

Jesse James Stommel

Teaching Narrative

It's early January, 2001. A week before the semester begins, my second semester of graduate school, my first semester of teaching. I have everything worked out. I have a handful of assignments for my Freshman Comp. class eating a hole in my bag. Their first assignment, week one: a two-page close-reading of one sentence—one sentence and a short one, two pages on nothing but one lonely sentence—no context, no references to the author's biography, nothing, nada, zilch, just those ten little words from Zora Neale Hurston: "ships at a distance have every man's wish on board." I'm begging, basically, for fear—26 writhing, hypnotized bodies—smelly, sweaty, fleshy fear.

Here's the situation, as I see it. I've got 26 students enrolled or waitlisted in a class for 18. I've got to start weeding people out—the late, the absent, the lazy. It's like jury selection. Simple, practical, vicious. Anyone begging to be let in from the waitlist will feel my wrath. If I have a flaw as a teacher, I tell myself, it's that I'm *too* nice, *too* forgiving, *too* easy. Here's the solution: I'll just be mean the first week. The ones that stay will respect me and I'll save the slackers from a semester of misery. Sort of like euthanasia, or more politely, natural selection. A revelation: I'm actually a hard teacher with high expectations, and I want hardcore students. I chant my revelation like a mantra for weeks, "hard teacher, high expectations, hardcore students. Natural selection. I think I can. I think I can." And I even *practice* being mean—in the shower, on the bus, at the grocery store. I'll lay down the rules, and the students will learn them and succeed. I'm determined to be a good teacher.

Toward that end, I'm going to have them doing a close-reading by the first week, since that's what this is all about anyway. "What's a close-reading?," they'll start to ask. But it's all there in a worksheet—a top ten list, if you will—my personal ode to the close-reading. All they have to do is answer the ten little questions and *shazam*: a close reading. I've taught something. They've learned something. We're all doing our jobs. They're on their way to a diploma, and I'm on my way to a paycheck. I'm happy. They're happy. *Fun!*

Wait, I stop myself, *fun?* Are we supposed to be having fun? This doesn't seem like fun, for them or me. Oh well, I'll worry about that week two.

So, I buy school supplies (after all, a good teacher has all the right accessories), start reading the books I'll be teaching (none of which I've read before), relishing every instant—licking my chops, salivating, ready for fresh blood. On the phone with my mom, I tell her my plan. Euthanasia. "I'd drop your class in a second," she says. "Good, then you're exactly the kind of student I'm trying to weed out. Jury selection's a bitch, isn't it?" Mom laughs, but I'm practicing, even now. "Hard teacher, high expectations, hardcore students, natural selection. I think I can. I think I can."

Saturday, three days before my first class, I'm reading *How Children Fail*, filling my brain with anything and everything I can find about teaching. I'm determined to be a good teacher. "Children looking into our eyes do indeed want to know whether we are in there," I read, suddenly feeling a little like a deer caught in headlights. "If we will not let them look in, or

if looking in they see nobody there, they are puzzled and frightened. With such adults around, children cannot learn much about the world; they must spend most of their time and energy thinking about the adults and wondering what they will do next.” Okay, I pause, I need to be *myself*, but that can wait until week two. “I think I can. I think I can.” I’m devouring this book in one sitting. It’s not about teaching math at all, actually, it’s a suspense novel, a cliffhanger, and I’m turning page after page, without bothering to scrape my jaw off the floor.

“How can we make school a place where real learning goes on, and not just word swallowing.” Another doozy, and I’ve barely breathed since the last one. This book is about me. I’m about to force-feed the close-reading to 26 (soon to be 18) *kids*. Not unlike the kids Holt is talking about. Sure they’re 8 or 10 years older, but they have the same fears. College freshman are still afraid “of failing, of disappointing or displeasing the many anxious adults around them, whose limitless hopes and expectations for them hang over their heads like a cloud.” What’s 8 or 10 years, anyway? Hell, *I’m* still a kid and still afraid, of failure as a student, but right now I’m mostly afraid of failure as a teacher. That’s why I want to scare them, because *I’m* scared. Freaked out of my fucking mind, in fact. The first impression is everything. In one instant, I could make or break the entire semester. Will I say the right thing? Will they understand? What will they think of me? What will I think of me? Will I be able to teach them something?

I keep reading, but my mind is reeling. “The only answer that sticks in a child’s mind is the answer to a question that he asked or might ask himself.” Top 10 list. Hah! I’m trying to give them all the answers with this silly little worksheet. They won’t know what a close-reading is. They won’t even care. They’ll follow the formulas I’ve laid out for them, turn their paper in and will have no idea they’ve even done something. In fact, they won’t have done something. I’ll have done it for them. Sure, I’ll have taught something, but what will they have learned?

“Children cannot learn much from cookbooks, even the best cookbooks. A child learns, at any moment, not by using the procedure best to use, but the one that seems best to *him*; by fitting into his structure of ideas and relationships, his mental model of reality, not the piece we think comes next, but the one he thinks comes next.” I’m not determined to be a teacher at all. I’m determined to be a chef. This won’t do at all. Revelation: They’ve got to invent the close-reading for themselves. But how will I make sure they do it? Oh yeah, “hard teacher, high expectations, hardcore students, natural selection. I think I can. I think I can.” But with a handful of assignments I won’t use and only two days left to plan, can I?

It’s got to be 3:00am, and I’m still reading. “The fact is that we do not feel an obligation to be truthful to children.”

Ay, there’s the rub. I don’t have to be mean at all, just *truthful*.

I’m afraid and unprepared (regardless of how much I plan), but I’ll head to my first class and wing it. With a book in my hand and my *self* in a chair, I’ll “make the most of it.” Forget all this “be a good teacher” business. I’ll just throw some toys into the center of the room and play. In fact, I’m not determined to be the *teacher* at all. I’m determined to have fun...