book. I finished at 4 in the morning.

First of all, I'd never read a book in two days, and it made me feel smart (an important piece of the puzzle). Even more surprisingly, though, when I turned the last page I found myself on the verge of tears. I was shocked. How could black and white on a page make me feel so emotional? I was a tough kid from a tougher family. I hadn't shed a tear since elementary school. And here I was, choked up. From a book.

Before I reveal the title, I want all the guys reading this to know I *didn't* cry that night. I fought it off. Not everyone knows this, but it's not an official cry unless a tear exits the eye. And when I felt it coming on that night, I used an age-old trick. I looked up, allowing everything to soak back in. And it was all good.
The book I read that night was Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.
My professor said something I will never forget when I went and talked to her the following week. Even in the harshest and ugliest of circumstances, she explained, there's still hope. That's what she loved most about *The Color Purple*.
It's what I loved most, too, I decided.

That hope.

I immediately went in search of other stories that might move me, too. I read all the novels I'd skipped in high school. I read novels by black female authors like Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston. I read Ruth Forman's first poetry collection so many times I had every line memorized. And when I discovered Hispanic writers like Sandra Cisneros and Junot Díaz and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, it was over. I was hooked. Novels became my secret place to "feel." My dad and uncles didn't need to know about it. Neither did my teammates. But I could sense something happening inside of me: reading was making me whole.

Today when I write my own novels, I try to craft the best possible stories, and I certainly aim to be entertaining, but I'm also conscious of the powerful function literature can serve — especially in the lives of kids growing up the way I did. My goal as a writer is to recede into the background, allowing readers to fully participate. I want them to be able to watch the characters and listen to conversations and be free to form judgments of their own. I believe it's in this space that young readers acquire experience with complex emotions like empathy and sensitivity, which makes them more likely to be in tune with emotional nuance out in the real world.

Happy Endings

A few weeks after I met Joshua I tried to track him down through his school librarian. I wanted to tell him what I thought about his pages and ask if he'd had a chance to check out the book I'd given him. What a great story this would make, I thought. An author and a student exchanging writing every so often, becoming long-distance creative buddies. Maybe one day he'd even publish something of his own, and I could brag to everyone that I was his mentor.

Unfortunately this story doesn't have the neat little happy ending I'd imagined. Joshua, I was told, had dropped out of school. The last the librarian had heard, he'd gotten in trouble with the police and had left San Antonio to live with his grandma in Houston. I left my contact information with her in case she heard anything, but that's pretty much where the trail went cold.

So, what happened to Joshua? Did he make good in his new city? Or did things continue to spiral downward the way they sometimes do for kids born into impossible circumstances? I'll probably never know. But even if it's the latter, I'll still never forget our brief encounter. A happy ending doesn't make something more valid. And as long as Joshua manages to stay alive, his story could change at any time.

Even late in life, the way it did for my dad.

Back in my graduate school days, I used to drop by my folks' place once a week for dinner. I'd eat at the kitchen table talking to my mom and little sister while my dad ate in the living room watching his favorite TV show, *Cops*. We didn't usually interact a whole lot. But one night, my old man stopped me on my way out the door. He pointed at the book tucked under my arm and asked what I was reading.
"*One Hundred Years of Solitude*," I said, holding it out for him to see.
He nodded.

I assumed that was the end of it so I waved to everyone and made my way through the front door. My dad followed me outside, though. "Hey, Matt," he said. "You think I could borrow that book when you're done?"

I'd never seen my dad read much of anything, and Garcia Marquez seemed like a tough jumping-off point, but I handed over the book anyway, telling him: "It's all yours. I finished it on the ride up here."

It took him over a month to read the book. When he handed it back to me I tried to get his feedback on the multiple storylines and the magical realism, but all he'd say was that he liked it. He followed me outside the house that night, too. "I was thinking," he said, looking over his shoulder to make sure we were alone. "Maybe you could let me read whatever books you finish."

"Sure," I said, trying to hide my surprise.

Over the next two years, my old man read everything I put in front of him. Fiction, nonfiction, essays, plays. He even started reading books he found on his own. My mom pulled me aside one day and told me he was becoming a completely different person. He was less angry now. He even talked about going back to school.

After my first novel came out, and I moved to New York, my dad enrolled at the local community college but kept it a secret. He struggled through a year of remedial courses but eventually got the hang

of it and told his family what he was doing. He went on to earn his associate's degree, and we were all incredibly proud of him. But he didn't stop there. The following year he transferred to the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he studied literature.

My dad just recently finished his bachelor's degree, and he's now a bilingual teacher at an elementary school in Watsonville, Calif. (where my mom teaches, too). He's still tough, and he doesn't show a whole lot of emotion. But you should see the guy's eyes light up when we start talking books. "You gotta read Roberto Bolaño, Matt. I'm serious. I don't know what's taking you so long."

"OK, OK," I say. "I'll read Bolaño."

"Start with *The Savage Detectives* and just go from there. Trust me."
Sometime when I have these kinds of conversations with my dad, I find myself thinking: Who the hell *is* this guy?
But it's like my dad always tells me. Reading changed his life.

Just like it changed mine.

Will anything come along and change Joshua's life? Maybe not. But I always go back to my professor's line about *The Color Purple*. Even in the harshest and ugliest of circumstances, there's still hope.

Source: http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/11/11/243960103/a-reluctant-reader-turns-ya-author-for-tough-teens