

NOTES ON AMERICAN LETTERS



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"Literature ranges from simple songs and sayings to elaborate and extended tales of human deeds. The most compelling literature concerns persons whose feelings, thoughts, and actions engage us in the lived time of mortality. Ideas and abstractions, which systematically separate themselves from persons and from time, do not form the essence of literature and do not surpass it."

-Roger Shattuck, *Candor and Perversion*

EDITOR'S CORNER

The Summer Issue closes the first year of *Notes on American Letters*. However, this is the first time that we have asked for responses to an article we are including. Because there are diverse responses to this very special idea about assessment of writing we asked two highly qualified English educators to weigh in on the topic.

Notes on American Letters is only accomplished because of the amazing efforts of every member of our editorial team. All honor to their diligence and excellence.

Joe Milner
Editor

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Lucy Milner

Over sixty years have passed since I was in sixth grade, and I have forgotten almost everything from that year—with one noticeable exception: I remember vividly that Mrs. Kleckner read to us every day after lunch for at least thirty minutes, and often longer. It is not surprising that I have forgotten everything except that fact. It is a tribute to the importance of reading to children. What is surprising is that I even remember what Mrs. Kleckner read that year; she read several *Hardy Boys* detective stories, several *Nancy Drew* mysteries, and she read *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and *The Prince and the Pauper* in their entirety. I am amazed that I remember in detail what she read, but that amazement should transfer to the long term effect of reading aloud to children.

I have been a volunteer reader in elementary school for over thirty years, and I want to share the things I have learned from that wonderful experience. First and foremost is the importance of story-telling itself. I shall also include a few tips on how to improve one's reading and a starter's list of poems and stories that have been well received.

One unique feature of our species is language. We have been talking to one another for one or two million years. Writing has existed a tiny fraction of that time, so speaking aloud has constituted the overwhelming majority of our communications (and still does), speaking with one or more people within easy listening range. Stories are the primary way we receive, retain, and transmit knowledge. The structure of the story itself reinforces memory. The brain cannot remember random facts, but it can remember an immense amount if it is woven into a story. Let me give one example which convinced me that this is true. I attended a seminar a while back on jury selection. A law firm had retained a group of experts to solve a problem they were having in an important case. There were two important expert witnesses in the case. The attorneys had done four simultaneous mock trials using these two witnesses. When they polled the four juries after the mock trials, they learned to their horror that half the jurors could not remember one of the witnesses at all! And half of those jurors who did remember the witness couldn't remember whether he testified for the plaintiff or for the defendant. Hence the experts were called in to find out why. After studying the mock trials and interviewing all the jurors, the experts concluded that the reason the jurors couldn't remember the witness was because he didn't fit into the story that the lawyers were trying to tell. At the beginning of a trial the lawyers give an opening statement that is a summary of the story that their side of the case is going to present. This example, as much as anything else, convinced me that what I said above is powerfully true—*stories are the primary way we receive, retain and transmit information.*

In addition to transmitting knowledge, reading aloud to children allows them to use their imagination. I try to choose for the most part stories and books that have no pictures or illustrations. After several sessions of reading, I discuss with the children that the stories I have read have no pictures, and ask if they would like to know why. I ask them when they watch television, where does the picture appear? They tell me that it appears on the TV screen. And I ask them when they go to the movies, where does the picture appear? And they rightly say it's on the front wall. But, I ask, if I read a story with no illustrations, where does the picture appear? And the kids rightly point to their heads and say in their brains. Of course, there is another lesson to be learned here, and that is that there are exceptions to every rule. I always have the preceding discussion when I read some of the books that have great illustrations. I particularly love the collected stories of James Herriot's *Treasury for Children*. The illustrations of Ruth Brown and Peter Barrett are so gorgeous and add greatly to the stories. I regularly read three outstanding books by Nina Laden, that are beautifully written and illustrated, *Private I. Guana*, *The Night I Followed the Dog*, and *When Pigasso met Mootisse*.

Reading aloud will result in increased engagement and extended attention spans. Choosing stories with lots of conversation between the characters is a surefire way to enhance listener involvement. When reading, I act out and imitate the characters. If the character is loud and gruff,

so should the reader be; and likewise, if the character speaking is meek, or young and innocent, this should be reflected in the reader's voice and body language. Imitating animals is especially fun. The best story I have found for imitating animals is a chapter called "Wilbur's Escape" from *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White. ("Wilbur's Escape" is also included in a delightful collection of *Children's Classics to be Read Aloud* selected by Edward Blishen.)

In the last century and a quarter, an immense amount of children's literature has been published. Much of it is not the best choice to read in the thirty or forty minutes the children are your captive audience. I will now share a number of books and stories that I have read with great success.

Invariably, when I begin to read to a new group each year, I choose the fabulous story by North Carolina storyteller Jackie Torrence, "Wicked John and the Devil." It is a tale from the North Carolina mountains, found in a fantastic collection called *Best-Loved Stories Told at the National Storytelling Festival* (1991). The repeated dialogue between the Devil and Wicked John is a delight for the reader and for the young listeners. This book is out of print, but still available 'used' through Amazon. It is well worth the purchase and contains 37 stories in all. Two additional favorites of mine are contained therein, "The Pinch-Hitter" by Michael Parent and "Jack and the Silver Keys" by Duncan Williamson.

My list of suggestions would not be complete without mentioning two perennial classics by Shel Silverstein, *A Light in the Attic* and *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. Short poems are as effective reading aloud as the stories I have referenced above, but they have the additional advantage of being able to fit into short time slots, either at the beginning of a reading session, or at the end when there are only a couple minutes left before the class ends. There are over two hundred poems to choose from. I have had immeasurable success reading: "Squishy Touch," "Hungry Mungry," "Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out," and "Little Abigail and the Beautiful Pony." Every classroom should contain both these volumes, and they make good class gifts if the class doesn't already have them.

In summary, my decades of reading aloud to children have convinced me that reading aloud enhances the listener's knowledge base, improves their memory, exercises their imagination, extends their attention span, augments their enthusiasm for reading, increases their vocabulary and reading skills, and provides hours of pleasure for the reader as well as the children.

