Teacher to Teacher

What Texts Effectively Raise Issues Related to 9/11 for Secondary Students?

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Elephant, Gus Van Sant’s exploration of a Columbine-like tragedy, underscores the current generation’s attempt to define the meaning of events in Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999, and, by extension, of 9/11. As such, the film can help students explore their post-9/11 culture.

Elephant’s cinematic detachment and deliberate lack of narrative brilliantly explore modern school life. Van Sant, avoiding explanation of Columbine, shows the loneliness and anonymity that are now unintentional byproducts of our schools. In one scene, three girls discuss friendship in a series of empty phrases as two of the girls demand that the third stop dividing her time between them and her boyfriend. The exchange is both hilarious and sad (and sadly familiar), implying that even high school friendships, once seen as the most lasting and meaningful, are lost inside a mess of inarticulate jargon.

Though Van Sant’s main purpose is to make a film about an enormously tragic event, he never veers from presenting it as an absolutely ordinary day, peopled by ordinary kids. In so doing, he gives no more weight to the actions or motives of the shooters than to the nerdy girl who will not wear gym shorts to Physical Education. The power in this film comes from just that jarring, understated normalcy—until the first shots are fired, the two boys are just part of the background noise. They and their first victim (the nerdy girl) are social equals in their outsider status at this high school.

Media interpretations of Columbine created a powerful misconception that the outsider is a greater danger to our safety and our lives than the school bully. Conversely, Elephant demonstrates how students instinctively understand that outsider status can also portend greatness, rebelliousness, or artistry. At the same time, students feel compelled to seek insider status. Students, not surprisingly, are comfortable with this paradox. It is not a set of circumstances they are happy with, but they accept the paradox and their complicity in it, fully aware that there is the possibility that the outsider ultimately will triumph over the benefits of peer acceptance. Unfortunately, after Columbine, the teen rebel, the high school artist, and the visionary have often been lumped in with the troubled, angry, and sometimes self-destructive teen—individuals to be avoided, not celebrated.

Perhaps this explains students’ fascination with a better-known film, Napoleon Dynamite, whose ending leaves the “insider bully” wondering what went wrong. Time and again, my students will say that they see themselves in both Elephant and Napoleon Dynamite. High school can be silly; it can be disconcerting. It can be lonely; it can be life-affirming. And in rare circumstances, it can be terrifying.

The significance 9/11 will assume when it passes from factual event to cultural metaphor will be determined by students because, even now, it is forming them. It is they who will discover where it fits and what it means. Just as Columbine was not about black trench coats or Marilyn Manson, 9/11 will not be about terrorism. It will not be about tall buildings. It will not be about jet planes. It will be about us and what we believe in. Elephant can encourage students along a dynamic path of self-discovery.
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I have found Avi’s *Nothing but the Truth: A Documentary Novel* (NBTT) to be helpful in two ways that are relevant to post-9/11 English classes. First, it creates opportunities to investigate stereotypes that inundate us daily in all the texts of our lives. Second, *NBTT* provides a good, critical example of media manipulation.

Multigenred and multivoiced, *NBTT* tells the tragic stories of Philip, a ninth grader, and his homeroom/English teacher, Miss Narwin. Philip wants to run track but needs higher grades in English. Venting frustration, Philip repeatedly hums during the national anthem in Miss Narwin’s class (students are to stand silently). Philip is suspended from school; however, the national media soon celebrate him as a patriotic hero, and Miss Narwin resigns from teaching.

Tension in the novel results from characters’ stereotypical misunderstandings of each other. Miss Narwin does not know that Philip reads S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* at home and that he hopes to compete in the Olympics. Conversely, Philip does not know about Miss Narwin’s application for a university summer program entitled New Approaches to the Teaching of Literature for Today’s Students.

Students also engage in stereotyping as they read *NBTT*. When I asked students to describe Miss Narwin, whom Avi does not describe, and Philip, the influence of stereotypes became apparent. Miss Narwin is “old, probably wore her hair in a bun”; “I bet she wears glasses”; “She probably looks like an old wrinkly woman with gray hair and dresses all crazy.” Philip is a “class clown,” “a jock.”

Once the problems of stereotyping in *NBTT* are clear, we extend our analysis to stereotypical images of “Middle Eastern–looking people” on popular TV programs, such as *24* and *The Unit*. It is important to extend our examination to these stereotypes related to 9/11.

