

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO

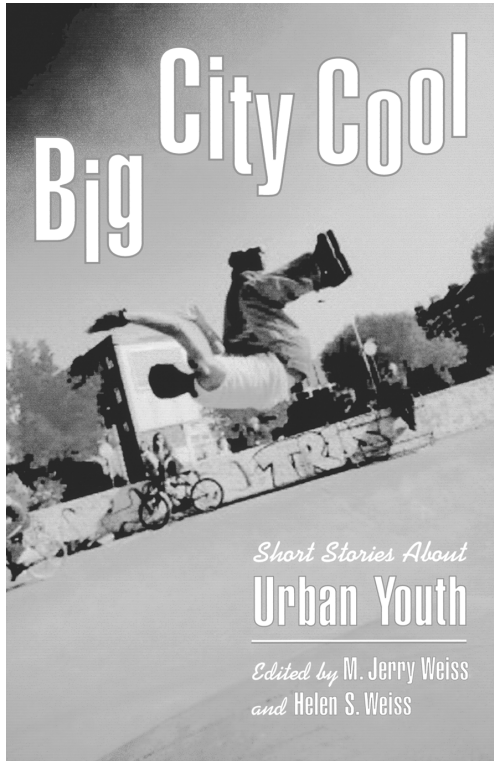
Big City Cool

Short Stories About Urban Youth

EDITED BY M. JERRY WEISS & HELEN S. WEISS

(AGES 12+)

BY LISA K. WINKLER



PERSEA BOOKS / NEW YORK

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Big City Cool: Short Stories About Urban Youth
Edited by M. Jerry Weiss and Helen S. Weiss

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INTRODUCTION

Big City Cool: Short Stories About Urban Youth offers middle- and secondary-school teachers a collection of diverse fiction that appeals to all teen readers whether they live in cities, suburbs, or rural areas. The variety of themes: child/parent issues, friendships, growing up, isolation, prejudice and more, are depicted through vivid writing, realistic dialogue, and poignant situations. Each story invites further exploration beyond reading. As educators, we welcome new ways to engage students and inspire them to make connections between topics in school to their lives away from school. Great literature transcends reading and stays with us, guiding our interactions with others and shaping our life experiences. As editors M. Jerry Weiss and Helen S. Weiss write, "Using the city as their stage, the authors of *Big City Cool* sensitively combine universal elements of pathos and conflict to tell realistic, engrossing tales of great immediacy."

This guide evolved from my use of the anthology in public school teaching, and is designed to assist you in bringing these stories to life for your students. It offers an introduction to each story, vocabulary, pre-reading, reading, and writing activities. I've cited allusions and references mentioned in stories to assist you in teaching. You can choose to explain these to students or assign mini-research projects, possibly with oral presentations, so students will better understand events in the stories. Let this guide be your basic tool and then adapt, alter, expand the assignments based on the needs and interests of your students. Whether you teach the entire book, assign a few stories, or have it available for independent reading, short stories can inspire future reading experiences. I've also included general guidelines for reading response journals and suggestions for creative and persuasive writing. With some stories, I've suggested specific writing extensions to enhance the reading experience. Finally, if students enjoy the stories, encourage them to read the books written by the authors.

VOCABULARY ACTIVITIES

Vocabulary words are identified for each story. You may want to either add to this list or decrease it, depending on your students. You can decide whether to introduce vocabulary before reading the story, during, or after. Vocabulary activities could include looking up definitions, writing parts of speech and original sentences, finding the words on the pages and making a guess about their meaning, based on context clues and so on. You can quiz students on words, assign them to write their own stories using the vocabulary words, or to play games, “Vocabulary Bingo” for example, as ways to reinforce word meanings.

READING RESPONSE GUIDELINES

1) Connections: text to text, text to self, text to the world. Compare and contrast your story to others you've read, to situations or people in your own life, to events in history or the news.

2) Characters: Do you like the main characters or not? Why? Do you have any advice for them? How would you behave if you were the character? Comment about the narration. Who's telling the story?

3) Predictions: Make a prediction about what you think will happen. Why do you predict this?

4) Social questions: Look for race, gender, or class inequalities and injustices. Who has the power in the story and how is it used? What do you think?

5) Setting: Is it realistic? Does it fit the story? Copy a line describing the setting that you like.

6) Dialogue: Is it realistic? Can you "hear" the characters talking? Could you change the dialogue? Give an example and cite the page number.

7) Lead: How does the author begin the story? Does it bring you in as a reader? Can you suggest a better way to begin?

8) Plot: Is there enough action? Too much that distracts from the characters' emotions? What plot devices does the author use? Does the plot fit the genre?

9) Emotions: Did you laugh? Cry? Worry? Get angry?

10) Literary devices: Does the author use flashbacks and foreshadowing effectively?