BUILDING THE ARK BEFORE IT RAINS

Jamey Heit

I taught my first English Composition class in 2002. At the time, I was a Master's student at Princeton and Mercer County Community College needed last minute help. Eager to get my teaching career started, I took the job and poured myself into teaching 15 kids in downtown Trenton. My class evaluations were superlative because I didn't set any real checks on my availability. I graded unlimited drafts. I promised to return those drafts in less than 24 hours. I met bi-weekly with every student to go through papers closely. I gave students the sustained, quality engagement they needed to become better writers. That first class was the last time I provided any of my students with the time and focus they needed to become better writers. Starting with my second class and stretching across a decade and a half of teaching writing, the amount of time I devoted to my students waned. I soon learned the compounding effects of multiple sections of English Composition, committee assignments, commuting between different institutions, and, of course, my own research. I became really good at finding the optimal way to get through a stack of papers while seeming to be fully engaged with my students.

When I started ecree, these disjunctive experiences were forefront in my mind. I was well aware of what students needed to become good writers, just as I was well aware that very few teachers could provide this level of engagement with any consistency. My goal, then, was to build technology that could replicate some part of what I did during that first course so that I would have more time to spend on the things I knew were effective.

I did not set out to make myself irrelevant. My goal was to optimize my limited time. What could I hand off to an algorithm that would not only prevent me from spending time on things that did not require my expertise, but also give my students sustained engagement that mirrored my own instruction? The answer that drove ecree's creation was a desire to spend my time on content while making sure students were saturated with high quality feedback on the technical aspects of good writing.

This introduction is meant to highlight some pedagogical assumptions that frame how ecree does automated assessment. Richard Thaler, the eminent Behavioral Economist, offers a good summary of why technology can be an asset for a student who is learning how to write. Thaler summarizes an effective way to learn: "Psychologists tell us that in order to learn from experience, two ingredients are necessary: frequent practice and immediate feedback. When these conditions are present, such as when we learn to ride a bike or drive a car, we learn, possibly with some mishaps along the way."¹ Students need to practice writing; we know that repetition helps them understand the basic concepts of good writing. Beyond that, Thaler emphasizes the things I intuitively brought to my first class: volume and efficiency. If students practice a lot in a short amount of time, they absorb the underlying concepts of good writing.

With Thaler in the backdrop, it is easier to articulate the goal for using automated assessment while helping students learn to write. This technology should exist firmly within a low-stakes context. The process is elementary in that students should be mastering a baseline skill set. Teachers don't need to spend the majority of their time on these basic elements of good writing. An algorithm can and should do that heavy lifting. If the basic mechanics of good writing can be addressed algorithmically, teachers can give students the opportunity to practice as much as they want before meeting with their teachers to discuss the things that cannot be automated. Rather than meet with my Ethics students to go through why they need to explain how their evidence supports their point, I can spend my time exploring why ethical assumptions are relevant to living a life that contributes positively to our world. That is a far better use of my time and expertise. The pedagogical assumption I

¹ Thaler, Richard. *Misbehaving: The Making of Behavioral Economics*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company (2015), 50.

want to illustrate here is that a low-stakes setting is where automated assessment can be invaluable. This provides the necessary setting for students to develop a baseline aptitude. That aptitude includes both the basic mechanics of good writing and the confidence that those mechanical elements can be applied to any writing task assigned. Both within the classroom and in the professional world, these two skills are invaluable.

From this approach, we were able to build an adaptable platform that does several important things: give students real-time feedback on the key elements of writing, give teachers the flexibility to use their own questions in their classrooms, and, through the additional practice students get, give teachers diagnostic insights into individual and class-wide learning trends.

Mechanistic assessment is how ecree's algorithm functions. This term indicates that the elements that are scored, and on which students receive feedback, include: the technical skills of good writing: clear purpose, structure, organization, use of evidence, and analysis. These are the foundational skills that, when practiced in a low-stakes environment, enable students to achieve better outcomes in a high-stakes context. There is tremendous value in giving students feedback in real-time. Because ecree tells how well they did on key elements of their writing immediately, they improve significantly. These elements are not hidden; they are public and standard (and available on our website). When the feedback is given in real-time, students are able to work on concepts without the standard lag that frames human grading. Rather than wait a week or more to get a paper back with comments, students can get feedback in less than 30 seconds.

Other automated assessment algorithms require extensive training (to the order of hundreds of exemplar papers), which in practice means that teachers can only use the prompts for which programs have been able to acquire training sets. Processing speed is an obvious benefit that computers offer, but for students learning to write, limiting teachers to a pre-set list of prompts often counterbalances this speed. ecree does not require any training sets; teachers can add whatever question they like in under a minute without a single exemplar essay. Benefits to this advance in technology range from allowing teachers to assign prompts that account for context to allowing immediate engagement with current events. If someone is teaching Political Science, for example, ecree allows that teacher to assign a reflection on a current political event. If the teacher had to train an algorithm using hundreds of exemplars, such immediate engagement would simply not be possible.

The more information we have, the more insight we can get into areas of relative strength and weakness. If students write ten drafts, the teacher can be pretty sure of the concepts and techniques with which that student is struggling. So why isn't this diagnostic insight widely available? The obvious limitation is that ten drafts means a lot of extra work for teachers. If the drafts can be assessed automatically in the same way as a human would assess those key elements of good writing, then teachers can have precise insights into the areas where non-algorithmic engagement is needed. This allows teachers to be far more effective with their time and improve student outcomes because teachers know how to optimize whatever face-to-face time they will get with a student.

Used in partnership with teachers, automated assessment can advance student outcomes through sustained, high-quality engagement. This combination of algorithmic horsepower and human expertise can address the core challenge of how to improve student writing at scale. Importantly, ecree combines with human expertise through its adaptability in a way that fits within existing models of teaching students how to write. For example, because ecree does not have to be trained students can still explore their own areas of interest and work towards their own topics. Once the student has decided on a paper topic, her/his teacher simply needs to add that topic to the platform and the student will be able to get as much practice as s/he wants.

Education must confront the challenges of transitioning to a digital world. Efficiency, automation, and threatened traditions are very real concerns. My goal in combining my professional and academic narratives is to articulate a constructive way to think about technology in education.

