

TEACHING FROM THE 'WRITE' SIDE OF THE BRAIN

Fiction Can Play An Important
Role In Your Classroom

by *Joseph Todd Emerson*

I'm proud to be a third-generation public school teacher. While my parents would say my destiny was to be in the classroom, teaching was not my first career choice when I was coming of age. For several years, I intended to go to New York and fulfill a fantasy of becoming either a cartoonist or making a living in the comic book industry. In adolescent zeal, I declared myself the next Charles Schulz—the world would

laugh, cry or do both based upon my four-panel creations.

When I entered high school, I was ready to follow my chosen career path. I started some semblance of a portfolio, acquired special typing paper, and purchased the quality inks to make my dream materialize. My father even built a handcrafted, professional-grade drawing board so I could experience the joy of making my own creations come to life. ➔

Illustrations by *Brandon O'Neill*

Sadly, the art teacher I had freshman year didn't recognize comic art and caricature as a legitimate art form. The only time I ever got an A in the class was on an extensive pencil drawing of a lion resting in the African grasslands. Today, that picture hangs in my home, serving as a reminder of days passed, a protector of current ambitions, and a huntress of future goals.

Later, I met Russell Hopson, who became my favorite history teacher and mentor, and a career in teaching social studies emerged victorious over my adolescent grandiosity. The afternoon I told him of my decision to read, study and write about the past, he asked, "What do you intend on doing with this degree?"

"Teach," I replied.

"Why do you want to study history?"

"Because you inspired me, Mr. Hopson."

"How's your writing?"

That question left me speechless. At most, I could say I was well-read compared to my classmates. I kept up with current events and public policy issues of the era and participated in numerous protests. I truly was a mediocre writer. It wasn't until my junior year at Christopher Newport College when I wrote a term paper on the bland topic of trade and commerce during the Middle Ages that I felt comfortable saying I could string the words floating in my mind into coherent sentences. Without any forethought, I took my artistic talent and transitioned it into the medium of

words instead of pen and ink.

My career in the classroom has taken divergent paths. I taught middle school social studies for 16 years, earned a doctorate, accepted a visiting faculty appointment in The George Washington University's Educational Leadership program, worked on numerous campaigns for VEA-endorsed political candidates, had two novels released, and wrote a short story that won third place in a national writer's competition. As my third decade as a teacher approaches, I've been revitalized by teaching high school

Introductory and AP psychology and sociology. Due to the nature of the subjects I teach, I consider my classroom a safe zone where my students are encouraged to express their innermost desires, where creativity is cultivated and not disparaged; a room where teenagers are provided opportunities to understand who they are as individuals while navigating the turbulent waters of emergent adulthood.

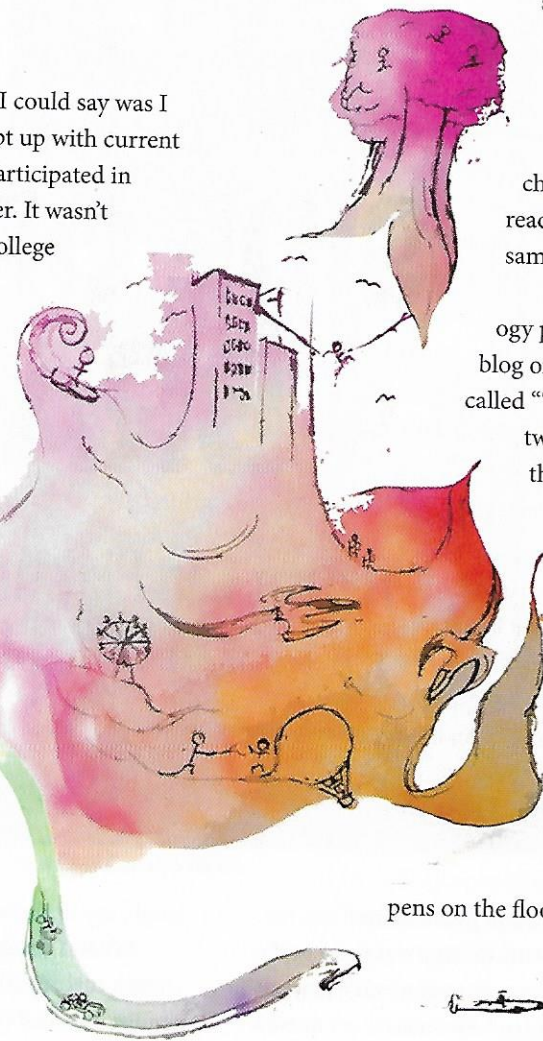
I've come to the conclusion that words do have both meaning and power. Literacy and effective communication are more than just issues of sound educational practice. They also have political ramifications, cultural imperatives, and ethical components. David J. Morris, a Marine Corps veteran and author of *The Evil Hours: A Biography of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*,

says, "One of the primary means for wounded minds to convey their experiences is through literature."

