

# The Fire Next Time: Educating Students for Times of Trouble

Carol Jago

"Oh, good Lord, the verse you make / it gives a chap the belly-ache," wrote A.E. Houseman in his poem "Terence, This Is Stupid Stuff." This was the response of a friend of the poet to Houseman's dreary, pessimistic verse.

My students often voice similar complaints. "Why can't we read something with a happy ending? These books are depressing."

But Houseman's answer to his friend in his poem is this:

Therefore, since the world has still,  
Much good, but much less good than ill,  
And while the sun and moon endure,  
Luck's a chance, but trouble's sure,  
I'd face it as a wise man would,  
And train for ill and not for good.

Stories, even depressing ones, help young people train for the ills they are almost sure to face in their own lives.

Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* is a good example. Many teenagers, particularly high-strung and high-achieving students, at one time or another flirt with the idea of suicide. Plath's tale about a young writer with tremendous potential who suddenly finds herself suffocating from depression triggers conversations about how students face setbacks in their lives and how they deal with disappointment. I don't "teach" the book – an able high school reader can gobble up these 200 pages in a weekend – but I use it for literature circles. Once one group begins talking about Esther Greenwood's perfectionism, failed relationships, and attempts at suicide, most everyone in the class wants to read the book. Copies of *Ariel* and other books of Sylvia Plath's poetry fly off my bookshelves. Why pretend that being talented and smart automatically brings happiness? It helps to know that others struggle with inner demons and other ills they don't understand. Books demonstrate to students that they are not alone in their inchoate sadness.

Students also need to learn that these difficult economic times are less an anomaly than a social ill that

has been faced by many other people in different times and places. Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy* helps readers see how poverty complicates relationships, causing people to behave in unexpected ways. When the nine-year-old Richard is mugged coming home from the grocery store, his mother sends him back outside with a stick. She understands that the world is a brutal place, so rather than comforting her traumatized child, she forces him back out into the street to confront the trouble that surrounds him. The lesson she teaches is not one of violence but of survival. Ultimately Richard finds his way on and beyond those mean streets through reading and writing. *Black Boy* allows students to experience the debilitating effects of poverty and discrimination vicariously and to begin to understand why the struggle for economic justice and civil rights is everyone's business.

Teenagers love talking about injustice. The challenge is to inform their thinking about social ills with factual stories. Consider how often students draw conclusions about life from media images and so-called reality shows. We need to offer them more authentic sources of information upon which to base their opinions. Studs Terkel's oral history collections have much to recommend for classroom use. Though the books are long in terms of page count, the individual interviews are short, tremendously engaging, and easily read and discussed in a class period. Whether students read *Division Street: America* (1967); *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (1970); *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (1974); or *American Dreams: Lost and Found* (1983), they will learn that Terkel takes care to present all points of view. The juxtaposition of voices tells the larger story about social conditions and injustices.

The collection of Terkel's I have used most often is *Working*. Though some of the jobs described in 1974 seem oddly archaic to students (such as switchboard operator), the interviews portray such a concrete

experience of work that they transcend the particulars of any single job. As auto assembly line spot-welder Phil Stallings says, "I stand in the same spot, about two- or three-foot area, all night. The only time a person stops is when the line stops. We do about thirty-two jobs per car, per unit. Forty-eight units an hour, eight hours a day. Thirty-two times forty-eight times eight. Figure it out. That's how many times I push the button."

I hand out copies of *Working* and ask students to scan the table of contents to find five interviews they are interested in reading. I then have them copy the job titles on an index card and find someone else in the class who has chosen one of the same interviews. This is all a very noisy business, but what I like about it is that students come away with a sense of the richness contained in the volume. Teams of students then read the interview, discuss what they have read, and report back to the class with a one-minute summary. Based on these mini-reports, everyone chooses another three interviews to read for homework. Often students become caught up in the collection and read many, many more interviews.

As our combined experience of *Working* grows, I ask the class what they are finding common to people's work lives. What are the differences? What makes for a satisfying working life? What thwarts a satisfying work life? As students talk, I chart their observations on the board. We read more. We talk more. After a few days of study, I invite students to think of someone they might interview about working: a family member, a friend, or a stranger. This is not a "learning about what I want to be when I grow up"-type project but rather a chance to investigate what it means to work and what it means to face difficult working conditions and injustices. (An excellent website with guidelines for teaching students to conduct oral history is hosted by History Matters at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/online.html>.)

Another oral historian I greatly admire is Anna Deavere Smith. In 1992, Los Angeles was torn apart by race riots. My students and I lived through the experience, so when Deavere Smith's book of oral histories *Twilight: Los*

*Angeles, 1992* was published the following year, I felt it imperative to have our own experiences of those days enlarged by the voices in Devere Smith's collection. Though the language of the script---the author performed the work as a one-woman show---is sometimes raw for classroom use and the testimony charged with racial overtones, I persuaded parents that the subject was too important for us to turn away from. I made the case that for the sake of a peaceful community we needed to know what others were thinking and feeling. Again we followed up with an oral history project of our own. And again, stories prepared us to better understand and address the social ill of racial discord and misunderstanding.

(For a sense of how Anna Devere Smith works – and her interview and portrayal of Studs Terkel – check out the YouTube video of her TED lecture, "Four American Characters," at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KR8SwPmCFd4>. Please do not even think about showing this video to students until you view it yourself.)

I worry that the financial good times of the early 21st Century lulled many Americans into thinking that they would never end and that everyone benefited equally from the prosperity. Ours is such a stratified society that it is easy to ignore the extent to which whole communities have been excluded from the party. Even as we head into a recovery, there will be disproportionate gains and continued unemployment, injustices and social ills to be addressed. Our students cannot escape living through troubled times.

These are issues that cannot be ignored. I believe we have a moral imperative to educate children for, in James Baldwin's words, the fire next time. Deep reading and courageous classroom conversations may be just what we need to train them to deal with tomorrow's social ills.

*Carol Jago has taught middle and high school for 32 years in Santa Monica, California. She currently serves as president of the National Council of Teachers of English.*