

Memoir: "You Can't Keep Them Down"

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Objective: Students will study and critique memoir presented in various media: books, videos and Internet. Students will create their own memoir.

Purpose: A semester long upper level high school English course or elective.

Description: Students will read three memoirs with the common theme of rising above adversity: *Angela's Ashes* by Frank Mc Court, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou and *Over the Top of the World* by Will Steger.

Students will keep a journal, write a book review and post it on the web, contact the authors by e-mail or letter, view the movie adaptation of the memoir and compare it to the book and finally create their own memoir either written, through music, or as an i-Movie.

Grading:

- 15% 3 book reviews (one on each memoir). 1 book Review to be submitted on-line
- 20% Journal
- 15% 3 movie reviews (*Shackleton*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Angela's Ashes*). 1 review submitted on-line
- 5% Computer research and presentation.
- 5% Interview questions for 3 authors and correspondence with one author.
- 40% personal memoir as i-Movie or written

I. OVER THE TOP OF THE WORLD

Objective: Students will study a short memoir, keep a journal, critique a movie, and research on the Internet.

Time Period: 2-3 weeks.

I chose this book to begin the unit because it is short and has many pictures and it's interesting especially with Will Steger being a local Minnesotan. I thought it would be a good way to ease the students into the unit. There are also many Internet connections with Steger's trek as well as a British expedition in 2001. There are also many opportunities for cross-curricular teaching with geography, science and math. From Kirkus Reviews Steger (for adults, *Crossing Antarctica*, 1992) recounts how, in 1995, he set out with 2 women, 4 men, 33 dogs, and 2 tons of gear to cross the ice-covered Arctic Ocean in this real-life adventure story. Teachers of geography and earth science will want to grab this text, packed with full-color photos of the Arctic landscape, the dog sleds, and team members in their elaborate gear, performing the many tasks necessary for their daily existence in a sub-zero environment. Steger's voyage, told in journal form, is straightforward but dramatic: Adversity confronted the group early on, when a sled broke through the ice and nearly drowned a team of dogs. Subsequently, one of the seasoned explorers resigned, and the remaining members of the group were forced to reassign responsibilities, reduce the number of sleds, and accept a 300-mile airlift over unstable ice.

Steger's narrative shows that while the team charted their position with computers, communicated with classrooms around the world via a satellite uplink to the Internet, and wore clothing spun from space-age fiber, it was their physical stamina, knowledge of their dog teams, and their ability to work together that

ultimately led to their success. The whole project is inspiring, and readers will find that it's worthwhile to get acquainted with this band of intrepid and remarkable people. (Nonfiction. 8-12) — Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Journal: Your journal will be used throughout the class and checked every 6 weeks. Each entry should be approximately ½ - 1 full page. I will give you a journal suggestion, but if there were something you would like to write about, please do. Your journal is for your thoughts, reactions, questions etc... about the memoirs you are reading and watching. Your journal does not need to be written in a formal style, as an essay would be.

Motivator: Discuss memoirs that students have read or seen i.e. *8 Mile*, *Selena* or *Go Ask Alice*. Why are other people's lives interesting to us? Discuss explorations. What is left to explore? Why do people explore? Discuss Will Steger from Ely, Minnesota.

Activities:

Journal and discussion: Would you write a memoir to be published? why/why not? What about writing a memoir 10 years from now? Why do people write memoirs?

Read *Over the Top of the World*. While reading using active reading strategies: question, infer, predict, connect, visualize, use post-it notes to mark the strategy. You will use these markers later. (See worksheet and explanation of reading strategies).

Internet Activity: in groups of 1-4 find information on one of the following topics and present your findings to the class. I will have each topic written on a separate piece of paper and give one to each group. Use your favorite search engine. Share the website addresses in your presentation.

Explorers of the North Pole Raising sled dogs Climate, topography, geography of the North Pole * find a map Native peoples of the North Pole Planning a trek (to any location) History of the North Pole

Journal and discussion: Should you spare people's feelings when writing a memoir or should you be accurate? How important is the truth?

What personal connections did you make to the story? Have you ever gone on a quest? Have you ever given up like Ulrik Vedel?

Interview questions: Develop 10 interview questions for Will Steger or any other member of his team. Use the post-it notes you put in the book while reading. Try to think of questions that will not have a "yes" or "no" answer. E-mail the interview questions at www.polarhusky.com or www.internationalarcticproject.com. Share responses with class.

Finish reading *Over the Top*.

Journal and discuss: Did you enjoy the memoir? Explain. Would you recommend others read it? Explain.

Write a review of *Over the Top of the World*. Use the following format. You may submit this review on the Internet to www.amazon.com, www.scholastic.com or St. Paul Public Library web site Cyber Scrolls at www.stpaul.lib.mn.us. Make sure to include which website you use to post your review.

