

Exploring Ethics: The Role of Multicultural Narrative

by Patricia Goldblatt

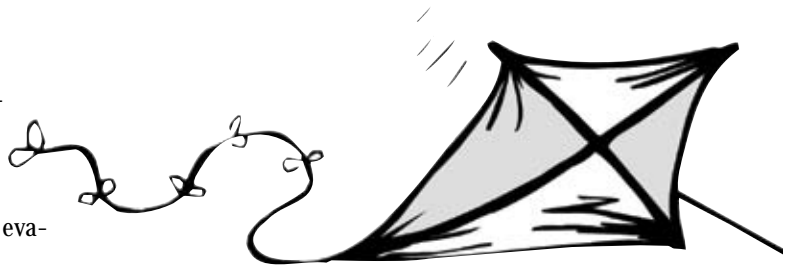
How can we teach broad ethical concepts without moralizing? How can we attract the attention of our students who are technology-wise and zine-savvy? How do we make meaningful connections in a world where connections suggest nanosecond coupling, pseudo-voices, hidden faces, and evanescent relationships?

Three recently published novels, Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, and Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness* address questions of morality and relationships from three different cultural perspectives. Set in Britain between the horror of the 9/11 attacks and the outbreak of the Iraq war, *Saturday* depicts upper-middle-class characters experiencing these outside events as reflections of their internal and interpersonal struggles. *The Kite Runner*, which takes place in Afghanistan before and during the Taliban regime, interweaves personal and political conflicts, but in a faraway region where the stakes are much higher. *A Complicated Kindness*, set in a Mennonite community in Canada, portrays a closed world and a young woman who pushes against its boundaries, as her mother and sister did before her.

The Craft of a Story

In a time of such impermanence and flux, stories still endure and capture attention. Narratives that describe the eccentric or mundane experiences of life have persisted from the origins of oral storytelling. For teachers, whose realm is still the classroom, certain fundamentals remain in spite of diverse cultural and historical traditions and even if that classroom is created by a computer. John Dewey highlighted the basis of education as relational, interactions between and among people, teacher and student, student and student. Mediating a text, encouraging negotiation for students themselves, is the aim for teachers. Interpretation is key for classes and individuals to unravel and apply what they read to their personal milieus, transferring ideas from text and screen to their individual lives. In a sense, a story is a scaffold, both for the writer's ideas and the reader's acceptance of that story as "truth."

Beyond the actual words that compose a story, structures also exist that are applicable to student understanding. For example, students may learn that an author has sifted words and actions



through a personal lens, organizing time to stretch or shrink; that events may be selected or omitted depending on the writer's purpose; that the language chosen may be open to interpretation, connotation, and denotation, depending on audiences who are well educated or new to a country. In terms of a story's character development, certain facets of personality might come to light while others are ignored. All elements are essential to the writer's craft of creating a story.

A writer recounts an experience, giving it a "reasonable order" (Gudmundsdottir, 2001), like art imitating the processes of life.

Therefore, selectivity by the reader is vital in focusing on themes or relevance to their own lives. Indeed, that is what humans do every day: looking, selecting, considering, making judgments, ignoring, ordering, and rearranging their thoughts and actions to conform to their intentions. Similar is the development of a story, as the writer arranges people, places, and perspectives for specific purposes.

And what sticks in readers' minds after the books are closed is their connectedness or emotional response to events described: the same heightened feelings they may associate with special times such as birthdays and funerals that separate those events from the tedium of repetitive daily activity (Bruner, 1986). Bruner and Lucariello (1989) write:

Not surprisingly many experienced teachers probably appropriate the narrative as a meaning making tool to organize the curriculum, not only to make sense for them as teachers, but to aid student learning and thereby linking themselves, the subject they are responsible for and their students to "cultures [sic] storehouse of knowledge and procedures."

As social beings, humans mediate complex social situations through their senses, minds, and interactions with others. Language, thought, and action are combined as individuals enter a story, read the words, reflect alone or with peers, and experience echoes or resonances to their own experiences. Collective belief systems may be given voice through the vocabulary in a text, but

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the reader may actively decide if she or he hears or rejects the voices that speak or do not speak a language to which she or he

can relate. For the teacher of texts, s/he may pose open-ended or focused questions that prompt exploration and analysis of the themes or ideas presented by the writer. Requiring readers to search beneath the surface for deeper meaning engenders critical thinking.

The teacher as coach or mentor should be aware of the many voices at play along with the heteroglossia of the text as mediated by the author and her/his characters. Emancipatory narratives (H. McEwan, 1997) can emerge for a reader when a text allows for “the subjectivity and the validation of conflict as a source through which . . . [readers] become strong and learn to speak their own experiences” (Bloom, 1996, 192). The teacher’s work promotes that attentive thinking, which does not reinforce the gendered, hierarchical, patriarchal structures of traditional and dominant cultures.

