

## **The Power of Life Histories: Moving Readers to Greater Acts of Empathy Through Literature and Memoir**

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### **Abstract**

This paper argues that narratives, specifically literature and memoir, offer a way to build empathy and understanding by moving readers to deeper levels of text interpretation and critique. The paper examines a new literacy framework, Life Histories, that uses talk, collaboration, writing, and performance to understand the complex relationships between character and cultural contexts, an understanding that leads to empathy. Life Histories are explored in three very different contexts: an international workshop in Guatemala, a fifth grade in Westminster, Maryland, and a literacy course at Rowan University. Qualitative naturalistic research is used to explore the ways that Life Histories worked in these three sites and can lead to greater empathy in readers. Qualitative data include student surveys, blogs, online postings, and transcripts from discussions, videotaped performances and life history scripts. This study argues for the power of talk about texts, collaborative writing, and performance to gain a deeper understanding of self and a deeper empathy for others.

"The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows."

-Sydney J. Harris

### **Introduction**

Although multiple interpretations of Harris' words abound, this paper argues that his quote aptly addresses dilemmas faced by literacy professors. How indeed might scholars and teachers use narrative, both literature and memoir as a way to "turn mirrors into windows?"

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. (Bishop 1990, ix)

Might not literature and narrative texts be seen as the perfect vehicle through which readers can explore the lives of others, informed by understanding of self? If the reader does no more than see himself reflected in the novel or short story, how can he fully enter authors' text worlds to understand others' perspectives? Understanding character solely through the reader's lens narrows and limits the possibilities of literature. This paper offers new ways to teach literature so that a reader can learn to look beyond himself to the realities of others. Literature and memoir become the reader's window into the broader human experience rather than a mere reflection of his own.

If one imagines for a moment real lives and real ways of making meaning of the world, the Life Histories of people offer valuable insights. They make meaning and help us to better understand the world through narrative and dialogue (Bruffee 1999; Rossiter 1999). Yet, this understanding must at first take on a personal cast, just as the seeing of one in a mirror. As people understand their lives in terms of stories, meaning making takes a narrative form (Bruner 1990), whereas shared meaning and authenticity are at the

heart of dialogue (Bakhtin 1986). People relate their own life narratives through the filter of their memories and interpretive meanings. Anthropologists James Peacock and Dorothy Holland (1993) propose using the term life-focused to refer to the history that primarily addresses the factual events and subjective experiences of the subject. How the subject tells the story reflects the meaning the subject has made of his or her life experiences; life stories are also always contextual. Thus Life Histories enlighten the storyteller as he narrates personal experiences that lay bare his being. But the question remains: How do narrators shed their own perspective to wear that of others? Or is it possible to do so?

Life Histories constitute one way that readers can understand the nuances of characters, both fictive and real, and bring them to life in ways that is interesting, meaningful and accessible. Linde (1993) argues that Life Histories also show the complex interactions between characters and cultural contexts. Life Histories feature culturally defined landmark events in a life (i.e. birth, death, discrimination), make some sort of evaluative point about how characters want to be seen by their readers, and do not stand alone but are linked in a web to other stories (Linde 1993). Nieto (1992) further supports the possibilities of Life Histories, arguing for the importance of multicultural literature so that all readers may see their lives reflected in texts. She suggests that Life Histories can change the way readers look at the world by offering new perspectives and promoting appreciation for those different than self. These new understandings then give rise to critical inquiry and illuminate the human experience (Nieto 1992). Figure 1 presents the major characteristics of Life Histories:

<b>Life Histories</b>
Life History inquiry is about gaining insights into the broader human condition by coming to know and understand the experiences of characters in literature.
Life Histories allow readers to understand a situation, profession, condition, or institution through coming to know how characters walk, talk, and work within the particular worlds the author creates.
Life Histories enable readers to understand the relationship and the complex interaction of each character between life and context and life and self.

Figure 1. Source: Cole and Knowles 2001.