The purely economic benefits of automation are clear, so there is a clear need to think about adapting that technology to the classroom. If done poorly, it will be easy to lose sight of the unique things a teacher brings to the classroom. If done well, this partnership can leverage both human expertise and automated technologies to help students become writers. In a digital world, this skill will continue to correlate strongly with successful careers for our students.

Letters to the author:

While I would like to imagine students slaving over their computer prompted editing advice, I remember something I learned from my experience teaching: students respond to relationships. It's the teacher's feedback that sends them scribbling through a sentence for the tenth time. My own students routinely ignored the computer's editing marks but devoured my feedback. Students can learn from a computer, but I believe feedback is better consumed when it originates from a relationship. A computer offers editing advice in the same way word processors offer suggestions about spelling. The correction is made and the student experiences little reflection over the error or interest in preventing relapses. After all, the computer will correct the error again next time. Yes, immediate feedback is paramount to student success, but I'll wager that feedback is a catalyst for growth when it comes from a relationship. Computers correct errors, teachers inspire growth.

Crystal Vandiver, M.Ed.
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I've never used *écree*, but learned about it from Dr. Heit, his team, and this article. Having taught multiple composition courses every semester for a decade-plus, I applaud efforts to optimize teachers' time while providing students with feedback encouraging practice and sustained engagement. But I have reservations about automated assessment.

Here's one: in my experience, beginning writers often confuse mechanical proficiency with rhetorical, stylistic, and intellectual competence, even prowess--a logical consequence of training focused on correctness and/or formulaic approaches to argument. Such students may produce papers with technical merit and may justifiably expect high grades. I understand that *écree* is meant to supplement, not replace, feedback from human readers, but the students I know would be frustrated upon receiving positive feedback on one "part" from a computer and more critical feedback on another "part" from a professor--who has tacitly signaled that focusing on mechanics isn't worth her time.

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**DYSTOPIAN VISIONS: FOUR WAYS TO WORK WITH THREE
“OLD” SHORT STORIES IN NEW AMERICA
Katherine Thompson**

Dystopian fiction has an enduring appeal, in its capacity to help us recognize ourselves and imagine possible futures based on the issues of our time. In an age of perceived “political apathy” among many adolescents, dystopian literature can be used to help engage teen readers in critical reflection on themselves and their own society, as well as to spur them toward an active engagement with social justice (Ames, 2013).

This paper will focus on practical ideas for teachers to work with three “modern classic” dystopian short stories: Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” (1948), Ray Bradbury’s “All Summer in a Day” (1954), and Ursula Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” (1973). All three stories centre around themes of cruelty, scapegoating, and gender in worlds recognizable as similar to our own, but just different enough that we can maintain a sense of separation alongside an anxiety about future directions for our society. The approaches put forward will draw from relevant educational literature to support their implementation in a variety of classroom settings.

ABILITY-GROUPED LITERATURE CIRCLES

Differentiation of curriculum and pedagogy in heterogeneous, mixed-ability classrooms proves challenging for many teachers, but is essential for meeting student needs. Key to successful differentiation is providing supports for all students to access the same core concepts being taught, as well as providing extension/appropriate challenge for gifted students (Lawrence-Brown, 2004; Kanevsky, 2011; Subban, 2006). Literature circles are one way to achieve this, allowing students to focus on “powerful ideas” (McCall, 2010) and repositioning student/teacher talk in the classroom to give students more power and agency in their discussion of texts (Blum, Lipsett & Yocom, 2002). This approach also satisfies the major tenets of the Self-Determination Theory of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), potentially allowing students choice of text and “role” in the literature circle (autonomy), ability to work cooperatively with peers (relatedness), and allowing access to competence via the freedom to work with a text that meets them in their Zone of Proximal Development in terms of literacy and thematic demands (Vygotsky, 1978 as cited in Kanevsky, 2011 and Subban, 2006).

Students can choose or be assigned to a circle that will work with one of the three stories. If the teacher chooses to utilise ability grouping, “All Summer in a Day” presents the simplest literacy demands; “The Lottery” falls in the middle; and “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” is the most complex in its vocabulary, sentence structure, and more philosophical, rather than narrative driven, approach. Within each circle, students can play different roles, such as “connector”, “questioner”, “illustrator”, “vocabulary enricher”, and so on (Daniels, 2002 as cited in McCall, 2010). These roles can be determined by the teacher to fit their goals; in the case of these stories, one student may look for particular literary devices or descriptive techniques, another may look for gender-related issues, another may follow the development of the scapegoat character. Depending on the teacher’s context, this activity may form a single lesson of a larger unit or provide multiple lessons/up to a week’s worth of material; there are options for each group to present about their stories to the rest of the class, or to “jigsaw” into new groups with representatives from each circle to discuss how their group’s story met the central themes being studied.

CRITICAL THEORY CASE STUDY — FEMINIST LENS

The three stories can be used to demonstrate the usefulness of applying critical theory to literary texts, as advocated by Milner and Milner (2008). Such application can help bring rationality and relevance to the act of literary analysis and interpretation for students, and help focus questioning and discussion. Two of the stories are written by women, and all three were composed in different decades of the twentieth century, backgrounded by different stages of the women’s movement.

All three of the stories involve abuse or violence toward a probably-female victim¹, who is also the closest thing any of the stories have to a protagonist (the de-centering of the protagonist is fodder for this analysis in all stories except perhaps “All Summer in a Day”). The use of this female figure as scapegoat can help students examine the subordinate and oppressed role of women historically and in the present day, and combined with learning about the authors/time periods may help students gain insight into issues contemporary to each story’s composition, then drawing parallels to our own time. The stories may further offer stimulus for research essays or critical-theory-based debates.

TEACHING LITERARY DEVICES/DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

All three stories contain literary devices such as simile/metaphor, descriptive language, dialogue, rhetorical questioning and more, as well as many elements of traditional dramatic structure or Freytag’s pyramid (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, denouement) (Herron, n.d.). Students can examine how the writers have constructed their plots, paying particular attention to the discordance of expectation set up by the initial lines or paragraphs and the subsequent events of each story. They may be able to draw connections to familiar films or other media and see how these stories may have provided an influence for those writers (e.g., the parallels between “The Lottery” and *The Hunger Games*). Students may experiment with crafting their own stories that experiment with creating settings, plots and characters consistent with the dystopian and “twist” tropes of these stories and present to their classmates with additional commentary on how their story satisfies the elements of dramatic structure.

