

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO
OUTSIDE RULES
Short Stories About Nonconformist Youth

Edited, with an introduction by **CLAIRE ROBSON**

(AGES 12+)



PERSEA BOOKS / NEW YORK

Copyright © 2007 by Persea Books, Inc.

For additional Teacher's Guides, catalogues, or descriptive brochures,
visit our web site, www.perseabooks.com, or write to:

Persea Books
853 Broadway
New York, NY 10003
TEL: (212) 260.9256
FAX: (212) 260.1902
E-MAIL: info@perseabooks.com

Outside Rules: Short Stories About Nonconformist Youth
Edited by Claire Robson

CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Creating Safe Space	3
The Outsider Experience	4
General Questions for Discussion or Writing	6
Point of View	6
Topics for Discussion	7
Topics for Creative Writing	8
Individual Stories	9
A Minstrel Visits by Sandell Morse	9
Mr. Softee by Wally Lamb	11
My <i>Tocaya</i> by Sandra Cisneros	12
Surrounded by Sleep by Akhil Sharma	13
One Extra Parking Space by Jacqueline Sheehan	14
Laughing in the Dark by Rand Richards Cooper	15
Nobody Listens When I Talk by Annette Sanford	16
Saint Chola by K. Kvashay-Boyle	17
The Frontiers of Knowledge by Claire Robson	19
Gypsy Girl by Caitlin Jeffrey Lonning	20
April by Katharine Noel	21
The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas by Reginald McKnight	23
Playing the Garden by Chris Fisher	25
The White Room by Rebecca Rule	26
Story Comparisons	28
About the Author of this Guide	29

INTRODUCTION

It's nice to explore a new place for yourself, but if you are pressed for time, a guide can come in handy. This guide is intended to offer quick and easy access to the stories in this collection and to suggest ways to teach them. Having selected the stories, I have now tried to find ways to open up this literary landscape and invite students in to explore it.

Since this landscape has its potential dangers, I first offer some notes on establishing a safety zone. Next, I sketch the major contours, the big picture—some thoughts and activities concerning the outsider experience and point of view.

Finally, I map each individual story by formulating key questions for it. These questions might be assigned along with the reading of the story, as a written response to the reading (either formal or informal), as a prewriting exercise before class discussion, or used to structure a lesson plan including teacher-guided class discussion. However they are used, they are intended to engage students with the substance of story and to show its resonance and relevance. Also included are prompts for personal writing, which will further deepen and enrich student response to the stories in the collection.

Clearly, the questions are not exhaustive, nor are all relevant to every student population. They will provide, at least, a starting point for your journey.

CREATING SAFE SPACE

Teaching about sensitive issues can be a challenge. While it is important to discuss and write about outsider experiences, such as the sense of being different, or the experience of being bullied and marginalized, it's a topic that has the potential to make students vulnerable.

Here are some of the ways to address safety in the classroom:

- Establish clear classroom rules. I have found the following to be useful: Zero tolerance for disrespect of others, either verbal or written. Be very clear about what is "acceptable." For instance, I don't tolerate graphic, gratuitous violence, sexist or homophobic comments, outright prejudice, or other comments that make others feel unsafe or threatened.
- Don't force students to share their work. Encourage them to do so, but allow them to "pass" when it comes to speaking and sharing.
- Respect confidences, and let students know, up front, the circumstances in which you will or will not share student work with other adults.
- Don't assume that all first-person work is autobiographical. Indeed I've found it helpful, when discussing work, to separate narrator from writer in first-person creative writing (i.e. talk about "the protagonist" rather than "you"). This sets an emotional distance between the writer and the written.
- Provide structured ways to encourage positive feedback from students on other students' work. I ask them to:
 - Start positive and leave constructive criticism to the end.
 - Start with the big picture and leave minor "picky" details to the end
 - Remember that we are all outsiders, sensitive to ridicule
 - Here are some suggestions for structuring feedback:
 - * Have students "popcorn" (just fast freeform comments without hand raised) things they liked or remembered about the piece (encourages quick, positive feedback from a wide range of students)

- * Have each student give an overall response to the piece in twenty seconds or less (prevents over-talking by dominant students, who "decide" for the class)
- * Have students define "the gift" of the piece. Ask: What is essentially great about it?
 - Use prewriting to encourage discussion. I found that I was expecting students to be articulate too soon, and that even five minutes' free writing (in which students keep the pen moving and don't cross out or edit) on a topic or question builds confidence, encourages experimentation, generates ideas, and loosens up inhibitions.
 - I write my own responses to writing assignments and share them with students, in an attempt to model respect for the writing process and the teaching materials, and a willingness to be vulnerable.

