

Adrian Fogelin's Fiction in the Middle School Classroom

A University Teacher Educator's Perspective
by Cindy Bowman

and

A Middle School Teacher's Perspective
by Renn Edenfield

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More Than Pages in a Book

Stories are powerful tools in building relationships, understanding, and knowledge. As teachers, we should consider the narratives of all of our students and the ways that these stories intersect to create new narratives. Our narratives are where we develop a sense of ourselves; and if these selves are to grow and develop, we must seek spaces where we can make deliberate, value-based decisions. Nietzsche espouses that our narratives about ourselves only have worth if we alone have formulated that narrative; accepting anybody else's version of ourselves makes us a failure as a human being.

Meeting Adrian Fogelin and reading her novel *Crossing Jordan*, which is set in Tallahassee, Florida, took me and prospective teachers, as well as the middle schools students and teachers with whom they worked one year, beyond the pages of her books and offered us new understanding of the rich history of Tallahassee. When they first read *Crossing Jordan*, a few university students questioned the authenticity of a story of racial prejudice in their hometown. Yet within seconds, stories of misunderstanding, distrust, discrimination, and prejudice filled the classroom. A similar response occurred when we introduced *Crossing Jordan* to a class of 7th graders: disbelief melted into serious discussion of examples of discrimination that they had seen, or even in which they had been participants.

Community emphasizes mutual and interactive experiences directed toward the preservation of humanity. It affirms the subjectivity of students and leads to positive change for the welfare of others. Without community and without trust, moral and intellectual growth would not become full or rich. Our sharing of narratives—in university classes, in middle school classes, and during the times that university and middle school students met together to read and study Fogelin's *Crossing Jordan*—became a vital component in planning classroom activities to awaken middle school students across the county to personal and social issues. The pre-service teachers began planning lessons on the Civil Rights Movement, local heroes, Southern values, Confederate generals, and stereotypes. They created analogies for fences, taped Gospel spirituals, made

photo essays of the local landmarks mentioned in the novel, wrote skits depicting Cass and Jemie, and planned field trips to the cemetery where the two girls secretly met. They saw the power of Fogelin's novel when they presented some of their ideas to young adolescents in two different middle schools in Tallahassee.

Crossing Jordan in the Schools

The study of this novel demonstrated a connectedness with others, developed a community of learners, and allowed students to learn together and be responsible for one another. Through these experiences, university and middle school students created and constructed a fuller meaning of the novel together. The integration of an awareness of the social dynamics and life contexts of Tallahassee created dynamics for learning which were unparalleled. While the university students implemented pre-reading activities in two middle schools, they discovered how each individual student responded to different sections of the novel, and how vividly the middle school students could explain their favorite parts. They also noted how the connections the students made to their personal lives encouraged participation and class discussion. The pre-service teachers were unprepared for the young adolescents' commentaries on female athletes, makeup, friendship, competition, the "New York lean," "the boob factor," and relationships.

Activities

Teachers, English Education students, colleagues, and I began creating excitement for the literary event of reading and studying the novel in one Tallahassee middle school by hanging sneakers from the ceilings in classrooms, the cafeterias, media centers, and gymnasiums. A few days later, signs proclaiming, "*Crossing Jordan* is coming" decorated the schools' hallways. The chorus students began learning Gospel spirituals for a school-wide kick-off celebration that was scheduled for one of the two schools. The middle school students became as excited about the reading kick-off as they would have been about a high school football game. The university students worked with classroom teachers and school administrators to invite the Superintendent of Schools, Adrian

Fogelin, a local sports celebrity, local television news anchors, and newspaper reporters to the celebration. They created a video slide presentation of city landmarks accompanied by Bruce Springsteen's "My Hometown" and canvassed local vendors for prizes to award students participating in warm-up activities. Classroom teachers performed a skit of a scene from the novel to the cheers of all students and guests, the school chorus sang, and accompanied a popular teacher as she sang a Gospel solo. The kick-off event was a celebration of reading and a celebration of community.