Journal and discuss: Would you make *Over the Top of the World* into a movie? Why/why not? Consider

commercial appeal, cast, setting, plot, narration, and emotions of the trekkers into film, would add anything, delete anything from the original text?

View two Shackleton movies: First view the nonfiction Omnimax version (description below) Shackleton's Antarctic adventure [videorecording] / a co-production of White Mountain Films and NOVA/WGBH Boston ; directed by George Butler ; produced by Susanne Simpson, Scott Swofford, and George Butler.

Shackleton's Antarctic adventure recounts the extraordinary true story of polar explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton's 1914-1916 British Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, which many consider "the greatest survival story of all time". This expedition has become a testament to heroism and human endurance, with all 28 men surviving nearly two years in the barren, frigid Antarctic when their ship, the *Endurance*, was caught in pack ice and eventually crushed. (summary from the library card catalog).

Next view the dramatized version of Shackleton's adventure. Kenneth Branagh, Lorcan Cranitch, Matt Day, Ken Drury, Embeth Davidtz, Rupert Frazer, Robert Hardy, Mark McGann, Kevin McNally. Credits Director of photography, Henry Braham ; editor, Peter Coulson ; music, Adrian Johnston ; costume designer, Shirley Russell ; production designer, Michael Howells. Note Originally produced for television broadcast in 2001. Audience MPAA rating: Not rated. Summary True story of Ernest Shackleton's Antarctic adventures. Bound for Antarctica in 1914, Shackleton's ship, the *Endurance*, was trapped in the pack ice of the Weddell Sea. Ten months later, the ship sank, stranding Shackleton and his crew of 27. Based on the diaries and first person accounts of expedition members, the film tells of their ordeal and their 800-mile journey in an open boat across the world's worst seas that made their rescue possible.

Review and Compare Shackleton movies: Choose three criteria on which to evaluate the videos: character development, setting, soundtrack, special effects, acting, costuming/makeup. Take notes on the criteria during the movie. Write your review (see review form). Submit movie review to www.amazon.com.

Journal and discussion: Why would anyone want to go on an arctic expedition? Would you?

Extra Credit:

- create a travel brochure for the North Pole
- Read *Winterdance* by Gary Paulsen and present oral or written book talk.
- Read *Call of the Wild*, *White Fang* or *To Build a Fire* by Jack London and present oral or written book talk.
- Record what the noise of breaking ice might sound like
- On the internet find out information about the International Arctic Project
- On the Internet find out what is Will Steger doing now?
- Review movie of *White Fang* or *Iron Will*

II. I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS

Time period: 6-8 weeks.

I chose this novel because Maya Angelou has such a poetic writing style and for the diversity of an African-American woman. Her story is also one of triumphing over adversity, which I believe is an important message for my students – some of which have difficult lives.

Motivator: Discuss Maya Angelou's importance as a contemporary author including her poem written for Bill Clinton's inauguration "On the Pulse of Morning". She also has her own line of Hallmark cards. Angelou is also included in the novel *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, which the students may be familiar with. Most importantly though she overcame abuse and discrimination to become a successful author.

Journal and discussion: In the beginning of the novel Maya says: "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult" Have you ever faced any type of discrimination? How did it feel? Explain. What else could be the "rust on the razor" of growing up right now in the 2000's?

Read the novel using active reading strategies. Keep in mind you will be contacting the author. Think of questions to ask her while reading.

Journal and discussion: How did friendship with Louise change Maya? Write about friends in your life that have influenced you and discuss whether the influence is bad or good.

Internet Activity: in groups of 1-4 find information on one of the following topics and present your findings to the class. I will have each topic written on a separate piece of paper and give one to each group. Use your favorite search engine. Share the website addresses in your presentation.

Stamps, Arkansas, poems by Maya Angelou racism in U.S. in 30's and 40's Joe Lewis other novels by Maya Angelou WWII Japanese internment camps

Journal and discussion: How does the mind help people deal with traumatic events? What do you think of Maya's reaction to her sexual abuse?

Interview questions: Develop 10 interview questions for Will Steger or any other member of his team. Use the post-it notes you put in the book while reading. Try to think of questions that will not have a "yes" or "no" answer. E-mail the interview questions at www.annonline.com.

Finish novel

Journal and discuss: How did Maya grow and change from the beginning of the memoir to the end? Is Angelou a reliable narrator? How might memory distort narrative?

Review novel focusing on tone and theme. Use the format from Over the Top of the World.

View movie *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Journal and discussion: Tone: Did the movie capture the tone of the novel? why/why not? Plot: Did the movie include events you feel are important? Was anything left out? Why might the director have done this? What did the movie do better than the novel? If you thought the movie missed something from the

novel, how would you improve it? **Character:** Was the casting appropriate to the personalities in the novel? Did the actors transmit the emotional impact of the novel? **Setting:** Was the setting as you pictured it? Did it have the impact on the characters evident in the novel?

