

Teaching *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky*:

An Opportunity for Educating about Displacement and Genocide

"NEVER AGAIN," are the words most often spoken in reference to the Holocaust. It is a short phrase, commanding and without ambiguity. It is also a call for action, and as citizens of the world, we are charged with ensuring the horrors of the Holocaust do not repeat themselves. In 2007, the National Council of Teachers of English conference program listed nine sessions on teaching about the Holocaust; the specific foci of these presentations suggest that English educators are using the classroom not only to develop reading and writing skills, but also to investigate history, politics, and ethics. In these sessions, presenters used the power of the story in Weisel's *Night* or the unmistakable voice of Anne Frank to discuss ways of teaching tolerance and activism to students. These presenters, and teachers like them across the world, are willing to tackle difficult subjects in their classrooms and worthy of admiration; they are doing meaningful work that shows a commitment to the teaching of English and to making the world a better and more humane place.

Yet, despite worldwide consensus that genocide must not be tolerated, the latter half of the twentieth century is one of the grimmest in recorded history. In her Pulitzer Prize winning book, *From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, Samantha Powers reminds us, "Genocide occurred *after* the Cold War; *after* the growth of human rights groups; *after* the advent of technology that allowed for instant communication; *after* the erection of the Holocaust Museum on the Mall in Washington, D.C" (503). In over five hundred pages, Powers chronicles the genocides of the last sixty years, and she highlights failed opportunities for

intervention and repeated demonstrations of apathy from the American public. She ultimately concludes, ". . . time and time again, decent men and women chose to look away. We have all been bystanders to genocide" (xvi).

As English teachers, we are aware of the power of literature to educate and to expand consciousness, both intellectually and emotionally. Philosopher Richard Rorty believes that literature allows readers to have a vicarious experience through characters whose lives who are "outside the range of us" while English professor Lynn Nelson argues sharing stories can reduce violence. He quotes Leslie Marmon Silko to make his point:

The Power of Personal Story
I will tell you something about stories.
[he said]
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled
They are all we have, you see.
All we have to fight off
Illness and death (43).

Mary Warner, English Education professor and former teacher, speaks specifically to the role of literature in adolescents' lives and says, ". . . readers, especially adolescents facing a complex of issues, can grow an understanding of and sensitivity toward themselves and others" (xxiv).

If we are truly committed to impacting the world through education, it is important that we do not objectify history into a series of facts or reduce historical literature into just another text to analyze; instead, we need to show students the relevance of

our lessons and situate those lessons in the immediate present. Therefore, when we help students understand how something as horrifying as the Holocaust happened, it is important that we remember many genocides have happened since, and that another genocide is occurring *right now* in Sudan where the United Nations reports approximately 200,000 people have been killed and 2.5 million have been displaced. Arab janjaweed militiamen are blamed for the murders and attacks of millions of Sudanese citizens in what has officially been called a genocide (www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/sudan/fact_sheet.pdf).

Benson Deng, Alephonsion Deng, and Benjamin Ajak are refugees from Sudan, and they have written the book, *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky*. In it, the narrative voice alternates between the three authors as they recount their experiences growing up in Sudan; the format results in three different mesmerizing and tender accounts of childhoods of displacement. The story begins before the conflict in a small village where, as little boys, they would play with mud and “stand under the acacia trees and watch the giraffes curl their black tongues around the leaves above” (4). The safety of their surrounding is shattered when their village is attacked and “Grass roofs lit up like a cluster of torches. Guns started popping again. Cries. More explosions. The popping louder and faster” (52). It is at this point that the narrative truly comes to life because it is the beginning of the authors’ fifteen-year walk across Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya.

They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky has received critical acclaim and was the required summer reading for all students attending the Michigan Tech last fall. It is a timely and important work, and it is an opportunity for us, as educators, to use literature to create awareness about global issues.

Introducing the Book with Activities and Film

As already stated, the book is arranged chronologically. During their flight to the United States, the authors discover things such as toilet flushing and ice cream, but their lives after their arrival in America are not discussed. In 2003, directors Megan Mylan and John Shenk created the Emmy-award nominated documentary, *The Lost Boys*, which follows two young

boys, Peter and Santino, as they adjust to life as refugees in the United States. The movie depicts a harrowing portrait of both what it is like to become part of a new culture and of contemporary America. While showing this film after reading *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky* is logical—it could function as a possible continuation of the story—it is even more useful as an introductory activity. The film poses serious questions about students’ lifestyles and functions an anchor to begin a discussion on displacement. Of course, just as students have different life experiences, refugees also come from a variety of backgrounds and have undergone a multitude of different experiences; however, by watching Peter and Santino struggle with familiar things such as high school basketball, budgeting, and girls, students can begin to humanize some part of the refugee experience within a familiar context.