- 11) Theme: What is the author showing about life? Is there a moral?
- 12) Ending: Did the end work? Would you have liked the story to end differently? How?
- 13) Abandoning: Why are you abandoning the story?
- 14) Recommendations: Who would like the story and why?
- 15) Great writing: Is the word choice memorable? Does the author create images with similes and metaphors? Copy some and comment.

PERSUASIVE WRITING

- 1) You think your story would make a great movie for teens. Write a letter to a production company to convince them about your idea. Include suggestions about who should star as the main character, where the movie should be filmed, how the dialogue should be written, etc.
- 2) Convince them how and why the movie would be successful. You think your story needs a new ending or even a sequel. Write a letter to the author suggesting he/she write one and include reasons why it needs a sequel. Also include your own ideas for the sequel. You could even suggest that you assist the author because you have such great ideas.
- 4) You think your best friend should read the story you select. Write a letter to your friend telling him or her about the story, what you got out of it, and convince him/her to read it. Be sure to include three reasons why your friend should read the book.

CREATIVE WRITING

- 1) Rewrite a story as a poem.
- 2) Use magazine photos to make a collage about the story.
- 3) Retell the story in cartoon form.
- 4) Sketch a scene from a story.
- 5) Write a diary of one of the character's from a story. Tell his/her secret thoughts, motivations, history, ideas for the future, and thoughts about others.
- 6) Pretend you're one of the characters from a story. It's 20 years from the end of the story. Write a letter to another character either from that story or another one, about what you've been doing with your life.
- 7) Write a series of letters between any two characters in any stories.

THE STORIES

“BLOCK PARTY—145TH STREET STYLE” BY WALTER DEAN MYERS (page 3)

Set in New York’s Harlem neighborhood, the first story in *Big City Cool* deals with how Peaches, a teenage girl, feels about her mother’s announcement that she’s getting remarried. Says Peaches, “This is 145th Street. Hurt happens here just like everywhere else. Sometimes you deal with it; sometimes you just got to get some help.”

Vocabulary

conservative, p. 4 / homely, p. 5 / righteous, p. 8

Pre-Reading

1) Introduce the author. Note that he’s a popular African-American writer who grew up in Harlem and cite some titles of his books: *Monster*, *Slam*, and many others. How would the author’s growing up in a place assist him in writing a story set there?

2) Use a map of New York City to show where Harlem is.

3) Discuss what comprises a city block. What is a block party? This provides an opportunity for some pre-writing: Students can describe their neighborhoods, a street fair (or similar community type event). Include as much detail as possible: foods, music, entertainment; sights, smells, sounds.

4) Discuss slang; give examples that identify particular geographic locations or ethnic groups.

Reading

1) As students read, have them list details that illustrate the setting (foods, sounds, etc.). Then, have them do the same for their own neighborhood or for a family or community event. How is the setting important to this story?

2) Is Peaches' response to her mother's announcement understandable? Why or why not?

3) On page 7, the author writes: "After a while Peaches did come over but she made sure nobody thought she was having a good time." Why is Peaches behaving this way?

4) Because of its strong plot, this story is a good one to outline. Students can identify the rising action, the climax, and the resolution. What is the turning point in the story?

Writing

1) Looking at the use of slang in the story, instruct students to rewrite a section without slang. How does this affect the impact of the story?

2) Is the friendship between Squeezie and Peaches realistic? Students can write about a friendship, comparing and contrasting their friendship to these teen girls.

3) Using the description on page 4 about Peaches and her father, have students write about their own memories of an older relative.

4) On page 7, Squeezie says: "You know you got a fast mouth, girl . . . I don't know how you can be so correct and righteous in your heart, and still fix your mouth to say all them mean things." Ask students to describe a time when they acted or spoke impulsively and then regretted their actions.

5) Overall themes: helping others, friendships, parent/child relationships.

"FREEZER BURN" BY MICHAEL ROSOVSKY (page 13)

A year and a half after the death of Phil Adam's mother from ovarian cancer, he and his father, a children's librarian, continue to grieve. Old newspapers clutter their apartment; ice surrounds containers of food his mother left in the freezer. When a girl from Phil's school and her younger brother appear at the library, Phil's routine days of reading and doing

homework end. Then his father meets the school's assistant principal and life seems like it might change. "Freezer Burn" presents a poignant story on the impact of a death, and the importance of continuing to live.

Vocabulary

wincing, p. 14 / subdued, p. 16 / eavesdropper, p. 20 / feigned, p. 21 / cavernous, p. 21

Pre-Reading

- 1) What does the title mean? Give examples, i.e., dried ice cream.
- 2) References: Ivanhoe, p. 13; Robert E. Howard, p. 15 (He is the author of the "Conan, the Barbarian" series.)

