



## BOOK IN REVIEW: A TEACHING GUIDE

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# Of History Lessons and Forbidden Loves and Stories Worth Telling Twice

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**M**y mother, a youthful 72-year-old, has a terrific memory. She remembers the first and last names of her elementary school classmates, the plaid skirt her mother made for her to wear on Easter when she was 14, and the date that she and my father left Farmville—the small town in Virginia where she grew up—and moved to Tennessee, as well as the date, six months later, that they packed their belongings and headed “home.” She knows the whereabouts of second cousins, the locations of family burial plots, and the news about the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of old family friends. When I ask her about her senior year in high school, however, she recalls only sketchy details.

My mother would have graduated from Farmville High School (FHS) in 1960, but because Prince Edward County, Virginia, was the only locality in the nation that, rather than follow the Supreme Court mandate to integrate its public schools, chose instead to withhold funding for public education, the doors of her high school were padlocked the summer between her junior and senior years. Farmville High School never reopened, and public schools in Prince Edward County remained closed for five years. So the year my mother would have graduated from FHS, she attended classes in church basements at the newly formed pri-

vate school for the children of White families. The closure of the public schools, part of a movement called “massive resistance,” stunted the county’s public education system, which still suffers from the effects more than 50 years later. (To read more about the closure of the schools in Prince Edward County, see <http://www.vahistorical.org/collections-and-resources/virginia-history-explorer/civil-rights-movement-virginia/closing-prince>.)

When I have asked her over the years to tell me about being a teenager living through the fight for civil rights, she has always struggled. I’m not sure that she or her former classmates comprehend the primary role the county and the town played in the national tumult that ultimately led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin illegal. (Read more about the Civil Rights Act of 1964 at <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/civilrights/1964-civil-rights-act.htm>.)

In her recently released book, *Something Must Be Done about Prince Edward County* (2015), Kristen Green, the granddaughter of one of the leaders of the massive resistance movement in the county, explores this phenomenon of institutional memory loss among the White members of the community and works to explain the history and contextualize the pathos of the era. Green, a journalist, spent several years researching the compelling story she tells. Married to a man with “mixed racial heritage” (p. 23), whom she met while working as a reporter in San Diego, Green frames the richly detailed narrative she constructs

with a personal question about how her grandfather, whom she knew as a doting and affectionate “Papa,” might have responded to her husband and his great-grandchildren. She wonders how he and his contemporaries could have so

clearly misjudged the historical moment in which they were living.

Green’s book captured my attention not only because, like her, I grew up in Prince Edward County and, also like her, I have often wondered how many of the people I know and respect could have misunderstood their potential role in supporting human rights by opposing the school closures, but also because her thorough investigative approach to telling a nuanced story, documented in the appendix of her book, is impressive. She humanizes

the complicated narrative, indicting the culture that sanctioned discrimination but also approaching interviews and her examination of secondary sources with curiosity and a need to comprehend. Interestingly, I read Green’s book shortly after reading Robin Talley’s debut title *Lies We Tell Ourselves* (2014), a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award in 2015, which is the only young adult novel I have read that explores the effects of the massive resistance efforts.

Talley’s book, like Green’s, is an ambitious attempt to paint a portrait of a small Virginia community struggling to respond to the shifting social and political landscape and the institutional racism that plagues the community. Talley creates the fictional town of Davisburg, Virginia, as well as fictional Jefferson High School, and imagines the turmoil that erupts when the school is forcibly integrated. She narrates the story of her two protagonists, Sarah Dunbar, who is African American, and Linda Hairston, who is White, as alternating first-person accounts in an effort to dramatize the situation and to highlight the personal impact of the events. When Sarah transfers

to Jefferson as a top-notch student at her old high school, she is forced to prove herself as capable to teachers and administrators, as well as to her abusive peers. Conversely, Linda, the self-centered daughter of the influential newspaper editor in Davisburg, feels justified in her outrage that the fight for desegregation has marred her high school experience. Ultimately, it is a coming-of-age story for both characters who, when required to work on a school project together, discover a romantic attraction that both surprises and frightens them. Neither character fully comprehends the repercussions of defying the cultural expectations for race, gender, and sexual identity.