The text then becomes a touchstone or an inducement to think for oneself, provoking an openness or honesty to analyze what is said or dramatized and reflect on its meaning. Novels’ myths of the conquering hero, the fairy-tale princess, or happily-ever-after are sites now for challenges, compromises, and contemplation rather than canons of acceptance and acknowledgment that books speak the truth by describing realities of lived experience.

To examine literature in this way calls for a language of “caring” (Noddings, 1991)—care for the characters, the story, and the themes—and an ability to look beyond the surface. This examination avoids the perpetuation of stereotypes and simplistic polarity of good and evil. Rather than generalizing, students are asked to look at events and people in texts in terms of needs, contexts, and situation. Students are encouraged to show greater sensitivity to nuance, description, interactions, and innuendo, and what may be subtly suggested or even omitted. Lacunae and silences can be as evocative as monologues or lengthy conversations!

By intuiting the reasons for behavior or the thoughts behind words (or silences), readers’ understanding deepens. Often those reasons for actions have ethical or moral foundations. A discussion that focuses on moral reasoning then becomes a dialogue, an interchange between the values of justice (fairness and equality) and caring that involves interpersonal relationships, feelings, attitudes, and flexibility (see Noddings, 1991). Looking beyond the usual clichés and stereotypes that society has woven into stories and advertisements of beauty, wisdom, youth, and age, the concepts of acceptable and ostracized become an established teaching tool for perceiving the world and how one relates to those images.

It is for these reasons that books should be catalysts “to see a world in a grain of sand” (William Blake), and curricula should be chosen for the presence of strong, evocative stories that instigate conversations on serious issues, such as diversity. For Maxine Greene, it is the transformative power of imagination to break “through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness” (Greene, 1973, 47) that holds promise for re-education. Narratives provide the continuing chain that can expand perceptions. Narratives hold the potential to acknowledge truths inherent in the Human Condition, like compassion and caring. Responding and reflecting deeply and sensitively allows for initial shared responses to moral conundrums, and perhaps even new ways to confront and think about societal issues.

Stories pose the question, but readers once engaged own the responsibility of addressing the issues:

What is called the magic of the [writer] resides in his ability to transfer these values from one field of experience to another, to attach them to the objects of our common life and by imaginative insight make these objects poignant and momentous. (Dewey, 1934, 118)

John Dewey and Maxine Greene declare that “common objects” (Dewey) and “public spaces” (Greene) establish the locus for conversations on issues that provoke moral choices. An education that invites dialogues extends a way to think about and deal with troubling depictions. Dewey suggests that students possess four proclivities to deal with stories: social instinct (the wish to communicate with others); constructive impulse (to make things); instinct for investigation (to find out); and expressive impulse (to create) (Dewey, 1897/1922). These impulses are capable of moving the student through a social process of learning and becoming empowered to address issues that rankle and disturb.

For Greene and Dewey, dialogues broaden awareness so imagination and horizons expand, encouraging alternative choices. In narratives, students may discover inspiration and reason to act for societal improvement. Life experiences featured in stories function as sites for contemplation and spur a quest for improved lives. School, in providing opportunities for those insights, stimulates students’/readers’ consideration of the moral basis on which decisions can be made and changed and the possibility of renewed and improved actions that work toward a public Good.

Saturday

Written by Ian McEwan, *Saturday* presents the reader with Henry Perowne, a neurosurgeon in London. What is remarkable is the reality of Perowne’s thoughts. It is as if the reader has entered his mind as the character reacts immediately and honestly to a host of events. He is, above all, a thoughtful and reflective man. Unable to sleep, he goes to the window and witnesses a streak of burning light. He wonders, is it a meteorite, should he awaken his wife; is it a terrorist attack, has anyone been hurt; has there been an explosion, should he dash off to help? All the thoughts that occur instantaneously are recorded. From mundane activities of visiting his mother with Alzheimer’s to awaiting the arrival of his beloved daughter, Daisy, from France, to a random car collision en route to a squash game with a colleague to his professional life in which he compassionately considers surgical options for his patients, Henry is a person for whom the reader can care. As a role model of an ethical human, he worries about the state of the world, the morality of the coming war in Iraq, and the likelihood of an attack on London. His family life, he feels, is under threat.