Once students understand how negative stereotyping works in literature and on television, we consider the ways authors may use language to encourage opinions even in supposedly neutral media texts. We see a prime example of this in *NBTT* when a reporter writes about Philip without getting all the facts, spinning a story full of half-truths. The article portrays Miss Narwin as the person at fault, while Philip looks like a patriotic student who is being victimized by the school’s administration and faculty. We look closely at the language the reporter uses, how she foregrounds Philip and his family as “super-patriots” and explains that Miss Narwin “changed the rules” and “threw [Philip] out of class, insisting a disturbance was being created” (118). For example, we discuss the connotative differences between the words *suspended* and *threw out*.

In our post-9/11 world, English teachers must select texts that will help students to critically examine the world and media representations of it. Avi’s *Nothing but the Truth* is an excellent choice because of how effectively it raises discussion of stereotypes and the problems they cause.

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Patrick Forde’s *In Spirit*, first printed in the September 2002 issue of *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* and nominated for a Hugo Award and a British Fantasy Award in 2002, is a science fiction response to the events of 9/11. Science fiction offers a perfect venue, allowing Forde the opportunity to explore the emotions and psychology of that day from the perspective of the future.

*In Spirit* is arranged as a frame story, one narrative surrounding and creating the context for the other. The outer narrative discusses the development of time travel and its subsequent violent dismantling and gradual rebirth set in the context of hearings during 2033. The internal narrative of *In Spirit* follows the emotional and psychological development of a fictional terrorist collaborator, Raed; his cousins are 9/11 hijackers.

Raed has been sentenced to two thousand back-to-back life sentences with no possibility for parole. His crime: he knew what his cousins were planning and did not intervene. The Raed of 2001 was a devout Muslim, thoroughly under the influence and control of his increasingly radical cousins. During his incarceration, Raed’s faith wanes, along
with the anger that closed him off from the outside world, including his wife and young daughter. After thirty years, a middle-aged Raed is offered a unique opportunity to become a test subject in a study designed to investigate the therapeutic possibilities of a specific kind of time travel: he emotionally participates in the past events of 9/11, but he is unable to physically affect their outcome. Raed's experiences comprise the majority of the novella's internal story. He witnesses a pair of exhausted firefighters battling a fire at Ground Zero; he escapes from the 82nd floor of the south tower with two men and stares incredulously as it implodes; he watches helplessly as a smoldering file folder burns his tiny daughter's hand as she plays in her Muslim preschool's yard. Raed's intensely emotional interactions with the 9/11 victims transform his understanding of himself and the tragic events he helped create.

Before we read In Spirit, I have students write a journal entry: If time travel were possible, knowing you could not change any part of the event you were witnessing, where and when would you go in history? Why did you choose that time and place? We discuss the students' varied choices: World War II, the Civil War, their parents' wedding, a favorite birthday, the death of a relative or close friend. As we read the novella, students make predictions or reflect on the day's material. Our culminating activity is letter writing; students write to the person of their choice—Patrick Forde, Raed, Osama bin Laden, or the terrorists.

I use In Spirit as a jumping-off point for many class discussions: defining science fiction, understanding cultural variety, and examining concepts of societal and personal change, including prejudice. We conclude the novella on September 11 each year, and I hope the students meet this anniversary with greater insight into the tragedy of 9/11 and its repercussions. I think students also come away with a greater understanding of themselves and their ability to process complex intellectual and emotional issues.

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In dealing with the delicate issue of 9/11 with my students, I have found that reading two selections from our British literature anthology—St. Crispian's Day Speech from Shakespeare's Henry V and “The Charge of the Light Brigade” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson—generates discussions related to the current situation in the Middle East. While these are not contemporary pieces, the theme of war itself draws students into questioning a variety of topics from Islamic or Muslim racism to bipartisan politics. As a supplement, I use four songs related to war and simultaneously address the California State Standard (Listening and Speaking 1.5) requiring students to arrange supporting details, reasons, descriptions, and so forth. I ask students if they can find the essential details to determine if the songs are pro-war or antiwar. They must then support their decisions. The two pro-war songs are Darryl Worley’s “Have You Forgotten?” and John Michael Montgomery’s “Letters from Home.” The antiwar selections are Bob Dylan’s “Masters of War” and Edwin Starr’s “War.” While these songs are clearly for or against war, students are able to dissect the songs using their opinions, and they support their opinions through debate. I’ve heard arguments that have turned “War” into a pro-war piece and “Letters from Home” into an antiwar statement. I print the lyrics for students to include in their binders, and the lyrics and the accompanying worksheet stimulate the conversations about war, the current times, and even past wars they learn about in social studies.

Works Cited

Correction to September 2006: In the review of Looking for Alaska on page 93, the location of the boarding school was incorrectly identified in two places as Georgia. It should have been Alabama. We thank the reader who called this to our attention.