



BOOK IN REVIEW: A TEACHING GUIDE

S. d. **Collins**



Sugar and Spice and Everything . . . FIERCE:

The Resolute Young Women of *Always Emily*

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Welcome to *The ALAN Review's* inaugural column of “Book in Review: A Teaching Guide,” the purpose of which is to offer instructionally grounded ideas designed to increase the use of young adult literature in classroom communities at many levels.

With this issue’s theme of “Stand Your Ground: Fostering Independent Thought and Action,” I chose to feature Michaela MacColl’s *Always Emily* (2014), a mesmerizing tale inspired by two powerful young women—sisters, even—who became a couple of history’s most beloved authors: Charlotte and Emily Brontë.

In the spirit of full disclosure, a second reason I chose *Always Emily* is that it connects me to a former professor of mine whose daily practice was to foster in his learners independent thought and action. At the time, I was teaching eighth-grade English at the Tennessee School for the Deaf and was taking my first young adult literature class. The professor, with his tie so brilliant and multicolored that I thought it must have been taken from the material of a harlequin costume, blazed into the classroom and ignited all of our passions for young adult literature.

The professor was Dr. Ted Hipple, ALAN’s first and longtime Executive Secretary. Ted shaped ALAN through decades of unwavering service and support, he inspired countless educators to become proponents

of young adult literature, he advocated for books that didn’t shy away from culturally taboo subjects and that gave marginalized teens a voice, and he defended the right of every person to read whatever they wanted to read. Undoubtedly, the man knew how to stand his ground.

As facile as Ted was with the English language, it was a Latin expression he quoted often that became for me a verbal talisman of sorts: *de gustibus non est disputandum*—literally, “about taste there is no disputing.” This is the basic premise behind Ted’s insistence “*that* you are reading is vastly more important than *what* you are reading.” Ted convinced me, as well as hordes of others, that reading literature other than the classics was not only enjoyable, it was good for the mind and spirit. What’s more, Ted urged that we teach young adult literature in order to transfer the excitement it offers, regardless if the readers are middle-grade learners, college students, colleagues, parents, administrators . . . anyone who is open to a good book.

By the way, the writers Ted Hipple used to discuss at length happened to be Victorian authors—authors such as Jane Austen, George Eliot, . . . Charlotte and Emily Brontë—the two who happen to be our featured “Stand Your Ground” characters in this edition of “Book in Review.”

About the Book

The Characters

Always Emily is a tale of intrigue and suspense inspired by the real-life Brontë *sisters*, Charlotte and

Emily, who began their craft early in life and who would become two of the world's most renowned authors. In this fictional tale, Charlotte is 19 and Emily is 17. Although close in age, the sisters couldn't

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be any more different. Charlotte is down-to-earth, no-nonsense, and careful in all her affairs. Emily, on the other hand, is not; she is as reckless as she is curious, as headstrong as her sister is cautious. Still, the two must combine the extraordinary imaginative-ness and cleverness that are present in both of their writings to untangle a series of knotted mysteries

in their life on the moors. Furthermore, Charlotte and Emily must figure out how to work together quickly . . . before someone else dies.

The Author

Growing up in upstate New York, Michaela MacColl was infinitely fascinated with how famous people achieved their prominence. She studied multidisciplinary history at Vassar College and Yale University, which turns out to be the perfect degree for writing historical fiction. However, before she began writing, MacColl moved to France for five years, returned to Connecticut, worked as a technical writer and project manager for Internet design firms, raised two daughters, led a Girl Scout troop, built Habitat houses, and ran the elementary school book fairs for eight years running! Somehow during all this activity, MacColl also began to write.

Her first novel, *Prisoners in the Palace* (2010), explores the restricted and sheltered life of Queen Victoria the year prior to receiving her crown. In her second book, *Promise the Night* (2011), MacColl's subject is aviator Beryl Markham. In *Nobody's Secret* (2013), 15-year-old Emily Dickinson must unravel the mystery of the death of a nameless handsome young man with whom she enjoyed a brief, surreptitious, and flirtatious exchange prior to his turning up dead . . . in her family's pond. When not in Connecticut with her family, MacColl enjoys traveling for the sake of research or presenting about her books.