Life Histories, then, can be described as a framework for narrative analysis that involves reading, collaborative writing and performance in order to fully know characters in literature. Questioning and discussion enable understanding in several ways: (a) the actions of the characters within the particular worlds the author creates; (b) the relationship and the complex interaction of each character between life and context, self, and place and (c) the complexities of a character's day-to-day decision-making and the ultimate consequences that play out. Insights thus gained contribute to the broader collective experience of the piece of literature or novel. Readers work in small groups and revisit the book, documenting significant information about a selected character. They craft a script, create character performances and perform the collaboratively created character tableaux. Performed as a whole, depictions of character and events and cultural contexts weave together the story and individual characters' places in it.

Yet, there remains a caveat about which researchers must be mindful. How the subject tells the story reflects the meaning the subject has made of his or her life experiences; life stories are also always

contextual. In this sense, it becomes critical to use textual evidence as well as background knowledge to build the Life Histories of others. And the question remains: How does a reader understand empathy and how does he fully arrive at feelings of empathy? How does he create an authentic representation of other?

Peter Goldie in *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* explains empathy in this way: “Empathizing with another person is an essentially simulationist approach, and involves *imagining the experience of a narrative* from that other person’s point of view” (2003,178, emphasis original). Later, Goldie clarifies what he means by “a narrative:” it is “the thoughts, feelings, and emotions” of another (195). He then proposes three requirements for empathy that allow one to distinguish it from related emotions such as sympathy or affective feelings. He describes these three requirements:

First, it is necessary for empathy that the reader be aware of the other as a centre of consciousness distinct from himself. Secondly, it is necessary for empathy that the other should be someone of whom the reader has a substantial characterization. Thirdly, it is necessary that the reader have a grasp of the narrative which he can imaginatively enact, with the other as narrator” (Goldie 195; quoted in Matravers 19).

For Goldie, empathy is a highly complex, largely intentional process that involves one person’s imaginative conceptualization of another’s affective or cognitive states. Yet when applied to literature and memoir, it becomes a double-edged sword.

In *Narrative Empathy* (2013), Suzanne Keen proposes a theory of narrative empathy, which is defined as “the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another’s situation and condition.” She argues that the private experience of reading—the generation of what she calls narrative empathy—makes people more altruistic in everyday life. Yet, she acknowledges that there is little evidence that reading literature has such effects. In her book *Empathy and the Novel* (2010), she reviewed available research in psychology, cognitive science, and neuroscience, as well as studies of reading practices, and found no significant studies to support her claim.

Countering Keen’s theory of narrative empathy, others critically scrutinize the idea of an empathy-altruism hypothesis, which holds that novel reading can indeed elicit empathy and ultimately encourage social action and good world citizenship. Like Keen, they argue that there exists no evidence to support such a claim.

Despite this lack of evidence, our research argues that literature does have the power to elicit true empathy. And, more importantly we believe that empathy must precede any type of social change. We agree with Fassler (2015) who asserts: “If you would like to change the situation now, go out into the street. Literature, to me, is about a more important change: It changes our vision, our understanding, the way we see. And people who are changed by literature, in turn, will be more capable to change the situation.”

We embrace Keen’s theory of narrative empathy and argue that narratives, specifically literature and memoir, offer a way to build empathy and understanding by opening new possibilities to move readers to deeper levels of text interpretation and critique. We maintain that Life histories can, in fact, move readers beyond the printed page to ultimate social action. We argue that using a critical lens to drive textual interpretation catalyzes the true power of literature and memoir - to lay bare the complexities and intersections of individuals and society.

## **The Becoming of Life Histories**

For Madden, the idea of examining the possibilities of Life Histories began in 2002 after meeting high school teacher Jim Bodeen who had conducted research with Hispanic youth in the state of Washington. In an effort to validate the Latino cultures of their families, high school students interviewed family members and created testimonios from their interviews. These testimonios told true stories of struggle and perseverance experienced as new immigrants. Like Life Histories crafted from true-life events, testimonios offered people a way to embrace their cultures with pride and a platform through which to share their stories. And in the telling, sometimes performing, of these testimonios, audiences began to more fully understand what it means to seek acceptance if culturally and linguistically different. Madden and a colleague, Susan Browne, continued to explore the possibilities of Life Histories crafted from literature and memoir. They conducted research in literacy courses for undergraduate and graduate university students, eventually moving to a middle school study of eighth graders. Across all of these contexts, Life Histories proved a strong catalyst to evoke emotion, compassionate understanding and acknowledgement of difference and its challenges.