Style: Was the writing of description captured in the cinematography of the movie?

Write a review of the movie: Choose two aspects discussed in your journal to focus on for your movie review. Submit review to www.amazon.com.

Extra Credit:

- travel brochure for Stamps, AK
- read and review other works by Maya Angelou
- look up reviews of the movie on-line and agree or disagree with the reviewer
- author study on Maya Angelou

III. *Angela's Ashes*

I chose *Angela's Ashes* because it is such an enjoyable book to read. Although Frank suffers unimaginable hardship in his life, the book is filled with humor. I think it's a wonderful message that no matter how bad things get, you can still laugh. This book does have some mature content so it is optional in the unit depending on time and students.

Motivator: Discuss ethnic stereotypes, including Irish (drinking, brawling, St. Patrick's Day, IRA). How do these generalizations start? are they true?

Journal and discussion: Can misery be funny? How? Why? Discuss examples in comedy: The Simpsons, Saturday Night Live, Monty Python. Bring clips to class to discuss.

Read the novel using active reading strategies. Keep in mind you will be contacting the author. Think of questions to ask her while reading.

Journal and discussion: How can Frank not be more bitter towards his father? How important or unimportant is your father in the forming of your character?

Internet Activity: in groups of 1-4 find information on one of the following topics and present your findings to the class. I will have each topic written on a separate piece of paper and give one to each group. Use your favorite search engine. Share the website addresses in your presentation.

Limerick, Ireland Irish immigration to U.S. Irish independence / Northern Ireland Conjunctivitis Cuchulain/Irish mythology Brooklyn during the Great Depression Catholic church

Read novel

Journal and discussion: Could Angela have done anything to help her family sooner? Why did she stay with her husband? Why do people get married and have children? Do you plan to do either or both of these things?

Read novel

Journal and discussion: What part does the Catholic Church play in Frank's life? Is religion positive or negative to Frank? Is religion a force in your own life?

Interview questions: Develop 10 interview questions for Will Steger or any other member of his team. Use the post-it notes you put in the book while reading. Try to think of questions that will not have a "yes" or "no" answer. E-mail the interview questions at www.annonline.com.

Journal and discussion: How does Frank keep going? Who/what helps him? What connection can you make between McCourt, Angelou, Shackleton and Steger?

Finish novel

Journal and discussion: Did you enjoy the novel? explain. Focus on humor.

Review novel focusing on humor. Use book review form.

View movie Descript 1 videocassette (146 min.) : sd., col. ; 1/2 in. System det VHS Dolby surround. Note Closed-captioned. Cast Emily Watson, Robert Carlyle, Joe Breen, Ciaran Owens, Michael Legge. Credits Director of photography, Michael Seresin; production designer, Geoffrey Kirkland; editor, Gerry Hambling; music, John Williams. Note Based on the book by Frank McCourt. Originally released as a motion picture in 1999. Features: Cast and crew interviews. Audience MPAA rating: R. Note For private home use only. Summary Frank McCourt's early life as a boy and young man in impoverished Ireland

Journal and discussion: Tone: Did the movie capture the tone of the novel? why/why not? Plot: Did the movie include events you feel are important? Was anything left out? Why might the director have done this? What did the movie do better than the novel? If you thought the movie missed something from the novel, how would you improve it? Character: Was the casting appropriate to the personalities in the novel? Did the actors transmit the emotional impact of the novel? Setting: Was the setting as you pictured it? Did it have the impact on the characters evident in the novel?

Style: Was the writing of description captured in the cinematography of the movie?

Write a review of the movie: Choose two aspects discussed in your journal to focus on for your movie review. Submit review to www.amazon.com.

Extra Credit:

- Present Irish music
- Oral/written report on Irish mythology
- Create a travel brochure for Limerick, Ireland
- Read *'Tis* and do a book talk
- Make an Irish flag
- Have an Irish tea

FINAL PROJECT

You will create your own personal memoir in one of the following forms:

iMovie: Write a rough draft and put it on a story board. Do the iMovie tutorial to familiarize yourself with the program. Shoot video, scan photos, find music etc. . . and create your memoir movie.

Music: Find songs that represent significant events in your life. Include written or oral narration about the significance of the songs. Burn a CD with your memoir medley.

Written:

Create a journal like Steger in *Over the Top of the World*

Write a poem with emotional impact like Maya Angelou.

Write your memoir using humor like Frank Mc Court in *Angela's Ashes*

Inspiration: All memoirs need to demonstrate some background work. You should use at least one of the following to help organize your memoir:

- Interview a family member or friend about you and their favorite memory of you.
- Find and include old photos of you and your family. Have the photo explained to you.
- Make a timeline of your life including good, bad and ugly events. Focus on growth and change throughout your life.