



BOOK IN REVIEW: A TEACHING GUIDE

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It Only Takes a Spark:

Almost All Changes Start with a Small, Personal Act

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Those of us who have lived more than three or four decades have seen vast changes in the landscape around us. Some of these changes have been a long time coming, while others are not so welcome. Water and other natural resources are not as abundant as they once were thought to be, and many communities must now choose between watering their green lawns, thus depleting the water supply, or preserving the water for human and animal consumption. Several catastrophic oil spills and the looming threats of global warming are forcing us to think about our reliance on fossil fuels as energy sources and to support continued work on automobiles that run on different fuels. Our nation finally elected an African American president, its first in the country's long history. A woman is currently a legitimate contender for the nation's most important office. And gay men and women have the legal right to marry their life partners.

Snail mail has almost ceased to exist since Smartphones now allow us to contact our friends and family almost instantaneously—and get a response in lightning-quick fashion. Gone is any need for a long-distance telephone calling plan or collect calls, since most cellphones allow us to talk to anyone in the world for one small monthly fee. Long an undiscussed

problem in the nation's schools, bullying is finally being addressed through various summit meetings in the White House, and many school administrations no longer dismiss violent acts as “boys being boys” or “girls being catty.” Many readers now prefer to read their printed material through e-readers and not in the traditional book format with paper and binding. Even this column, thanks to today's wonders of technology, can be saved and edited multiple times or have its format, font size, and style tweaked numerous times—all without the use of Wite-Out or correcting tape. The world has changed a great deal from the time many of us were born to what it is presently. Arguably, it will continue to change, whether for better or worse, but just as being able to fly from one city to another quickly has its merits, it also has its environmental costs.

It's interesting to think about what sparks certain change or innovation. Most likely someone is discontent with the way things are or the way things are done. Perhaps this someone wants something more . . . more cheaply, quickly, efficiently, ecologically—the list goes on. I recently read Andrea Davis Pinkney's (2015) *Rhythm Ride: A Road Trip through the Motown Sound* in which she describes how Berry Gordy drew inspiration from the assembly lines of Motor City for his own musical dreams of creating stars from ordinary men and women in his neighborhood. He made changes in America's musical tastes through his nurturing of various African American musicians. And interestingly, though not surprisingly, these tastes

changed further as the nation became preoccupied with the Vietnam War, civil rights, social justice, and other matters. Almost always, changes that swept a school, a community, a nation, or even the world started small, with one man or woman or even teen, as in the case of Malala Yousafzai, a young Pakistani social activist who was shot because she insisted on attending school and spoke out for the rights of females to have an education. But what provides the impetus for that one person to stand up or to speak out for what's right? That's the focus of this issue's column.

Mahatma Gandhi has been credited with sharing these inspiring words with others: "Be the change that you wish to see in the world." Teens could do a lot worse than to pay attention to his suggestions and use those words to light their paths as they navigate treacherous waters. In the two books featured in this issue's column, two different teens face dilemmas that are in some ways unique to them and in other ways relatable to most teens. There have been countless books and articles written about the causes of bullying and how to deal with bullies. Some of that advice is useless, while some of it is helpful or at least reassuring, but each bully has his/her own unique way of reacting to others, and sometimes, it isn't an individual that is the bully, but society as a whole, or even our own internalization of what we see as society's expectations. This may have something to do with how we feel about ourselves, often thinking we are too small or too large or not pretty or handsome enough. Sometimes it has to do with thinking that we just don't measure up in some way.

The protagonist in Emil Sher's *Young Man with Camera* (2015), T—, doesn't seek out attention or necessarily want to bring attention to the subjects that he photographs, and yet, the very act of taking certain photos could be seen as an act of bravery—bravery that in some respects is just as courageous as the actions of those being photographed. In T—'s case, he takes pictures of something that his antagonist doesn't want anyone else to have seen—an act of cruelty toward a homeless woman that escalates beyond mere unkindness.