Over time, the idea of empathy emerged. Could these Life Histories actually move readers to true empathy? Intrigued, Madden and Lee then asked: What might happen if readers were exposed to literature and narrative? If, instead of actual life stories, readers learned empathy through literature and narrative memoirs? As described and charted in a previous section of this paper, Life Histories took on new meaning. Moving beyond telling of life events, the argument and eventual new research looked at the possibilities of dancing with texts or fully interacting with texts through talk, writing and performing. Could this new form of life history elicit empathy in the same way that true stories had done in Bodeen's students' testimonios?

## **Three Contexts: Learning from Life Histories Evolves**

The Life Histories contexts discussed in this paper include a teacher symposium in Guatemala City, Guatemala, a fifth grade classroom in Westminster, Maryland, USA, and a university classroom in Glassboro, New Jersey, USA. Qualitative data include weblogs, student scripts, and interviews from three settings. The first setting in Guatemala City, Guatemala studies Life Histories created from the novel by Ann Cameron, *El Lugar Mas Bonita en la Tierra* by graduate students from Rowan University. Guatemalan teachers then experimented with Life Histories, writing and presenting performances from the novel *Seedfolks* by Paul Fleischman. The second research setting involves 24 fifth graders in Westminster, a small town in western Maryland, who examine the power of the performative (Life Histories) in authenticating and understanding children's Holocaust literature. The third context describes the work of 17 Rowan University pre-service elementary teachers who analyze the impact of the performative on understanding poverty and discrimination in Francisco Jiménez's memoir of his migrant childhood in *The Circuit*.

### *Guatemala: Teachers Embrace Life Histories*

In Guatemala, an oral culture where much teaching about literature comes from teacher stories and read alouds, Life Histories took on a different meaning. Consideration of the challenges that teachers face in schools changed the nature of crafting Life Histories.

Illiteracy is a critical problem in Guatemala, where 77% of the population do not attend school beyond sixth grade. Three realities contribute to this statistic: 1) there is limited access to middle and high schools for many students, particularly poor children in rural areas; 2) public schooling is not free; students must

buy their own books/supplies and uniforms; and 3) teacher training is at best minimal--elementary school teachers need only a high school diploma and there are few baccalaureate teacher training programs to train middle and high school teachers. Consequently, large numbers of people in Guatemala cannot read or write. The Republica de Guatemala Instituto Nacional de Estadistica Censos Nacionales XI de Poblacion y VI de Habitacion 2002 reported the following: Education, public and private, is paid for by individual families. The only difference between public and private is the level of cost. Public education costs less, but oftentimes it is too much for the average family and the children are not able to study. Fact: 67% of all Guatemalan children between 7-14 years old do not attend school. This is the reality of schooling in Guatemala.

In 2011, we traveled to Guatemala City, Guatemala to present at the International Literacy Conference. This conference of over one thousand teachers, many who traveled hours, became the first context for the current paper. Here the study looked at the responses of Guatemalan teachers to Life Histories. What would be the implications of creating these life stories with young Guatemalans, many who had little to no access to books?

Prior to the conference presentation and workshop, one of us worked with Rowan undergraduate students to create Life Histories and plan to perform them in Guatemala. The students selected a short novel about a young boy in Guatemala called *The Most Beautiful Place in the World* by Ann Cameron. Following Life Histories processes, students read, talked, wrote collaboratively and produced final scripts. They practiced their performance, taking on an additional challenge – they performed in Spanish.

Conference participants, over 80 Guatemalan teachers in an international conference workshop, watched and applauded as Rowan students performed the Life Histories of characters in *The Most Beautiful Place in the World*. Few had read the novel, but the overwhelming response was a clear understanding of the story, the characters, and the interwoven connections between the characters and their world. Post performance conversation between the teacher participants and Rowan students suggested that there was indeed a place for Life Histories in Guatemalan schools.

Rowan students then guided teachers in crafting Life Histories of their own. The novel, *Seedfolks*, by Paul Fleischman was introduced to the teacher audience; then chapters representing individual characters were distributed to small groups. Teachers poured over their two- three page segment of *Seedfolks*; they talked, argued and finally scripted stories that captured the essence of every character in the novel.