THE OUTSIDER EXPERIENCE

The stories reflect diverse experiences of being marginalized, or being "different." Their protagonists are East Indian, Pakistani, Caucasian, Latina, African American, and Native American. Susan ("A Minstrel Visits," p. 3) is overweight. Gigi ("Gypsy Girl," p. 110) is the prisoner of her alcoholic and abusive mother. Eli ("Mr. Softee," p. 15) and Marie ("The White Room," p. 166) are artistic. Kevin ("Playing the Garden," p. 155) is gay. Shala ("Saint Chola," p. 81) and Clint ("The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas," p. 139) are facing complex issues of religious, cultural, and racial differences. Timothy ("The Frontiers of Knowledge," p. 99) is isolated and geeky. Danny ("Laughing in the Dark," p. 61) and Ajay ("Surrounded by Sleep," p. 38) have lost siblings and are over-

looked by their parents as a result. Patricia is trapped in poverty ("My *Tocaya*," p. 33). Thomas ("One Extra Parking Space," p. 56) has Down's syndrome. Angie ("April," p. 116) is mentally ill. Marilyn ("Nobody Listens When I Talk," p. 76) is just taking time out to take stock. All stories were chosen for their potential to encourage learning and discussion about diversity and to promote tolerance, as well as for their literary merit.

These are some of the questions that might form a useful way in to the outsider experience:

- What is an outsider? Lack of access to wealth? Oppression because of race, gender, sexual identity? The name-calling opening of "Saint Chola" (p. 81) might be a useful starting point for this discussion.
- What are the protagonists "outside?" How valid is their perception that there is an "inside," a unified world that excludes them? How far is their sense of dislocation valid? Here, we might take such characters as Timothy, Susan, Danny, and Marilyn, and consider how much they have conspired to create their isolation.
 - In what sense are the main characters outsiders at the beginning of their stories?
 - What are the reasons for their sense of "difference?"
 - What can we point to in society and in the individual to explain these outsider experiences?

A key premise providing a basis for story selection: Not all outsiders are victims. Most of the protagonists in these stories surmount trials and obstacles to achieve some kind of triumph—if not an outright victory, then at least we are left feeling that there is hope for them. Only one, Timothy in "The Frontiers of Knowledge" (p. 99) seems to remain as isolated as he was at the beginning of the story. This should provide a useful focus for discussion in each of the stories concerned:

- How successful were the main characters in escaping the "outsider" identity, or in discovering that it is okay to be different?
 - What qualities of character helped him/her to do this?
 - What support did he/she find?

GENERAL QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING

- 1) How common is the outsider experience in schools, playgrounds, and families?
- 2) What have your own experiences been when it comes to being an outsider?
- 3) What helps young people feel that they belong? Religious institutions such as church, temple, or mosque? Clubs and societies? Schools? Families and extended families? Peers?
- 4) Are there other outsider experience not discussed in this collection? What about autism, the experience of being skinny or unattractive, having a speech impediment, older parents, a weird family, or acne? What about abused or neglected children, or teens with divorced parents? It would be most interesting for the class to write these stories and compile its own anthology.

POINT OF VIEW

Point of view is a difficult thing to teach, especially to young students, whose imaginations draw them effortlessly and uncritically into the fictional world presented. When they write, they often fluctuate between writing intensely personal first-person nonfiction and fiction that sets a wide distance between themselves and their imagined characters. Two of the greatest challenges all writers face are to achieve emotional intensity without being maudlin or self-involved, and conversely, to invent charac-

ters who are quirky, alive, and vibrant, rather than narrative chessmen, or one dimensional actors in a morality play.

All the stories in this collection are written as fiction, but most read more like memoir, as though the events described actually happened to that person. There are no instances where the narrative seems to be recalled, after a period of time has elapsed. This was one of the chief criteria used when the stories were selected. Also, there are no stories which set an emotional distance between the chief characters and the events in which they participate. One of the strengths of this collection is the ingenuity our writers have shown in responding to this challenge.

"A Minstrel Visits" (p. 3), "Mr. Softee" (p. 15), and "Laughing in the Dark" (p. 61) all employ first-person narrative, set in the past. "The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas" (p. 139) is set further in the past, but has a tremendous sense of immediacy. "Playing the Garden" (p. 155) is narrated in the first person, by an ancillary character; the "main" character never appears in the story—a device also used by Cisneros in "My *Tocaya*" (p. 33), in which the story of Patricia is delivered in tantalizing segments through the cynical narration of a girl who's not even a friend, and whose name we never find out. "Nobody Listens When I Talk" (p. 76) uses the difficult first person immediate present. "The Frontiers of Knowledge" (p. 99) employs an unreliable narrator. "Surrounded by Sleep" (p. 38), "Gypsy Girl" (p. 110), "April" (p. 116), and "The White Room" (p. 166) all use omniscient narrators. "Saint Chola" (p. 81) also has an unusual and tricky point of view, known as second-person narrative, in which the reader seems to become the main character and is addressed as "you."

