

# DEVELOPING CONTEMPORARY LITERACIES THROUGH SPORTS: A GUIDE FOR THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Edited by Alan Brown and Luke Rodesiler

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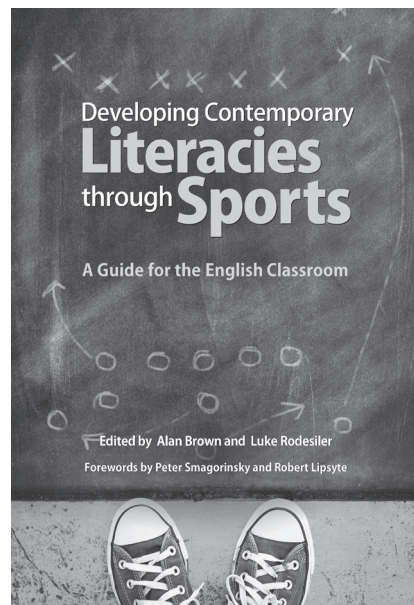
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# Bastille Day, or Why We Need Books More Than Ever in Our Students' Lives

LINDA RIEF

The little boy does not notice the white truck slowly entering the promenade, nor does his father, who is feeling only the warmth of his toddler's small legs wrapped around his neck and braced in his hands. The dad senses the sweet smell of apple juice on his son's breath and feels the soft curl of his son's fingers rubbing his stubbly chin. After all, they are on holiday, with nothing more to do than exclaim their delight at the bursts of reds and blues and whites raining down from the smoke-dark sky. These are the sounds of life.

The twenty-ton truck moves slowly down the seaside promenade, raising few concerns; but then it speeds full throttle, its driver's foot pressed full weight on the accelerator, suddenly aiming for mothers pushing strollers, plowing down, mowing over children and grandparents, dragging bodies now wedged in the undercarriage as it bears down, zigzagging, barreling, slamming into families, so many of whom can't escape behind plastic benches lining the cobblestoned streets. Oohs and ahs are stifled by explosions and screams that pierce the night, slice the air. These are not the fireworks celebrating Bastille Day—the celebration of *liberte, egalite, fraternite*. Freedom. Equality. Fraternity. These are the sounds of death.<sup>1</sup>

These are the sounds, the movements, the actions of extremist fundamentalists who thrive on hate. Kill out of hate. Die for hate.

Among the things humans have done to humans is make us realize we are not safe anywhere: not on a plane bound from Boston to Denver to meet a first grandchild; not at a soccer match between the Germans and the French at the Stade de France in Paris; not at a Christmas Party in San

Bernardino, California, sipping ginger ale punch and munching sugar cookies; not boarding a plane at the Brussels airport, carry-on bags packed with Belgian chocolate for your sisters; not taking the commuter train early on the London Underground to meet your buddies at the Bell and Whistle to grab a pint of ale; and not even on the promenade in Nice, the French Riviera, your son perched on your shoulders, oohing and ahing at the fireworks exploding in celebration of Bastille Day.

No one is safe anywhere, because these extremists are everywhere.

Yes, I am afraid. And worried. Worried that warning my grandchildren, or my students, not to talk to strangers, not to make friends with people they don't know on the internet, not to get in a car with a driver who's been drinking, not to take food or drink from anyone they don't know, not to dive headfirst into the shallow end of a pool or lake—worried that telling them to always wear a seatbelt, to always know where the exit in a building is, to look both ways before crossing the street, to always eat their fruits and vegetables—*hoping*, but *knowing*, that none of these things will really keep them safe. Danger today comes as a surprise—the place where it is least expected.

Why can't we stop this? How is someone taught to hate so completely, so deeply, so violently? These are incredibly difficult and complicated questions, even in our attempts to understand the misery in which many of these haters live. My good friend Maureen Barbieri, in our own conversations as we wrestle through these issues, reminds me of W. B. Yeats's line, "The world's more full of weeping than you can understand," from his poem "The Stolen Child."