Using the Book in the Classroom

Pre-reading Activities

NORTH WINDS AND VAST MOORS

Where writers live can have a tremendous impact on their writing. In a 1956 interview for the *Paris Review*, William Faulkner said, "I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it" (Meriwether & Millgate, 1980, p. 255). When Emily arrives home—to her own little postage stamp of native soil—the narrator explains, "The cool night air caressed her skin and the north wind felt like a familiar friend's embrace. . . . Emily gasped in delight when the moon reappeared and illuminated the vast moor unfold" (pp. 45–46).

View one or several images from the resources below. Take into account everything that you see: the sloping rise and fall of the moors, the color of the flora, the winding paths, the cloud patterns in the sky, the light breaking or disappearing on the horizon. Put into writing as many details as possible using as much sensory language as you can. What emotions and/or thoughts begin to effervesce in your mind? Record those, too. This is the native soil that shaped and formed the Brontë sisters.

- <http://www.dennisbromage.co.uk/north-yorkshire-moors>
- <http://kathfeatherstone.turnpiece.net/gallery/728>

LOVE AND HATE—IT'S A FAMILY THING:

In *Always Emily*, Charlotte describes Emily as "aggravation personified" (p. 100); Emily describes Charlotte as "insufferable" (p. 92), yet the sisters guard each other's deepest secrets and put themselves in harm's way to protect each other. Discuss with your peers a love/hate relationship you have in your life. How is it possible that this paradox of such opposite emotions exists? At the end of the day, which emotion emerges to become the most dominant?

Interdisciplinary Connections

Michaela MacColl embeds several issues and topics significant to the early 1800 Yorkshire setting of *Always Emily*. Consider some of these topical connections to various content areas by exploring the following resources.

Tuberculosis

“Tuberculosis in Europe and North America, 1800–1922” (Contagion: Historical Views of Diseases and Epidemics): <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/contagion/tuberculosis.html>

“Tuberculosis” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention): <http://www.cdc.gov/tb/>

Mental Illness

“Mental Institutions” (Brought to Life: Exploring the History of Medicine): <http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife/themes/mentalhealthandillness/mentalinstitutions.aspx>

“Mental Health” (The National Archives): <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/mental-health.htm>

INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION IN GREAT BRITAIN

“Effects of the Industrial Revolution” (Modern World History Interactive Textbook): <http://webs.bcp.org/sites/vcleary/ModernWorldHistoryTextbook/IndustrialRevolution/IREffects.html>

FREEMASONS

“History of Freemasonry”: <http://www.mastermason.com/jjcrowder/history/history.html>

Group Discussion Questions

1. MacColl begins *Always Emily*:

The minister pronounced the final benediction for Elizabeth Brontë, aged ten. The funeral was finally over.

The surviving Brontës huddled in the family pew. Charlotte, the eldest child at nine, sat stiffly, her back perfectly straight. She frowned at her younger sister, Emily, who had fidgeted unconscionably during the long service. Then she clutched her eight-year-old brother Branwell’s hand. With a loud sniff, he snatched it away and wiped his nose with his knuckles. (p. 1)

What does the reader learn from these first few lines—about the setting, about one of the story’s conflicts, about the main characters?

2. At the end of the first chapter, nine-year-old Charlotte is admonished by her father that she must

become more responsible because she is now the oldest after losing her mother to cancer and her two older sisters to tuberculosis. What can a reader infer about Emily’s future from the last sentences of the first chapter:

Charlotte put her hands to her face and sobbed. Emily put her arm around Charlotte’s shoulders. She couldn’t imagine anything more awful than being the responsible one. (p. 14)

3. One of MacColl’s subplots involves Charlotte and Emily’s father’s advocating for the rights of mill workers who are being displaced by machinery.

