

Avenging Social Injustice Through Literacy

Using All-School Read Selections to Educate and Motivate Your Students

By Judith Turner

In October 2003, I attended a language arts conference session about the novel *Lay that Trumpet in Our Hands*. Intrigued by author Susan Carol McCarthy's tale of the personal events that led up to the writing of *Trumpet*, I ordered and read the book. Immediately, my obligation to teach my students how life was in central Florida in the twentieth century, especially the life of African Americans subjugated to Jim Crow laws, became apparent.

As a public charter school of choice, Terrace Community Middle School accepts all students by way of a lottery system. Consequently, our student population mirrors the great diversity found in the Tampa Bay population. Because these students live, learn, and grow within the confines of our community, they are not necessarily exposed to the tribulation wrought by the Deep South's segregated past. *Trumpet* throws all those who read it smack-dab in the face of Jim-Crow Florida.

Literacy and social literacy are important to me. Beyond nurturing literate learners, I work to empower them to literally change our world for the better. While I find it important that learners gain facts, become adept interpreters and analyzers of concepts and theories, and become functional practitioners of technical skills, I believe they will find it difficult to effect change in the world unless they feel it is their right to do so. I felt very strongly that *Trumpet* would accomplish all these goals.

At the end of the 2005–2006 school year, I pitched *Trumpet* as the all-school read and the culminating “Avenging Social Injustice” symposium to our literacy coordinator. The book would be read in social studies classes with support from language arts. In preparation for the symposium, students would

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research famous African American Floridians; life in Florida in the 1950s; and a present-day, global-scale social injustice of their own choosing—writing a report and presenting posters regarding their research findings. The literacy coordinator agreed.

In February 2007, the whole student population began their *Trumpet* journey. As my eighth-grade students read and discussed the book, I realized that many of the people mentioned in this work of historical fiction were beyond most students' frames of reference. To familiarize them with these figures, I assigned extra credit research projects on the lives of some of them: Harry T. Moore, Thurgood Marshall, Fuller Warren, and Lake County Sheriff Willis McCall, to name just a few. As the extra credit facts came in, students wrote what they found to be interesting on full-size, "crime-scene" silhouettes—representing the individuals in the book—that had been cut out and mounted on the hallway walls of the social studies wing.

From the crime-scene forms, curious students learned about the triumphs and tragedies that took place in mid-twentieth-century Florida. They learned how Mr. Moore, the first Florida state secretary of the NAACP, fought for equal pay for African American school teachers, and how Mr. Marshall became the first African American Supreme Court justice. On the other end of the spectrum, they learned that *Trumpet*-era Florida governor Fuller Warren was an admitted clansman, and of horrific hate crimes committed by Lake County Sheriff Willis McCall. The crime-scene project was a hit. "I never knew Florida was so prejudiced," a student commented during one *Trumpet* discussion.

In addition to reading the book, we watched a video about the lives and untimely deaths of Harry T. and Harriette Moore, and we read newspaper articles from the period on that subject, following those stories all the way up to the November 2006 discovery of Harry Moore's briefcase in an abandoned barn. One day, a student came into my classroom and excitedly told me that the Harry Moore case was mentioned on a news show he overheard the prior evening. And a sixth-grade social studies teacher forwarded to me an e-mail in which a parent thanked him for assigning *Trumpet*. The mother later explained to this teacher that her son lives and breathes sports; trying to get him to read is a constant

struggle. But not so with *Trumpet*. Passing through Lake County on their way to a sports event, Mom and son actually discussed the book! (Lake County figures heavily in the novel.)

To further bring life to this project, I decided to contact author Susan Carol McCarthy and invite her to the symposium. Not only was the author willing to attend, but she also suggested inviting Evangeline Moore, Harry Moore's surviving daughter. My principal agreed to invite both women—and both women agreed to attend.

When Ms. Moore arrived at the airport, what struck me immediately was how her countenance is so similar to what I imagine was also her father's—quiet, serious, unwavering, dignified. While my colleague Kristine Bennett and I waited with Ms. Moore for Ms. McCarthy's plane to arrive, we couldn't help noticing the large package she held securely in her lap. During our conversations, it came out that the package contained the remnants of her father's briefcase—she didn't want to risk checking it in baggage.