It's interesting to consider how the stories use chronology. "One Extra Parking Space" (p. 56), another first-person narrative, starts in the immediate present, but reflects upon events that happened earlier, then runs up to the time of the narration and looks into the future. "Gypsy Girl" (p. 110) is very short, but effortlessly presents events that span a number of years, using the very creative idea of the five Gypsy Girl Rules partly to show the span of time. "Nobody Listens When I Talk" (p. 76) reenacts the interior life of a teenager who spends an entire summer in a swing.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1) In "Playing the Garden" (p. 155) and "My *Tocaya*" (p. 33), we never

meet the heroes of the stories. Why do you think the authors did this? Is it effective?

2) Timothy in "The Frontiers of Knowledge" (p. 99) can be called an unreliable narrator. What do you learn about him that he doesn't tell us directly?

3) How does author Caitlin Jeffrey Lonning use the idea of the five "rules" to structure her story, "Gypsy Girl" (p. 110)?

4) Which stories use point of view most effectively in your opinion? Justify your answer.

TOPICS FOR CREATIVE WRITING

1) "Nobody Listens When I Talk" (p. 76) is written in the immediate present tense ("From time to time my friend comes.") "Saint Chola" (p. 81) uses the second person narrative ("You walk the halls and you see what's there.") Try using these points of view in a story of your own. If nothing comes to mind, take something you've already written, and shift it into these points of view. How does it sound different? What were the challenges and benefits of writing that way?

2) "A Minstrel Visits" (p. 3), "Mr. Softee" (p. 15) "Laughing in the Dark" (p. 61), and "The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas" (p. 139), all sound as if they are written about real experiences, but they are actually fiction. They may be based on actual events, but their authors have taken the liberty of making things up, while still retaining the feeling that all is factual. Take an actual event, something interesting or unusual that happened to you in the last week, and use it as a starting point for a story written in the first person.

3) Write about someone you know, from a first-person point of view. Put this person in a situation that brings out his/her best or worst (like Timothy in the library in "The Frontiers of Knowledge" [p. 99]) and see what happens.

4) Write about yourself in the third person. You might choose one of the starting points from the stories in the collection. Here are some sugges-

tions: a first day in a new school ("Saint Chola" [p. 81]), a time you behaved badly ("Mr. Softee" [p. 15]), a time you behaved well or stood up for yourself ("The White Room" [p. 166], "A Minstrel Visits" [p. 3]), a time you were bullied or teased ("The Frontiers of Knowledge" [p. 99], "The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas" [p. 139]).

5) "Nobody Listens When I Talk" (p. 76) is a story in which not much happens except what's inside the narrator's head. Write a story about someone who looks like he or she is doing nothing, but is in fact very busy thinking.

6) "Gypsy Girl" (p. 110) uses the five gypsy girl rules to tell Gigi's story. Find five rules of your own to structure a piece of writing, or a similar way to divide up the narrative into sections.

INDIVIDUAL STORIES

A MINSTREL VISITS (page 3)

This is the only story in the collection to focus primarily on an adversarial relationship with a parent. It hardly needs pointing out that a common complaint for teens is that their parents don't understand them, don't "get" them, and make them feel at once enraged and belittled by their impossible expectations.

Topics for Writing and Discussion

How much sympathy do we feel for messy, chubby Susan? What does she care about (see page 4 "lying on my bed thinking about Allison, the most popular girl in my class, who's almost my friend")?

How much sympathy do we feel for her mother, living in "this wilderness." What does she care about?

How would you define the emotional dance between Susan and her mother? Why and how does Susan deliberately annoy her mother? How does her mother respond? What is the payoff for each of them?

Why does Peter Anthony describe himself as a "minstrel"? What exactly does he do? How responsible is he in his relationship with Susan and her mother?

Reread the scene in which Peter, Susan, and her mother meet for the first time. How does the author show the characters' intentions and personalities through their behaviors? Consider such things as the way Susan's mother introduce Susan to Peter, the way Susan makes the salad, the way Peter involves Susan in making the dressing.

What do you make of the relationship between Peter and Susan? What does the unicorn represent? Why does Susan's mother hit the roof? Does she have a point? Does Peter help Susan? If so, how? What do you think of the way the story ends?

What's your guess about how things will turn out for Susan?

Creative Writing Prompts

Write about Susan when she's twenty-five. Where is she? What is she doing?

Have you ever had a fantasy about your parent or parents finally wishing that they had been nicer to you, but it's too late? Write about it.

The author, Sandell Morse, describes the ways in which Susan deliberately annoys her mother. What creative ways have you found to irritate your family members?

Write a scene about a simple activity, such as cooking dinner, that reveals a great deal about the three people involved.

Write a story in which someone who seemed powerless takes control of the situation.

MR SOFTEE (page 15)

This story touches upon another key area in adolescent experience, the all-important issue of looks. Though many teens will say that looks are not important, Eli's sense of entitlement, his fascination with the gorgeous Charlene and his disdain for Doris are fairly typical of actual teen behavior. This story provides a great way in to discussion around issues of appearance versus reality, popularity, integrity, and values around love and relationship.