Willowdean, the protagonist of Julie Murphy's *Dumplin'* (2015), decides to start her campaign for change on a small level by embracing her size and entering the local beauty pageant. After all, she assures

herself, who says a beauty queen has to be small? Although she has no expectation of winning the contest, she inspires others to stand up and be counted—or perhaps no longer to hide their identities in shame. But along the way down that oh-so-long and lonely runway, she realizes that she also has her own nest of insecurities about her body and what others may think.

About the Authors

Emil Sher

An eclectic Toronto author who has written for several different age groups, Emil Sher adapted Karen Levine's (2003) *Hana's Suitcase* for the stage. He founded the Breadbox Theatre in 2005 to introduce early-grade schoolchildren to the joys of live theater and has written poems that were published in *Chirp* magazine. With two board books to his credit—*A Button Story* (2014a) and *A Pebble Story* (2014b)—Emil has also written for older readers. *Young Man with Camera* is his debut young adult novel. Born and raised in Montreal, Emil received the 2014 K. M. Hunter Artist Award in Literature, a Canadian Screenwriting Award, and a gold medal at the New York International Festival. Learn more about Emil at his website: <http://emilsher.com/>.

Julie Murphy

A transplanted Southern belle who was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, this author considers her true home to be Fort Worth, Texas, where she found her niche. She has written two books: *Side Effects May Vary* (2014) and *Dumplin'*, and is hard at work on a third and a fourth one. A former reference librarian, Julie now writes full time. Fans can check out some of her short fiction at the @hanginggardenstories or learn more about her at <http://andimjulie.tumblr.com/> or <http://juliemurphywrites.com/>.

About the Books

Young Man with Camera: A Novel with Photographs

While it's true that pictures often speak louder than words, sometimes those pictures need explication, and often the pictures spell trouble for the person who took them. In the same vein, photography can be a wonderful means of self-expression for some, but it

T—’s ability to see the beauty in what others might dismiss, as well as his courage in confronting evil in its most basic form, will inspire readers to their own acts of bravery.

can also lead to controversy, trouble, and unwanted attention when the wrong picture is snapped at the wrong time. So it is for T—, the book’s narrator. Ever since first grade, T— has been bullied by a group of classmates he secretly calls “Joined at the Hip,” for obvious reasons. The leader is a cruel young man named Ryan, who hides his ever-growing anger and violence beneath a veneer of politeness. T— finds solace in photography as well as in his friendship with

both Sean and a homeless woman named Lucy, whose wry cardboard statements provide amusing social commentary. As might be expected, Ryan’s harassment of T— intensifies, especially when he realizes that T—has seen and photographed something Ryan would want no one to see. Ryan elevates his campaign against T—, and when his threats seem to have little effect on the

boy, he threatens others who are important to him.

The book contains black-and-white photos taken by the protagonist, all of which provide insight into unseen beauty. With support from Ms. Karamath, a teacher at his school, and inspiration from Diane Arbus, whose work celebrates marginalized individuals, T— finds the courage to let his images speak for him as a way to right the wrongs he sees around him. T—’s ability to see the beauty in what others might dismiss, as well as his courage in confronting evil in its most basic form, will inspire readers to their own acts of bravery. One by one, each act makes a difference in the world. As T— comes to realize, photos can also change the world by bringing attention to an issue or putting a face to a social problem.

Dumplin’

To some, country singer Dolly Parton might stand for everything artificial in the world, and yet, when she sings, her beautiful voice needs no instrument to accompany it, as her lyrics and voice tear listeners’ hearts right out of their chests. Dolly matters a great deal to Willowdean Dickson, partly because Willowdean appreciates her music, but also because she

shares that appreciation with her recently deceased Aunt Lucy. Sixteen-year-old Willowdean makes no bones about the matter: she is unapologetically fat. Each year she watches as her mother, a former beauty pageant winner who now runs the local Clover City event, prepares the next possible candidates for the crown. Perhaps against the odds, Willowdean is funny and filled with confidence. For the most part, she owns her size and isn’t concerned about what others may think. But some of that self-confidence crumbles when she and Bo Larson, an employee at the diner where she works, begin a secret romance. She becomes anxious about his touching her fat. She’s also dealing with the loss of her aunt, who died at the age of 36 weighing 498 pounds, and her mother’s determination to get rid of all of Lucy’s stuff.

