



Standards Consensus Series

TEACHING
LITERATURE
in MIDDLE
SCHOOL:
FICTION

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

1. Choose and read a children's book—preferably one written for an audience of four- to six-year olds. You will be reading this book aloud to the class, so length should also be a consideration.
2. Write a paragraph to introduce the book to the class. Remember to mention the book's title and author.
3. Find three values (qualities that are held important, such as honesty, loyalty, hard work, etc.) that are strongly stressed throughout the book.
4. Write a short paragraph in which you explain the three values encouraged in the book. You will need to explain and give examples of *how* each value is reinforced in the story (pictures, description of characters, dialogue, etc.).
5. Your presentation should last between five and eight minutes. As you read, you may share the pictures with the class if you wish.

This activity encourages students to speak confidently in front of their peers, and the simplicity of the texts means that even hesitant readers can enjoy the assignment.

Beth Chaney, Walnut Springs Middle School, Westerville, Ohio



HOMOPHOBIA: THEME OF THE NOVEL *JACK*

Faggot!" reverberates down the corridor. Homosexual labels are common terms of disparagement at the school where I teach. Speakers may not intend to question the sexual orientation of classmates—they use such terms loosely, as general insults—but even so, I'm often aware of some student who shrinks in discomfort. I'm bothered by my students' callous attitudes concerning homosexuality.

While listening to National Public Radio, I heard a review of a book, written for adolescents, about a teenager whose father left the family after he realized he was gay. The reviewer said the book was well-written, sensitive, and enlightening. I grabbed a pen in time to write down the title and author: *Jack*, by A. M. Homes.

I read *Jack* and decided it was easy and engaging enough for the “at-risk” students I teach. I agreed with the reviewer that the book has literary merit; it is worth teaching apart from the fact that it addresses an issue that concerns me. To secure support from my school’s administrators, should anyone object to *Jack*, I sent a statement to them, explaining that I wanted to teach a book that does not advocate homosexuality but that does dramatize the suffering that may result from intolerance.

At home I imagined that I might receive irate, accusing telephone calls, so I searched for a pamphlet I recall stashing years ago called *A Student’s Right to Read*, published by NCTE. I never did find my pamphlet, but I didn’t need it. The only objection my students raised about *Jack* is that it is too young for them. The hero of the book is only fifteen; most of my students are about seventeen; so those who want a protagonist their own age are right. I recommend using this book with younger students.

My students answered the following questions about *Jack*, working in either small, cooperative groups or singly, as they preferred. Originally the only question under “A” was number five, but I found that students from homes where violent behavior is routine had difficulty evaluating the fathers’ behaviors. I added questions one through four; working through them helped those students see that the gay father is more caring than the heterosexual father.

CHARACTERIZATION, PLOT, THEME, POINT OF VIEW, AND SETTING

After reading all of the novel, *Jack*, by A. M. Homes,

A. Contrast Jack’s father, Paul, with Max’s father, Mr. Burka. Support your generalizations by listing specific acts each did.

1. What does Mr. Burka do to and for Mrs. Burka?
2. What does Paul do to and for Jack’s mom?
3. List each fatherly act by Mr. Burka.
4. List each fatherly act by Paul.

From here on, please answer in complete sentences.

5. Compare Paul and Mr. Burka as people and as fathers. Which is better? Why?

(This answer, written by a two-student team, was typical: *“Paul is a better person and has much to contribute to society rather than Mr. Burka. Paul is compassionate, affectionate, open and honest when dealing with his feelings. Mr. Burka treats his family as if they were all in the military. He also suppresses his feelings until they explode with physical violence. Paul is continually spending quality time with Jack. Mr. Burka spends quantity time but not quality time with his sons.”*)

- B. What is the main idea, the theme, expressed in this book? In other words, what is the author’s message?

(This question was the one I most wanted insightful answers to, and I was pleased. For example: *“I think the intention of this book was to help people understand the differences in others. I was left with a better idea of what homosexuality is and that people don’t necessarily choose to be gay. Also that if people are gay they shouldn’t try to cover it up. A person’s sexual preference doesn’t change who they really are.”*

Another group wrote: *“Don’t judge a book by its cover but, by what is in the inside. The theme is that people who are not norm to society are often better people than the norm of our society. The idea is not to judge people by what they are but by the actions in which they chose to deal with other people.”*)

- C. *Jack* is written in first person. The author used the pronoun “I” rather than the pronoun “he,” and the story is told from the point of view of the main character. What are some advantages in writing this novel in first person?
- D. The author set her novel in contemporary, middle-class suburban America. Speculate about why she chose this setting instead of some other.

Jack succeeds in causing students to look at their own assumptions and attitudes. In this way, and in its use of the vernacular, it possesses some of the strengths of *Huckleberry Finn*. I would like to teach *Jack* along with *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Catcher in the Rye* and ask my students to compare these books. A colleague suggested that I could include *Coming of Age in Mississippi* by Anne Moody.

Complementary writing assignments could be about people the students have known who were “picked on” at school or elsewhere. My writing students always have a repertoire of experiences on this topic.

I was relieved and surprised that only one student expressed offense from *Jack*; he confided his feelings to me after class, saying, "It sucks." A few others said it was a good book; but, as I mentioned earlier, a few thought it should be read by younger students. At term's end I was delighted when, to the course evaluation question "Of the areas covered in this course, which aspects will be of greatest use to you?" an anonymous student wrote, "The novel *Jack* because it showed me another point of view towards gay people than just calling them fags."

Nan Phifer, Lane Community College Adult High School, Eugene, Oregon



THE CALL OF ADVENTURE

Jack London's "To Build a Fire"

It was no longer a mere matter of freezing his fingers and toes, or of losing his hands and feet, but . . . it was a matter of life and death with the chances against him.

—Jack London, "To Build a Fire," 1902

One subject that has nearly universal appeal for teenagers is adventure. In fact, for many young people, just the mention of the word conjures images of excitement and danger, strange and exotic settings in far-off lands, and heroes who take risks and perform brave deeds. Yet while our teenage students may be quick to see the glamorous possibilities of adventure stories popularized by television and films, they are not so quick to consider that besides revealing the best in people, these stories also reveal the worst. Adventure stories show human strengths *and* weaknesses.

Fortunately, students' interest in the subject draws them to some of the excellent literature that explores the possible negative consequences of people failing to listen to sound advice and common sense and being tested to the limits of their abilities under extreme circumstances. Jack London's regularly anthologized short story "To Build a Fire" (from his collection of short stories