Reading

- 1) Where is Verna going? (p. 18)
- 2) Read page 19 as a Readers' Theater exercise. How did reading aloud bring the characters and story to life?
- 3) What kind of influence was Tad on Phil? (p. 23)
- 4) How has Phil been bullied?
- 5) How are Phil and his father coping with their loss?
- 6) What would be on their "to do" list? (p. 24)
- 7) Does the story end with hope? What messages or themes does the story present about death?

Writing

- 1) Let students eavesdrop, perhaps on their parents' conversation and then write it down. What did they learn from the exercise?
- 2) Bullying is a prevalent worry in adolescence. Students can describe a

time when they've been bullied or did the bullying, or witnessed bullying. How did they feel afterward? What can be done to prevent bullying? How should bullies be punished?

3) Rewrite the story from a different character's point of view.

4) Write the next chapter: perhaps focus on what happens between Phil and Verna, or Phil's father and Ms Dobrish.

4) Other themes: grieving, loss of a parent, etc.

“WHITE’ REAL ESTATE” BY SHARON DENNIS WYETH (page 25)

Set in Washington, DC, “White’ Real Estate” addresses racial profiling in the context of real-estate racial steering. Wyeth, a Washington, DC, native, tells a compelling story about a black family’s search for a new home and the prejudice they encounter. The main character, Sharon, may or may not represent the author. Divorce, family, moving, and home, along with bigotry, are all major themes.

Vocabulary

Harbored, p. 28 / smirk, p. 30 / squandered, p. 30 / nondescript, p. 35 / avid, p. 35 / laden, p. 35 / flanked, p. 35 / opted, p. 36 / scrambling p. 37

Pre-reading

1) Showing a map of Washington, DC, would help students understand the story and how addresses are given by quadrants.

2) Examine real estate advertisements in newspapers to study the language used. What words describe neighborhoods? Are any words “clues” to the idea of racial steering? Introduce this term.

3) Pre-writing: What impact does moving have on a child? A teenager? A family? Draw on personal experiences which will vary with each student. What are the disadvantages of moving? What could be advantages?

4) As they read the story, students can keep a list about the character—

what do they know, what do they find out. Use post-its to mark characteristics. What can we tell about her from the title? Why is white in quotation marks? (This is also an opportunity for a lesson on quotation mark usage.)

5) References: "I Love Lucy," p. 31

Reading

1) If reading this story aloud or assigning for homework, page 29 provides a natural break in the narrative.

2) What are her looks telling us? (p. 30)

3) What does the expression "foreign ring" mean? (p.31)

4) Page 32 offers places to stop reading and solicit predictions from students. "There was something nervous in the car, though I couldn't tell what it was."

5) How can stress bring on allergic reactions? (p. 35)

6) What is the significance of the toy box? (p. 35–36). This could be a writing assignment.

7) "... as I grow older I am more and more aware of the price that my mother paid," Sharon says on page 37. How can a price be more than money? How did her mother pay a price? Describe the sacrifices she made for her children.

Writing

1) Sharon describes her personal den on page 27. Students can write about their own personal "dens" or places they go to be alone.

2) Sharon is proud of her home (p. 28). What makes a home?

3) Page 29: Students can write her play, "The Hula Hoop Contest," in groups.

4) Themes to explore: racism, cultural differences, moving, divorce, family, home, value of hard work and persistence.

“RULES OF THE GAME” BY AMY TAN (P. 38)

Amy Tan, author of *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchen’s God’s Wife*, and other novels, presents a glimpse of Chinese immigrant culture in “Rules of the Game.” Though Waverly Place Jong’s older brother selects a battered chess set from a church Christmas party grab bag, it is Waverly who learns to play the game. She quickly becomes a prodigy, competing in tournaments and winning trophies. But her success brings tension in the family, and she has to plan her next move.

Vocabulary

curio, p. 38 / dim sum, p. 38 / pungent, p. 39 / ancestral, p. 39 / eluded, p. 39 / deftly, p. 39 / solemnly, solemnity, p. 41 / intricate, p. 41 / benefactor, p. 42 / deliberately p. 43 / adversary, 43 / retort, p. 44 / benevolently, p. 44 / etiquette, p. 44 / vanity, p. 44 / humility, p. 45 / prodigy, p. 47 / malodorous p. 47

Pre-reading

1) Introduce students to Chinese culture. If there’s a Chinatown nearby, try to visit. Construct a K-W-L chart to see what students already know and what they learn by reading. Read excerpts from Tan’s novels or show a clip from the movie made from *Joy Luck Club*.

2) Discuss the title. Students can relate rules of games and sports they play. Why is it important to have rules? To follow rules?

3) Discuss how Chinatowns develop, perhaps showing a map of San Francisco.