As she feels her self-confidence undercut by her own mother, who affectionately calls her Dumplin’, she decides to enter the beauty pageant—not to win, but to prove to herself and all the folks out there that beauty comes in all sorts of sizes, forms, and packages. Along with several classmates who see her as their leader in self-empowerment, Willowdean makes her way to the pageant stage but does so on her own terms. The authorial voice is particularly strong here, and it may change some minds about body size, beauty, and those silly beauty pageants. Willowdean’s changes start with truly embracing herself and opening her heart to the possibility of love, friendship, and acceptance. While she teaches her mother a thing or two along the way, she has much to learn herself. It all makes me wonder, *Since beauty varies so widely from culture to culture or decade to decade, what is the point of those so-called beauty pageants? Why not an intelligence pageant?*

The Covers

Anyone who spends more than five minutes with me knows that I am crazy about book covers and love discussing them with my students, since covers often determine whether someone decides to pick up a book and read it or simply leave it on the shelf. The covers of these two books are creative and enticing, playing with perspective and shading. *Young Man with Camera’s* cover never lets us see its main character, since his face is covered by a camera lens, perhaps a symbol for the very device that allows him to give voice to his fears and what he has seen. It allows him

to hide from the viewer. Relying on blues and shading that bring to mind a darkroom, the cover allows readers to think about what is being seen, but also about who is behind that camera and who chooses the shot and how to set it up. It may be that he is not quite as hidden as he might like to think.

Dumplin' showcases a voluptuous woman—a full-figured gal, as some might say—dressed in a vivid red gown with her arms lifted to the sky, head thrown back, as if opening herself up to what might be waiting in the wings. A tiara is seen against the book's black backdrop, and the quote to “go big or go home” is a great reminder to seize life rather than wait for that right moment or that right size or that right person to be dropped in your lap. Because readers cannot see the face of this young woman—only her chin, nose, golden locks, and her transcendent joy—she could be anyone. While she is clearly not hiding—that red dress makes that impossible—at the same time, she isn't revealing everything to us, either.

Using the Books in the Classroom

Prereading Activities

Examine the covers of both books before beginning to read them. Have the class discuss what possible elements have been included and which ones have been omitted and how students feel about those artistic decisions.

Using video clips and photos showing standards of beauty over the decades as well as the documentary and news notes from “The Ideal Woman through the Ages” at <http://news.discovery.com/history/art-history/history-beauty-120412.htm>, discuss how standards of beauty have evolved and why there is such a focus on beauty for females and, less often, for males. Who decides what those standards for perfection are? Also, share with the class the promotion for a campaign called “Changing the Face of Beauty: Capturing Grace One Face at a Time,” which is working to include individuals with disabilities in the media and in advertising campaigns at <http://changingthefaceofbeauty.org/>. There are many related YouTube clips supporting this campaign that can be found simply by Googling the phrase “changing the face of beauty.” Share and discuss with the class these Dove Real Beauty Sketches at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=litXW91UauE>, as well as the Dove

Campaign for Real Beauty (Male Version) at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_I17cK1ltY.

When discussion turns to bullying, have the class make a list of what comprises bullying and then rank order the class's list from 1 to 10, with one being the worst kind of bullying and ten being the least intimidating type of bullying. Encourage discussion about perceptions of levels of bullying. For instance, what might seem to be at first a fairly harmless type of bullying, such as teasing or name calling, can escalate into something more dangerous. Then read aloud the international picturebook *Red* by Jan de Kinder (2015), in which the narrator teases her young classmate Tommy because of his tendency to blush easily. Discuss how her teasing the boy for something that commonly happens to everyone escalates and how the narrator must find the courage to stand up to the bully Paul, even though he may turn on her. After all, she describes him in this way: “His tongue is as sharp as a knife. And his fist is as hard as a brick. He's twice as strong as me” (unpaged). Ask the class if those words are effective in describing the bullies they or others have encountered. Why or why not?