Topics for Writing and Discussion

There are three young women in this story—Charlene, Doris, and Debbie. What do you think they represent for the protagonist?

Why is Doris so taken with Eli's poem "about a guy on a beach trying to decide who he really was" (p. 22)? Why does Eli deny writing it?

Doris says that people think she's weird (p. 23). Do you agree? Does she have any redeeming features?

In what ways does Eli behave badly throughout this story? What's the worst thing he does?

Eli's father asks him, at the end, if he's learned something he didn't know before. Does he?

Creative Writing Prompts

Write about something you did that you are ashamed of.

How much does popularity matter? Be honest.

How much do looks matter? Be honest.

Would you rather be "good" and ugly, or "bad" and good-looking?

Write about an experience that changed your life.

Define a good friend. Define a bad friend. Write about one of each.

MY TOCAYA (page 33)

Like "Playing the Garden" (p. 155), this is a story in which we never meet the "outsider" character. Much of the story's charm derives from the cynical voice of its narrator, Patricia. It's interesting to see how her friend (also Patricia) manages to escape the poverty and limitations of her class and cultural background, if she indeed does. There are parallels to be drawn here with professional athletes and entertainers from minority cultures. It's also interesting to note the different and yet in some ways similar methods the two girls use to forge a life. Both rely on charming members of the opposite sex, though arguably, Patricia Benavidez does so with a shrewder sense of long-term goals.

Questions for Writing and Discussion

We never meet Patricia Benavidez. What do we learn about her, and her life? What do we learn about the other Patricia, the narrator? How much do you like her?

The narrator says of Patricia Benavidez, "the girl had problems." What were these exactly?

In what ways is she an outsider?

How exactly did she escape her problems? Fill in the story line.

Do you think her escape was successful?

Patricia compares her namesake to Marilyn Munroe. What are the similarities?

What's similar about the two Patricias, and what is different?

Creative writing prompts

Write a piece in the unique "voice" of your neighborhood. Think of popular slang you can use—the "in" things and the "out" things.

Write a story with a surprise twist, in which the underdog comes out on top.

Write a boy-meets-girl story, where a third person helps along the romance.

Most people, at one time or another, wish they could escape their lives. Write about times you've felt this. Alternatively, write about the things that make you happy to be you.

Ever thought about your own funeral? Describe it.

SURROUNDED BY SLEEP (page 38)

This is probably one of the more challenging stories in the collection, in that it is fairly internal and has fewer compelling incidents and scenes than the others, with the exception of "Nobody Listens When I Talk" p.76. Nevertheless, as a study of benign parental neglectfulness, the nature of God, and the reality of grief and loss, it will probably strike a chord with many teens, who are often more sophisticated than we think when it comes to their examinations of such issues.

Questions for Writing and Discussion

How do you think Ajay's parents treat him during his brother's illness? Point to three or four examples to justify your ideas.

Why does Ajay see God as looking like Superman? How do you account for his strange conversations with God?

Where do you see evidence that Ajay understands what his parents are going through, perhaps more than they understand him?

If you had been Ajay's parents, how might you have treated him differently during this difficult time?

Describe the way in which grief affects each of the three characters, Ajay, his mother, and his father.

What causes Ajay's outburst towards the end of the story? What does he learn?

Creative Writing Prompts

Have you ever wished that you could just rewind three minutes of your life? Write about that time.

What comforts you when you are sad or lonely?

Have you ever experienced a loss (grandmother, relative, friend, or pet). Write as honestly as you can about the things that helped you get over it, and the things that didn't help at all.

Write your own conversation with God. Ask some tough questions.

ONE EXTRA PARKING SPACE (page 56)

Here's another story in which the outsider turns the tables, in a neat twist at the end of the narrative. It's hard not to enjoy Thomas, with his love of batteries and his robust pride. "Special needs" students are often an easy target for teens. Hopefully this story will serve as a useful starting point for discussion. It might be interesting to consider how your school community caters for these students.

Questions for Writing and Discussion

How does Thomas's family treat him? His father? His mother? Elizabeth?

How is Thomas different from other people and how is he the same?

Have you ever known anyone with Down's syndrome?

How do you explain the cruelty of the men in the truck? What makes people attack others who are "different"?

Have you ever witnessed bullying? Have you ever taken part?

Creative Writing Prompts

Write a story about revenge.

What was the most unjust action you ever witnessed or experienced?

If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be?

Write a story in which you stick up for someone.

What could your school do to prevent bullying? Write a letter to the principal making some concrete suggestions for change.

Write a story from the point of view of someone who bullies. Try to get into their state of mind.