Reading

1) The first sentence mentions “the art of invisible strength” (p. 38). Discuss what this means and why it might be important for an immigrant family to have it.

- 2) Waverly's mother imparts "daily truths" to her children. This can provide a writing prompt—describe sayings, etc. that parents and other relatives might say.
- 3) Waverly says she "didn't think we were poor." Like Sharon in "'White' Real Estate," Waverly is proud of her home. What makes a person poor? Why doesn't Waverly feel poor? (p. 38)
- 4) There are many descriptive paragraphs of Chinatown in the story. Students can complete a chart of the five senses as they read. How does the addition of these details impact the telling of the story?
- 5) How does Waverly's mother stereotype Americans? (p. 40) This provides an opportunity to discuss cultural stereotypes.
- 6) Describe the mother's character so far in the story. What is she most afraid of? (For example, see p. 41, where she's afraid of being embarrassed by her children's behavior.)
- 7) Playing chess would be a wonderful activity, either during the reading of the story or at the end. (p. 43)
- 8) What does Waverly's mother mean, "Is shame you fall down nobody push you." (p. 45)
- 9) Reference to Bobby Fisher, p. 47. Explain to students who he is.
- 10) What does Waverly learn by playing chess?
- 11) How does her family react to her success?
- 12) What does the ending mean? Do students think Waverly will continue to play chess? Why or why not?
- 13) Look again at the title. Does "rules of the game" apply only to playing games? How does it relate to being part of a family?

Writing

- 1) If there's a Chinatown, try to arrange a visit. If not, find a Chinese restaurant that will deliver to school. Maybe you can arrange a student price for a dim sum lunch.
- 2) Depending on skills of students, plan a chess tournament or a games day. Make sure students are aware of rules.
- 3) Have students visit and then describe a neighborhood, evoking as many senses as possible.
- 4) On page 42, Tan writes: "white wispy and whistling whisper." This example of alliteration can be used as a model for students to write their own. What does the use of alliteration do for the reader?
- 5) Themes to explore: winning isn't everything, don't boast.

"ALONE AND ALL TOGETHER" BY JOSEPH GEHA (page 51)

This story and the next, "American History" by Judith Ortiz Cofer, could be taught together. Though set in different places and times, and featuring characters of different ethnic backgrounds, each story represents a historical event that changed humanity and history. They show how a national tragedy affects individual families. Set in Chicago, "Alone and All Together" shows the effect of September 11, 2001, on an Arab-American family.

Vocabulary

glum, remote, p. 51 / "ibn Arab," p. 53 (means "Arab son," implying that they're not US citizens)

Pre-reading

- 1) Students can interview older relatives about memories of significant events. For example, where they were when JFK was shot, the moon landing, 9/11, etc. Create a timeline of events based on what students collect. What makes these events unforgettable?

2) The story features a Muslim family. Students can research about the religion and culture to help understand some of the words in the story.

3) Discuss the title: How can we be alone yet all together? (For example, being alone in a crowd.) Students could write about this.

Reading

1) What is wrong with the mother? (p. 52)

2) On pages 55–56, Libby describes how her sister Sally changed when she became fifteen. Allow students to discuss how siblings, cousins, or they themselves have changed as they entered adolescence. This could be done in writing and then shared with the class or in groups. What topics and concerns are universal to teenagers, no matter the cultural backgrounds? What challenges does everyone face growing up?

3) Discuss the terms of endearment mentioned on page 56. What terms of endearment are students given in their own homes? What do they think about them?

4) Page 57 provides a natural break in reading. Why did Libby's father change his last name after the divorce?

5) Why is Sally feeling alone? (p. 59)

6) On page 61, Ahmed is bullied. What should you do in these situations? What would you do? Good writing prompt.

7) The Sears Tower is mentioned on page 62. It might be helpful for students to see what this looks like and compare statistics about the World Trade Center to this building. These could be researched by students and presented to the class.

8) "Being afraid is catching, but so is being brave." This quote on page 62 could be a writing or discussion prompt.

9) Allow students to experience a minute of silence, p. 62, to see how long it is. How did they feel during this?

Writing

1) On page 60, “tight rubber band voice” is an example of personification. What does this do to writing? Students can write their own examples to practice this figurative language.

2) Research/discussion topics: 9/11, Islam, Arab culture, etc.

3) Themes: prejudice, cultural stereotypes, bullying, title—what does the story say about the human condition? This is a good example of using a real event from history or current news to inspire writing.

“AMERICAN HISTORY” BY JUDITH ORTIZ COFER (page 64)

Like “Alone and All Together,” this story is set in the aftermath of a national tragedy. The Puerto Rican community residing in Paterson, New Jersey, turns silent upon hearing the news that President Kennedy was assassinated on that November day. Elena, a ninth grader, knowing she should be sad like everyone else, stifles her excitement about visiting Eugene after school to study history. When she arrives and is turned away by his mother, she confronts history and tragedy together.

