

Language Arts February eNews

The WCCHS Language Arts Division outlines its purpose in its mission statement: “the language arts division exists to develop an environment and a curriculum that encourages a lifelong appreciation of reading, writing, and speaking as universally attainable means of profoundly enriching one’s own life experiences.” The motto, “Find Your Voice” emphasizes the division’s commitment to student empowerment through text. This month Wildcat voice can be heard analyzing literature, writing poetry, and crafting arguments.

Wego Freshmen enrolled in English 1 and English 1 Honors recently read Ann Patchett’s short story “Why I Like Laurel,” as part of their investigation into Coming of Age age and inquiry into the question “Do I owe anything to anyone else?”

The narrative chronicles the experiences of two African American girls growing up in 1940s Tennessee and the aftermath of a tragedy that impacts both friends permanently. The plot and voices of the characters resonated with students, so English teachers **Jen Culbertson and Mary Fremeau** encouraged the students to literally question the author, who responded to the students’ inquiry and shared the impetus for the story.

Patchett told students, *"It was such a sad time in my life. I think there's some comfort in thinking up a situation sadder than your own. It seems impossible to say, 'Hey, I was a sad 25 year-old white girl of privilege writing a story about a lynching because I was so low,' but I have to think there's some truth in that."*

Patchett further responded to the 9th graders’ queries:

1. If you were to write a follow-up story about Delia and Laurel, would Laurel ever speak again?

I believe the story belongs more to you than to me, so the question is do YOU think she would ever speak again? Reading it now just as a reader (not as the person who wrote it in another lifetime) I’d think not.

2. Are the characters based on real people you knew? If so, who, and why did you choose them?

In a very weird way, yes. I had a friend named Diane, and Diane had a childhood friend named Laurel. Laurel was the biggest drag in the world, needy, complaining, depressed. When she would come to visit the little town where Diane and I were teaching I would always say, ‘Why are you still friends with this woman? Diane had had a really hard childhood, and awful childhood, and Laurel had been very loyal to her when they were kids, so now Diane was loyal in return. None of thing things that happened to the girls in the story were true but that feeling of profound loyalty came from knowing Diane and Laurel.

3. What was your motivation to write a story about racism/friendship in the 1940s? How hard was it to put yourself in the shoes of a 10-13 year old African American girl in the 1940s?

I wrote a whole series of stories based around connected African American families in Tennessee in the 1940’s. This story was one of about a dozen or so stories. I was going to publish them in a book (I had a book contract for them), but when I finished, the stories all sounded too much them same and I threw the whole project away. If you dig around I’m sure you could find more of them. It wasn’t hard to put myself in their shoes. I just imagined them. I was brave and fearless and unaware of issues of cultural appropriation back then. I wouldn’t write this story now.

4. Why is it so hard to find information on this amazing short story?

Once I wrote my first novel I stopped writing short stories. I wrote and published a lot of stories in my twenties but I was a better novelist than I ever was a short story writer. I just forgot about the stories, sort of the way you forget about your training wheels once you start riding a regular bike.

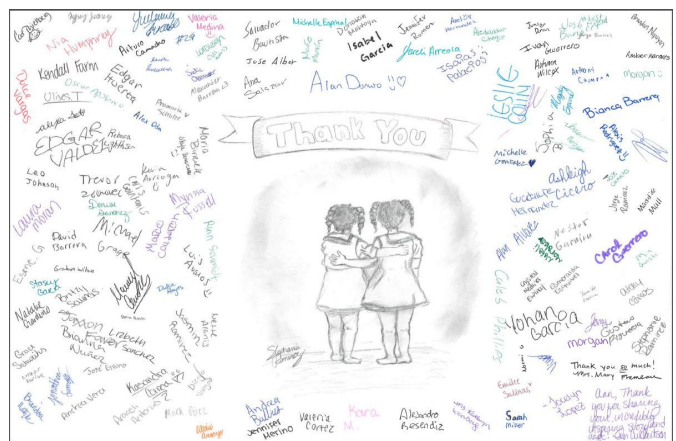
5. How long did it take for you to write this story?

I can't say for sure but I would guess two days. I think I wrote most of my stories in two or three days, then I'd polish them up.

6. When did you first hear the song "Strange Fruit" by Billie Holiday? Is there a connection with "Why I Like Laurel"?

I heard "Strange Fruit" as a child. I loved Billie Holiday. It's the saddest song in the world and, of course, is what the story is all about.

Wildcat students and faculty responded with consummate class, and forwarded this thank you note to Patchett.