When defending her father’s actions against

an unsavory headmistress, Charlotte says, “My father tells the truth even when it’s not to his benefit” (p. 25). Later, Reverend Brontë explains to a mill owner that, “I hope I will always do my duty as a priest and as a human being” (p. 106). By taking this position, the Reverend jeopardized his job as parish

priest, which was the family’s only source of income. In fact, Charlotte thinks at one point, “Worse was the paralyzing fear that something—an illness or an accident—might take down her father, and then what would happen to them all?” (p. 101). Discuss with your peers the positives and negatives of being so strongly principled. What would you have done if you were the Reverend Brontë? If you were part of his family, what would you encourage him to do?

4. Although Charlotte constantly stands her ground when it comes to her principles, as does Emily, Charlotte is far more cautious when it comes to taking physical risks . . . until she decides to sneak into a large trunk to spy on a secret meeting of Freemasons. When Charlotte discovers she is trapped, she tries to stay calm, “But fear, *raw and bleak as a February storm*, threatened to overwhelm her” (p. 150; emphasis imposed in this and subsequent examples). MacColl weaves into her

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narrative many such figurative lines. Choose the line above or one of the lines below to discuss the literal meaning.

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“Her [Emily’s] pen moved frantically, *as though her words were like water overflowing its channel.*” (p. 138)

“‘Emily!’ *As though a butcher’s cleaver had crashed between them* [Emily and Harry as they were having their first kiss], a shrill voice drove them apart.” (p. 186)

“Tabby [the Brontës’ maid] pretended to scold Emily but was delighted when Emily gobbled down the jam. It was her personal ambition to fatten Emily up. Indeed, since her return from school, *Emily had plumped up like a bullfrog’s*

throat.” (p. 64)

- As Charlotte remembers her two sisters (Maria and Elizabeth) who died from the ravages of “graveyard cough” (tuberculosis), she says, “I suppose Emily and I should consider ourselves fortunate to have survived” (p. 88). Tabby replies, “The Lord only takes those he needs. You and Emily were spared because you have wonderful futures in front of you.” What are your thoughts about Tabby’s reply? Considering all three of the remaining sisters (including Anne, the third surviving Brontë sister) achieved success as writers, what might have been Maria and Elizabeth’s future? What do other cultures/religious systems believe about death?
- Several times throughout *Always Emily*, MacColl juxtaposes the actions of her characters against the backdrop of “thick, dark clouds rolling down from the moors” (p. 123), “rain splattering gravestones” (p. 123), “mist turning thicker” (p. 191), “sewage flowing freely down the street” (p. 203), and “thick fog” (p. 241). How does MacColl use the various backdrops to establish the mood of the novel? How would the story change if the settings were

changed?

- Read Emily Brontë’s (1941, p. 30) short poem, “Past, Present, Future” (found at <http://www.poetsgraves.co.uk/Classic%20Poems/Bronte/Past%20Present%20Future.htm>).

Past, Present, Future

by Emily Brontë

Tell me, tell me, smiling child,
What the past is like to thee?
“An Autumn evening soft and mild
With a wind that sighs mournfully.”
Tell me, what is the present hour?
“A green and flowery spray
Where a young bird sits gathering its power
To mount and fly away.”
And what is the future, happy one?
“A sea beneath a cloudless sun;
A mighty, glorious, dazzling sea
Stretching into infinity.” (p. 30)

Compare the voice of the narrator in this poem to the character of Emily in MacColl’s novel. What are the similarities? How are they different? To what does Emily compare the past, present, and future?

Post-Reading Activities

STAR (RE)SEARCH

Michaela MacColl writes, “I’ve always been fascinated by stories of how famous people grew up to be that way.” MacColl has written historical fiction featuring strong women such as Queen Victoria, Beryl Markham, Emily Dickinson, and the Brontë sisters. Choose a famous person who captivates you. Conduct as much research as possible to find out what you can about that person’s life as a child. Once you have ample information on your person of interest, as MacColl always did, have a go at creating a story that you align with historical information while creating a series of fictional events.

