

Olentangy Local School District Literature Selection Review

Teacher:	Laura Swetnam, Chris Moore	School:	OLHS
Book Title:	The Unwinding	Genre:	Non-fiction/political science
Author:	George Packer	Pages:	430
Publisher:	Farrar, Straus, and Giroux	Copyright:	2013

In a brief rationale, please provide the following information relative to the book you would like added to the school's book collection for classroom use. You may attach additional pages as needed.

Book Summary and summary citation: (suggested resources include book flap summaries, review summaries from publisher, book vendors, etc.)
The 2013 National Book Award Winner
A New York Times Bestseller

American democracy is beset by a sense of crisis. Seismic shifts during a single generation have created a country of winners and losers, allowing unprecedented freedom while rending the social contract, driving the political system to the verge of breakdown, and setting citizens adrift to find new paths forward. In *The Unwinding*, George Packer tells the story of the past three decades by journeying through the lives of several Americans, including a son of tobacco farmers who becomes an evangelist for a new economy in the rural South, a factory worker in the Rust Belt trying to survive the collapse of her city, a Washington insider oscillating between political idealism and the lure of organized money, and a Silicon Valley billionaire who arrives at a radical vision of the future. Packer interweaves these stories with sketches of public figures, from Newt Gingrich to Jay-Z, and collages made from newspaper headlines, advertising slogans, and song lyrics. Packer's novelistic and kaleidoscopic history of the new America is his most ambitious work to date.

Provide an instructional rationale for the use of this title, including specific reference to the OLSD curriculum map(s): (Curriculum maps may be referenced by grade/course and indicator number or curriculum maps with indicators highlighted may be attached to this form)

In the AP Language and Composition blueprint, the reading informational texts standard includes the following points:

- "5. Analyze and interpret samples of good writing, identifying and explaining an author's use of rhetorical strategies and techniques in their own writing.
6. Critique the effectiveness and validity of arguments in text and whether they achieve the author's purpose.
7. Analyze the features and structures of informational text and critique them for effectiveness."

All of these tasks will be explicitly addressed through teaching and reading of *The Unwinding*, with a particular emphasis on rhetorical argument and how the author achieves his purpose.

Include two professional reviews of this title: (a suggested list of resources for identifying professional reviews is shown below. Reviews may be “cut and pasted” (with citation) into the form or printed reviews may be attached to the form)

Review #1

From NPR: (O'Malley, J.P. "American Voices On 'The Unwinding' Of America's Values." NPR. NPR, 21 May 2013. Web. 02 Feb. 2017.)

"Halfway through *The Unwinding*, George Packer — author of the highly praised *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (2005) — delineates how quickly political idealism can disappear when one becomes exposed to a world of easy money.

Jeff Connaughton, who served as a legal adviser in the Clinton White House and then cashed in, making millions as a Washington lobbyist, candidly describes how the professional classes changed in the 1980s: "When the benefits exploded on Wall Street and Washington, when it became possible to make millions of dollars in corporate booty ... when norms began to erode and disappear that had held people back at least from being garish about the way they made money, the culture changed." Connaughton is just one of many colorful characters Packer introduces us to in this book, which documents the drastic social, political and economic upheaval the United States has experienced over the past three decades. Reading almost as a collection of short stories, Packer's narrative — which owes a literary debt to both George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* and John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy — follows the personal triumphs and failures of various individuals from across the United States. Others we meet along the way include Dean Price, the son of a tobacco farmer and an evangelist for a green economy in the rural South; Tammy Thomas, a Rust Belt factory worker trying to survive the financial collapse of Youngstown, Ohio; and Peter Thiel, a Silicon Valley billionaire who questions the true worth of the technology economy.

At first glance it seems as if Packer is simply documenting the change that took place as the social order of the Roosevelt republic gradually collapsed. But as this book progresses, it becomes apparent that a very pertinent question is being asked: What common bond do those who are ostensibly held together by an idea of American democracy actually share? It's a question the author doesn't definitively answer, but in his quest to find out, a few home truths are discovered. Through his nuanced style of literary journalism, Packer portrays the complexities behind an argument most readers will be familiar with: The outsourcing of manufacturing jobs, the deregulation of the financial sector, and the shift to the right and the rise of free-market principles in both the Democratic and Republican parties has led the U.S. to its worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Packer carves out his thesis by letting his characters tell their own stories. The argument, in short, might read something like this: Over the past 30 years, American democratic values have been undermined by the powerful lure of unregulated capitalism.