INQUIRY/CONCEPT-BASED APPROACH

The three stories’ similarities lend themselves to joint study in an inquiry-based or concept-based unit planning approach (Milner and Milner, 2008, pp. 466-467). Though the teacher may have pre-set ideas as to what these similarities are, a triple Venn diagram activity can encourage a student-centred production of common themes, issues, and questions raised by the stories; in other words, the teacher can guide the students toward articulating the unit’s central concept or question, and be responsive to this in planning subsequent activities. For example, one group of students may zero in on the scapegoating concept and draw parallels to their own experiences of bullying. Another group may focus on the morality question and whether suffering can be justified if a greater number benefit. They may draw their own intertextual connections between, say, “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” and Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* and investigate real-life examples of instances in which one person or group’s misery supports the prosperity of another group. This approach supports students to grapple with “powerful ideas” (McCall, 2010) and is in itself a form of culturally responsive pedagogy, enabling “students to understand that knowledge has moral and political elements and consequences, which obligate them to take social action to promote freedom, equality, and justice for everyone” (Gay, 2002 p. 110).

¹ Le Guin does write that the neglected child in her story “could be a boy or girl”, but feminist theory could examine what gender readers imagine for the child, and connect to wider societal and global issues of not valuing female children – and by extension, adult women – as much as males.

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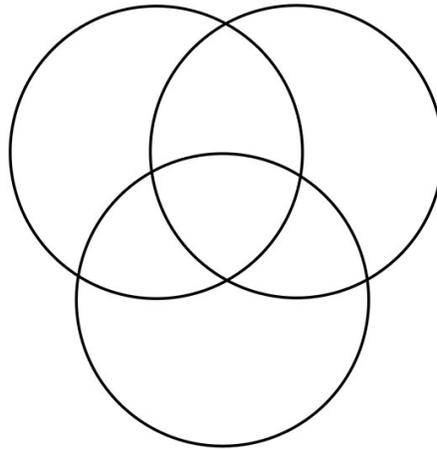
**CONSTRUCTING DEEPER MEANING THROUGH
A TRIPLE VENN**

Lindsay Schneider

"We Are One Lesson¹:" Empathy as the Heart of "Butterflies," "The Lion," and "Am I Blue"

TRIPLE VENN

Venn Diagrams: a seemingly simple learning tool consisting of two overlapping circles in which learners chart similarities and differences between two objects or texts. Yet this technique draws out one of the most essential components of literary analysis and life-long learning: connection. By analyzing what makes texts unique while synthesizing their similarities, learners gain new and deeper insights into each individual text. A triple Venn diagram takes this model one step further to create a central overlap between three works while parsing out the similarities and differences in all three works.



Such a model works particularly well with short stories and in the secondary ELA classroom, as it promotes student engagement in a rigorous, text-rich learning environment. Each short story is given its own prominence while encouraging readers to conduct a close reading with the ultimate purpose of synthesis and meaning making.

TRIPLE VENN IN ACADEMIA: ALICE WALKER'S "AM I BLUE," CHRISTOPH MECKEL'S "THE LION," AND PATRICIA GRACE'S "BUTTERFLIES"

Alice Walker's "Am I Blue," Christoph Meckel's "The Lion," and Patricia Grace's "Butterflies," share a simple point of congruence: the interaction and relationship between animals and humans. While compelling, this insight is magnified when the texts are studied as one lesson.

In less than 350 words, Patricia Grace packs a punch in "Butterflies." When an unnamed young protagonist brings home the story she wrote, her grandparents stop their work to reflect on her teacher's negative response. Their thoughtful pause invites readers to pause as well; alongside the child protagonist, readers realize the teacher failed to consider the perspective of the child's story – and begs readers to question in what ways we do the same.

Particularly in an English classroom, such a short story captures readers and serves as a poignant starting place for the triple Venn activity as it introduces the topics of work, perspective, connection, and empathy as well as the animal motif. Due to the simple plot structure and direct tone, students can quickly uncover Grace's purpose and message.

However, as teachers, our aim is to push students into deeper analysis particularly with a text that has much more meaning beneath the surface. By connecting "Butterflies" with "The Lion" and "Am I Blue," students will be able to discover more complexities within "Butterflies" and

¹ Walker, Alice. "Am I Blue."

analyze each text more fully.

Another nameless protagonist – and this time, narrator – is presented in Christoph Meckel’s text. “The Lion” provides a more challenging read than “Butterflies,” based on its ambiguity and use of archetypes; by reading these two texts in conjunction, however, readers are given an entry point into Meckel’s text, thus making it more accessible. A quick Venn diagram reveals similar motifs of animals, work, halting work, and connection, while “The Lion” further introduces the passing of time, change of seasons, thresholds, role of sleep, and a wider variety of animals.

Finally, Alice Walker’s “Am I Blue” provides more didactic approach to the topics introduced in “Butterflies” and “The Lion” while still using the motifs of animals, work, and the role of changing seasons. A final unnamed protagonist reflects on her own encounter, which allowed her to experience connection with a horse, Blue, who is housed on her neighbor’s property; her personal reflection gives way to a more sociological, political, and historical reflection on America’s own history with empathy – and lack thereof. Walker’s text further engages readers in a deep truth that forgetfulness leads to a lack of empathy, which leads to hatred and prevents true freedom. Readers will quickly recognize the role of forgetfulness and the passage of time from Meckel’s story as they compare these texts.

By reading these stories together, readers begin to better appreciate the significance of the animal motif, thus revealing greater insight into each individual text. As Walker’s story explicitly states, “...it was odd what the look of hatred did. It gave [Blue, the horse], the look of a beast... And I thought, yes, the animals are forced to become for us merely ‘images’ of what they once so beautifully expressed.” The animals in each story call readers to look beyond the highlighted dissidence and loneliness while simultaneously inviting readers to seek out moments of empathy and connection anywhere we can find them. The animal motif implores readers to remember that even when there appears to be no commonalities based on appearance, there is always the opportunity to see, listen, hear, and better understand the perspective of the other – a meta-analysis that pairs impeccably with a triple Venn diagram.