Interdisciplinary Connections

The impact of art through music or photography is felt throughout both books. Spend a few hours browsing the covers of popular magazines at your local newsstand or online. What do the images found on those covers tell you about what our society or the readers of the magazines may value? Spend a couple of hours or a day, if you have the time to spare, listening to a local radio station that plays top 40 or country songs. Record your observations about what songs are played, who sings them, what their topics and themes are and any subliminal or overt messages that you can

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detect from them. Often, when I spend a lot of time in my car or jump into it at the start of the day and then again at the end of the day, I am dumbfounded that the very same song that was playing at 6 a.m. can be heard again at 3:30 p.m. Why is that?

For a deeper understanding of the impact of music in *Dumplin'*, check out these clips featuring Dolly Parton singing “I Will Always Love You” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHw62eZpHk4> and “Jolene” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1plvBR02wDs>.

As for the power of photography, students will enjoy seeing the images described in *Young Man with Camera* in these clips of “Diane Arbus—Secrets—Photography”:

- “Masters of Photography” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5BmKx5KeCE>
- “The Terror of War” at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/nostri-imago/4427918225/> and <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2012/06/the-historic-napalm-girl-pulitzer-image-marks-its-40th-anniversary/>
- “Tank Man vs. Chinese Tank in Tiananmen Square” at <http://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=tank+man&view=detail&mid=343D625BBDF2F5A1AC6F343D625BBDF2F5A1AC6F&FORM=VIRE2>
- “Tank Man: The Amazing Story of THAT Photo” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SACHKW4o1E>

Group Discussion Questions

- Willowdean Dickson in *Dumplin'* and T— in *Young Man with Camera* deal with life in very different ways. Willowdean is more assertive, almost courting controversy or daring someone to make comments about her, while T— prefers to stay below the radar and avoid trouble. With which protagonist do you identify most? Why? If you were telling their story from another point of view, say, Ellen, Willowdean’s best friend, or Sean, T—’s only friend, how might the story be different? What do Ellen and Sean notice about their friends that others may not?
- Names matter, and so do nicknames. In Willowdean’s case, her mother’s affectionate use of the moniker “Dumplin’” shows her fondness for her daughter but also an utter disregard for Wil-

lowdean’s feelings. In T—’s case, he prefers an initial letter rather than a name since that helps him remain hidden and unknown. Why do you think this is the case for the two of them? Talk to your parent(s) or guardian(s) and other family members to learn more about the origin or significance of your name and/or nickname. Then write a brief piece introducing yourself to a stranger through telling the story of your name.

- Many sports teams have mascots and names that some groups find culturally offensive because they attribute certain acts of violence or warlike behavior to certain ethnic groups. What do you think?
- Why is it so difficult to speak up for what is right? Is it harder to speak up for *ourselves* or for *others*? Why do you think as you do? Is it possible to speak up for both at the same time? Does speaking up necessarily mean using one’s voice, or can it occur through art, music, or even a refusal to speak?
- Both protagonists face bullying of different sorts. At her high school, athlete Patrick Thomas delights in ridiculing Dumplin’ for her size and teasing her would-be boyfriend Mitch for dating a large woman. T— has faced constant teasing and escalating harassment from Ryan and the crew he has dubbed “Joined at the Hip” ever since first grade. What prompts these characters to belittle Willowdean and T—? If you could respond to them, what would you say to make them stop? What are some reasons that others pick on classmates? Discuss a time when you yourself experienced bullying or bullied someone or watched bullying happen and then did nothing. How would you react now?
- Although both protagonists have loving parents, their parents are also clueless in many respects. T— knows that his parents will buy Ryan’s good boy act and dismiss T—’s fears about his attacker, while Willowdean lives with a mother whose values and ways of behaving are very different from hers. Why do you think T—’s parents are so quick to believe the best of Ryan and the worst of their son? Why does Willowdean’s mother fail to understand the strong connection her daughter had with her Aunt Lucy?
- Creative expression matters in both of the books. In *Dumplin'*, Willowdean fashions a hat representing a part of Texas and is moved by the songs of country singer Dolly Parton; in *Young Man with*

Camera, T— uses his camera to record the world as he sees it. Suppose the two characters traded their creative connections. What do you think Willowdean would photograph? What music would make sense to T—? Why?