LAUGHING IN THE DARK (page 61)

This story deftly identifies a situation in which many adolescents find themselves “slipping through the cracks.” Danny looks okay, but things are far from okay with him. It takes an eccentric and kind friend to pull him out of his slump. The reality is that most adolescents, like Danny, turn to their peers for support, rather than to parents or concerned adults. This story accurately charts the subtle development of adolescent relationships—the sudden swerves at the immanence of intimacy, and its inexorable development.

Questions for Writing and Discussion

How has the disappearance of Danny’s sister affected his family? His father? His parents’ relationship? Danny himself?

What do you think happened to Danny’s sister? What clues do we have to go on?

In what ways are Danny and Angela similar? In what ways do they differ?

Does Angela help Danny? How?

Why does Danny eventually get out of his slump?

Several adults try to help Danny in this story—Mr. Tourtelotte, Mr. Latimer, Danny's father. Why do their efforts fail? How helpful do you think adults are when it comes to talking to adolescents? What advice would you offer them?

What happens at the end of this story—beyond the physical ?

Creative Writing Prompts

Write about someone who is eccentric, but a really great person.

Write about a time when a friend helped you through a bad stretch in your life.

Write about the ways in which adults simply don't get it.

Write about a time when you felt that you were "slipping through the cracks" and nobody was noticing.

Write about the worst, or best, partner you ever had on a project.

NOBODY LISTENS WHEN I TALK (page 76)

Some parents see adolescence as a time when a lazy, monosyllabic monster somehow replaces a normal, active, talkative son or daughter. "Who are you?" they ask this sullen creature, "and what have you done with my child?" "Nobody Listens When I Talk" gets inside the mind of the withdrawn adolescent, and more than that, it celebrates this creative dormancy. A summer in a hammock gives Marilyn time to consider her options, to decide whether or not she wants her flaky friend to set her up with unappealing dates, or allow her mother to make her "an apprentice woman," in training for bland domesticity. She is free to contemplate life and mortality, to reflect on own her life, and even to escape it in order to become different—"a riddle with a hundred answers." What appears to Marilyn's parents to be lethargy is actually important personal work, and this story neatly capturing this little-documented experience.

Questions for Writing and Discussion

Nothing happens! There's no beginning, middle or end. Can this piece of writing really be called a short story?

What does Marilyn think about in her hammock? Has the author described typical adolescent concerns, in your opinion?

As she reads stories about other people's lives, Marilyn feels like she becomes those characters. Is it useful to daydream like this, or just a waste of time? How important is Art anyway?

Creative Writing Prompts

Write your own story in which your internal life and process over a summer are captured in 1500 words or less. Use the immediate present and the first person point of view.

Parents sometimes say that adolescents are difficult to talk to. Write an instruction manual for parents and/or teachers, called 10 (or 20) Tips for Talking to Teens. It might include a list of Do's and Don't's. It could be a parody of a product care manual, or an essay, or a poem.

If you could be someone else, who would it be? Write a story from that person's point of view.

Marilyn dreads the awful dates her girlfriend will set her up with. What's the worst date you ever went on?

"Nobody listens when I talk"—this is a common adolescent complaint. If you could choose one person, sit them in a chair and make them listen, who would it be, and what would you say? Write this as a direct address to that person.

SAINT CHOLA (page 81)

From its opening words, this hip story captures the rhythms and cadences of inner city youth, and is a good model for young writers when it comes to finding distinctive, original, authentic voice. It also considers some

major issues—post 9/11 aggression towards Moslems, the difficult tightrope Westerners walk between honoring cultural traditions and promoting the equal rights of women, the tough decisions that the children of immigrants often have to make as they try to fit in with their peers and at school. There's some interesting ironies—Shala's brother, Ahmad, is in danger in Pakistan because he looks too American, and in America because he looks too "Arab." Shala is yelled at by a feminist mom for sticking up for her principles and though she is tormented for refusing to take off the hijab, she only put it on under protest. Despite her strong principles, she makes prank calls and steals Slurpees from the corner store. The story proves, I think, that although we all recognize ethical behavior when we see it—as in Shala's magnificent response to being bullied—it can be hard for any of us to decide between right and wrong.

Questions for Writing and Discussion

Was Shala just stubborn, or a fighter for freedom and justice? How do you define ethical action? Is personal choice always acceptable? Are there objective moral standards that go beyond cultural expectations?

If Shala had stuck up for arranged marriage would you respect her choice?

Discuss the use of irony in this story.

Do you believe that immigrants should conform to the languages, customs, and religions of the countries they live in? How easy is this, in your experience?

How ethical is Shala, overall?

Creative Writing Prompts

Write about a time that you've felt out of place.

Write about a time you've been bullied for sticking to your principles.

Write about a time when you felt that your parents were just too old-fash-

ioned or clueless and then write about a time when you felt that they stood for something truly important.

"Wannabe. Dweeb. Skater. Hesh. Tagger." If you were to write a guide to the students in your institution, how would you classify them?

What's the difference between elementary school and high school, high school and college? What are the challenges, rewards, and dangers of these transitions?