Confronted by his children’s outrage at the invasion of Iraq and capture of Saddam Hussein, Henry suggests that it is better that any dictator be removed. Two rational sides of an argument, two points of view conflict and challenge the reader with the logic of both. In terms of caring human relationships, there is love and commitment demonstrated by his loving reactions to his wife, curled into his body as they sleep, and to his daughter, when he averts his eyes from her at an unexpected invasion in the living room. The reader is privy to familiar moments they too will rec-

ognize from their own lives. They, too, may test, and wonder how they would respond to events that interrupt daily life and liberty.

Set against Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach," *Saturday's* deeper levels of meaning can be discovered in the text's structure, symbolism, and story. Echoes of Arnold's "Ah love, let us be true/ To one another . . . as on a darkling plain" can be found in this novel. The world Arnold creates is a lonesome one, "melancholy . . . retreating . . . naked." It is the people in it who forge understanding and faith and resurrect meaning from senselessness. In this way, a world of chaos can be deconstructed and rebuilt based on caring relationships. The antidote to impending catastrophe occurs in the small things in *Saturday*: buying fish for a dinner party, relishing the shiny surface of a car, enjoying a meal with family. As in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, the ugliness and trauma of war and everyday life can be temporarily suspended in the tiny gestures of care and beauty that humans have power to control—if even for brief moments.

In the Classroom

Although Arnold's world is gloomy, the classroom can provide hope for the future. McEwan gives the reader a family, in particular, a wife and husband who demonstrate a core of concern and stability amid chaos. While conflicts emerge and dissipate in the novel, support and love are facets of real life. Road rage and a white lie are threads of a fabric that lead the reader back to the ultimate goodness and thoughtfulness of the protagonist, Henry, who is flesh, very human, and far from divine or a heroic stereotype. That Perowne is a neurosurgeon also underlines the fact that acts of science may aid in alleviating pain. His approach, far from egotistical or aggressive, is a salve that ameliorates and heals. McEwan's novel demonstrates the virtues of forgiveness, familial love, and decency.

In discussing the images, the themes, the variety of characters set in the post-9/11 world, students may find a gap for themselves, where they fit, acknowledging familiar events as they unfold in their own lifetime. Instances of care, compassion, integrity, and responsibility, not superhuman prowess or unbelievable acts, provide models to emulate and paths of reason.

Invasion is a recurrent theme in the novel: street-violence invading middle-class domesticity along with a protest march against the invasion of Iraq. As well, Henry invades the bodies of his patients with scalpels, seeking to cure their diseases. As in all cases, the results may or may not be successful, and invasions are topics of paradox as presented in this novel. With random acts of senseless shootings everywhere, and the need for doctors to investigate disease, the dual sense of invasion must be considered.

Henry is not a person who lives in stories. His faith is in reason, not fantasy. Ironically, both of his children have pursued the arts, poetry, and music. Henry is proud and supportive of their achievements, even a bit surprised at their prowess. He says, "This notion of Daisy's, that people can't 'live' without stories, is simply not true." Yet it is in stories that we grow closer to Henry's humanity, as he recalls his mother's expertise as a swimmer and receives cheers from his classmates for her efforts; in his recounting of the poetry battle between Daisy and his father-in-law that disrupts their former close relationship; in his remembering how he met

his wife through surgical intervention. Henry is living proof that our lives are composed of stories—narratives big, small, tender, and terrible that clothe and create who we are.

The Kite Runner

While *Saturday* introduces the reader to known and troubling events in the West, Khaled Hosseini reveals Afghanistan, a world far and foreign to many readers. The story also centers on relationships, but focuses primarily on Amir, a wealthy son and a Sufi, and his loving servant, Hassan, a harelipped Hazara boy. Amir cannot understand the compassion and concern that is heaped on Hassan by his (Amir's) father, Baba. Often Amir mourns his mother's absence, "a smiling princess in white," for he is more like her, and less like his sporty, strong, party-giving, bearlike father. However, Amir's ability to fly kites and win at this sport has aroused his father's admiration. Ironically, Amir's ultimate success at kite flying is compromised when he betrays Hassan, who runs to retrieve the prizewinning kite.

This day of recrimination will shape and haunt the rest of Amir's life. Many years later, after finding success and love in America, Amir will be drawn back to Afghanistan and confront the Taliban. He will return to his father's old house in Wazir Akbar Khan and attempt to undo past mistakes, seeking redemption and peace.

In the Classroom

There are many human stories of relevance for young people in this book. Although considered by some as a coming-of-age narrative, *The Kite Runner* excites emotions, thoughts, and feelings in readers of diverse ages and backgrounds. In terms of exposing inequities and schisms, the novel portrays Afghanistan before and after the reign of the Taliban. Descriptions of hangings in the soccer fields, abject poverty, deprivations, and gross assaults on human rights, along with dangerous, urgent needs to escape a pernicious government that deprives its own people of freedom disturb the reader's consciousness.