The next day went exactly as planned. Two eighth-grade students sang "The Ballad of Harry T. Moore," a song adaptation of a 1952 poem by Langston Hughes. Four students then took turns reading the poem "For My People," by Alice Walker. With dignity and the wisdom of her years, Ms. Moore spoke first, recounting her life with her parents and the realities of growing up black in Jim-Crow Florida. The students had the chance to view her father's satchel as she read from some of the letters that were recovered from it. She poignantly recounted that Christmas break in 1951, when her sister and her aunt and uncle picked her up from the train station and brought her not home, but to the hospital where her mom lay dying. Her dad was already dead. But, at twenty-one years of age, she refused to believe it until the funeral director allowed her to touch his face—that face that looked so much like hers. Her mom died nine days later because the bomb, placed beneath the Moore's bedroom window, ruptured a hole in her stomach when it detonated. "Her intestines were black and blue," Moore said. "I have never been the same and I never will be the same," Moore replied in answer to a student question about the death of her parents.

Next, Ms. McCarthy shared with students the events behind the writing of *Trumpet*. The book contains only three fictionalized parts, she explained. The protagonist, Reesa, existed in the mind of a wistful baby sister (the author herself) in an oligarchy of older brothers. The Marvin Cully character and his parents are fictional, but based on the actual events of a central Florida lynching, as well as McCarthy's interactions with employees in the author's family citrus business. Finally, Florida residents and Florida towns were given fictional names.

Ms. McCarthy affected my students more than I ever could by validating facts from the book: the wounding of a family member, the dynamite blasts, the characters and locations in the book, and the heroic exploits of a humble, honest father. It was the real deal—and it allowed my students to experience the world of *Trumpet* and Jim-Crow Florida in a way that transcended the here-and-now of the symposium and followed them all the way home and into their lives.

The author ended the keynote address by presenting information about hate crimes in present-day Florida and how, in recent years, Florida has ranked second in the nation in the number of active hate groups. She explained to students that while Evangeline may have been the beginning of the *Trumpet* story, and her own book was the middle, they would write the end. In her sprightly way, she implored the students to continue making a difference using what they had learned about our collective past to change our collective future. A seventh-grade student ended the event by presenting an excerpt from Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel's speech "The Perils of Indifference."

Later in the day, students had a chance to get their personal copy of *Trumpet* signed by the two women, who took time to speak to every student who asked for their autographs. But before the day culminated in hugs and tears of good-bye, Susan McCarthy addressed the faculty at a luncheon, held in honor of the author and Ms. Moore, telling us how important teachers are to the lives of students. She explained to us that she was never a stellar student, but one teacher in grade school told her she could write. That was all it took.

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It's a fundamental truism: our youth are our future. My school reinforced this concept with our work on *Trumpet*. However, on a number of occasions, I fielded such questions from students as, "Why do you always say that it is up to us?" and "What can we do?" As educators, we must provide them with opportunities not just to read about the world around them, but to breathe in that world and experience it firsthand, so that they become aware that it truly is within the realm of possibility to make changes for the better.

The impact of *Trumpet* continues to resonate within my school: during the 2007–2008 year, I am spearheading the civil rights team, a new student group in which students will dedicate themselves to working toward social justice and actively preventing racial harassment of any kind in our school community. It's truly amazing how reading and literacy not only make us better as individuals, but can also activate us—especially our young—to effect greater change.

About the Writer

Judith Turner is Lead Teacher and Social Studies Subject Area Leader at Terrace Community Middle School in Tampa, Florida, where she teaches 8th Grade U.S. History. In addition, she has been a Language Arts Subject Area Leader/teacher, Ancient History teacher and Geography teacher. Ms. Turner has a B.A. in Literature and Language from the University of Wisconsin – Green Bay, and a Masters in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from the University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida. She is a lifelong advocate for social justice through reading and writing literacy.

Helpful Hints for a Successful All-School Read

1 Form a leadership team. The team should always include a school administrator, a representative from each subject area, a school finance manager, and a school operations administrator (i.e., someone who has control of the school bell system, the ebb and flow of daily traffic, and other logistical matters). To be most effective, each point below should be a team collaboration.

2 Select your age-appropriate book one year in advance of the students' reading of the book. This will give you enough time to plan fundraisers to offset any potential costs (speakers' fees, materials and supplies for activities, and so forth).

3 Select your book based on an overall theme: women's studies, science, Native Americans, civil rights, or apartheid, to name a few. It is imperative that you and the team are passionate about the theme and book selection.

4 Develop an activity that encourages all faculty and staff to read the book in advance of the students. Group presentations at a faculty/staff meeting or cyber-book clubs work well.

5 Create student discussion and comprehension questions for the book, along with culminating, displayable projects for each grade level.