Write a letter to yourself when you're forty. What advice do you have to offer your older self?

THE FRONTIERS OF KNOWLEDGE (page 99)

Timothy's educated and affluent father deprives his son of the affection and attention he needs to thrive. Though he seems to live a life of privilege (compared, say, with Patricia Benavidez in "MyTocaya," p. 33), Timothy is a sad and lonely character who fumbles his one chance to connect and, sadly, retreats back into his sense of superiority. The end of the story, in which Timothy's misogyny hardens, seemingly forever, is intentionally chilling. I worry about young men who take refuge from their feelings in cyberspace. "The Frontiers of Knowledge" is arguably the least optimistic story in the collection.

Questions for Writing and Discussion

How happy is Timothy at various points in this story, and how much sympathy do you feel for him?

Discuss Timothy's relationship with his mother.

What do we learn about Timothy's father? How responsible is he, as a parent?

Cell phones, the Internet, text messaging, television—when is modern technology a curse, and when is it a blessing?

Timothy describes himself as a misogynist. Is misogyny alive and well, or is it a thing of the past? How do you define the differences between the sexes?

This story has a distinctive voice. How does the author use language to convey this?

To some extent, Timothy's intelligence and scholarliness do set him apart from his peers. Why is this so—why are good students considered to be geeks?

Creative Writing Prompts

Write your own story, based upon the events Timothy describes, but written from Helen's point of view.

There have been many stories in which another, artificial world assumes more importance than reality (*Alice Through the Looking Glass; The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe; Pan's Kingdom*). Write your own. Consider what will act as a "portal" to the other world.

Write about a time that you've felt someone has looked down on you because of your gender, your good grades, or because of something about your appearance or clothes.

Have you ever pretended not to care about academics, or lied about how hard you study? Write a story about that.

Write a description of a person who is not particularly likeable, then write a first-person narrative that gets inside that person's skin.

GYPSY GIRL (page 110)

There have been several high profile "custody kidnappings" in the North American news, including strange cases where kidnapped children have adjusted to their "new lives," and re-emerged years later. How resilient are adolescents? How well do they resist the immediate influences of their families? In one sense, "Gypsy Girl" is a coming-of-age story, in that Gigi slowly gathers the independence and strength she needs to leave her abu-

sive mother. But how wise, or safe, is her final choice—to jump on the back of a motorcycle driven by a stranger? From the frying pan into the fire? Or a wise demonstration of good instincts? Caitlin Lonning has deliberately left the ending open for discussion.

Questions for Writing and Discussion

How realistic are the events in this story? Have you read of anything similar in the newspapers, or seen it in the news?

Why is Gigi's mother the way she is? What reasons can you find for her strange behavior?

How many years, or months are covered in Lonning's narrative? How has she handled the chronology in this story?

What do you think will happen to Gigi after the story's end? Was she wise or foolish to jump on the motorbike? Is there another word you might use to describe her decision?

What protection do children and adolescents really have from abusive parents, or parents who are mentally ill, or alcoholic? What help is available?

Creative Writing Prompts

Create your own five "rules" and use them as a starting point for a story.

Write the day in the life of the "tall skinny boy," ending with his exiting the store to find Gigi sitting on his motorbike.

Write a story about an amazing escape.

Can you identify a point where you became your own person, able to make decisions and stand up for yourself? Write about that moment.

APRIL (page 116)

Mental illness is one of society's last taboos. Unless students have witnessed its impact on a friend or family member, they are unlikely to know

as much about it as they do other forms of ill-health. This story shows the devastating effects of mental illness. Angie's life has been put on hold, and her friendships and her future threatened. At the same time, Noel's story succeeds in winning the reader's sympathy. The use of limited omniscient narration helps here—we are allowed to see clearly into the mind and heart of only one character, Angie herself, and she is revealed as likeable and entirely trustworthy.

Questions for Writing and Discussion

What did you think about mental illness before you read this story? How much did you know about it? How often do you hear it discussed?

What have you learned about mental illness by reading this story (if anything)?

What forms of mental illness do you know about? Where could you find more information about these?

What's the difference, if any, between depression and mental illness?

How has Angie's illness affected her life, her friendships, her future?

Though it isn't a very amusing topic, there are some funny moments in this story. What are they?

There are also some very sad moments. What are they, and which do you find the most sad?

Angie does something that might seem a little odd, after Hannah pees in the snow. Is this a symptom of her mental illness, or can you kind of understand it?

How does Angie's meeting with Jess go, overall—success or failure? Give your reasons.

What are some of the ethical issues in this story? Is Jess a good friend to Angie? Is Angie a good friend to Sam? Is Hannah a good member of staff?

Why is Angie so upset when she finds out the real reasons for Hannah's interest in her life?

Sam features quite largely in the story. What does he add to our understanding of mental illness, if anything?

Creative Writing Prompts

Write an excerpt from Angie's diary, in which she reflects on her meeting with Jess.