Vocabulary

profound, p. 64 / viragoes, p. 64 / hierarchy, martyrs, p. 64 / discreet, p. 66 / linger, p. 67 / vigilant, p. 67 / virtue, p. 67 / enthralled, p. 68 / lilt-ing, p. 68 / elation, p. 70 / humiliation, p. 70 / trance, p. 72 / solace, p. 72

Pre-Reading

1) This story could be part of a unit or history lesson about the 1960s. It could also be paired with nonfiction readings, news article,s and video clips, etc. about the Kennedy assassination and the nation’s response.

2) Cofer creates an image of Elena’s apartment building, El Building, with a simile, “like a monstrous jukebox” (p. 64). Ask students to keep a log or create a class poster of the similes they find as they read the sto-

ries. They can practice writing their own and adding them to their own writing.

Reading

- 1) How did Elena keep Eugene company? What was she doing? (p. 66)
- 2) Elena is reading *Gone with the Wind*. (p. 68) Students would need an introduction to this book. What would a Puerto Rican girl living in an urban New Jersey northern city find compelling about this sprawling Civil War story?
- 3) Why did Mr. DePalma react the way he did? (p. 69)
- 4) How did the neighborhood change after hearing the news? (p.69)
- 5) On page 70, Elena’s experiencing a moral dilemma. Why is this?
- 6) What does her mother mean, “you are heading for humiliation and pain?” (p. 70)
- 7) What does “resigned tone” mean? (p. 70)
- 8) Compare Eugene’s house to Elena’s building. How does where she live contribute to his mother’s feelings about her?
- 9) In what way was “the young widow and her two children,” p. 72, part of their family?
- 10) The story ends with the image of snow falling, turning from white to gray. How is this a metaphor for what happened in the story? Why did the author end the story this way?

Writing

- 1) Suggest journal writing comparing students’ own lives to Elena’s experiences—jumping rope, prejudice, family worries, etc.
- 2) This is a perfect story to write from a different character’s point of view.

Suggest Eugene: How did he respond when his mother told him she turned Elena away? Write that conversation.

3) Write a continuation of this story. What happens in their lives after Eugene moves to a southern city? The characters could write letters to each other.

“DEAD MAN RUNNING” BY EUGENIA COLLIER (page 73)

Fifteen-year-old Jazzy, a dropout drug pusher, is an eyewitness to murder. “Dead Man Running,” told alternatively through flashbacks and an italicized back-story, brings to life the events that landed Jazzy in the witness box. Realistic in language and detail, the story presents a look at lives entwined in crime and the hopeless conditions that lead them there.

Vocabulary

ominous, p. 74 / ominously, p. 75 / show adjective & adverb sauntered, p. 75 / wavered, p. 75 / cordoned, p. 78 / impassive, p. 79 / gaggle, p. 79 / oblivious, p. 82 / akimbo, p. 83 baleful, p. 83 / subtle, p. 84 / surly, p. 84 / credence, p. 88 / vengeance, p. 89 / sanctuary, p. 89 / pristine, p. 89 / spawned, p. 89 / denizen, p. 89 / fortitude, p. 89 / coherent, p. 89

Pre-Reading

1) An introduction to courtroom procedures would enhance understanding of this story.

2) The story has many examples of figurative language. On page 73, an empty lot where a house once stood is “a space like a gap in a snaggle-tooth mouth.” Students can look for more similes as they read and write their own.

Reading

1) Discuss whether the story ends with any hope for Jazzy. What does “released into a dangerous freedom” mean? (p. 89)

2) Tie this story in with other courtroom dramas, plays, or movies. Students will differ in opinions about “reasonable doubt” (p.88).

3) What are the larger issues in this story? (For example, crime, drugs, desolate neighborhood, illiteracy, etc.) What are the solutions?

Writing

1) In addition to similes, students can look at sentences that create vivid images: “Pregnant with danger” (p. 74), “The wellspring of rage” (p. 89), “faith and fortitude,” an example of alliteration (p. 89). Students can write their own phrases.

2) For a grammar exercise, have students rewrite p. 76 in standard English. How does this change the story? Why is it acceptable sometimes to use non-standard grammar?

3) Write this story from a different character’s point of view.

4) It’s twenty years after the end of the story. Write a diary entry about what you’ve been doing with your life and how the events in the story affected you.

“BLUES FOR BOB E. BROWN” BY T. ERNESTO BETHANCOURT (page 90)

Bob E. Brown’s life changes when the grandfather he’s never met suddenly enters his life.