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I have no answers.

Yet, we cannot be afraid for our children and grandchildren. Or for our students. They have to live in this world with all its diversity, as well as its adversity. We can choose to find the hope that lives and flourishes in so many lives.

We can help our young people realize that the world is filled with good, kind-hearted, compassionate people, of every religion, every ethnicity, every sexual orientation, every skin color. We have to stop labeling people. We are all human beings. We have to treat each other with respect and dignity, one human being to another. We have to recognize that our differences are our strengths. We have to believe that each of us would step up to help another person in any way we could because it is the right thing to do.

Many years ago I sat in the audience of 300 educators at an international literacy conference in Heidelberg listening to Miep Gies, the woman who cared for Anne Frank, her family, and another family for the two years they were in hiding from the Nazis. She kept them fed. Kept them positive. Kept them hopeful. She never wavered in her relentless belief that they would survive this horrific period. She never believed she did anything extraordinary. She was vehement in her belief that all of us would have done what she did, presented with the same situation, *because it was the right thing to do*.

She said she hesitated when invited to speak at this conference, having told herself she would never set foot in Germany again. But then she realized she was labeling and blaming all Germans for the actions of a few. So she accepted.

Miep is the heroine of the Anne Frank story. She kept them alive as long as she could, even gathering the strewn papers harboring Anne's every thought for the two years they were in hiding. She exposed the world to the confusion and anger and love and intellectual energy of an adolescent trying to understand and forgive the world in the worst of its behavior.

We have to believe that each of us would step up to help another person in any way we can because it is the right thing to do.

As teachers, we have the opportunity to expose our students to the heroes of the world: Miep Gies, Malala Yousafzai, Ishmael Beah, Iqbal Massai, just to name a few. We not only have the opportunity, but the obligation to offer our students voices from around the world in the voices we share with them.

If we have any doubt about the goodness of people, especially children, watch the YouTube video about the middle school football team from Olivet, Michigan

([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ejh\\_hb15Fc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ejh_hb15Fc)). Their kindness to a disabled classmate taught each of these players more than they ever anticipated.

Or read about the Masai tribe in Kenya who wanted to help the victims of 9/11 by giving one of their most cherished of gifts to the survivors—14 cows (<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/03/world/where-9-11-news-is-late-but-aid-is-swift.html>).

Or show your students the TED Talk given by twelve-year-old Adora Svitak called “What Adults Can Learn from Kids,” and has had more than four million views ([https://www.ted.com/talks/adora\\_svitak?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/adora_svitak?language=en)). In her keynote address at the 2016 International Literacy Association Convention in Boston, she reiterated that literacy means little unless it is coupled with empathy, respect, trust, and understanding of one another.

It is in the stories of kindness throughout the world, that we give hope to our young people. This is where books come in. Stories, both fiction and nonfiction, define us and nourish us—intellectually, aesthetically, imaginatively, and emotionally. Our stories, and the stories of others, teach us what it means to be human.

Every time we put a book in a student's hands we are helping them gain empathy toward and understanding of each other. It is in their reading and their writing that they grow to be articulate, compassionate citizens of the world who can communicate their thoughts, beliefs, opinions, and feelings well to others and who can understand and evaluate the thoughts, feelings, opinions, and beliefs of those around them.

In the words of Kylene Beers (2016), “Literacy means having power, and with that power comes responsibility.” It is in our young peoples' lives that we put our best hope for this world. It is through their literacy that they may be able to imagine the ways we might solve the issues and situations that have created such disarray and fear in the world.

I have no definitive answers, but perhaps the books we put into our students' hands will help them figure out that the only label we should each carry is “human being.” Books can change our minds and hearts. Books can help our students understand, forgive, and reimagine the world, even in the worst of its behavior. Books show them that when we make this a kinder world for each of us, it becomes a safer world for all of us.

We have the unique opportunity to put books (and videos) into our students hands that show diversity and offer hope for this world. Here is a partial listing of some of those books and videos. Thanks to Teri Lesesne and Penny Kittle for their recommendations.