Write about a time when you were really down.

Have you ever witnessed crazy behavior? Write about it.

Were you ever really anxious about meeting a friend or someone else? Write about what happened.

It seems that Angie is embarrassed about her friendship with Sam. Were you ever embarrassed this way, to introduce one friend to another friend, or a friend to your parents, or maybe even to introduce your parents to your friends?

Write a letter from Angie to her classmates explaining what they should know about mental illness, and how they might best support her when she returns to school.

THE KIND OF LIGHT THAT SHINES ON TEXAS (page 139)

This story, set in 1966, earns its place in the collection for its clear and honest study of institutionalized racism, and its avoidance of didacticism in the process. Clint, one of three black students in a Texan school, is tragically desperate to fit in, to distance himself from the other two black students. There are several characters that students will love to hate: the hideous Mrs. Wickham, with her overt and covert racism; Gilcrest, who takes an unhealthy pleasure in pitting the class bully against a smaller black student as an entertaining spectacle; and Oakley, the highly convincing villain, with his ignorant and inaccurate

braggadocio. The story's ending should provide plenty to talk about.

Questions for Writing and Discussion

At one point, Mrs. Wickham says that she doesn't want the "nigra" children in her class to take offense. How racist is she? Look through the story carefully to find obvious and not so obvious examples.

Do you think Gilchrest was wise to pit Oakley and Clint against each other in an adult version of dodge-ball? Harmless fun, or a recipe for disaster?

Dodge-ball has actually been banned from the school curriculum in several states. Why do you think this is the case?

Is Clint a hero in this story? How does he behave well? Are some of his actions cowardly?

Oakley is a clearly a bully. Do you feel at all sorry for him?

This story is set in 1966. Have times changed as far as racism is concerned?

Why does Marvin attack Oakley at the end of the story? Who wins? Has justice been served?

Prompts for Creative Writing

Have you ever experienced, witnessed, or engaged in racist behavior? Write about it, changing names if you need to.

Have you ever known a class bully? Write about that person as objectively as you can.

Have you ever kept quiet when something unfair was happening, or was said? Write about it changing names if you need to.

Have you ever witnessed a teacher, a parent, or other adult in authority, behave unjustly? Write about it changing names if you need to.

Have you ever deliberately distanced yourself from another person, just to save your own skin?

Write an account which features a schoolyard fight.

Write a story in which help comes from an unexpected direction.

PLAYING THE GARDEN (page 155)

"I've been trying to figure things out for myself lately, watching people, deciding what makes them tick," says the unnamed narrator of this story. Certainly, his family demonstrates an interesting, but not unusual, dynamic when it comes to Kevin, their gay son. The father remains invested in his son's future as a "normal" hockey-playing male, while the mother protects him from the truth, or perhaps, protects Kevin from his father's wrath. Bearing in mind that the statistics suggest that one in ten students are gay, and that high schools can be hostile places for gay adolescents, this story has the potential to provide a good focus for discussion.

Questions for Writing and Discussion

This story is clearly about a college student who realizes that he is gay, but the word "gay" is never used. It's also a story narrated in the first person by a younger brother who is never named. Why these interesting omissions?

Kevin's father is determined to see his oldest son become a star hockey player. How much should parents support their children's activities and at what point does it become unhealthy for them to do so?

Why does Kathryn tell her mother that Kevin is gay, but not her father? Are mothers stronger than fathers, more emotional, better at keeping secrets, or do they tend, in your experience, just to be overprotective?

Kevin seems to change from a sporty heterosexual to an artsy homosexual very rapidly when he goes to college. Does this seem realistic?

What impact does Kevin's coming-out have on his family, and particularly, on his younger brother?

It's interesting that we never meet or even see Kevin. Does this make you feel more or less sympathetic towards him?

Creative Writing Prompts

Write a story about an important event, person, or issue that is never actually named.

Write a story from Kevin's point of view.

If you could change one really important thing about yourself, what would it be?

If you could "start again," how would you choose to be different?

Write a story about a secret.

What interests do you share with a parent, or other adult? What activities bring you closer together?

THE WHITE ROOM (page 166)

This story skates interestingly between genres—part narrative fiction, part parable, part fairy-tale. The mix creates a suitable vehicle both for its New England characters—part Abenaki, artistic, nature-loving, and creative—and the author's purpose, which, as I see it, was to craft an important teaching story. Marie's mother wisely encourages her daughter to overcome her fears rather than surrender to them, and as a result, Marie is able to tap into her own creativity, to make her own way in the world. The author suggests that Art can be difficult—it may even bite you on the thumb,—but if you hold onto it, the rewards are more than worth the pain.

Questions for Writing and Discussion

What do you think the squirrel represents? What does the White Room represent?

Marie is afraid of the White Room at the beginning of the story, and she doesn't want to paint or draw. Why not? What changes her mind?