Meanwhile, in the university classroom, students continued to prepare for working with classroom teachers to engage students in the reading of *Crossing Jordan*. They created interdisciplinary lesson plans including the following:

Science

- Wakulla Springs State Park
- Florida sinkholes and land formations
- Elevation studies
- Sunburn

Math

- Using the track to study distance, rate, and time
- Calculating percentages
- Geometric shapes

History

- Civil Rights and Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Rosa Parks and discrimination
- Tallahassee heroes

Art

- Building fences
- Sketching graveyard scenes
- Making dolls

Physical Education

- Track and field activities
- Famous women athletes

English

- Writing obituaries
- Reading excerpts from *Jane Eyre*
- Poetry about friendship
- Essays/research on prejudice

Journalism

- Writing articles about "Chocolate Milk"
- Covering neighborhood events
- Study of photographic techniques and copy layout
- Computer software for news articles

Music

- Gospel hymns
- Southern music themes

Examples of Novel-Related Assignments

THE CHALLENGES OF BEING DIFFERENT

- Students will create a photographic quilt that displays pictures of their lives and race-relations (chap. 6).
- Students are required to interview and photograph community members and leaders who provide an array of information about race-relations in different eras of American History
- From their interviews, students can create a poem, a brief essay, or a series of proverbs about the person they interviewed.

BIOGRAPHY

Journal: Throughout life, there is one significant event that a person will always remember. Think about an important event that occurred in your life. In your journal, discuss one event that you would want people to always remember after your demise.

- Students will be introduced to the concept of writing a biography. Students will view a videotape of interviews on the life of homeless people recorded at the Tallahassee Homeless Shelter.
- Students will create an outline for their biographies (names on tombstones).
- Groups will work on puppet shows.

TECHNOLOGY

Students will formulate into groups of four and create a PowerPoint presentation of their different neighborhoods.

Culminating Activities

At the other middle school, students celebrated their completion of the novel by displaying the novel-related projects that they had created during the study of *Crossing Jordan*. The projects included the creation of these artifacts: models of Cass's and Jemmie's homes separated by the fence, trifold boards of journal responses and illustrations of the girls' secret meetings in the cemetery, postings to Amazon.com, dolls similar to those of Nana Grace, songs written to portray different characters in the story, and dialogues they created between characters that they would have included in the novel. Invitations were sent to Adrian Fogelin to attend the wrap-up festivities. The author graciously agreed to attend, to the delight of the middle school and university students. Students brought cookies and chocolate milk (an homage to Jemmie and Cass's favorite drink) and hung banners welcoming Ms. Fogelin back to their school. The event was a lively wrap up that in which middle school students, classroom teachers, university pre-service teachers and faculty, and parents were involved; everyone was energized by the common bond: their experiences with Fogelin's novel, *Crossing Jordan*.

The pre-service teachers learned how much time and effort are necessary in planning such pre- and post-reading events, and were enlightened by the honest and forthright comments the students made to the author. They also learned that they must be willing to take risks and discuss issues that are relevant to the lives of their students. Finally, they learned that caring is a fundamental need of children who seek acceptance, and that literacy enhances our ability to care for others and mold our world and us. Adrian Fogelin, as a person and writer, reminds us to see each new day, new moment, and new experience as a story with which we can begin to build global understanding and vision.

A Middle School Classroom Teacher's Perspective Renn Edenfield

For an attorney, it must be winning the case for a trusting client. For a doctor, I guess it's seeing a sick patient recover. For an actor, maybe it's being nominated for an Oscar, but for this teacher, it's knowing that one-hundred forty middle school students look forward to my class each day that helps me feel successful. I know that if they want to be there, even though it's still 7th Grade Language Arts in Room 30, I must be doing something right.

The concept sounds simple, but making it happen for the right reason, academic achievement, is more complex than I could have imagined when I started teaching middle school

language arts in 1973. Now, twenty-nine years later, I think about how much middle school students have taught me about helping them learn to read, write, listen, speak, and view our language, literature, and life. Studying how they react to my style, respond to my lesson plans, and perform the tasks associated with learning language arts, helps me grasp the intricacies of being a good teacher. Yet, every time I think I finally know all the important "stuff," I learn some other invaluable message.