After viewing the film, students’ learning is further enriched with a few introductory exercises on refugees. In his book, *Nurturing the Peacemakers in our Students*, Weber provides a chapter with numerous lessons for teaching about refugee experiences. He lists complete lesson plans for a series of useful activities including lessons from the *Save the Children* “Refugee Activity Pack” (To my knowledge, these lessons are no longer on the Save the Children website). In these lessons, students work in groups to brainstorm what makes a home and what items they would take with them if they were forced to evacuate. Again, these activities make a particularly useful starting point because they are grounded in what is familiar to students, that is, the places and environments that they know.

Reading *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky*

Once students are familiar with the concept of displacement, they are ready to begin reading the book. The alternating chapters create an almost surreal reading experience—the boys’ stories overlap one another and create an account of life in Sudan that is layered and deep—but because each chapter is narrated in the first person, it is easy for students to lose track of whose voice is speaking. To help them understand the basic plot of each boy’s story as they read, students should map the authors’ journeys on

photocopied maps of the region. A map is provided in the introduction of the book, and it can easily be enlarged on a Xerox machine. The already labeled routes can be removed with correction fluid to allow students to mark the journey for themselves. The handout attached to the map is useful for introducing this activity (see Figure 1).

It is important to note that students will not begin their maps until Part Two of the book because that is where the authors' journeys begin. The first portion of the book contains descriptions of life in the boys' hometown of Juol and does not facilitate "tracking."

While a summary of the storyline is useful, students must move beyond mere plot summary into more sophisticated readings. Scholars such as Britton, Moffett, Rosenblatt, Atwell, and Keene and Zimmerman argue that readers should be engaged with a text in order to create their own meanings, and reader response journals are a widely used way to facilitate students' active engagement with their reading. Teacher Cynthia Ann Bowman argues reader response journals allow students "the opportunity to internally monologue, to actively participate with the literary work" (78) while Vaca and Vaca state, "When teachers integrate writing and reading, they help students use writing to think about what they will read and to understand what they have read" (261).

Once they begin reading Part Two, students keep a reader response log in which they write as if they were traveling along with one of the authors. Since Benjamin's chapters are short and infrequent, students

Below is a map of Sudan and the neighboring countries. You have been given two identical maps. As you read each chapter, you will track the journeys of Benson and Alepho on each of the maps. Write a short summary of what you read in a one- to two-sentence entry. For example, in the chapter, "Why? Because." Benson is in the refugee camp Paniydo, so on Benson's map, you would find Paniyodo and make an entry that reads something like this:

Benson is smacked by a UN teacher because he doesn't know proper English. His friend is poisoned by an old woman who dropped a salamander in his soup.

Figure 1. Guidelines Explaining to Students How to Track Characters on the Map

You are going to pretend you are traveling with Benson or Alepho on their journey, and you will write about what you might have seen, felt, or experienced. Each time you read one of Benson or Alepho's chapters, you are going to imagine yourself in the situation and write a creative response to the chapter. For example when Alepho tells about the difficulty of bed bugs in the refugee camp, he writes:

At night we were tired, but we couldn't sleep because of the bedbugs. Every morning we'd get up and have bumps all over and smeared blood from scratching ourselves. . . . We couldn't kill them because if you did it could fill the whole building with its bad smell. Worse than a skunk, if someone squashed one, the boys would come in, 'Oh my God, you killed a bedbug'" (131).

If you chose to write about this incident, you might write a description of what it felt like to be covered in bedbugs or you might imagine yourself so frustrated with bites that you killed one and had to deal with the consequences from the older boys.

Figure 2. A Hand-Out That Explains a Response Journal

choose between Benson and Alepho and create an entry to correspond with each chapter. The point of the response journal is to allow students a space to actively imagine themselves as part of the story and to deepen their understanding of the authors' experiences. Therefore, their responses should not be summaries of what happened, but should instead be creative works. Figure 2 is an example of a hand-out that describes this assignment.

While personal response is important, students should extend their understanding into a broader context. In their book, *Teaching Literature to Adolescents*, Richard Beach et al. describe many ways to interpret narratives, including examining settings and social worlds, which include social, cultural, and historical contexts" (134). Part of what makes *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky* such a teachable work is the way the authors situate themselves not only in their immediate environments, but also in a broader world and political context. Consider this excerpt from the chapter titled "Not in Our Mama's House No More":

Seeing destroyed towns changed our mood. They didn't even look like villages anymore. I thought I understood why the Murahaliin attacked our village. They wanted our cattle, our things and our kids. But I didn't understand this complicated war, how it mortally devoured the land and left it so full of skeletons. The adults talked of the war all the time. They discussed slavery, apartheid, racism, segregation and tribalism. They called it a religious war. A jihad (123).

