
From the Editor

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Character and Characters

For many of us, the allure of English began with literature and by connecting with characters who inspired, fascinated, angered, or even frightened us. Reading good literature—of almost any type—is amazing because it provides rich experience without the negative repercussions that lived experience inevitably requires. We want students to read stories to learn more about life than one person—especially in adolescence—can learn from his or her own life. We want students to learn more about themselves by living vicariously through characters they meet in the pages of good books. We also want students to read to develop a sense of shared experience, which can come from reading and discussing some of the same texts. And, we want students to develop empathy regarding the backgrounds, circumstances, and needs of others who are not like themselves. The best learning, the richest experience, the most meaningful and lasting empathy comes from connecting with vibrant characters whose literary lives grip our attention and become part of how we think about the world.

Connecting with literary characters does not come naturally or easily for most students, and simply requiring students to read and then demanding that they answer multiple-choice questions about them is hardly likely to inspire such connections. Helping students develop truly meaningful associations with characters—to develop the kinds of knowledge described above—requires talented teachers. Talented English teachers are prolific readers (and need the time to read large amounts of fiction, poetry, drama, and nonfiction), and they need to be able to select good texts that their students

will find engaging and worthwhile. Talented teachers also find ways to help students make meaningful, personal associations with the characters they encounter in assigned reading and in self-chosen reading. Bringing characters to life, a sentiment that runs through the articles in this issue, requires knowledge of a great range of literature, knowledge of specific students, and methods for involving those students in those texts.

When we think of literary characters, most of us think of figures from fiction or drama, but engaging characters may also be found in nonfiction. Memoir and biography offer often beautifully written and fascinating historical detail. Even the local newspaper can open opportunities for students to develop empathy and the kinds of critical thinking that comes from putting oneself in the shoes of others. Several years ago we published an article that describes a method for engaging students in a news story in a manner I still find fresh every time I employ it in my classes.

Connecting with Characters in Nonfiction

In his “Echoes of Silence: Empathy and Making Connections through Writing Process,” Joel M. Freedman describes how he asked his students to write in the voices of several “characters” (in this case, real people) who were currently embroiled in a controversy in another community in the same state (in this case, the tragic murder of a young, gay man). Freedman’s assignment asked students to select one person from the news story and to write a letter from that person’s perspective to another person from that article. Students wrote letters from the young man who was killed, from the other

young man who committed the murder, the parents of both boys, and from many of the other people interviewed in the article (teachers, a pastor, police, local community members, etc.).

Freedman's assignment encouraged students to explore complicated, deeply personal issues, but in ways that benefitted from the distance that literature (in this case, nonfiction) can provide. He saw the kinds of results in students' writing that we all hope to achieve when we ask students to read literature:

Students made connections and recognized themselves in the community of the world. They used their imaginations to express their concerns and internal conflicts and to hypothetically take on the concerns and conflicts of others quite different from themselves. Most importantly, many students exercised their ability to empathize. If in some instances students were less than empathetic, they at least struggled with their consciences. (94)

The new focus on nonfiction that has resulted from the Common Core State Standards has put many English teachers on edge. But it need not do so. Nonfiction also requires the kinds of deep, critical reading that fiction, poetry, and drama require. And in some cases, as Freedman shows, nonfiction texts can benefit from exactly the kinds of engaging character analysis that help students connect to fiction.

In This Issue


We were not surprised to receive a large number of excellent articles for this issue of *English Journal*, of which we are able to publish only a fraction.

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Characters have inspired many of us as readers and teachers, as the quality of the articles we published demonstrates.

In this issue, readers will find ideas for helping students connect to characters from canonical literature, including Odysseus, Ivan Ilych, Daisy Buchanan, Sykes Jones, White Fang, Rose Hsu Jordan, and the Little Prince, and characters from popular culture, such as Percy Jackson and Superman. Other articles explore characters from nonfiction, such as Anne Frank, the titular character from *A Child Called "It,"* and memoirist Jeannette Walls. And much more.

Readers should not miss Barry Gilmore's wonderfully written "EJ in Focus," in which he explores why and how we love literary characters, and how that love can find expression in English classes. And, we'd like to highlight Chris Gilbert's exploration of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, which inspired Landon Sellars, one of Gilbert's students, to compose the dramatic illustration of the main characters from that apocalyptic novel, which appears on the cover of this issue of *EJ*.

We're pleased also to present in this issue the 2011 YA Honor List and an excellent collection of poems, columns, and other features. We hope this September issue will help us all begin afresh another exciting and productive year of teaching and learning. 

Work Cited

Freedman, Joel M. "Echoes of Silence: Empathy and Making Connections through Writing Process." *English Journal* 98.4 (2009). 92-95. Print.

Help Shape NCTE Positions by Submitting a Resolution

If you have concerns about issues that affect your teaching or if you'd like to see NCTE take a stand on a position you support, you have an opportunity to be heard! Propose a resolution that may be voted upon and passed at NCTE's Annual Convention.

For further details on submitting a resolution, to see resolutions already passed by Council members, or to learn about proposing position statements or guidelines other than resolutions, visit the NCTE website (http://www.ncte.org/positions/call_for_resolutions) or contact Lori Bianchini at NCTE Headquarters (800-369-6283, ext. 3644; lbianchini@ncte.org). Resolutions must be postmarked by **October 15, 2012**.