Vocabulary

dismay, p. 91 / indifferent, p. 96 / glint, p. 101 / initiation, p. 105

Pre-Reading

1) Roberto, called Bobby outside the family, is an aspiring blues guitarist. It might be helpful to play blues music for students.

2) Music is the central focus of the story. In addition to blues, introduce all types of music or invite students to bring in their favorites. In the story, Bobby tells his grandfather, “. . . there’s lots of kids of all backgrounds who play blues, jazz, even soul. That’s the great thing about music. It cuts across all lines.” (p. 105) As a pre-reading exercise, have students write about their favorite music.

3) This is a multigenerational story. Ask students to interview their parents and grandparents (or other older relatives or neighbors) about their tastes in music. Compare and contrast interests among students, perhaps having students create a chart.

4) Showing a map of New York City as you read will help them understand the locations of different neighborhoods.

5) Discuss the title. How is it a play on words? In what way can we be blue? Come back to this after reading the story.

Reading

1) On page 90, Roberto informs us that he's the "last kid left at home." Students might be able to relate to this, depending on their birth order. This could be a writing activity.

2) Page 91 Roberto tells us "most of our family life is in the kitchen." Why would this be so? Relate to students' lives- what room would they say holds most of their family life? This subject can prompt a discussion or a writing assignment.

3) Is the father's reaction to the news realistic? (p. 92) Why does he hold a grudge against his father? Students can describe any personal experiences with grudges and what became of them. Is this a positive way to go through life?

4) This is a great story for making predictions. What do students think will happen when Bobby meets his grandfather?

5) Is it too much of a coincidence that Bobby's grandfather was a musician?

6) Discuss the title again. How is it a play on words? In what way can we be blue? How was Bobby blue?

7) References to explain: "I Love Lucy" and "Twilight Zone," (p.103).

Writing

1) There are many similes in this story that students could use as models to write their own. Some examples: “I swallowed a lump in my throat the size of a baseball . . .” (p. 96), “Halfway through, I realized I was making as much impression as a snowball on a brick wall.” (p. 96), “He blew his nose like a trumpet playing an A natural.” (p. 103). Discuss with students how the similes make the writing more vivid.

2) What would it be like to meet a relative you’ve never met? What would you talk about? What historical events occurred during this person’s life? Students could research the life and times of such a relative, create a timeline based on the events, and create mock interview questions. Then a timeline can be created based on the events discussed in interviews.

“BLUE DIAMOND” BY NEAL SHUSTERMAN (page 107)

When Doug’s friend Quinn suggests a road trip to Las Vegas, he realizes there’s much more at stake than their attempts at gambling. This friendship story between two 17-year-old boys affirms what’s important.

Vocabulary

grimacing, p. 107 / plunder, p. 107 / proverbial, p. 107 / drone, p. 108 / squander, p. 109 / eccentric, p. 112 / desolate, p. 115 / chiding, p. 118 / pensive, p. 119

Reading

1) To fully appreciate the adventures of Doug and Quinn, a preliminary introduction to Las Vegas would help. Perhaps a video clip or photographs could illustrate the setting.

2) Quinn’s life is described as “the negotiation of a maze,” p. 108. What does this mean? Ask students to relate this to their own lives.

3) Notice the similes on p. 108: “I’m about as predictable as a traffic light . . .” and “A crescent moon shines through the sun roof, cold and sharp as a scythe.” How do these enhance the writing?

4) Reference, p. 110: “good old Grant” is a \$50 bill.

5) Reference p. 116: the film “It’s a Wonderful Life.” To understand Quinn and his problems, it might be helpful to see this film or scenes from it.

6) What does this story say about life? What’s important?

7) Is the friendship between the boys believable? Why or why not?

Writing

1) Rewrite the story from Quinn’s point of view.

2) It’s ten years later. Describe the boys’ lives. This could be in form of letters between the boys.

“HOLLYWOOD AND THE PITS” BY CHERYLENE LEE (page 120)

Realizing she’ll never be the child star her mother hopes for, the fifteen-year-old narrator of “Hollywood and the Pits” discovers Los Angeles’ La Brea Tar Pits and a passion for archeology. Facts about the La Brea Tar Pits appear in italics intermittently throughout the story, showing how natural selection and survival of the fittest offer more life lessons than any stage performance can.

Vocabulary

barrage, p. 121 / vaudeville, p.123 / skewing, p. 126 / ingénue, p. 126 / groveling, p. 128

Pre-Reading

1) An introduction to the Tar Pits, perhaps through student research, would enhance understanding of the story. It might be useful to introduce facts about Los Angeles—what do students know (Hollywood, etc.) and compare with this natural phenomenon. This would be an excellent story to tie in with environmental science.