I'm fortunate to teach in a town with two universities and a community college, but I didn't take advantage of it until 1994 when I participated in the North Florida Writing Project (directed by Dr. Sissi Carroll) Florida State University. That summer institute changed by life. I learned that I was starving to be with other teachers, to interact with them, to hear new ideas, and to feel affirmed when sharing mine. When I realized that a community of educators existed, I wanted to be a viable member, which meant collaborating with teachers at my school, other local schools, and eventually presenting at state and national conferences. Every interaction with another educator complemented my classroom practice and made me yearn for more. After years of feeling isolated, I couldn't get enough of this kind of "fellowship," which led me to engage in collaboration with Dr. Cindy Bowman, also of the English Education program at Florida State University.

When Cindy supervised one of my student teachers and offered to place some pre-service educators from the English Education methods course with me, the other benefits of partnership surfaced. The FSU students brought a new energy into my classroom, and Cindy and I exchanged conversation about how to accomplish our goals for both her students and mine. Because she shared Adrian Fogelin's first YA novel, *Crossing Jordan*, with me, my students and I experienced the excitement of reading about two middle school girls, Cass and Jemmie, set in our hometown, Tallahassee, Florida. As the FSU pre-service teachers implemented the pre-reading activities, my students became emotionally engaged in the reading even before they opened the book. We soon understood, though, that more important than the novel's setting were the issues of racial prejudice surrounding the girls' friendship. Cass' father built a fence to separate his white family from their new African-American neighbors and forbade Cass to associate with these people. How would the girls manage this conflict?

Many rich classroom discussions ensued as the students shared their thoughts and attitudes and individual, and family beliefs. It was the first time I had seen such open talk on this sometimes touchy subject, and as I listened to these 7th grade students communicate with each other, I marveled at the electrifying power of literature, the conduit for the flow of thoughts and ideas and developing attitudes about real life.

Cindy's decision to become actively involved with what was going on in the middle school also allowed my students the experience of meeting an author face-to-face. Adrian Fogelin spent the day with us at Cobb. As we prepared for this celebrity visit, I saw the students internalize some appreciation for literature, too. With the expectation of meeting and talking to this writer, Mrs. Fogelin and her characters became personal to them, and they valued that connection. Their words say it best (I have touched up some of their spelling):

Dear Adrian Fogelin,

I Loved your book *Crossing Jordan*.

My favorite part is When Cass was sneaking out of the house, and she got outside. Jemmie said, "Girl, it's going to be morning before you decide whether you want to stay on or get off those stairs!" How long did it take you to write that book? How did you know about all those parts from *Jane Eyre*? Have you read the book?

Sincerely,
(Grade 7 Boy)

Dear Adrian Fogelin,

I wanted to state my opinion on your book *Crossing Jordan*. I thought that your book was flawless. I loved it. When reading each chapter it leaves you a hunger for more. One thing about this particular book is how true it is about racism. I truly enjoyed reading *Crossing Jordan* and have recommended this book to other people. This book has most definitely changes my point of view on racism. Thank you for sharing this book with us.

Sincerely,
(Grade 7 Girl)

Dear Adrian Fogelin,

Hi! I'm so looking forward to you coming to our classroom. I love your book so far. My favorite part is when Missy gets overheated and Leona saves her. Then Missy's dad tries his hardest to pay her back. I have never met an author so you'll be the first one I'll meet. That's because I have never wanted to meet any other author expect for you because your book is really good! I'm really looking forward to meeting you!

Sincerely,
(Grade 7 Girl)

Dear Adrian Fogelin

I wish you were here so we could go to the restaurant and drink chocolate until we drop. Then we would go to the track and field to see if you still got it. Then we could go to my house and talk about how you were inspired to write your book. After that we could talk about making a movie. That's what we would do if you were here know.

Sincerely,
(Grade 7 Boy)

As I evaluate my effectiveness in the language arts classroom, I think about the energy, effort, and expertise it takes to make a difference in the education of middle grades students. It is a constant challenge, and I question whether I even matter. I am not automatically revered by clients or patients because of a college degree, nor am I idolized by fans because I'm on the big screen. Admittedly, many professionals like attorneys, doctors, and actors also work hard to make a difference in our world; I appreciate their skills and talents. Sometimes I even wonder what it would be like to be valued by society the way they are. But then I think about my love for children and for learning and for educators, and I understand that not everyone can be a teacher.

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