TRIPLE VENN IN THE CLASSROOM

In the secondary ELA classroom, a triple Venn activity with these three texts can serve as a standalone lesson at any point in the course: to kick-off the level of expected rigor, to bridge between units while building complexity, or to review at the end of the year. Given the variety of levels of the texts, teachers can quickly differentiate; conducting a Jigsaw activity would allow groups of students to explore one text intensively then work with a new group to forge connections. Students could also read each text as homework and come to class prepared to complete the triple Venn in small groups.

Furthermore, this activity can also be beautifully situated at the beginning or end of a novel study of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, to reinforce conceptual and thematic ideas. Students’ conclusions from the triple Venn activity mentioned above can spark class discussion, Socratic seminars, or paper topics. Moreover, students can delve deeper into the animal symbols of the mockingbird, rabid dog, and roly-poly in *To Kill a Mockingbird* by creating a separate triple Venn diagram for these animals and connecting the animal symbolism to that found in the aforementioned short stories.

Whether connected to another text or as a standalone activity, students in the secondary English classroom will be quick to dive into creating a triple Venn diagram for these three texts. The model of the triple Venn is accessible for students; it is a familiar organizer that students feel confident using. Additionally, by using short stories filled with animals, students see a quick entry point into the texts. Once students feel confident in their surface level connections between the texts, they can begin to uncover more subtle nuances.

"We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

-Elie Wiesel

In breaking news, the U.S. State Department has accused the Syrian government, under President Bashar al-Assad, of constructing a crematorium to cover up mass murders of political prisoners. Satellite images of a prison compound splash the front pages of news sites the world over. Aerial views in black and white, they are foreign, but they are also familiar. Aerial reconnaissance images like these were taken of Auschwitz and of Birkenau—they, too, were shocking once.

We are disturbed. Dismayed. Disgusted. Distraught.

And then we carry on with our lives.

This is a horrifying truth of humanity—it is so much easier to be indifferent than to intervene. We find ourselves asking, "What could we do anyway?"

It is this question that initially frustrates Julia Jarmond, a transplanted American journalist living in Paris and the main character of *Sarah's Key*. As she writes an article covering the roundup of Parisian Jews by French police under German occupation in World War II, Julia ends up discovering secrets that hit much closer to home—literally within her historic Paris apartment. It is this trail of secrets that ends up leading Julia on a quest for truth and justice and, along the way, her story becomes inextricably intertwined with that of Sarah Starzynski, who once inhabited the very apartment Julia plans to share with her family.

Julia begins her research by interviewing surviving Parisians who watched as their neighbors were systematically arrested, gathered in the Velodrome d'Hiver, and then taken away to Auschwitz, and she finds herself judging those bystanders just as harshly as those who actually perpetrated the "crimes against humanity". And it is so easy for her (as it is for us) to do: we all like to think we would have stood up for what is right—that we would have told the Nazis they were wrong, that we would have spoken out against injustice.

And yet, there are too many modern examples of this same indifference.

Consider the Armenian genocide, which started in 1915 and which our modern ally, Turkey, refuses to acknowledge *to this day*. Consider the Cambodian genocide of the 1970's under the Khmer Rouge, in the name of "cultural purification." Consider the Rwandan genocide of 1994, which our own government hesitated to call "genocide," since that would require us to intervene. Consider the Janjaweed, who are still perpetrating acts of genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan, as they have been since 2003.

And yet, in 2017, Bashar al-Assad constructs a crematorium.

As Elie Wiesel once said, "My favorite words are 'And yet.'"

How is this possible? How can we still be allowing these atrocities to happen?

The excuses are innumerable. We want to assume, like Julia initially assumes about her in-laws, "They're good people; it must be coincidence." And too often, when we ask questions, we—like Julia's father-in-law Edouard—are told to "Be quiet." And that's easier, anyway. After all, we want to forget—forgetting means we don't have to deal with the guilt or the reality that *we are part of the problem*.

In her research, Julia encounters a man whose life's work is researching and learning about every victim of the Vel d'Hiv roundup. He forewarns Julia of the potentially depressing answers she may find, saying, "Unfortunately, when you start looking into this, you don't come out unscathed." He explains to her that his goal is to "escape statistics—to give a face and reality to each individual destiny." It's a noble goal: it is far too easy to get lost in the numbers:

6 million Jews¹. 1.2 million Armenians². 2 million Cambodians³. 800,000 Rwandans⁴. 300,000 Sudanese⁵. 470,000 Syrians⁶.

And this is exactly what we, as teachers, have to do for our students. We have to help them “escape statistics” by providing them with the tools to connect the history with individual faces and realities. After all, as Sarah’s husband ultimately tells their son, “We’re all a product of our history.” If we cannot see how our past relates to our present, how can we ever hope for a better future? In a voiceover at the end of the film, Julia tells her daughter to carry Sarah’s story on, saying, “When a story is told, it is not forgotten. It becomes something else—a memory of who we were; the hope of what can become.” We have to carry on the memories, even the painful ones—especially the painful ones—in order to remind future generations that the potential for good *and* evil exist in every single one of us.

In fact, the best thing we can hope for is that they “don’t come out unscathed.” The best thing we can hope for is that we make them more than uncomfortable with the truths they encounter—that they are truly affected to the point that inaction feels impossible and that “remembrance” is no longer enough.