2) The Lee Sisters appear in vaudeville. Find some videotapes of vaudeville acts to introduce this bygone form of entertainment. (p. 123)

Reading

- 1) Reference—Gene Kelly, p. 126. Students might enjoy seeing a tape of him dancing.
- 2) Continue looking at similes and discussing how they help create images in writing: “the vertebrae looped like a woman’s pearls hanging on an invisible cord”(p. 120), “[hair] flowed beyond her waist like a cascading black waterfall” (p. 126), “like tar on the bones of a saber-toothed tiger” (p. 128). Have students write their own.
- 3) On page 127, the grandmother says “movies are just make-believe, not real life. . . . Not meant to last.” What does this mean?
- 4) “The tar pits had their lessons.” (p. 129) What were the lessons the narrator learned from the Tar Pits? How did she grow up in this story?

Writing

- 1) On page 123, “. . . the Lee Sisters—Ug-Lee and Home-Lee” have names that are puns. Introduce puns and have students write their own.
- 2) The narrator becomes fascinated with the Tar Pits through volunteering there. Discuss how volunteering can lead to interests and careers. This could be writing prompt. In what ways do students volunteer? School activities, etc. How can hobbies become obsessions?

“THE BALDIES ARE COMING” BY PAUL MANY (page 130)

Walking to school becomes an experience in observation for the narrator of this story, a young teenage boy who attends parochial school in Cleveland. Though we never learn his name, we learn a lot about him. All students will be able to relate to how the power of imagination can lead to fear.

Vocabulary

neutered, p. 130 / viaduct, p. 130 / winced, p. 134 / languid, p. 135 / deftly, p. 135 / reveries, p. 136 / lurking, p. 136 / feinting, p. 138 / lurid, p. 138

Pre-Reading

1) The first paragraph describes how Edward Hopper's urban paintings capture light. Seeing reproductions of these paintings would help explain this to students. The paintings themselves could be used as writing prompts either before or after reading the story.

2) The narrator attends a Catholic school run by nuns. Students might need some introduction to the difference between public and parochial school, including a discussion of the seriousness of committing sins. (p. 136)

Reading

1) The reference to the Black Death, on p. 136, is an example of irony and sarcasm. Why does the narrator claim the nuns at St. Mary of the Angels "learned their religion" during this time?

2) Note the metaphor, p. 130: "this light has all the color and strength of a glass of tap water." How is a metaphor different from a simile? Which do they think creates a stronger image? Have students write their own metaphors.

3) As the narrator walks to school, he sees graffiti on highway viaducts. Students could look for examples of graffiti in their own neighborhoods. They can write found poems from words they find.

4) We see evidence of the narrator's vivid imagination beginning on page 130: "...thousands of black blobs of gum, long pounded in the concrete, . . . which I imagined would, on some hot day, regain their gooeyness and swallow me the way the woolly mammoths in my science book were swallowed by a Pleistocene tar pit." What does this say about the narrator? (His imagination feeds his fears, etc.) Students can look for other examples of the narrator's imagination as they read. (The next one is on page 131.) How do these help move the story along?

5) The story continues with a description of the stores on the street, including a pet store with a large snake in its window. Students can walk down their street or through their neighborhood and describe the stores.

6) On p. 132, a yoyo company moves into the vacant pet store. Allow students to bring in yoyos and play games.

7) Who are the Baldies and why is the narrator most scared of them? Are they real?

Writing

1) Beginning on page 135, the narrator creates “abnormal” scenarios in order to meet Donna Costanzo, a girl he has a crush on. Have students create their own scenarios.

2) This is a very visual story. Allow students to illustrate scenes or create cartoons.

3) On page 136, the rumor of the Baldies has escalated. Discuss the power of rumors. Are they harmful or beneficial? Write about this.

“DON’T SPLIT THE POLE” BY ELEANORA E. TATE (page 139)

When Lizario, known as Lizard, and his older brother, Dartanyan, known as Dart, search for a new place to skateboard, they encounter unusual, supernatural events. Did they imagine them? This fantasy/science fiction story, set around Halloween, brings superstitions, sibling relationships and skateboarding together.

Vocabulary

translucent, p. 145

Pre-reading

1) The story begins with Lizard crashing his skateboard into a patch of prickly flowers and describes more serious accidents he’s had since starting the sport. As a way to engage students in this story, read the beginning, and then ask students to share their own experiences with sports injuries. This could become a writing assignment.

2) The story’s main characters are two brothers. Students can write about relationships with siblings. After they read the story, they can

discuss how their relationships with their siblings compare with Lizard and Dart.

3) The boys have nicknames. Discuss why people are given nicknames. If students have nicknames, they can write about how they got them; if they don't, they can write about what nickname they'd like to have.

4) The title, "Don't Split the Pole," refers to a superstition. Discuss what a superstition is and what other superstitions students know. (p. 143)

Reading

1) The first sentence, p. 139, provides an example of vivid verb use and could be used as a model for sentence imitation. What do the active verbs do for the story?

