Pairing Contemporary Nonfiction with Canonical Texts

Audrey A. Fisch
New Jersey City University
AFisch@njcu.edu

Susan Chenelle
University Academy
Charter High School
susanchenelle@gmail.com

Most of us became English teachers because we love literature. Sometimes, our students find our literary texts inaccessible and non-engaging; truthfully, sometimes we, too, find the books we teach unappealing. Pairing literary texts with informational counterparts can reframe the literary texts to ignite interest and engagement.

Humanity and Masculinity

*Lord of the Flies* is a difficult book, a brutal investigation of masculinity, and probably all the more important in the current context of bullying. However, *Deep Down Dark: The Untold Stories of 33 Men Buried in a Chilean Mine, and the Miracle That Set Them Free*, Tobar’s amazing account of the 33 miners’ burial, survival, and rescue from a Chilean mine, offers an antidote to Golding’s uncompromisingly negative view of the male gender.

Tobar himself notes the similarity, remarking that the trapped miners “stripped down to their underwear against the heat . . . look like a group of homeless men who’ve decided to stage a scene from that novel and film about castaway boys, *Lord of the Flies*” (167). These men are grown-up versions of Golding’s boys, facing devastation, deprivation, and isolation while brimming with testosterone and Latino machismo.

But these men, unlike Piggy, Jack, and Ralph, form a sustaining community. Their story of leadership and compassion is inspiring. For example, each day before their single meal of one teaspoon of tuna and half a cookie (the men lose an average 30 pounds each), they gather for “a brief sermon . . . and a self-criticism session at which the men apologize to one another for their transgressions, big and small. I’m sorry I raised my voice. I’m sorry I didn’t help get the water” (96). Instead of turning on each other, these weakened men rely on one another, even for help walking to the bathroom.

Combined, these texts offer contrasting accounts of manhood. We need to keep hearing the story of Golding’s savage boys, but Tobar’s funny, gentle, and spellbinding account of amazing humanity and masculinity offers balance.

Authority, Conformity, and Defiance

Orwell’s *1984* and *Animal Farm* are widely taught and often
Dmitri Shostakovich lived through these realities: he watched as friends and prominent cultural figures were tortured and killed, some after naming Shostakovich as an anti-Soviet conspirator. Just as in 1984, Shostakovich saw husbands inform on wives and children on parents.

His personal story is one small piece of the horror of Stalin’s reign. In 1937, Stalin issued “arrest quotas for each region in the USSR” (118): “259,450 . . . to be arrested . . . 72,950 . . . to be shot” (118). Stalin, like O’Brien in 1984, used terror to try to “break down all social structure . . . and to create a new people . . . Homo sovieticus, the New Man of Communism” (118).

But while Anderson’s Symphony details the reality underlying 1984 and Animal Farm, it also tells of the power of art: to serve as a record, an inspiration, and a locus of resistance.

At the heart of the book is Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony, written for his beloved Leningrad during the Nazi siege that starved the city. The climax is the symphony’s performance by Leningrad’s dying musicians, broadcast throughout the city and at the surrounding German soldiers. As Anderson notes, the music told a story of Russian humanity, a counternarrative to the Nazis’ dismissal of the Slavs as “subhumans” (345), and of “the will to stay human” (345) despite the “starvation, fear and death” (345) the people of Leningrad had endured under first Stalin and then Hitler.

The Lessons We Really Want to Teach

Our goal is to equip students with the ability to grapple with how and why Lord of the Flies, 1984, and Animal Farm still matter. These highly readable informational texts offer opportunities for students to make connections, find the relevance, and engage more readily and deeply with both these literary texts and the realities of their present-day lives.

Works Cited


Audrey A. Fisch is a professor of English and coordinator of secondary English education at New Jersey City University (afisch@njcu.edu, NCTE member since 2002). Susan Chenelle is supervisor of curriculum and instruction at University Academy Charter High School in Jersey City, New Jersey (susanchenelle@gmail.com, NCTE member since 2008). They are the authors of the Using Informational Text to Teach Literature series (Rowman).