Yet even before the oppression of the Taliban, there are discernible differences between Amir and Hassan, master and servant, Sufi and Hazara, healthy and scarred, forged by religious intolerance that insinuates growing conflicts: themes of diversity abound in differences of class, religion, freedoms. These shades of gray will darken into black horrors as the Taliban takes power and hypocrisy, perversion, and cruelty destroy both humans and their country. It is a terrible tale, a pathetic fallacy that entrenches the suffering of innocent people and Afghanistan's natural, cultural, and societal resources. Not unique to Afghanistan, abrogation of rights is sadly a theme for our times: a source and resource for comparative studies where social justice has been abrogated and denied.

Although large-scale global suffering is made visible in Hosseini's descriptions, it is the small, painful moments that bring us closer to the victims—both Amir and Hassan. As children, their innocence is torn from them. They play their parts in a societal caste system that maintains the status quo; that one is born to suffer does not remove the reader's empathy, sorrow, pain, or outrage at the events that occur. Amir's desire for his father's approval and

love is palpable and terrible. His cruelty to the loving Hassan is evidence of his need for approval. As children, Amir and Hassan are fragile and helpless, their victimization in an inclement system unthinkable.

Hosseini's writing is so powerful that readers will be caught up in his stories of invasion, intrigue, friendship, rivalry, adventure, and escape. An educative experience is part of a chain that increases capacity for more experience or, "knowledge of something else" (Dewey, 1938, 122), whether that be deeper understanding of social, cultural or moral ramifications. With so many students fleeing or arriving from various cultures, teachers' empathy and understanding of why or why not a student/reader chooses to share personal stories or make connections to one's own life is important in working with classes.

When I taught Postcolonial Literature to senior classes, I used a simple writing assignment to initiate our study. I asked the students to consider how they were similar to or different from their ancestors. They were encouraged to interview grandparents, relatives, or even their parents; write letters; and follow up on those off-hand comments, such as "Oh, you're just like your Aunt Fanny."

These conversations began to unravel family stories that helped the students understand their connections and histories. I recall one young woman who suddenly could align her earth-saving ways with her German grandmother's need to be frugal in recycling materials; the grandmother's reasons resided in wartime deprivation, rationing goods, and loss of family property. Never before explained to my young student, the interchange resulted in sudden insight and reason behind Agnes's perception that her grandmother was stingy. Agnes could see her own frugality as

had lived out my memories on the pages of *The Kite Runner*, and now I found myself living out his. . . . But perhaps nowhere did fiction and life collide more dizzyingly than when I found my father's old house in Wazir Akbar Khan, the house where I grew up, just as Amir rediscovered his Baba's old house in that same neighborhood. It took me three days of searching—I had no address and the neighborhood had changed drastically—but I kept looking until I spotted the familiar arch over the gates. (Hosseini, 2003)

A Complicated Kindness

Of the three books discussed here, *A Complicated Kindness* by Miriam Toews might be most accessible to adolescent readers. Whereas the narrators of *Saturday* and *The Kite Runner* are adults, the storyteller in *A Complicated Kindness* is Nomi, a rebellious 16-year-old living in the Mennonite community of East Village, Manitoba. Her entire town is composed of Mennonites, except for the tourists who come to visit.

Speaking in a voice reminiscent of *Catcher in the Rye's* Holden Caulfield, Nomi, once a "curious, hopeful child," stops attending school, shaves her head, and wanders around in a marijuana-induced haze. She protests the collapse of her family, which she believes is due to the strict regime and rules of her tight Mennonite community, and she condemns the practice of shunning those who go against the dictates of her church. She mourns the disappearance of her sister, Tash ("she was so earmarked for damnation it wasn't even funny"), and her mother, Trudie, whose un-

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almost a continuation of her grandmother's resourcefulness in terrible times.

Issues abound for discussion. As inner and outer worlds collapse, Amir's journey to adulthood and his responsibilities to confront and undo past indiscretions drive the novel. Examining the craft and the writer often illuminates the text further. An author's insights into the reasons or motivations for a story can offer revelations for readers on the relationship between life and narrative, personal and public, craft, and causation. Hosseini writes,

In March 2003, with the novel proofread and in production, I found myself tracing my protagonist's footsteps, sitting in the window seat of an Ariana Airlines Boeing 727 headed toward Kabul. Like Amir, I had been gone a long time, almost 27 years, in fact; I was an 11-year-old, thin-framed seventh-grader when I left Afghanistan. I was going back now as a 38-year-old physician residing in Northern California, a writer, a husband and father of two. I gazed out the window, waiting for the plane to break through the clouds, waiting for Kabul to appear below me. . . . The old adage in writing is you write about what you've experienced. I was going to experience what I had already written about. . . . Soon, the line between Amir's memories and my own began to blur. Amir

happiness becomes unbearable after Tash leaves and she (Trudie) is excommunicated by her brother, Uncle Hans, referred to by Nomi as "The Mouth of Darkness." Yet, much like *Saturday* and *The Kite Runner*, the core of Toews's book is the need for a loving, secure family.