SUGGESTED TEXT PAIRINGS

- All But My Life* By Gerda Weissmann Klein
- All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr
- Between Shades of Gray* by Ruta Sepetys
- The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak
- The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne
- Forgotten Fire* by Adam Bagdasarian
- Maus* by Art Spiegelman
- Night* Elie Wiesel
- Salt to the Sea* by Ruta Sepetys
- Sarah’s Key* by Tatiana de Rosnay

SUGGESTED FILM PAIRINGS

- The Book Thief* (2013)
- The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2008)
- Hotel Rwanda* (2004)
- Schindler’s List* (1993)

1 “Documenting numbers of victims of the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution.” Holocaust Encyclopedia. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed on 15 May 2017. <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10008193>

2 “The Armenian genocide (1915-16): in depth.” Holocaust Encyclopedia. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed on 15 May 2017. <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10008189>

3 “Cambodia’s brutal Khmer Rouge regime.” Asia. BBC. 4 August 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-10684399>

4 “Rwanda genocide: 100 days of slaughter.” Africa. BBC. 7 April 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-26875506>

5 “Darfur – overview.” Sudan. UNICEF. 14 October 2004. https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/sudan_darfuroverview.html

6 “Death Toll From War in Syria Now 470,000, Group Finds.” Middle East. The New York Times. 11 February 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/12/world/middleeast/death-toll-from-war-in-syria-now-470000-group-finds.html>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS TO SUPPORT CLASSROOM ANALYSIS

- 1-Were you aware of the French government's role in the Holocaust? Or the Vel d'Hiv roundup?
- 2-The film centers on the stories of two women: Sarah and Julia. Whose story did you relate to more? Why?
- 3-Did you enjoy the juxtaposed storylines of the past and present, or did you find them detrimental?
- 4-To what extent does the apartment on Rue de Saintonge unite the past, the present, and all the characters? Could the apartment be considered a character itself?
- 5-When and how did the film utilize suspense?
- 6-As Julia learns, the truth comes at a price. Do you think the truth she found was worth the "price" she paid?
- 7-If you had to identify a "moral" of this story, what do you think it would be?
- 8-Many characters in the film make sacrifices, large or small. Which sacrifice(s) were easiest to relate to? Which were most difficult to understand?
- 9-Which characters in the story demonstrated indifference? Which characters chose not to be bystanders?
- 10-Holocaust survivors like Elie Wiesel have taught us to "Never forget" the atrocities of our past in hopes that we will learn from our failings in the future. Which characters in the story do the "remembering?" Which characters choose to forget?

POSTS

“WHY WE CHEAT”: CAUSES AND REMEDIES FOR ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

Christopher Sabolcik

“Why We Cheat”

Authors... Ferric C. Fang and Arturo Casadevall

Source... *Scientific American Mind*; pages 31-37

Date Published... May/June 2013

Basic concept: Ferric Fang and Arturo Caadevall, both professional scientists and academics, explore the causes, effects, and potential solutions to the growing issue of academic dishonesty. In an attempt to explain the near ubiquity of cheating in higher education and scientific research, Fang and Caadevall outline research in humans, animals, and bacteria alike which suggest that competition for limited resources, the availability and immediacy of incentives as punishment or reward, and cultural conditions promoting success (e.g. “publish or perish”) all contribute to individual motivation to break with “the rules.” Further research into the nature of cheating also reveal creativity and conscience play major roles in the development of “inventive rationalizations” (p. 34) to justify dishonest behavior. In response to what can become a normalization and habituation of cheating, the authors suggest a variety of innovative approaches to curbing this epidemic beyond the traditional method of intensifying punishment for violators. Potential solutions may include inculcating a healthy self-image with one’s scholastic work, developing more effective reward systems, including ethics in a standard course of academic study, and increasing surveillance and consistent enforcement of penalties.

Comment: Tackling one of the most pressing issues facing contemporary academia, “Why We Cheat” offers a concise glimpse into the complex universe of scholarly dishonesty, citing ample sociological and behavioral studies. While the article focuses primarily on the occurrence of breaking academic norms in higher education and scientific research, the arguments generally hold true for all levels of schooling. Teachers inherit students who exist primarily in a competitive, individualistic culture that values achievement, grades and exceptionality, so perhaps increasing rates of cheating should be less shocking. However, it is important to note the role that teachers from elementary schools through graduate labs have in modeling positive behaviors and establishing a culture where mores of honesty are promoted. The authors note that grade worship and the “publish or perish” paradigm encourages fraud, yet fall short in providing concrete examples and strategies of how individual instructors can overcome what might be best labeled the tragedy of the intellectual commons.

Quotations:

“In nature, cheating has evolved as a way for organisms to gain advantage over others without incurring the cost of effort. For an individual, the calculus is simple: Can I get something for nothing without being caught and punished?” (p. 33).

“Although there is a natural tendency to resort to stricter penalties to discourage cheating, little evidence supports the notion that harsher penalties are more effective than moderate ones. Instead education to instill and reinforce personal barriers to dishonesty is a more attractive approach” (p. 36).

“Ultimately, combating cheating most likely will require a multifaceted approach to promote a more ethical culture. These elements might include modifying reward systems to recognize teamwork and cooperation, penalizing wrongdoers in a consistent manner, setting up robust protections for whistle-blowers and improving methods to detect cheating” (p. 37).

Questions:

1- What incentive systems can educators create in order to maximize creativity and achievement in the most ethical way possible?

2- To what extent can empirical scientific study explain our seemingly innate tendency to cheat? Is favoring self-interest over collective ethics as innate as the authors seem to argue?

Allied Texts:

Cheating Lessons by James M. Lang (nonfiction)

Academic Dishonesty: An Educator's Guide by Bernard Whitley and Patricia Keith-Spiegel (nonfiction)

Atonement by Ian McEwan (fiction)

A Million Little Pieces by James Frey (nonfiction/fiction)

In Cold Blood by Truman Capote (nonfiction/fiction)

Ethics, Research Writing Across the Disciplines, Journalistic Ethics

EXHIBIT OF THE WEEK MARISA MERZ: THE SKY IS A GREAT SPACE

Katie Womack

The Week

Author... The Week staff

Citation...Page 24

Basic concept: This article provides insight into the life and work of artist Marisa Merz by drawing from some of the many recent reviews of the exhibition *Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space*, which was on view at the Met Breuer (January 24 - May 7, 2017), and is currently on view at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles (June 4 – August 20, 2017). Merz was the only female member of the Arte Povera movement, established in Italy the 1960s, whose members espoused anti-consumerism by using humble, found materials to create sculptural works and installations. This exhibition shines light on the importance of Marisa Merz's work which was often overlooked in favor of her male counterparts, including her husband, Mario Merz.