6 Always develop a symposium or celebration based on the book.

7 If inviting the author or other guest speakers, do so at least six months in advance of their appearance. Invitations directly from students—supervised by a teacher—work wondrously.

8 If you want media coverage of the culminating event, disseminate a press release at least one month in advance of the event.

9 Try to schedule the symposium or celebration for a half-day on your school calendar. Full-day events are possible but extremely difficult to pull off flawlessly.

More Ideal Books for All-School Reading Programs from Random House, Inc.

GOD GREW TIRED OF US: *A Memoir*

by John Bul Dau and Michael Sweeney

One of the uprooted youngsters known as the Lost Boys of Sudan, John Bul Dau was twelve years old when civil war ravaged his village. His searing account of hardship, famine, and war ultimately testifies to human resilience and kindness.

National Geographic, HC, 978-1-4262-0114-1, 304 pp., \$26.00

Paperback coming January 2008. Do not order paperback before 1/22/08.

National Geographic, TR, 978-1-4262-0212-4, 304pp, \$14.95

INTO THE FOREST: *A Novel*

by Jean Hegland

Into the Forest follows two young sisters struggling to make sense of their world when their near-future society collapses. In their isolation, they find that the basic necessities of survival must be cherished, and that they must find ways to sustain their emotional lives through individual sources of inspiration.

Dial Press, TR, 978-0-553-37961-7, 256pp, \$15.00

MOUNTAINS BEYOND MOUNTAINS

by Tracy Kidder

Selected as a Common Reading title by over 40 Colleges and Universities • ALA Notable Book • A New York Times Notable book

“This book is being widely used in freshman seminars at colleges across the United States, and it will likely stir debates on such wide-ranging issues as the politics of health care, the role of government funding, and ethics. Highly recommended.”— *Choice* (American Library Association)

Teacher’s Guide Available

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7301-3, 336 pp., \$15.95

Also available in Audio Read by the Author

Random House Audio, Abridged CD, 978-0-7393-0765-6, \$27.50

AMERICAN YOUTH

by Phil LaMarche

American Youth is the tale of a teenager in southern New England who is confronted by a terrible moral dilemma following a firearms accident in his home. A classic portrait of a young man struggling with the idea of identity and responsibility in an America ill at ease with itself.

Random House, HC, 978-1-4000-6605-6, 240 pp., \$21.95

Paperback coming January 2008. Do not order paperback before 1/8/2008.

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7740-0, 256 pp., \$13.95

THE GOOD GOOD PIG

by Sy Montgomery

A 2007 New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age Selected by Wynne H.S., Wynne, AR for its "Pig Out on Books Week"

Sy Montgomery had always felt more comfortable with animals than with people. So she gladly opened her heart to a sick piglet. Yet Sy had no inkling that this piglet would not only survive but flourish—and she soon found herself engaged with her small-town community in ways she had never dreamed possible.

Ballantine, TR, 978-0-345-49609-6, 272 pp., \$13.95

ENRIQUE'S JOURNEY

by Sonia Nazario

In this astonishing true story, award-winning journalist Sonia Nazario recounts the unforgettable odyssey of a Honduran boy who braves unimaginable hardship and peril to reach his mother in the United States.

Teacher's Guide Available

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7178-1, 336 pp., \$14.95

MY JIM: A Novel

by Nancy Rawles

ALEX Award Winner (American Library Association)

A New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age

This is a deeply moving recasting of one of the most controversial characters in American literature, *Huckleberry Finn's* Jim.

Teacher's Guide Available Three Rivers Press, TR, 978-1-4000-5401-5, 192 pp., \$12.95

A HOPE IN THE UNSEEN

by Ron Suskind

Top Common Reading Selection for Colleges/Universities

Ron Suskind tells the story of Cedric Jennings, an African- American teenager who is ferociously determined to study his way out of the inner city and get his piece of the American dream.

Teacher's Guide Available

Broadway, TR, 978-0-7679-0126-0, 400 pp., \$15.95

BLOOD DONE SIGN MY NAME: A True Story

by Timothy B. Tyson

A 2004 National Book Critics Circle Award Finalist

In the tradition of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, this is a classic work of conscience. Tim Tyson's riveting narrative of a fiery summer of racial conflict and one family's struggle to build bridges in a time of destruction is a complex rendering of a true story, in which violence and faith, courage and evil, despair and hope all mingle to powerful effect.

Three Rivers Press, TR, 978-1-4000-8311-4, 368 pp., \$14.00

Also available in Audio Read by the author

Random House Audio, Abridged CD, 978-0-7393-1177-6, \$27.50