- What were your favorite scenes or passages in each book? Why? Were you drawn to the humor or the pathos in each book? After all, there is plenty of both threaded through the narratives.
- Both protagonists find inspiration in the actions of others, some famous and others not so famous. How would you define the word “courage”? Make a list of courageous acts, and then rank them according to how much courage you think each one takes to commit.
- Although songs and photographs capture moments or experiences in time, they also immortalize those moments in a sense. What song or photograph would best represent you or your generation? Why?
- What do you think: Is a picture worth a thousand words? Or is one word worth a thousand pictures?
- Trying on bathing suits or appearing in public in a bathing suit is difficult for many reasons, according to Willowdean in *Dumplin’*. At beauty pageants, contestants often need to show their poise, their talent, but also their beauty through the wearing of a bathing suit. What do you think about this practice? Why is there no equivalent of the Miss America or Miss Universe pageants for men other than those related to body building? What does this say about how we define or identify beauty?
- Lucy, the homeless woman that T— spends a lot of time photographing, is a complex character. The author never tells readers her backstory, but he does make it clear that she is content with her life choices. What might some of the reasons be for someone becoming homeless? What are some of the advantages and disadvantages or dangers that the homeless face?
- Because many of those who are homeless are marginalized by society, their stories surely matter. What are some possible solutions to the widespread homeless problem in our nation?
- Learn some startling facts about homelessness in the United States from the National Alliance to End Homelessness at <http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/the-state-of-homelessness-in-america-2015>. Based on the group’s records and

conjectures, on a single night in January 2014, 578,424 people were either sleeping outside or in an emergency shelter or transitional housing program. The report contains a map showing areas where homelessness is more prevalent.

- Check out information about reasons behind homelessness on PBS’s Facts and Figures: The Homeless at <http://www.pbs.org/now/shows/526/homeless-facts.html>.
- Read about how one state is working to solve its homeless problem in this article, “Utah Found a Brilliantly Effective Solution for Homelessness,” at <http://www.businessinsider.com/this-state-may-be-the-first-to-end-homelessness-for-good-2015-2>. What do you think? Could this work? What other possible solutions might end the problem of homelessness?
- Investigate the issue of homelessness in your own community and state. What are some of the challenges raised by this problem? What pros and cons do you see to solving the problem? You might also enjoy reading Elliott Liebow’s (1993) *Tell Them Who I Am: Lives of Homeless Women*, which relates the stories of women who have spent a considerable amount of time living on the street.
- What sort of photographs might T— from *Young Man with Camera* have taken of the denizens at the Hideaway in *Dumplin’*? What do you think he might have found worth photographing about them? Do the right clothing and makeup make someone into an attractive woman? Or is it something else entirely? Explain your comments.
- Which character has the most impact on his/her world? Why do you think as you do? What possible long-range changes might their actions have on those around them? Which character would you most likely emulate when it comes to taking some kind of action? Why?

Wonderful Words Worth Noting

With the words they choose and the way they place those words, good writers help readers become familiar with their characters. Find a partner and discuss these quotes. Be sure to explain what each passage reveals about the character or how the quote makes you feel. What makes the passage particularly memorable? Or if you don’t like the lines, tell why they don’t appeal to you or why they seem inauthentic.

FROM *YOUNG MAN WITH CAMERA*

- “The truth is like our kitchen wall. It looks yellow. It is yellow. But there’s more than one yellow. Truth, like yellow, comes in a thousand different shades.” (p. 6)
- “After that I took a whole bunch of pictures of doorknobs. They’re not something anyone ever thinks about but you would miss them as soon as they were gone.” (p. 22)
- “That’s another reason why I love photographs. They can say things you didn’t hear the first time you looked at them.” (p. 23)
- “This laughter was thick gravy you pour over platefuls of grief to disguise the taste.” (p. 37)
- “When someone goes, they take all the missing parts with them. Maybe that’s one reason why we miss them so much.” (p. 92)
- “I wanted to clean up the mess. I wasn’t sure how I knew Sean was right. The mess would keep spreading like those huge oil spills that turn blue water black and leave birds so covered with oil they never fly again.” (p. 108)
- “If disappointment was a perfume, my mother would have bottles of the stuff.” (p. 110)
- “There’s another reason why we need photographs. To remember what was there before it disappears.” (p. 122)
- “I thought of the photographs I had seen of people who survived natural disasters. Earthquakes and monsoons and tsunamis. They all look the same, dazed and dented and out of batteries.” (p. 127)
- “The truth is as easy to crop as a photograph.” (p. 155)
- “A ton of words were bumper-cars colliding in my head but only one made it to my mouth.” (p. 183)
- “Some days I think there’s this river between parents and their kids and you don’t know if you’ll ever find the bridge that connects them. Some days I think the river is bridgeless.” (p. 184)