But the most surprising result was found in the actual performance. Using whatever materials they could find, teachers created costumes and backdrops for their characters. They practiced in small groups, nodding yes, that's right, or no, that's not what he would say. The final part of the workshop was turned over to the Guatemalan teachers. And what unfolded were powerful performances telling the stories of the *Seedfolk* family. Teachers understood and welcomed the possibilities of Life Histories. Lingering questions included:

If we have no books, how can we create Life Histories?

Could teachers read novels aloud and class together collect quotes and excerpts that show character qualities?

Guatemalans are wonderful storytellers. Can Life Histories become a new way to tell stories?

Our students can relate to this character and this book's setting. How do we support them in reading other texts not about Guatemalans?

A spirited discussion ensued among the 80 participants, facilitated by our Rowan University students. Teachers embraced the ideas of reading, writing, and performing characters' lives in stories. They understood that such a deep analysis of texts could lead to fuller understanding of characters, their relationship with others, and the intersection of characters and the cultural contexts of the worlds in which they lived. Yet, what didn't clearly emerge is the development of empathy for the characters. The Life Histories were scripted and acted but neither script nor performance explicitly pushed actors and audience to deep feelings of empathy for the lives of the characters.

### *Maryland: A Literary Seminar*

Kathy Carhart's class was conducted as a Literary Seminar. Themes served as the overarching driving force; they dealt with important ideas that pushed students to think critically. Questions were posed to frame the unit. "What purpose does government serve?" became the essential question for this Life Histories study. Hitler, the rise of Nazi Germany, and the Holocaust served as the historical focus in both social studies and language arts classes.

Most fifth graders in the class knew little about the rise of Hitler or the state of Germany after World War I. The teacher, Mrs. Carhart, recognized this and opened the unit of study with multiple exposures to texts and digital media to familiarize students with the context of Nazi Germany and the discrimination of the Jewish people. Students immersed themselves in Hitler's Germany, reading primary and secondary documents as well as memoirs and novels about the holocaust and holocaust survivors. They listened to Holocaust survivor's stories and read true accounts authored by Hitler's youth, trying to understand both perspectives. But historical fiction was selected as the genre for literature circles. Life histories would be crafted from three novels: *Devil's Arithmetic* by Jane Yolen, *Jacob's Rescue* by Malka Drucker and Michael Halperin, and *Daniel's Story* by Carol Matas.

Concurrently, the social studies focus addressed the meaning of government. Students applied their new knowledge about government to the emergence of Hitler's Germany. For example, in the social studies unit on government, all readings and talk was driven by the question: What purpose does government serve? Students examined the lives of American leaders, particularly George Washington who warned that "Government is not reason; it is not eloquence. It is force. And force, like fire, is a dangerous servant and a fearful master." Guided by Ms. Carhart, they began to understand what Washington's words meant and what could happen when a government was controlled by one or a few men. They revisited the Declaration of Independence and how America's forefathers wanted their government to serve the people. The class discussed the idea of chaos and how Germany's government got that way. They looked at how Hitler gained power and compared that to our elected leaders today. They began to understand that Germany and Europe were in chaos because of the power of one man.

Each day during language arts period, various activities occurred. Some students worked independently, reading. Others discussed in book groups. Several bent over the computers, entering their thoughts about the plot and their character onto the class blog. Brief summaries were written as well as thoughts about characters with cited evidence from the text. Blog writers also included new or interesting ideas as well as their imagined author's message.

### *Beginnings: Reading and Talk*

The beginnings of Life Histories in this fifth grade class called on students to read and re-read, revisiting the text to fully understand the narrative as it unfolded. Students were asked to engage in deliberate interpretations of messages in the text. During re-reading students marked the text or used post-it notes to

identify what they knew and understood about their selected character. This note taking became critical when groups met in circles to talk about their novels. To help readers more fully understand the power of conversation in this classroom, we have included here a brief portrait of one group discussion.

*The Devil's Arithmetic: A Group Discussion*

Strains of classical music play softly in the background against the hushed murmur of fifth graders. Talk begins in a corner of the room where seven students sit cross-legged on pillows, *The Devil's Arithmetic* and clipboards on their laps. Holden is explaining how book club scheduling goes.