For a journalist, this method of subtly pushing your polemic through other people's opinions can be a liberating experience. We meet, for example, Matt Weidner, a real estate lawyer fighting foreclosures in Tampa after the property crash of 2007, who opines that the economy is in the doldrums because "our parents were fat and lazy. ... Our grandparents would have never mortgaged everything and lived off credit." Weidner then asks one of his hard-pressed clients, Jack Hamersma, why all of the unemployed homeowners in foreclosure across the country don't come together and form a movement. Jack replies, "Imagine getting up every day and not having a purpose. You're not working; your self-worth goes down the toilet."

This degrading poverty is then poignantly contrasted with tales of colossal wealth, as the gap between the rich and the poor continues to rise. A friend of lobbyist Connaughton, whom he meets

on the Joe Biden presidential campaign, arrogantly declares, "This would sound strange to 99 percent of Americans, but \$400,000 a year doesn't go as far as it used to." For Peter Thiel, who amassed a fortune of \$1.5 billion from his investments in Facebook and PayPal, a seminal moment for American capitalism arrived in 1997, with the publication of a Silicon Valley novel called *The First \$20 Million Is Always the Hardest*. Thiel recalls how in the 1980s, a person was considered wealthy in the U.S. if he or she was a millionaire. In the culture of Silicon Valley now, getting rich means amassing billions.

Packer's strength as a storyteller lies in his ability to marshal a diverse range of voices from across the class divide, in a nation deeply divided by social status. But the scattered nature of the narrative — which starts in 1978 and ends in 2012 — means it inevitably lacks a sense of continuity and feels slightly long-winded for what it has to say. Moreover, the very brief biographical sketches Packer drops in every few chapters — of famous artists, celebrities and politicians, from Raymond Carver to Oprah Winfrey, Colin Powell and Newt Gingrich — ironically steers the book in a direction it otherwise tries to avoid, since Packer is clearly passing judgment on elements of American culture that have evolved since the late 1970s. When he tells us how gangster rap is eroding America's principles, his tone becomes slightly elitist.

Packer believes the seismic shift in political and economic life, which has left the social contract in tatters, will inevitably mean that members of an increasingly isolated American society will find themselves alone, having to "improvise their own destinies, plot their own stories of success and salvation." Despite *The Unwinding's* minor flaws, the book is a fitting reminder of the paradox of democracy in America, where ideas that are seemingly sacrosanct can be eroded and replaced within a generation.

Review #2

From Publisher's Weekly: (<http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-374-102418>)

Sometime in the late 1970s, the foundations of the American Century began to unravel. In this trenchant account, New Yorker writer Packer (*The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq*) charts the erosion of the social compact that kept the country stable and middle class. Readers experience three decades of change via the personal histories of an Ohio factory worker, a Washington political operative, a North Carolinian small businessman, and an Internet billionaire. Their lives follow the ups and downs of a changing country, where manufacturing jobs vanish, businesses thrive and fail, and political fortunes crest and recede. There's a pervasive sense that "nothing was locked down," thanks to the erosion of bank regulations that for 50 years averted the panics, and meltdowns that now push the middle class to the brink. Adroit homages to John Dos Passos's "newsreel" interludes provide astute quips and headlines. Brief biographies of seminal figures that shaped the current state of affairs offer the book's fiercest prose, such as in Packer's brutal takedown of Robert Rubin, secretary of the Treasury during some key 1990s financial deregulation that amplified the severity of the Great Recession of 2008. Packer has a keen eye for the big story in the small moment, writing about our fraying social fabric with talent that matches his dismay. Agent: Sarah Chalfant, the Wylie Agency. (May 21)

What alternate text(s) could also fulfill the instructional requirements?

Title: **Between the World and Me**

Author: **Ta-Nehisi Coates**

Title: **Strangers in Their Own Land**

Author: **Arlie Russell Hochschild**

Title: **Hillbilly Elegy**

Author: **J.D.Vance**

Title:

Author:

Title: ***Note: Alternate must include Coates and**

Author:

one of the others

Title:

Author:

Document any potentially controversial content:

Some language usage ("fuck," "shit," "damn," etc) and a few brief sexual or drug-related references -- all included as current events or as part of dialect of varying parts of America and never glorified.

Keeping in mind the age, academic level, and maturity of the intended reader, what is the suggested classroom use: (check all that apply)

Gifted/Accelerated Regular At Risk

GRADE LEVEL(S): 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

Reading level of this title (if applicable): AP

Date Submitted to Department Chair: 2/2/17

Suggested Professional Literary Review Sources:

School Library Journal

Horn Book

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)

Library Journal

Book Links

Publisher's Weekly

Booklist

Kirkus Review

Wilson Library Catalog

English Journal (and other resources of the National Council of Teachers of English)

The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)

Literature for Today's Young Adults