



Lesson Plans for *Brother I'm Dying*

Lesson one: Immigration (Three-Day Lesson)

Uncle Joseph's final trip to America did not arise from the desire to start a new life there; he travels to America seeking safety from the political unrest in his home country of Haiti.

In a decision that figures prominently in the dramatic action at the conclusion of *Brother, I'm Dying*, Joseph decides not to use his valid visa for his visit to America, but instead indicates a desire to apply for "temporary asylum," a choice that might have made sense at the time, but results in tragedy.

Upon his arrival in Miami, Joseph is detained at the Krome Service Processing Center, where he is held for questioning. After a day of tension and frustration amongst Joseph and his family members, he becomes ill and is taken in shackles to Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami. A little more than a day after his admittance to the hospital, Joseph is found without a pulse and unresponsive by an immigration guard and, after eleven minutes of unsuccessful attempts at resuscitation, he is pronounced dead.

Day One:

Of particular relevance to this lesson are the chapters from *Brother, I'm Dying* titled "Beating the Darkness," "Hell," "Limbo," and "Alien 27041999." Not only do they provide the human face for Uncle Joseph's final experience in America, they offer in grim detail the fearful situation in Haiti that precipitated his flight.

Read

Edwidge Danticat's Written Testimony for the House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law: "Hearing on Detention and Removal: Immigration Detainee Medical Care."

Testimony: https://www.aclu.org/files/images/asset_upload_file782_32063.pdf

Discussion

What did you find important about the details of Danticat's testimony? Was there anything in the document that surprised you?

In addition to the general questions above, it might be useful to discuss and define some terms from the testimony, including "Credible Fear Hearing" and "Freedom of Information Act."

Day Two:

Discussion

Arrange the students in groups for break-out discussions. The goal of these discussions is to gather varied perspectives on the testimony read during Day One.

Discussion Questions

- Of all the information presented in Danticat's testimony, what facts seem most relevant to our discussion of Joseph's treatment?
- What serious concerns about the treatment of immigrants—those visiting like Joseph, those seeking permanent citizenship, and even those who have come to the country illegally—are raised by Joseph's experience?
- Do you feel that the United States has a responsibility to people like Joseph?

Day Three:

Writing activity

Imagine that you are a journalist for a news organization based in the United States or in Haiti. Write an op-ed, an opinion piece, in which you defend or criticize how the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement handled the event with Uncle Joseph. Be sure to support your position with evidence from the book and Danticat's testimony.

Discussion

If students are willing, they should share their pieces with others in the class or group. After sharing participant opinions, it might be interesting to compose a list of ways in which U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement might defend their actions or might consider changes to their policies based on Uncle Joseph's experience. Is there consensus among the "journalists"? Is there a single theme that surfaces during discussion or a common thread that participants agree on?

Lesson Two: Memoir (Two-Day Lesson)

Day One:

Discussion

Edwidge Danticat's memoir, *Brother, I'm Dying*, strikes a balance between the personal and the public—between a heartfelt appreciation for a family's story and a metaphoric appraisal of the Haitian people's struggle.

The word *memoir* comes from the Anglo-French word *memorie*, meaning “something written to be kept in mind.” At one point in the memoir, Danticat writes that her father had been a powerful yet vague feeling for her. What role do you think *Brother, I'm Dying* plays in trying to make that feeling more specific? In what ways does she want her book to be “kept in mind”?

Memoirs can also serve a different purpose. Instead of fulfilling an author's desire to reconcile memory and present self, a memoir can allow the writer to document and close the door on a difficult period. Is this memoir actually Danticat's attempt to shape a narrative that affords her (and perhaps other immigrants, by extension) the chance to “move on” — to put a tragic moment in her family's life behind her?

Can the book do both—encourage its readers to remember while also looking forward?

Writing Activity

Choose an important moment in your family's life that you remember well. It can be a happy memory, a sad one, or even something funny and unexpected. Begin the writing process by creating a brief timeline of relevant events and a cast of characters so that you can frame your “mini-memoir” effectively.

Homework

Once you have a sense of the beginning, middle, and ending, write about the details you recall best. Don't try to tell the entire story; instead, focus on the specifics that demonstrate why you chose the subject matter. What was it that sparked this memory and reminded you of the larger story? The feel of a certain quilt from your grandmother's home, the clock on the wall in your childhood bedroom, the color of your father's eyes? If you end up with a fully developed narrative, great! If not, that's fine too—hopefully the detailed moments you remember will help you discuss the assignment with your peers.

Day Two:

Discussion

What was your experience in writing about your family memory?

Did writing about it change the way you felt about that time in your family's life?

Did it help you understand something new or powerful about your relationship with your family? Did you feel that your writing was helping you to keep something in mind or to move on?

Lesson Three – Commemoration (One-Day Lesson)

In 1975, *Atis Indepandan*, a Haitian musical group, released an album called *Ki Sa Pou-N Fe?*, borrowing their album title from Vladimir Lenin’s 1902 political treatise “What Is to Be Done?”. The album became a popular revolutionary anthem in Haiti in response to Francois Duvalier’s dictatorship, but little is known about the members of the group.

If students would like a more detailed introduction to *Atis Indepandan* or the Haitian struggle for autonomy and independence, they can read the entire introduction to the album in the liner notes. Otherwise, students should read the introduction to Band 5 “Papa-M Monte Oun Bato” (“My Father Left on a Boat”) on page 6 of the liner notes, and read along with the lyrics as the song is played.

Liner notes: http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/paredon/PAR01031.pdf

Song: <https://soundcloud.com/matoucalin/papa-m-monte-oun-bato-my-fath>

Discussion

What did you notice about the music? The instruments? The tone of the singer’s voice? Is this a happy song, a sad one?

Why do you believe *Atis Indepandan* felt compelled to record this song? What parallels might be drawn from their writing of this song and Danticat’s writing of her memoir?

Homework

Now it’s your turn to be the DJ! What historic or contemporary songs can you think of in the United States that commemorate independence or struggle? Do they capture some of the same feelings or messages that you think *Atis Indepandan* or Edwidge Danticat were communicating through their art?



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