How do the adults in this story support Marie's creativity? Is this different from the way most real adults behave or not?

"Marie's was a gift that could not be contained." Are some people more talented than others? What does it mean to be creative? Can anyone be an artist?

Why is nature so important in this story?

Who were the Abenaki? Is this important information to know about Octave and his family?

This story is a parable, or a teaching story, in that it has a clear message. What is that message and how is it conveyed? Do you agree with it?

This story is an example of "magical realism." It describes a world that seems like ours, but in which magical events occur. What signs are there, in this story, that it's not quite "real"?

Creative Writing Prompts

Think of something you really want to say, an important point or value you want to state. Write a parable to convey that point.

Write your own magical realism story, in which things start out ordinary, and then something surprising and magical occurs.

Do you have a creative urge, to draw, to paint, to make music? Write about the things that help and the things that hinder you in that process.

Write a story in which an animal becomes the protagonist's guide.

Write about your favorite aunt or uncle.

Write a story about a place that scared you.

Write about a time when a close relative really helped you out.

STORY COMPARISONS

The following comparisons might make useful assignments for writing and discussion.

Susan ("A Minstrel Visits," p. 3) and Eli ("Mr. Softee," p. 15) are both spoiled to some extent. Do you agree?

Ajay ("Surrounded by Sleep," p. 38) and Danny ("Laughing in the Dark," p. 61) have both lost a sibling. Compare the different ways they and their families deal with these losses.

Patricia Benavidez ("My *Tocaya*," p. 33), Shala ("Saint Chola," p. 81), and Clint ("The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas," p. 139) are all trying to hold their own in a white culture. Discuss their methods.

Susan ("A Minstrel Visits," p. 3), Marilyn ("Nobody Listens When I Talk," p. 76), and Timothy ("The Frontiers of Knowledge," p. 99) are all loners. Who has the best chance of breaking through this isolation? Justify your answer.

There are two notable bullies in this collection of stories: Charlene ("Mr. Softee," p. 15) and Oakely ("The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas," p. 139). Who's the worst, in your opinion?

Several of the characters in these stories take a stand, for themselves, or for justice: Susan ("A Minstrel Visits," p. 3), Patricia ("My *Tocaya*," p. 33), Shala ("Saint Chola," p. 81), Gigi ("Gypsy Girl," p. 110), Clint ("The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas," p. 139), and Marie ("The White Room," p. 166). Whom do you admire most?

Several characters find strong allies: Marie ("The White Room," p. 166), Danny ("Laughing in the Dark," p. 61), Susan ("A Minstrel Visits," p. 3), Shala ("Saint Chola," p. 81), and Clint ("The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas," p. 139). Who's the most unlikely ally? Who's the best ally?

Timothy ("The Frontiers of Knowledge," p. 99) and Eli ("Mr. Softee," p. 15) both act badly towards girls who were only trying to help. Are adolescent boys sometimes dumb this way? Some of the girls act badly too. Who are they?

Who is your favorite minor character?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

Claire Robson is the editor of *Outside Rules*. She has been a high school teacher, and has taught many writing workshops for teenagers and adults. She is the author of the memoir *Love in Good Time* (Michigan State University Press, 2003), as well as many poems and stories published in numerous journals, including *North American Review*, *Orchid*, and *So to Speak*. British-born, she lived for fifteen years in the U. S. before moving to Vancouver, British Columbia, where she now resides.

OTHER PERSEA ANTHOLOGIES FOR THE CLASSROOM

AMERICA STREET: *A Multicultural Anthology of Stories*
Edited By Anne Mazer

BIG CITY COOL: *Short Stories About Urban Youth*
Edited by M.Jerry Weiss and Helen S.Weiss

THE ELOQUENT ESSAY: *Classic and Creative Nonfiction*
Edited by John Loughery

THE ELOQUENT SHORT STORY: *Varieties of Narration*
Edited by Lucy Rosenthal

FIRST SIGHTINGS: *Contemporary Stories About American Youth*
Edited by John Loughery

FISHING FOR CHICKENS: *Short Stories About Rural Youth*
Edited by Jim Heynen

GOING WHERE I'M COMING FROM: *Memoirs of American Youth*
Edited by Anne Mazer

INTO THE WIDENING WORLD: *International Coming-of-Age Stories*
Edited by John Loughery

12 SHORT STORIES AND THEIR MAKING: *An Anthology with Interviews*
Edited by Paul Mandelbaum

STARTING WITH "I": *Personal Essays by Teenagers Youth Communication*
Edited by Andrea Estepa and Philip Kay

A WALK IN MY WORLD: *International Short Stories About Youth*
Edited by Anne Mazer

WORKING DAYS: *Short Stories About Teenagers at Work*
Edited by Anne Mazer

PERSEA BOOKS, 853 Broadway, NY, NY 10003

TEL: 212.260.9256 / EMAIL: info@perseabooks.com / www.perseabooks.com