Commentary: A number of reviews of Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space, including the subject of this post, have expressed the belief that this exhibition is long overdue. Merz, now 90, is still a practicing artist and this show may be the first opportunity many in America have had to see or learn about her work. Who do museums usually create exhibitions about and for, and who are they under-representing? Are museums and cultural institutions doing enough to tell previously-overlooked stories such as Merz's?

Quotations:

"But the Met Breuer's newest exhibition, Marisa Merz's first major U.S. retrospective, offers strong evidence that the former sideline dweller should be recognized as Arte Povera's greatest artist....The range of her work--including her drawings and paintings—lend the Met show 'a sense of fullness and intimacy that few in her cohort can muster.'"

"The exhibition 'highlights the freedom of Merz's imagination—a freedom she perhaps didn't have in her daily life.'"

"Merz may reject the 'feminist' label, but she cannot avoid being celebrated as one. 'She pushed against limits in ways that revealed what and where the limits were, and she turned the friction to shrewd and stirring account.'"

Questions:

1-The exhibition title is Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space. How do you think the exhibition curators selected this title? What is the title meant to evoke about the artist and her work?

2-Do you think women today in fields such as art, literature, or music face the same challenges Marisa Merz did in the 1960s? What about women in other careers?

3-Arte Povera was a movement focused on anti-consumerism and commonplace materials. What similar movements, trends, or ideals exist today? What opposing movements, trends, or ideals exist today?

Allied texts:

-Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*

-Gail T. Levin's *Lee Krasner: A Biography*

-Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

THE INTENT OF THE 2ND AMENDMENT

Daniel Norton

Why the Second Amendment has a Preamble: Original Public Meaning and the Political Culture of Written Constitutions in Revolutionary America

Authors...David Thomas Konig

Source...*UCLA Law Review, Volume 56, Issue 5; pages 1295-1342 (2009).*

Basic concept: In 2008, for the first time in American history, the United State Supreme Court declared that the 2nd Amendment to the U.S. Constitution defends an individual right to bear arms. In his majority opinion, Chief Justice Antonin Scalia based this declaration upon the belief that the amendment could be split into a prefatory clause, or preamble, concerning the maintenance of a militia which merely announced the purpose, but did not limit, the operative clause concerning a right to bear arms. This article disagrees with Scalia and asserts that amendment was originally understood to be a guarantee of the collective rights of the people to defend themselves against government tyranny. In support of this, Konig emphasizes the importance of preambles as a limiting factor in revolutionary era constitutions.

Comment: While Konig admits that the common interpretation of the amendment changed during the 19th century, he argues that the original idea and popular understanding of the amendment was to protect the collective rights of the people to gather in a militia as a check on government power. As a part of this, the preamble to the 2nd Amendment was meant to provide a purpose for the right to bear arms. But, should we interpret the Constitution and its Amendments based on the intent of the founders, or based on what the common understanding of each provision meant? What if that common understanding has changed over time? Or should we apply the Constitution and interpret as necessary to adapt to a rapidly changing world? The article also brings up the question as to whether the use of historical context is even possible when interpreting the Constitution, as it requires extensive scholarly research unrelated to the law itself.

Quotations:

"In the grammar of American constitutionalism, preambles were an essential feature of the syntax of rights. As this Part argues, the operative clause of the Second Amendment cannot be separated from its preamble, 'A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free state'." (1325)

"Significantly, the 1784 constitution satisfied the voters with its numerous preambles or prefatory statements, which presumed to control the government they had established. If even these provisions did not serve to protect voters' liberties, the constitution included a right of revolution, which began with a preamble." (1335)

Questions:

1- Should the 2nd Amendment be interpreted to protect an individual right to firearms, or should it be limited to a right to bear firearms for the purposes of a militia? Why?

2- Does the issue of interpretation discussed here pertain to other literature? For example, is there a "correct" way to interpret poetry? What other topics could be affected by differing interpretations?

Allied Texts:

-*"The Embarrassing Second Amendment"* by Sanford Levinson (1989)

-*District of Columbia v. Heller*, 128 S. Ct. 2783 (2008).

-http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/images/public_education/01_sep07_outofrange_tushnet.pdf

-*Paper Trail* by Barbara Snow Gilbert (2000.)

Poetry doesn't have a season, not really. I'll certainly declare National Poetry month each spring. And no, I can't help loving Frost a little extra each winter. And now that I think of it, fall — forever coinciding with back-to-school; with trading bathing suit for knee socks and a stiff, white collar, (my mother at the sewing machine, hemming another skort). That season will always feel a little Shakespearean to me. (Who hasn't felt the drama of love interests and rivalries and lunch room-level tragedies — that August draws some curtain back and all the school's a stage?)

But if I had to choose a season for poetry, it'd be summer. In the fold between the old and the new school year, we live our lives specially. We let ourselves soak. We let our minds rest. (We try to, at least). We leave ourselves open — to getting splashed or sunburned or thrilled or heartbroken. It is when we are most open that experience floods in, and becomes the wealth of a season. "Ground Swell" by Mark Jarman reminds us of our richest season — which is, simply, the place we find ourselves returning to in mind and heart.

How often that place contains tragedy and heartbreak. Return, still, Jarman says. Far from sixteen, we need the reminder: There is a time to teach the mechanics of writing and literature. And there is a time to urge poetic living — to release students to the "big waves/ Of the morning break" and let their ground swells form. We hope they will be present and open as that happens. We hope we have helped them to believe that meaning resides in their vivid individual experience (of life and death). We hope they will surf or soak or swim with a deep care for their inner lives. These are hopes for the poetic practices that matter in life.

But even we must let our hopes rest: This season will always be theirs. Even as we commission it with those delicious words, "Have an unforgettable summer." Already, some quiet source is gaining body, rolling in.