His research shows that reading, especially reading fiction, can change the brain structure of the reader, and that writing can do the same thing for the writer.

Keith Oatley, a retired psychology professor and author of a popular blog on the *Scientific American* website called "The Psychology of Fiction," offers two examples supporting my belief that reading fiction can help build empathy, a skill sorely lacking across our self-absorbed society. Oatley mentions an experiment by Dan Johnson, a professor at Washington and Lee University, who wanted to determine if empathy skills can increase after reading a short story. To test this, Johnson purposefully dropped a collection of ballpoint pens on the floor before his subjects started reading, during their reading period, and after they completed the selection.

What he found was astonishing: The more into the short story the readers were, the more likely they were to stop, bend down, and retrieve the pens. Does



this mean reading this specific short story was the biggest factor in this surge in empathetic feelings? I don't know; however, I do find it interesting that as the subjects were progressing into the fictional account, they became more likely to assist a stranger. As I tell my students, developing a notion of what others are thinking and feeling is a critical piece of cultivating positive human relationships. In the field of psychology, this is referred to as Theory of Mind.

Oatley also has suggested that fiction is a necessary byproduct of our evolutionary survival. This idea is known as "literary Darwinism," and means, in practical terms, that when we read about a character being placed in harm's way and forced to develop an escape strategy, we create neural pathways for surviving a similar dilemma in our own lives. Other researchers have suggested that reading fiction develops neurological connections associated with pattern development needed to interpret visual images, a skill vital for numeracy.

More recently, a group of European researchers concerned with the growing tension surrounding immigration wanted to ascertain if the *Harry Potter* series could assist in developing a more harmonious and positive social environment. In their study, published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, they had their subjects read the complete *Harry Potter* series. Three separate trials of high school students and college undergraduates in Italy and the United Kingdom had remarkable results. As readers' identification with Harry Potter increased, their social attitudes towards immigrants, displaced refugees, and gays and lesbians improved. When the *Harry Potter* series first gained popularity, I was thrilled that the tales and adventures of this amazing young man could instill an excitement and passion for reading. Now there is also some evidence that Harry Potter, and others like him, can help save the world from itself.

Irrespective of our content areas, as public school educators we need to start promoting a culture of literacy. Here's how I'm working to incorporate fiction into my sociology and psychology classrooms. Similar to the mini-capstone projects many school divisions are requiring seniors to complete, each quarter my sociology students pick a topic of sociological importance, research it, present divergent perspectives, take a position on the issue, and then indicate how the main sociological theorists would view the issue. Like science fiction authors, they are also expected to hypothesize what society would look like if their perspective of the topic was adopted universally. In addition, a major portion of the assignment requires the reading of a novel dealing with some aspect of their topic. Students must explicate

the novel and cite relevant passages regarding the author's tone.

I also emphasize fiction in both my intro and AP psychology classes. Intro students must complete a psychological profile of a fictional character, based upon the concepts and themes covered during the year. Since assigning this extensive project, I have read profiles ranging from Harry Potter to the Joker. During the course of the year, my AP students have to write three essays applying various themes of psychological thought to fictional scenarios. Also, once they have completed their national AP examination, I conduct a unit utilizing the film adaptation of Chaim Potok's novel, *The Chosen*. I've found that this piece of fiction about two Jewish boys coming of age in the aftermath of the Holocaust discusses almost all the topics we cover in class throughout the year. In an attempt to provoke debate and discussion, the students reflect upon the movie, the themes we've discussed, and their own spiritual formation, and write a paper overlaying each of these components.

Can reading change the world?

Can reading change the brain?

I believe the answer to these questions is a resounding yes! Just ask the immigrant, the refugee or the young man or woman struggling with their sexual identity who looks to literary references for hope, relief and acceptance. Or examine the life of Malala Yousafzai, the co-winner of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize, who confronted the extremists in her country demanding girls receive a proper, decent education and that books be made available for everyone.

Can creativity change the world?

Can creativity change the brain?

The answer to these questions is also in the affirmative. Ask the veteran or the trauma victim unable to articulate the horrific experiences they endured but are able to communicate in therapy sessions through works of art, poetry, or prose. Art, especially prose and poetry, can be used as one facet of a multi-disciplinary approach on a journey toward wholeness and reconciliation. Any form of artwork, from cartooning to painting to writing fiction, changes the physical, metaphysical and neurological world of the creator. I contend this "Standard of Living" is something we, as public school educators, should instill each day in the lives of our students as they continuously write the next chapters of their lives. ■

Dr. Emerson, a member of the Newport News Education Association, teaches at Denbigh High School. He's also the author of two novels, Donald's Cross and The Lions' Dens.