I use the adjective “ambitious” to describe Talley’s novel partially because I think she gives herself multiple challenges as a writer. She wants to educate readers about the contentious climate of the period, write in two oppositional first-person voices, develop a plotline that explores intricacies of both racism and homophobia, and balance the line between rendering dialogue that is authentic and evocative but that does not read as gratuitous or too insensitive. For the most part, she succeeds. Reviews of the book commend Talley’s commitment to render a raw but realistic depiction of the daily abuse Sarah and the nine other children chosen to attend the previously all-White school must endure. Ellen Goodlett (2014) writes in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* that she appreciates that “Talley didn’t shy away from giving her characters a lot to deal with and clear character arcs as they navigate difficult choices along the way” (para. 12). Writing for National Public Radio (NPR), Alaya Dawn Johnson, author of *The Summer Prince* (2013) and *Love Is the Drug* (2014b), notes that Talley “raises hard questions that [she] was glad the text addressed” (2014a, para. 5).

I agree with these reviewers that Talley effectively challenges readers to contemplate the despicable faces of discrimination, which she portrays vividly in a number of scenes set in school hallways and classrooms. Her protagonists, however, are as much “types” as they are characters: Sarah is saintly and long suffering, and Linda is self-righteous and smug. Despite this tendency to draw the characters a bit too broadly, Talley succeeds in providing an interesting perspective on the nation’s history of struggle to live up to its own expectations of equal access and equal treatment of its citizens. The harrowing predicament

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## In the Classroom

In the call for articles for this issue of *The ALAN Review*, the editors ask this question: “Can YAL foster more empathetic and nurturing dispositions and behaviors among young people?” In many ways, *Lies We Tell Ourselves* exemplifies an author’s attempt to address this type of question through provocative storytelling. Talley, who grew up in a small Virginia town herself and is scarcely more than a generation removed from the events she chronicles, clearly hopes that readers will experience a sense of connection with Sarah and her friends and will empathize with them as they navigate an onslaught of racially motivated abuse. She also purposefully complicates her narrative by introducing the same-sex attraction between her main characters, further dramatizing the climate of political injustice and social conditioning. It is unlikely that adolescent readers would be reticent about their reactions to the romance or to the instances of race-baiting, bullying, and the use of racial epithets that are integral to Talley’s plotline. The novel invites conversations about her depiction of historical events, as well as the implications for a generation of readers still negotiating the consequences of a system that institutionalized inequality.

What follows offers a framework for reading and discussing provocative historical fiction like *Lies We Tell Ourselves*, as well as other texts that explicitly engage questions about the ethics and morality of human behavior. To begin with, it is important to recognize that it is not possible to fully comprehend the scope and intention of many historical novels without exploring the events that serve as background information for the story. Context becomes key to the novel’s intellectual and emotional impact, especially for younger readers, whose grasp of history may be limited. Take, for example, Rita Williams-Garcia’s novel *One Crazy Summer* (2010), which won the Scott O’Dell Award for Historical Fiction and was a Newbery Honor selection in 2011.

Williams-Garcia sets her story in Oakland, Cali-

fornia, in 1968, and offers a nuanced portrayal of the Black Power Movement, focusing on the social justice aims of an organization like the Black Panthers. She anchors her story in the political milieu of the era. Three sisters, Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern, leave the safety of their neighborhood in New York, where they live with their father and grandmother, and fly across the country to spend the summer with their estranged mother, Cecile, a feminist poet who has adopted the name Nzila. Cecile’s choice to leave her children and make a new life for herself both confuses and intrigues her young daughters. As the girls learn about the politics of the era, so do readers, clearly making it easier for them to identify the cultural events and figures Williams-Garcia references.

If students lack contextual familiarity, they miss key themes and misunderstand the import of the situations the characters encounter. Learning activities that prepare students for texts situated within historical time periods provide them an informed entry into the story, deepen their interest, and ready them for small-group and whole-class discussions.