"It's really cool, guys," Holden begins. "See that big chart over there? We make our own reading assignments and schedule our book club meetings. We have to agree on how much to read, what to write about in our response journals and promise to come to meeting really prepared!"

Ms. Carhart gently interrupts, "Thanks Holden. We can talk more about that after our meeting today. Now, who's ready to begin?"

Ellis waves his hand and Ms. C nods.

"It's just plain stupid," he angrily protests. "It doesn't make any sense..."

Ms. C holds up her hand, "Stupid's a harsh word, Ellis. Why would you choose that?"

"Well," Ellis argues. "You're...you're just reliving the whole holocaust. Who would want to do that? Why would you watch a video to see it all again?"

"Umm, well I wouldn't call him stupid ..." Sarah holds out two fingers. Pushing her glasses back, she continues, "I'd just say he wasn't thinking at that time. Because what they said ... why he wanted to re-watch- it was just a bad time why would he relive and watch the whole video? I don't think anybody would want to remember that day and if you escaped you were lucky to ..."

"Hmmm," Ms. C replies, "What reaction did he have Ellis?"

"He was yelling at the TV and umm... I don't know, he was just mad..."

"Well, why was he yelling? If his action was stupid, why? Go back and look in chapter... we'll come back to you." Ms. C says reassuringly.

Jerry interrupts, " Was it just a day, Sarah?"

"Well it was a long time ... more than a day..."

Five students all wave two fingers, the signal to add further comments. Mrs. C points to Jayden.

"Well, kind of what we were saying. It says on page 9, well on page 8 then she reads from text:

...*Then she murmured, "Please forgive him, please. It was the war." Her voice was as soft as a prayer* (p. 8).

Several others signal that they have something to say. Ms. C nods to Casey, " I get it, I think. The grandfather is a survivor of the Holocaust and when he remembers, all of the anger he holds inside just comes out ... it's kind of a confusing way to begin a book, though. Why would the author do that?"

"Excellent thinking!" exclaims Ms. C. "Why indeed? You guys are now not only thinking about the story and the plot but you're questioning writing moves or decisions of the author. We've only read the first

chapter and it *is* really, really confusing. Take a few moments now, go over the your post-it notes and let's try to figure this out. Ask yourselves if this first chapter is a good way to begin the story and why or why not. ”

As Ms. C watches the group, she takes notes on her clipboard. Two girls whisper, sharing their post-it comments. Ellis frowns as he rereads the final words of the chapter. Then his face brightens as understanding dawns. “I get it, now I get it,” he bursts out. The group laughs and Ms. C smiles, “OK, Ellis. Go ahead.”

Ellis grins and explains, “Well, actually, it is a very cool way to begin a book! It's like, you know, the book where the kids go through a door into another world ....” “Oh, you mean *The Lion, Witch and the Wardrobe*?” Casey interrupts. “Yeah, yeah, just like that. I think the author ... Jane Yolen, right? Anyway I think she wants to start us in the present with someone who doesn't get the Holocaust at all and then take her back in time.”

“I think you're right?” Casey agrees. “And I think the author is pretty smart because I want to keep reading to find out where or what this new world is.” “Me too,” add a few others. “This is going to be a pretty awesome book!”

Casey looks at the clock and announces, “Uh Oh, our time's up. How much do we want to read before our next meeting .... “The whole book!” laughs Ellis. “Seriously,” Casey responds. And we have to write journal and blog responses too, so don't forget.”

Sarah suggests, “Well, Ms. Carhart said we have to be finished reading the book in three weeks. So let's split up the book that way. We meet every three days so we can read two chapters, post-it our thinking, write and be ready to talk.” The group agrees, replaces pillows in the reading corner and returns to their table.

“Nice work, today, everyone,” Ms. C comments. “I'll be curious to read and hear your thinking as we get deeper into the book ... and you've got a good plan of action. Keep asking those tough questions and bring them to group next time.”

