Second Reaction: Exploring Communities and Police Violence through Arts-Based Strategies in *All American Boys*


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*I wanted people to see me. See what happened. I wanted people to know that no matter the outcome, no matter if this day ended up as just another protest and Officer Galluzzo got off scot-free, that I would never be the same person. I looked different and I would be different, forever. (Reynolds and Kiely 303)*

*All American Boys*, written in tandem by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely and published in 2015, tells the all-too-familiar story of a young black man beaten by a police officer, which then highlights the divide between white and black experiences in one community. Reynolds wrote from the perspective of Rashad, the black teen who was beaten. Kiely wrote from the perspective of Quinn, the white teen who witnessed the brutality. The remarkable thing about this book is that it complicates the event rather than simply presenting two opposing sides.

The arts can often illuminate complications that words alone cannot. As an arts-in-education practitioner, I search for ways that arts strategies can help us empathize with characters, reflect on our own beliefs and actions, and examine relationships between power and oppression. Here, I present an applied theatre sequence that delves into themes and situations found in the book. Applied theatre uses drama-in-education strategies to explore issues related to social
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justice, so it is a natural technique to use with this novel. The entire sequence can be used after students finish reading the novel, or broken up and used throughout their readings.

**Strategy: Sculptor/Clay (Boal)**

Ask students to pair up. One is A and one is B. Have A “sculpt” B into a personal image of an all-American boy (without discussion). Then have all the As bring their sculptures into the center to form one complete image of all-American boys. One at a time, As make changes to the image until all of them are satisfied with it. Repeat the process with Bs as sculptors. After, ask students what they noticed about the sculptures, who was represented (or not), how they felt as sculptor and clay, and any parallels to the novel.

**Strategy: Proximity to the Problem (Weltsek-Medina)**

As a class, brainstorm the characters who are affected by Officer Galluzo’s attack on Rashad (specific characters as well as people in the community not named in the book). Ask each student to choose a character and create a social network entry for that character about the attack. Then put a chair in the middle of the room that represents the “problem” (do not tell them what the problem is). One at a time, have students introduce their character, and then stand or sit as close to, or far away from, the problem as their character is in relation to it. Have students justify their decision. (“I am . . . I am standing here because . . .”) After all students have situated themselves in proximity to the problem, ask questions about what they notice about different characters’ locations, the distance between characters, and any new insights into the novel.

**Strategy: Forum Theater (Boal)**

Although Officer Galluzo’s trial is not part of the book, students have enough information to hold their own trial. Have students volunteer to be characters in the trial: Paul, Rashad, judge, prosecution and defense attorneys, jury, and witnesses for both sides. Give them time to decide their character’s reactions to, and perspectives of, the events in the novel. Have these students create a basic outline or script of the trial before performing it. Not everyone in the class should have a role, however; those not initially in the scene will take the place of others. Explain that in forum theater, anyone in the audience can say “stop” in order to change what is happening or introduce new perspectives by taking the place of one of the actors. The trial must end, though, by finding Paul guilty or not guilty. Help students debrief after the verdict.

This is a powerful novel, ripe for dramatic depictions of events. However, some may fear using it in the classroom due to descriptions of violence and concerns that it is anti-police (it is anti-police brutality and profiling). Others may wonder why we need to hear from a white character, but I believe that is a strength of this novel as it provides an in-road for those who most need to read it. The book provides a “safer” means to talk about difficult subjects, such as implicit bias and racism, that students are aware of but may be nervous to discuss. Similarly,
over the course of the story, Quinn slowly becomes “woke,” realizes his white privilege, and decides that words alone do not make an empathetic ally—only action does. He is not, however, a “white savior.” This is Rashad’s story, and at the end, he adds his own name to the long list of victims of police brutality.

Works Cited


About the Author

Leslie Rowland is a PhD student in Literacy, Culture, and Language Education at Indiana University. A former high school English and drama teacher, her work focuses on critical literacy, drama in education, and social justice.