Throughout the book, there are accounts of UN and American intervention (or lack thereof), and students use the text as a jumping off point to deepen their own understanding of the ongoing struggle in Sudan. As they progress through the book, students should engage in ongoing mini-research projects on political and cultural issues that are relevant to what they have read. One particularly useful resource to facilitate this understanding is the Topics section of the *New York Times* website. In addition to a concise overview of the current situation in Sudan and a chronological listing of related newspaper articles, the site lists links to other useful sites such as the *UN Commission on Darfur* Report, the BBC country profile, and the *CIA Factbook* (< <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/sudan/index.html?8qa> >). Another valuable resource for gaining background is the thematic essays link on the *The Lost Boys* film site. Concise and well-researched essays on Sudan, the history of genocide, and refugees are available and make excellent hand-outs for students. Similarly, the site provides many useful teacher-written lessons on teaching about both refugees and genocide, and many of the lessons have hand-outs that are ready to distribute to in the classroom (< www.lostboysfilm.com/learn.html. >).

Culminating Project: Educating Others about Sudan

By the conclusion of the book, students have a rich understanding of what the authors experienced and a general knowledge of the broader political context of the narrative, but they are unaware of possibilities for activism. When teaching literature, particularly works that are politically charged, we have to be careful not to force our beliefs onto our students. If we were to require students to write editorials that speak out against the Sudan genocide or

to institute a class-wide fundraising project for a non-profit relief agency, we would risk hijacking students' voices under the weight of our own agendas. Yet, if we believe that literature has the capacity to affect students' consciousness in meaningful and impactful ways, we have to show students how to claim a voice as concerned citizens and activists.

In her book, *Stirring Up Justice*, Jessica Singer advocates for the fostering of activism in the English classroom through student-generated projects that move beyond "This [issue] bothers me" and into exploration and inter-disciplinary research. She emphasizes a multi-media approach and displays student projects in a public gallery for the school community. Singer says, "Rather than reporting, the projects [a]re meant to inform others about particular issues and then offer original ideas and suggestions for ways people may become directly involved" (115). This model allows students to research topics that are interesting to them, and thus acquire valuable academic skills, without forcing them to adhere to a pre-determined agenda. Such a strategy makes sense because it allows students to investigate possibilities for their own activism in an academic context without requiring them to move into a public sphere beyond the school community. Using an adaptation of Singer's model (see Figure 3), students create individual projects designed to educate others about any of the topics discussed in the book or movie.

Powers research on the genocides of the twentieth century led her to conclude that even in face of evidence, American politicians, journalists, and citizens assume that a genocide will not occur, and they trust in traditional diplomacy and negotiations. Once the genocide begins, they believe people who are careful will survive and donate humanitarian aid. Furthermore, political leaders look to the reaction of the American public when choosing to intervene, and society-wide silence is seen as indifference (xvi-xvii). These are troubling findings that are relevant to every member of the world community, but particularly to educators who shape our future citizenry and leaders. Therefore, we should use our ideals to shape our practice. So many of us got into the business of teaching English because we believe in the power of language and literature to develop social consciousness in young people and because we believe we could change the world. In *They Poured on Us from*

Based on your viewing of *The Lost Boys*, your reading of *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky* and the activities you have completed in this unit, you are going to create a project that will inform people about refugees, genocide, or the situation in Sudan (for example, you might want to create a visual display of the illnesses that plague refugee camps, or you could survey people you know to see if they are aware of what is happening in Sudan. You might want to find out if there is a refugee community in our city and set up interviews with some of its members, or you might want to create a timeline that tracks the U.S. response to the Sudan genocide). In other words, what issue have you learned about that warrant further investigation? Ask yourself how you can teach a new way of seeing or understanding this issue that could potentially promote positive social change.

You will create a “lesson” that is visual, oral, written, or musical. This lesson will teach your message to an audience of your peers.

You will also create a statement to explain your final project, and you will display this statement along with your project in a gallery that will be on display for the school community.

Figure 3. Individual Project Guidelines, adapted from Singer’s Model

the Sky, Deng, Deng, and Ajak have used their voices to show the world what is happening in Sudan. Let’s help students listen and make an informed choice whether they want to passively accept the genocide in Sudan.

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