Students engaged in mindful and deliberate interpretation of the characters using literal and inferential textual information. In this process of intensive reading, groups delved deeply into the literature. The emphasis was on the *lived experience*: connecting in personal ways with the story world and actually living in the author's constructed world. Blog writing and face to face discussions in book clubs, facilitated by Ms. Carhart, allowed these fifth graders to question and understand the realities of life in Nazi Germany. Students asked time and time again why the German people didn't rise up and save their fellow Germans, Jewish or not. They expressed outrage that the Holocaust could have ever happened. Ultimately, armed with a fuller understanding of the realities of Nazi Germany, students could then better relate to the characters in their historical fiction novels, building authentic Life Histories.

#### *Interpretation of Characters – Collaborative Writing*

After talk and discussion, students used notes and text markings and engaged in collaborative writing that gave voice to their character. Four characters per novel were selected as the major voices in the narrative; thus, four groups of three to four students “dug deep” in the text to build their character's life story. This layered process took place over time; groups synthesized the information they gathered. Working collaboratively, group members crafted a script - the life history - that would ultimately be performed.

During the writing process, groups received peer feedback from others who had read the same novel to ensure that the character was fully represented in the script.

### *Putting It All Together - The Performances*

The culturally channeled experience of dramatic performance deepened readers' literary understanding (Smagorinsky 2001). Using the script, one group member performed the monologue for the entire class. Through performance, actors and writers more fully realized what can happen when discrimination and racism are allowed to triumph over acceptance and tolerance. The excerpt that follows is written by a young fifth grader, Annie, who outperforms all of her 40 classmates. She truly becomes Rosa in *Daniel's Story* and mesmerizes the audience. She confidently takes the stage, red wig flaming and emotions overflowing with passion.

*Hope, hope is our enemy. We should give up hope, grab the guns, fight and die proudly! Do you want to die being tortured? Or die a hero for your people? How can you look around and see the people you love being murdered and tortured? Tell me that! You can't can you? Just imagine if we all got together and turned against the Nazis? Why can't people realize that the system only prolongs our suffering? We go to forced labor camps but in the end we will have helped the Germans. Look at all the uniforms and equipment we are making for the German war machine. We are killing ourselves unless we do something about it. Whether you follow the Germans instructions or not you are going to die! Don't think they will spare your life because they hate our kind.*

Annie slows and lowers her voice to a whisper.

*This war has darkened me, I became something I never wanted to be. Then Erica brought out the good in me, she changed me in a way I never knew I could be changed, she changed my heart, soul and mind. I use to only think of destruction and revenge but now I know you must choose love. Always choose love.*

Annie and her classmates who performed other fictitious characters from historical fiction novels all clearly understood the evil of the Holocaust and the Nazi regime. They "got" it! And they were angry. Angry at Hitler who murdered millions of Jews and at the German people who allowed it to happen. After the performances, conversation continued and questions erupted.

*Could this happen again?*

*Look at Iraq - how can we stop the killing of innocent people over there?*

*What can we do now to stop the murdering of innocents?*

These fifth graders and their performances began to demonstrate Keen's theory of narrative empathy. They expressed emotion and took on others' perspectives through reading, writing, viewing, hearing, and imagining narratives of another's situation and condition (Keen 2006).

### Rowan Literature Circles: Moving Towards Empathy

As we continued to engage students in Life Histories, we discovered a deeper connection between the act of writing Life Histories and developing empathy. Using Keen's theory of narrative empathy, we sought to understand how Life Histories might result in more empathetic reactions for the readers. We examined

this with Lee's undergraduate course, engaging seventeen-college freshman and pre-service teachers at Rowan University in the writing of Life Histories. As the students read *The Circuit*, a memoir by Francisco Jiménez on his childhood as a migrant worker in the United States, they were assigned one of the main characters to study as they read. Other activities included posting reading reactions on an online platform ([www.padlet.com](http://www.padlet.com)) and meeting in book clubs to discuss the book and their character.