SAY WHATTITT?

Each of MacColl’s chapters begins with a quote from one of the Brontë sisters’ novels or personal correspondence. Choose a quote that stands out to you—that you find intriguing or simply enjoy. Explain how the quote matches the plot progression in the chapter. If you were to pull a single quote *from within* the

chapter that would serve as an overview of the chapter, which piece of text would you choose?

NOTEBOOKS: A PLACE WHERE WORDS FLOW ONTO PAPER AS EASILY AS RAIN FALLS TO THE EARTH

Will Self (2010) offered the following advice as one of his “golden rules” for writing, “Always carry a notebook. And I mean always. The short-term memory only retains information for three minutes; unless it is committed to paper you can lose an idea forever.” It’s safe to assume that most everything that Charlotte Brontë and Emily Brontë ever published had its genesis in one of their writer’s notebooks. Ralph Fletcher (1996) explains, “Your writer’s notebook gives you a safe place to ask: *What really matters? What haunts me? What in my life, in this world, do I never want to forget*” (p. 13)? Practice the habit of the Brontë sisters and begin your own writer’s notebook. Simply begin paying attention to the world around you and collecting: odd facts, questions, lists, lines and insights, rants, raves, story ideas, character sketches—whatever comes to mind. Go ahead. It’s safe!

ONCE UPON A RELATIVE

The Brontë sisters were not shy about using family members as fodder for their imaginations. In Emily’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), several similarities exist between Emily’s character, Hindley Earnshaw, and her brother, Branwell. In Charlotte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charlotte created the character of Helen Burns to reincarnate her long dead sister, Maria.

Think about all the relatives you might see at a Bat/Bar Mitzvah or a family reunion or a Fourth of July cookout. Quickly write down three of the people who make you laugh or strike you as being unique. Now, choose *one* of the family members or friends to think about more deeply. As you think of your relative, which of that person’s specific actions makes her or him interesting? Write down as many actions as possible. Write about how the relative looks, feels, sounds, or smells. What kind of things does your relative say, and how does she or he say them? For example, my grandmother says things like, “Well, lawz” and “I declare!” Again, write as many specific examples of their words as you can. Describe, describe, describe!

Remember, although you began your character with a real person in mind, you can use your imagina-

tion to cook up more actions, add fictional details, and invent dialogue. You now have an entirely different character to use in your writing.

PAST MEETS PRESENT

Michaela MacColl’s *Always Emily* is an excellent introduction to the bold and tenacious Brontë sisters. Even for readers who have long enjoyed Charlotte’s *Jane Eyre* and/or Emily’s *Wuthering Heights*, *Always Emily* is a thought-provoking jaunt into the world of “what if?”

Where to go from here, though? Certainly, if your readers haven’t experienced either of the Brontë sisters’ classics, they may want to give *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights* a try. Other options are April Lindner’s books *Jane* (2010), a contemporary retelling of *Jane Eyre*, and *Catherine* (2013), a fresh retelling of *Wuthering Heights*. In both of Lindner’s books, rock stars and nightclubs become the scenery.

Additional Resources

There are infinite ways to invite students to imagine, explore, and create stories based on insights gained using *Always Emily*. Try the following resources to deepen your own and students’ understanding of the Brontës and an author’s process.

A teacher’s guide for *Always Emily* published by Chronicle Books
http://www.chroniclebooks.com/landing-pages/pdfs/AlwaysEmily_DiscussionGuide_FINAL.pdf

Haworth Village—A Repository of Links to All That Is Brontë
<http://www.haworth-village.org.uk/brontes/bronte.asp>

The Brontë Society and the Brontë Parsonage Museum
<http://www.bronte.org.uk/>

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