In the Classroom

There are many themes to explore in the novel. Confusion over systems of belief and the need to belong dominate Nomi's bitter words. As an adolescent, bereft from the loss of half of her family, her coping is seen in her passive but sarcastic language. When interrogated at school for not doing her homework, she reflects,

My town is so severe. And silent. It makes me crazy, the silence. I wonder if a person can die from it. The town office building has a giant filing cabinet full of death certificates that say choked to death on his own anger or suicided from unexpressed feelings of unhappiness. Silentium. People here just can't wait to die, it seems. It's the main event. The only reason we're not all snuffed at birth is because that would reduce our suffering by a lifetime. My guidance counsellor has suggested to me that I change my attitude about this place

and learn to love it. But I do, I told her. Oh, that's rich, she said. at's rich.

Her uncommunicative schoolteacher father, Ray, sells off their furniture bit by bit and is caught up in his own pain, barely able to drag himself to work each day. He reorganizes the city dump at night, creating an ersatz order of things lost, abandoned, or ruined; the symbolism is overt. Both Nomi and Ray coexist and attempt to cope, as people do after dramatic loss; however, "Together they live in a limbo of unanswered questions."

Nomi is more than just a rowdy teenager; her life is circumscribed by prohibitions against dancing, drinking, rock 'n' roll, recreational sex, swimming, makeup, jewelry, playing pool, going to cities, or even staying up past nine o'clock. Where will teenagers learn how to act out, test limits, grow, and develop when such strict boundaries exist? Perhaps what surprises most in this novel is the creation of Nomi, not as an accepting faithful follower, but as an ordinary and unique individual. Toews has provided the reader with a real person, not a religious icon, who exceeds limits. Interesting, too, are the portrayals of the other failed family members. The mother, in particular, sings in the choir, visits the sick, and helps the poor. Yet her difference marks her. As seen by her brother, Uncle Hans, she might have been wearing Hester Prynne's scarlet letter; and like Hester, her alienation puts her in the position to make acute observations about her community, particularly about its treatment of women. We, along with Nomi, ponder her leaving and the deep pain it causes.

Overtone of fundamentalism and its repercussions, as glimpsed similarly in *The Kite Runner*, are again topics for discussion. Other comparisons that focus on adolescent resentment, acting out, or coping are means for engaging students. Considering diverse cultures and coming-of-age novels are rich sources to initiate myriad examinations. Whether grouped by country, gender, theme, or conflict, these kinds of novels can trigger adolescent recognition, exploration, and contemplation of personal lives. When "another" narrates, sorting out the issues that confront a protagonist becomes an easier entry into problems with which the reader might be dealing. Additional benefits accrue when the contexts present new adventures.

For example, novels written by Julia Alvarez, such as *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, or Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, or Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, introduce traditions, restrictions, and concerns of women born into those cultures and their desires to adapt, conform, or rid themselves of cultural restrictions. Transitions that are necessary rites of passage are modeled by these protagonists, who endure, survive, and overcome, whether the challenges are physical, social, moral, or mythical. Interior monologues establish not only touchstones but also vicarious sites for self-study.

Conclusion

Emily Dickinson wrote, "There is no frigate like a book/. . . How frugal is the chariot/ that bears a human soul."

These simple, eloquent words, even in modern days of computers and Internet connections, still convey the magical properties

of a book. Composed, written, and shaped by humans who are varied as the colors of the rainbow and as diverse as the stars in the sky, books convey the emotions, thoughts, desires, and conundrums of sentient beings. There is humanity in the words that we recognize and adopt as our own. The power of books is multifold. The stories that they tell are forever. The choice for teachers is to find which narratives are appropriate and meaningful for their classes. The next task is to foster connections, moving from the text to the individuals in the classes, ensuring that assignments and evaluations are meaningful. The interplay, the back and forth, the fun, and the realization of young minds with evocative tales are the stuff of lifelong passion and learning. *Saturday*, *The Kite Runner*, and *A Complicated Kindness* are just three examples of books that teach diversity while acknowledging the ethical basis of our common humanity.

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