### *Beginnings: Reading and Talk*

It was a Wednesday afternoon, and the students entered the classroom prepared to discuss the first half of *The Circuit*. As they entered, they noticed that they had a question to answer on Todaysmeet.com: "What is one issue or event in the book you most want to discuss in your groups today?" As students posted, their responses appeared as a discussion thread on the screen:

*Why are so many kids?*

*If they were struggling so badly, why would they continue to have children?*

*Why did his father kill his pet bird and why did no one say anything about it?*

*Since they moved to California to have a better living, why don't Mama and Papa encourage Francisco to learn English?*

The students set the agenda for their own discussion, using their posting on Todaysmeet.com as a springboard. As Lee circulated between groups, she noticed a common theme in the discussion: the role children play in the Jiménez family. It was clear that students were struggling to understand why the family continues to have children:

*My rational self would say, "Stop having children!" But they are so destitute.*

Lee stopped her students' discussion and asked students to consider the issue through multiple lenses such as religion, economics, and culture. The students brainstormed and listed aspects that might apply:

*Maybe it's because they are Catholic.*

*They do need everyone to help to make ends meet- even the kids. So it's economic.*

*I don't even think birth control, like the pill existed then in the 1940s.*

*Many religions see having children as a gift from God.... they seem very religious.*

As a transition into reading the next half of the text, students watched a short documentary on migrant children in the U.S. Students were surprised to hear that since 1938, it is legal for children as young as 12 to work in the fields with no protections or regulations. They were also surprised to hear that Jiménez' experiences in the 1940s still occur today. It was clear that students were beginning to question their assumptions about migrant life; however, deeper reading of the text and the characters' experiences was warranted.

After completing the memoir, students posted reactions on the padlet.com site. Analysis of the posts revealed the complexity of empathy. Anne Jurecic (2011) warns “Although these social emotions may seem authentically personal, we are warned, they can be expressions of power, appropriations of others’ experience, and falsely oversimplified understandings of social and cultural relationships” (11). Several students posted reactions that expressed this privilege and power:

*Reading this made me feel less sad about my life.... I feel very privileged.*

*Seeing the struggles that Panchito and his family went through made me realize that people do suffer out there and have it way worse than myself . . . and this breaks my heart. I have come to the conclusion that I have it better than most and that I am very blessed.*

*This book has truly given me a bigger picture to look at and understand how lucky I am.*

Other students’ reactions revealed more sympathetic emotion that is different from empathy:

*Although it is difficult to connect with Mama on a deep level because I am not a mother nor going through the tough times her family is, I can admire her positive attitude and energy that she seems to bring to her family. She does her best to remain happy so that her family can also be happy. I can't imagine how hard this must have been for her with the environment that her family was in, but it is remarkable that she tried to make the best out of every situation.*

*When I look at Mama in her perspective, it makes me feel very stressed out. I cannot imagine watching my family suffer and not be able to help. I also cannot imagine the living conditions and how they were treated. To a lot of people the family was looked at differently than white people.*

*This book has transformed my life, as I now see larger human experiences throughout the world. I sympathize for families that are going through struggles like Panchito and his family. This book has truly given me a bigger picture to look at and understand how lucky I am.*

However, a few students wrote reactions that Keen identifies as empathy, in that the reader feels “what we believe to be the emotions of others” (2006, 208):

*If I look at Mama's perspective in 2016, I would be overwhelmed at how little the family has and how they have to do so much to survive. She has so many children and is still able to work hard and not give up.*

*As a reader, I felt like I was going through the experience with the family. I felt as though I could feel their emotions. I felt happy during good parts and upset during the bad things.*

*Mama like any other mother would be upset that her child got into a fight, however this quotes shows how they care about their children’s respect towards others.*

*I am the type of person who puts others before me and will do whatever it takes to make people happy and comfortable. That’s how Mama was in the book. I see some of her values reflected in myself.*

*I related closely to Panchito and saw myself in him and both of my sisters in Roberto. Seeing how even though the hardest moments in life the two can connect and have a beautiful relationship helps me know that my sisters and I can pull through too. I was able to lose myself*

*in the whole family dynamic and not even compare it to traditional stereotypes as I normally would.*

*As a reader of The Circuit I was able to meet these characters, people I would probably never encounter in my life, and have a better understanding of myself in terms of an overall bigger picture. So I was seeing these migrant workers, their ups and downs, and not only understanding their lives but also understanding and appreciating mine.*

Although some students reacted to the text through sympathy and privilege, a few students were able to begin moving towards deeper levels of interpretation and thus, empathy.