### Activity I: Background Knowledge Probe

A Background Knowledge Probe (BKP) is a prereading activity designed to help students self-assess the requisite knowledge they have or need to read a given text. We might think of it as a variation of a familiar strategy used by many language arts teachers, the Anticipation Guide, which “elicits students’ thinking, arouses curiosity, and focuses attention” (Merkley, 1996, p. 366). The BKP expressly helps “teachers determine the most effective starting point for a given lesson and the most appropriate level at which to begin instruction . . . [b]y sampling the students’ background knowledge before formal instruction on the topic begins” (Angelo & Cross, 1993, p. 121). This activity serves as both a review and a preview of the material to be studied. When I use this strategy, I typically create a questionnaire that lists important information, events, and characters/figures that appear in the text the

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class will be reading. Each inventory item includes a simple multiple-choice-style set of responses. Before we begin the reading or discussion, I ask students to fill out the questionnaires individually, then collect them, tally the responses, and use the information to help plan the first formal lesson related to the text.

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I share the class tally for each item and ask students to explain concepts they understand to their peers. This step allows students to demonstrate a level of expertise and allows me to add detail or context to the information they share, explaining how the concepts appear in the text. In creating the questionnaire, I work to select a range of concepts—some of which will likely be at least vaguely familiar to students and others that may

be completely unfamiliar to most of the class.

Here's an example of how the BKP could work for a unit that includes *Lies We Tell Ourselves*. Having basic knowledge of the school desegregation movement will affect students' understanding of the moral questions the novel raises. The questionnaire might include these concepts, each specifically related to the social and legal structures that serve as the historical background for Talley's narrative: Jim Crow, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Fourteenth Amendment, "separate but equal" doctrine, Justice John Marshal Harlan, NAACP, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, KS*, and Civil Rights Act of 1964. The students respond to each concept with one of the following four options:

1. I have never heard of this concept/term/person;
2. I have heard of this concept/term/person, but I don't really know what it means or what her or his significance is;
3. I have some idea of what or who this concept/term/person is, but I'm not too clear; or
4. I have a clear idea about what or who this concept/term/person is and can explain it to others.

After reading through the students' responses, the teacher creates a summary to share with the class,

illustrating which of the concepts are most familiar and which are least familiar. In a follow-up lesson, the class discusses each of the questionnaire items, with the students who suggested that they could explain the concepts sharing first. In this way, the discussion serves as an explicitly constructivist strategy, building on past experiences and prior cultural knowledge to prepare the students for their interaction with the reading.

### **Activity II: Collaborative Timelines**

Another strategy that I have found especially helpful when teaching historical fiction is the development of a Collaborative Timeline of Events that influence the plot. For this activity, I develop a list of events to research, write each event on a note card, and then have the students randomly select one of the events by drawing the cards from a hat. Students, working individually or sometimes with a partner, are responsible for becoming an expert on the event they select and creating a short summary of the event to share with the class. I ask the students to write their summaries either on large note cards or on small whiteboards. Their objective is to illustrate their research efforts by explaining the event in a few thoughtful sentences. As an element of the class discussion, we construct a timeline by displaying the synopses in chronological order on the wall of the classroom. We use the display as a tool to assist us with the discussion; students share their cards with the class in order to foster a more informed understanding of the text. Occasionally, I have also asked students to share their summaries electronically using Google Docs, free wiki sites (such as [www.pbworks.com](http://www.pbworks.com)), or the flashcard site Study Blue ([www.studyblue.com](http://www.studyblue.com)). These tools allow for the co-construction of a shared class document that all students can access and edit.

Though it could certainly be helpful for students to research historical events that led to the story Talley offers in *Lies We Tell Ourselves*, it could also be useful for them to trace the history of human and civil rights from 1959—the year the novel is set—to the present. The era of school desegregation has been followed by remarkable changes in the culture's thinking about race, gender, and sexual identity, but it has been a stormy trek. It could be especially instructive for students to trace the events of the last 50 years, focusing on an imagined life journey of the two pro-

tagonists. In the novel, Sarah and Linda are both high school seniors: if they were 18 years old in 1959, they would now be women in their early 70s. Developing a historical timeline of the progress in civil rights the two characters would have witnessed over their lifetimes is a creative assignment that allows adolescents to chronicle the hard-won victories, as well as the setbacks, that have positioned us as readers of a story like the one Talley tells.