"It was the rain that
took her voice away;
I told them, "washed it
out of her!"
They will not ask me about Nellie's Boy directly."
from "Why I Like Laurel" by Ann Patchett

eNews readers who are interested in experiencing "Why I Like Laurel" for themselves can access it [here](#) or search Ann Patchett's home page for information about her award winning novels [Bel Canto](#) and her 2016 release, [Commonwealth](#).

Those new to the allusion to the 1939 song "Strange Fruit" sung by Billie Holiday based upon the 1937 poem "Bitter Fruit" by teacher Abel Meeropol can listen to a recording of the song named one of *TIME Magazine's* Top 100. [here](#).



Other voices of note this month in the language arts division include sophomores enrolled in English 2 and English 2 Enriched, who have just completed a poetry unit inspired by Chicago's annual Louder Than a Bomb spoken word competition held each March and the ongoing efforts of Young Chicago Authors, a non-profit educational organization committed to inspiring the next generation of poets and spoken word artists. The documentary film *Louder Than a Bomb* featured on the OWN Network and available [here](#), captures the essence of slam poetry through the experiences of four former Chicago and suburban Chicago high schoolers who write and perform their own work.

In the spirit of LTab, Wego 10th graders spent the month of January studying spoken word poetry, a verbal art form characterized by word play, intonation, and voice. An excerpt from the poem "Mexican Dream" (see below) by English 2 Enriched student **Jesus Garcia** demonstrates the power of this vehicle and the talent of young Wildcats.

Sophomore satirist and student of E2E teacher **Jamie Cullen, Brandon Diep**, morphed model poem "How to Be a Person" by Shane Koyczan into "How to Be a Poet," which includes these imperatives: "One - Know that your poems have the power to change lives for the good, or bad. / Keep in mind that every poem you write, a kid will be forced to read and analyze it. / Ignore the fact that you are torturing kids and keep writing. Most importantly, inspire others to become torturers. (I mean poets.)" While **Josie Kotke** wrote about anxiety in "Anxiety," modeled after "Prayer Is" by B. Andy. Jose wrote, "Anxiety is the person who's waiting at the bus stop for a bus / That's not coming anytime soon, but once it does / It runs them over."

Seniors have also had the opportunity to find their voices in **Jill Nolan's** Writer's Workshop class. **Andrew Tortorello** of the Class of 2018 argues for "a world of swimming with the fishes in the depths of the ocean. Swimming with no scuba gear, breathing the air as if you were on land - Oh wait, nevermind. You are flying high in the skies, soaring amongst the birds. Wait, now you are in an erupting volcano. Feeling the heat from the molten magma as you descend into its depths. Hold up, now you are in space, or on top of a skyscraper, or in a mystical elven village, or a - whoa there, slow down with the imagination. All scenarios remain possible with the advancements of virtual reality. Virtual reality is not there yet, and it has quite the treacherous journey ahead; however, everything just described can be possible as virtuality reality travels further down the path - we just have to guide it down. The capabilities VR holds for the future enchant the mind with a plethora of possibilities. Immersing gamers in their own massive video game, combat simulations for armies, even creating a world in which paraplegics can walk once again. All science fiction. All within our grasp."

An excerpt from "The Mexican Dream" by Jesus Garcia

Fruit loops and unsymmetrical pigtails
I used to do everything by myself
I never cried for help, I never cried for help
I still don't cry for help
We live in two story homes
With organized front and back yards
That my dad's friend, Sergio,
Probably helped make.
Our daisies, tulips, and lilies planted by my fellow
Brown hand man.
But we are not supposed to live here.
Not in their Christian neighborhoods
Where for 8 years of my education I stood out
Just like a coffee stain - with lots of cream and plenty of sugar
- on a white tee shirt.
But I still call this place home even though I know
It has poured bleach on parts of my mindset.

Similarly future minded, Joshua Chica promotes the world of AI: "In a TED Talk, Pablos Holman told the audience that here in developed countries like the United States, we have quality of life figured out and automated, we have enough food and water to survive, we have shelter, but we don't have equality of life automated. I want to be a part of the collective who are able to bring about the solution to the problems: Artificial Intelligence. It must be properly controlled, have proper motivations, not inadvertently destroy humanity in its quest to complete its goal. To answer the question that John Locke had proposed three centuries ago, are humans material machines that are somehow able to think, or are we immaterial beings that are embedded into matter, would be a great feat to achieve. When humans are able to properly solve these problems of programming we would, at the very least, have solutions to problems of quality of life for all humans and the ability to put them into motion."

Now that you've heard these voices, go find yours!