From *Questions for Ecclesiastes* published by Story Line Press, 1997. Copyright © 1997 by Mark Jarman. All rights reserved

Ground Swell

By Mark Jarman, 1952

Is nothing real but when I was fifteen,
Going on sixteen, like a corny song?
I see myself so clearly then, and painfully—
Knees bleeding through my usher's uniform
Behind the candy counter in the theater
After a morning's surfing; paddling frantically
To top the brisk outsiders coming to wreck me,
Trundle me clumsily along the beach floor's
Gravel and sand; my knees aching with salt.
Is that all I have to write about?
You write about the life that's vividest.
And if that is your own, that is your subject.
And if the years before and after sixteen
Are colorless as salt and taste like sand—
Return to those remembered chilly mornings,
The light spreading like a great skin on the water,
And the blue water scalloped with wind-ridges,

Where things began to happen and I knew it.
And—what was it exactly?—that slow waiting
When, to invigorate yourself, you peed
Inside your bathing suit and felt the warmth
Crawl all around your hips and thighs,
And the first set rolled in and the water level
Rose in expectancy, and the sun struck
The water surface like a brassy palm,
Flat and gonglike, and the wave face formed.
Yes. But that was a summer so removed
In time, so specially peculiar to my life,
Why would I want to write about it again?
There was a day or two when, paddling out,
An older boy who had just graduated
And grown a great blonde moustache, like a walrus,
Skimmed past me like a smooth machine on the water,
And said my name. I was so much younger,
To be identified by one like him—
The easy deference of a kind of god
Who also went to church where I did—made me
Reconsider my worth. I had been noticed.
He soon was a small figure crossing waves,
The shawling crest surrounding him with spray,
Whiter than gull feathers. He had said my name
Without scorn, just with a bit of surprise
To notice me among those trying the big waves
Of the morning break. His name is carved now
On the black wall in Washington, the frozen wave
That grievers cross to find a name or names.
I knew him as I say I knew him, then,
Which wasn't very well. My father preached
His funeral. He came home in a bag
That may have mixed in pieces of his squad.
Yes, I can write about a lot of things
Besides the summer that I turned sixteen.
But that's my ground swell. I must start
Where things began to happen and I knew it.

WRITERS' WORDS
Lucy Milner

In each issue, the Writers' Words feature (earlier, and temporarily, called Wise Words) will offer snippets from the writing of miscellaneous observers who have something powerful to suggest to educators (particularly those of English language and letters) and their students.

"The job of the artist is always to deepen the mystery."

Francis Bacon (1561-1626)

"Language is a city to the building of which every human being brought a stone."

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

"Words are the small change of thought."

Jules Renard (1864-1910)

"I have never started a poem yet whose end I knew. Writing a poem is discovering."

Robert Frost (1874-1963)

"I was unhappy for a long time, and very lonesome, living with my grandmother. Then it was that books began to happen to me, and I began to believe in nothing but books and the wonderful world in books - where if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did in Kansas."

Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

"....The humanities do not immunize a society from cruelty and overreaction; early-20th-century Germany proves that. But on balance, the arts humanize us and promote empathy. We need that now more than ever."

Nicholas Kristof (1959 -)

FEATURED AUTHORS

Erin Branch

Associate Teaching Professor and Director of the Writing Program at Wake Forest University, where she teaches courses in writing and rhetoric. Recent scholarship has appeared in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* and her book, *Transforming Tastes*, is forthcoming from the University of Nebraska Press.

Brianna Brown

A graduate of the NC Teaching Fellows program at UNC-Chapel Hill and the WFU MA-Ed. program, Brianna Brown is in her eighth year of teaching. Brianna taught 10th grade English (World Literature) in Davie County and Wake County public schools for 7 years before making the radical shift to teach at a private middle school. She currently teaches 7th grade (Medieval) and 8th grade (American) Literature courses and coaches Middle and High School Cross-Country at Thales Academy in Rolesville, NC.

Rachael Duane

Received her BA in English from Wake Forest University, with a focus on creative writing. She is currently an MFA candidate in poetry at Seattle Pacific University.

Jamey Heit

Taught his first course in English Composition during the first of two Master's degree programs at Princeton. From there he earned a PhD with honors at Glasgow University in the Humanities. Along the way he has published multiple books, presented his work at major international conferences, and taught thousands of students how to be better writers. He's graded more than 20,000 essays. E Cree was created to help dedicated students and professionals around the world become incredible writers.

Lucy Milner

Began her teaching career in urban high schools in Georgia and North Carolina, continued teaching English methods classes at Salem College, and simultaneously, was passionately engaged in North Carolina's innovative summer program, the N. C. Governor's School, first as an English teacher and then as its Director. She has written book reviews and features for newspapers and educational journals, two books on children's literature and English pedagogy (as co-editor), and six editions of *Bridging English* (as co-author).

Daniel Norton

Graduated from Wake Forest University with a B.A. in Political Science in 2012. Since then, he has worked for several Information Technology corporations in roles ranging from Help Desk to Network Engineer. He has recently enrolled in the Wake Forest University School of Law Class of 2020.

Christopher Sabolcik

An English teacher at West Forsyth High School, having taught courses in literature, writing, journalism, public speaking, and debate. Over the summer, he teaches a class in critical thinking at the North Carolina Governor's School, a program for academically and artistically gifted students.

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A Double Deac, earning her BA in English and Political Science ('13) and her MAEd in Secondary English Education ('15) from Wake Forest University. She is currently a high school English Teacher at West Forsyth High School in Clemmons, NC where she teaches AP Literature and Composition, English IV, and Honors English I.

FEATURED AUTHORS

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Earned her B.A. at Duke University and her M.A. Ed. Wake Forest University and has taught in a variety of settings, including public and independent high schools, not-for-profit and summer programs (The Fresh Air Fund; WriteGirl; North Carolina Governor's School), and Mwalimu Anna Primary School in Mto Wa Mbu, Tanzania. She is currently the coordinator of the UNSW Matraville Education Partnership at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia.

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A graduate of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Colorado State University. She taught high school English in Greensboro, North Carolina, and ESOL at Randolph Community College. She worked as curriculum coordinator and has worked with Guilford College to build a teacher preparation program that promotes early leadership in new teachers. She is currently the director of secondary English Language Arts for Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, North Carolina.

Katie Womack

The Assistant Director of Collections Management at Reynolda House Museum of American Art. Katie holds a BFA in Ceramics from the University of North Texas and an MA in Museum Studies from Syracuse University. She has worked in the museum field for 13 years, with a focus on collections stewardship and exhibition management.

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