### Activity III: Language Use Inventory

When studying historical fiction that purposefully incorporates what we now consider insensitive dialogue, especially epithets, it is only appropriate to address the author's use of terms that readers recognize as aggressive or incendiary. Talley draws some of the White students at Jefferson as persecutors who hurl brutal insults at Sarah and her friends. It is a deliberate rhetorical choice designed to heighten readers' discomfort and engage their sense of empathy, but the scenes are difficult to read. As Vanesa Evers (2015) writes in a review of the novel for the Lambda Literary website, "The white students treat the African American students with so much hatred it is hard to breathe . . ." (para. 3). It is important to ask students to consider the import of an author's decisions about language use; doing so allows students to interrogate their own uses of language. Granted, this is sticky work, but it is expedient if we aim to enable our students to become aware of themselves as language users. Furthermore, neglecting to engage students in a critical conversation about language when reading a text that incorporates potentially offensive vocabulary may signal to students that its use has little consequence. It becomes an ethical responsibility for classroom teachers to explain their purposes in introducing a text that includes language that could be considered dehumanizing or demeaning and to encourage their students to analyze the impact of such language on an audience of readers. These discussions can be challenging, of course, but as Burke and Greenfield (2016) point out in a recent article in the *English Journal*, "Students are capable of the challenge if given a chance" (p. 50).

A reading strategy that addresses this kind of objective is a Language Use Inventory, which helps students to be reflective and prepares them for class discussions. As students read a text, the inventory

helps them keep a list of vocabulary for fundamental analysis. The teacher guides the students as they create a chart that includes columns for note taking. In one column, the students simply record any terms or phrases that they consider to be important to discuss. In related columns, the students reflect on their selections; the categories for reflection can either be designated by the teacher or co-created with the class. When I have used this strategy, I have often divided the class into small conversation groups and asked each to generate possible categories for responding to language

use. I model the work by sharing a word or phrase that elicits response, such as *queer*. I then invite the class, working in the small groups, to help me brainstorm a list of possible ways to think about the word; ultimately, we select the three or four categories that seem most intriguing or appropriate and use those as the headings for the other columns in the chart.

For a term like "queer," for instance, we might choose categories such as "Who uses this word and for what purposes?"; "Where have I heard this word and in what context?"; "How might this word be used to support or belittle someone?"; or "Do I use this word and, if so, what is the context?" The intention of offering the students this kind of note-making assignment is to help them focus on the author's rhetorical decisions as they read and contemplate the impact of their own word choices. In my experience, students find this method of attentive reading quite challenging; on the other hand, it demands that they begin to develop a critical awareness of language use. The charts support lively classroom discussions and often serve as prewriting for more formal responses to the text we are reading together.

### Concluding Notes

Well-told stories have the potential to move us, inform us, and change us. When students read young adult

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literature situated within a specific historical context, they have the opportunity to imagine themselves in the historical situations depicted and to reflect on the choices the characters make. If the writer is successful in building realistic, believable moments of conflict, readers will naturally grapple, alongside the characters, with consequential decisions. This experience of

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what we might call *perspective taking*—“the ability to take someone else’s viewpoint into account when thinking” (Markman, 2015, para. 3)—is the cornerstone of empathetic understanding.

Scaffolding readers’ experiences of a text with intentionally designed learning activities that animate their capacity to “walk in someone else’s shoes” magnifies the text’s

emotional impact. And intentionally offering students stories that explore historical struggles against social injustices that are mirrored in our contemporary world encourages them to consider the impact of precedent, personal responsibility, and sociopolitical engagement. In other words, stories about the history of our cultural struggles particularize and humanize, and they coax students to examine the world as it has been and to fight for what it might become.

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