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## NOTE

1. Some of the phrasing in the second paragraph comes from John Leicester of the Associated Press, in his article “Truck Attack Shows That French Are Not Safe Anywhere” that appeared in *Foster’s Daily Democrat* Dover, NH, on July 16, 2016.

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## REFERENCES

- Beers, K. Baylor Summer Literacy Institute. Waco, TX. July 2016.
- Leicester, J. (2016, July 16). Truck attack shows that French are not safe anywhere. *Foster’s Daily Democrat* (Dover, NH).
- Wiesel, E. (2006). *Night*. (M. Wiesel, Trans.). New York, NY: Hill and Wang.
- Yeats, W.B. The stolen child. *Poets.org*. Retrieved from <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/stolen-child>

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## RECOMMENDED TEXTS

### Book Titles

- Alexander, Kwame. *The Crossover*
- Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*
- Beah, Ishmael. *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*
- Benjamin, Ali. *The Thing about Jellyfish*
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*
- Courtney, Brice. *The Power of One*
- De la Peña, Matt. *Mexican WhiteBoy*

- Engle, Margarita. *Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings: A Memoir*
- Farish, Terry. *The Good Braider*
- Gino, Alex. *George*
- Hassman, Tupelo. *Girlchild*
- Kearney, Meg. *The Secret of Me*  
*The Girl in the Mirror*  
*Trouper* (picture book)
- Lai, Thanhha. *Inside Out and Back Again*
- Na, An. *A Step from Heaven*
- Palacio, R. J. *Wonder*
- Park, Linda Sue. *A Long Walk to Water*
- Reynolds, Jason, & Brendan Kiely. *All American Boys*
- Roten, Teresa. *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B*
- Ruby, Laura. *Bone Gap*
- Ryan, Pam Munoz. *Echo*
- Saenz, Benjamin Alire. *Aristotle & Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*
- Shihab Nye, Naomi. *Gate A-4 and other writings*
- Shusterman, Neal. *Challenger Deep*
- Woodson, Jacqueline. *Brown Girl Dreaming*
- Yousafzai, Malala. *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*

### Videos

- Prince Ea. I am NOT Black, You are NOT white.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0qD2K2RWkc>
- Yes! Magazine  
<https://www.youtube.com/user/yesmagazinetv/videos>  
<https://twitter.com/yesmagazine>

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## RESPONSE TO AN EXCERPT FROM *NIGHT*, BY ELIE WIESEL

“They were forced to dig huge trenches. When they had finished their work, the men from the Gestapo began theirs. Without passion or haste, they shot their prisoners, who were forced to approach the trench one by one and offer their necks. Infants were tossed in the air and used as targets for the machine guns.”

*Night*, by Elie Wiesel, Page 6

There are some things that stay with you long after you experience them. Whether it be a negative experience or a positive one, it always returns to you, tapping you on the shoulder when you are bored, whispering in your ear when you’re trying to focus. This excerpt was one of these experiences for me. For over a week after I read and reread these words, I could not stop thinking about this particular paragraph, which, I suppose, is understandable. This excerpt told of people, ordinary people, being forced to dig what were essentially their own graves. Babies, thrown into the air and used as shooting targets. Bodies being thrown to the ground, bullets biting deep into flesh, women, men and children alike screaming in terror, human beings, alive and whole moments before, now left to bleed out on the forest floor. No one but the Gestapo and their fellow Jews to hear their pleas. I could not imagine being in such a terrible situation, knowing you were going to die, cold-blooded, thrown into a freshly dug pit or just left on the ground. The horrors people experienced during this dark time in history are not acknowledged by young people today enough, and we often take the fact that we have never had to experience this for granted. Those people were normal citizens, just like us, ruthlessly murdered because of their religion. The purpose of experiences like these is not to make us angry or sad or distraught, it is to make us remember, and to be grateful, and to never, ever, take our situations for granted. They could, after all, change in a moment.

Ella, 8th Grade