2) What does the first paragraph hint about the story's setting and plot? (p. 139) (For example, the story is set in October, Halloween time.)

3) Note the similes: "His thick eyebrows met in such a furious furry line that it looked like a big black caterpillar had stuck itself on his forehead." (p. 141), "The charred skeleton of the long, one-story building aped at them like blackened teeth." (p. 142), "She pulled the sheet off the table like a bullfighter removing her cape." (p. 144).

4) What happens on page 144 that surprises Lizard and Dart?

5) How will the boys get revenge at the end?

Writing

1) The reference to *Forrest Gump* on p. 141 includes the quote "Stupid is as stupid does." Ask students to write about this quote in relation to themselves or to someone they know.

2) Writing prompt: "Sometimes trying to do bad things to other people just boomerangs back on you" (p. 148). Discuss what this means and allow students to write about their own experiences.

3) Write the next chapter: What happens when Sparks goes to Exchange?

“THE AVALON BALLROOM” BY ANN HOOD (page 152)

When seventeen-year-old Lily needs funds to attend Princeton, her mother unexpectedly comes through when she sells a valuable poster.

Vocabulary

frivolous, p. 153 / ironic, p. 155 / indigent, p. 157

Pre-Reading

1) Set in the 1960s in New York City’s Greenwich Village, this story has many references to the time period. This would be a great tie-in to study of the 1960s. References to research include: Jamie Lee Curtis, the *Munsters*, Nixon, Rastafarians, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, flower children, Sonny & Cher, and Woody Allen.

Reading

- 1) How was Lily’s father killed? (p. 155)
- 2) On page 155, Lily describes how her father is a stranger to her. How can people who are strangers also be a myth, a hero, and a god?
- 3) What is Lily’s mother’s relationship like with her mother-in-law? Is this believable or not?
- 4) How does Lily’s mother surprise her? What does this do to Lily’s opinion of her?

Writing

- 1) Ask students if Lily’s mother’s action reminds them of someone. Has anyone sold something valuable to provide for them? Do they have any possessions that they would sell if the money were needed?
- 2) Lily’s mother is big on rituals. (p. 156) What do rituals do? Why are they important in our lives? Students can write about family rituals.

3) On page 156, Lily says, “There is really no place to hide in our apartment, but if there were, I would be there.” This could be a writing prompt. Students can describe what would be their ideal hiding place and why would they go there.

4) Pretend it’s Lily’s freshman year at Princeton. Write her diary entries about her life now, her courses, her plans for the future.

“OLD SCHOOL / FU- CHAR SKOOL” BY JOHN H. RITTER (page164)

When Ben’s grandfather gives him a trumpet, Ben blends old styles and his own. Little does he know that his music will help save someone’s life.

Vocabulary

epitome, p. 165 / syncopated, p. 168

Pre-Reading

1) On page 165, Ben says “Granddad was the epitome of cool.” Once students understand the word *epitome*, they can write about what “the epitome of cool” is to them.

2) This is another story about how music transforms someone’s life. Discuss how this can happen, and connect this idea to the lives of the students or to the lives of others. This could be the focus of a research paper: How did a specific musician or group become interested in music?

Reading

1) The first sentence on page 164 creates a great image. What do students see?

2) What does “guilt by association” mean? (p. 165)

3) Music is compared to “a warm blanket” (p. 165), and having the ability to “paint the room” (p. 166). How can this be? Do these comparisons work?

4) Reference p. 169: Wynton Marsalis

5) What is Ben’s style? Why is it called Fu-Char Skool? (p. 169)

6) Simile p. 171: "... my stomach flips like a fish lying on the O.B. Pier - with the hook inside." What does he mean?

7) What does the title mean? Discuss how the term "old school" can mean loyalty. How is Ben loyal?

Writing

1) Ben's grandfather tells Ben Old School music is his "musical roots." (p. 164) He continues, "... Cut off your roots, and pretty soon you've got a hollow tree." Explain and write own connections.

2) "... a rep [reputation] is a lot like a tattoo. Easy to get, but hard to get rid of." (p. 167) Discuss this analogy and ask students to write their own ideas about reputations.

3) Write the next chapter, or what is Ben's life like ten years after the story's ending.

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Lisa K. Winkler holds a Master's of Education from New Jersey City University and a B.A. from Vassar College. She has taught middle school Language Arts for more than ten years and serves as a master teacher in the Newark, NJ public schools under the federal Striving Readers grant of No Child Left Behind legislation. She is also an instructor in the literacy education department at NJCU. Ms. Winkler has interviewed authors and reviewed books for professional journals, and presently writes for *Education Update*, a New York City-based newspaper.

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