FROM *DUMPLIN’*

- “But that’s me. I’m fat. It’s not a cuss word. It’s not an insult. At least not when I say it. So I always figure why not get it out of the way?” (p. 9)
- “I get what he means, because I think I’ve played pretend my whole life. I don’t know when, but a really long time ago, I decided who I wanted to be. And I’ve been acting like her—whoever she

is—since. But I think the act is fading, and I don’t know if I like the person I am beneath it all.” (p. 240)

- “I guess it could be that she was trying to be intuitive to whatever privacy needs she figured I might have. But the thought tickling in the back of my mind says that she’s not interested in being reminded of this body I wear.” (p. 257)
- “Because I can’t bear to tell him no. Not yet. I want to live with the possibility of what could be. If only for a couple days.” (p. 291)
- “I don’t even want to win, but I think there’s this survival instinct inside all of us that clicks on when we see other people failing. It makes me feel gross and incredibly human.” (p. 329)
- “There’s some kind of peace that comes with knowing that for every person who is waiting to be found, there’s someone out there searching.” (p. 345)
- “I guess sometimes the perfection we perceive in others is made up of a whole bunch of tiny imperfections, because some days the damn dress just won’t zip.” (p. 369)

Post-Reading Activities

- Peruse both books. Pick out some of your favorite words or phrases, copy those down on paper or print them out in different sizes, sort them out so that they form a word collage, and then add splashes of color to your creation. Be sure to share your creative product with a classmate, or post it in the classroom or school hall along with a pen and paper asking others to record their comments.
- Take a camera or Smartphone with you all day and record 10 things that seem important to you. Print out the images, arrange them however you like, and ask your classmates to create captions for each of them.
- Imagine that you are Lucy or Sean in *Young Man with a Camera* or Aunt Lucy or Bo in *Dumplin’* and that you keep a diary or a journal of your daily life. Write a series of five entries that provide insight into your character and your motivation.
- Ms. Karamath works hard to provide support and guidance to T—, and yet he never tells her the full story of his situation. T— reads part of her letter from the blue binder in which she attempts to make sense of what has happened. Write the rest

of the letter that she would have written, and then, channeling T—, create a photographic response back to her in which you tell your story.

- Selfies are ubiquitous these days. While sometimes selfies can do harm, at other times they can be empowering. In order to feel empowered and good about yourself, gather some of your friends and classmates and make a collection of selfies that celebrate what is best about each other. You may choose to do a self-portrait or a group portrait or even ask one another to take selfies of what each of you considers the best aspect of you and then gather all of those images together.
- Design and then sew Willowdean’s pageant dress. If you are feeling particularly bold, why not model it for your classmates?
- Draw a mind portrait of what you think T— looks like. Be sure to use illustrations as well as descriptive words to highlight physical characteristics and personality traits.

These Remind Me of You

Although they choose to cope in different ways, the protagonists in both books deal with tough issues. Their small changes on a personal level may inspire others to make changes in their own approaches to life or heighten others’ awareness of issues that need solutions. For instance, bullying and body shaming exist in every school and in every classroom, even though they may be hidden, and often acts of bullying occur on the way to and from school. See cj Bott’s excellent resources *The Bully in the Book and in the Classroom* (2004) and *More Bullies in More Books* (2009) for more titles that might have a place in the classroom. The ones listed below provide great starting points for exploring bullying and body image issues. Not surprisingly, one of the changes prompted by the digital age is the feeling of anonymity that can lead to posting provocative texts or photos.

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