### *Rehearsal for Writing Scripts*

After reading the entire memoir, as a rehearsal to writing life history scripts, students engaged in a Pinwheel Discussion, where an event from the book was posed, and four students took the role of a character to discuss it. Four chairs faced each other in the center, with chairs radiating out from the center chair like spokes on a wheel. The professor called out an event like “Coming to America” and the students discussed it from their character’s point of view. If they got stuck, they moved back and another student filled their spot.

In the beginning students played their character more as the character would talk today, using modern expressions (“I was so pissed off when you did that... it sucked.”). Conversations were stilted and students laughed at their own awkwardness. As the discussion continued, however, students took on more of their character’s voice. A pivotal moment came when the student playing Panchito responded to Papa killing his bird in a very dispassionate way. Another student, expressing exasperation, moved to the front, wanting to be heard. She begins:

*I was so pissed. Papa, why would you do that? I understand that you’re stressed, but no.... That’s my friend. The one thing I love, the one thing I wanted, gone. Taken away from me. Everything. No, you don’t understand how I feel. “Silent blood going down his silent beak.” How would you feel if your best friend was shot? Next time you feel stressed, don’t hurt my bird.*

The students sat stunned, taking in the raw emotion of her performance. Finally, one student remarked, “Yeah, but this is the 1940s. Children are seen, not heard. Would he say that to his dad?” Although the boy Panchito did not express these feelings in the memoir, the pinwheel discussion opened the door to the potential power of Life History: to give voice to that which cannot be said.

### *Starting to Script*

As one group discussed how to write their script, they observed that the oldest son, Roberto, does not say as much when compared to the other family members. The students decided that the most effective way to script Roberto’s life history was to place his actual words side by side with his internal monologue.

Across the room, another group collaborated on Mama’s script. “Mama seems like she stays the same throughout the book- always faithful and hardworking.” Another student disagreed, “But if you think about it, although she doesn’t have any schooling, she is the one who comforts Panchito when he loses his writings in the fire. She tells him as long as he has ideas, they cannot be lost.” The group talked further and decided to address the complexity of Mama’s feelings, especially the ones she cannot express openly to her family.

As they finalized their scripts, Lee challenged the students to keep pushing back on their own assumptions. Suzanne Keen (2006) argues that out of the many narrative techniques studied, narrated monologue has a strong effect on readers' responses to characters, what David Miall refers to as the "privileged information about a character's mind" (1988, 54). For instance, Francisco Jiménez wrote his memoir in the third person from Panchito's point of view, but Life Histories allowed these students to write, narrate, and perform an inner monologue for all characters.

### *Putting It All Together - The Performances*

In the end, students decided to write and perform their Life Histories using the voices of all the group members instead of having one student represent the group. The scripts that follow reflect deeper aspects of empathetic concern. Excerpts from Mama's Life History revealed the students' ability to empathize with Mama's broken dreams and tested faith:

*Faith is a strong power that I have always felt in which I never stray,  
But never before have I ever doubted my faith as much as I have today....*

*Life is not what we expected at all  
Picking cotton leaves our hands hard and raw  
The days are long and the nights are cold  
We've discovered the roads are made of dirt and not gold.*

In a final act of empathy, as the entire family is deported, the four students joined hands and walked off the stage:

*So we all hold hands, as we're taken away by the officers dressed in Green.*

In perhaps one of the most powerful examples of empathy, the writers of Papa's Life History focused each stanza of their poem on one of the four changes they identified for him: hopeful, hardworking, falling apart, and broken. During the Life History performance, each writer stepped out on stage and read from one of the four changes. Papa's life history began ominously:

*Oh say can you see the opportunity  
Streets lined with gold  
In America, no scrutiny,  
Our dreams we will hold.*

Through each of the four changes and sections of the life history, the writers examined the complexity of Papa's life, moving beyond sympathy for his situation into empathy for the demands placed on him as the head of his household, including the pressures Papa feels to create a better life:

*The plan to freedom is this:  
Cross la frontera  
And enter the land of great bliss.  
There will be a better life  
For my kids and wife.*

In the pivotal scene when Papa kills his son's bird, the students had difficulty empathizing with Papa since the death of the bird is so devastating for Panchito. The Life History, however, revealed the writers' ability to see the tragedy from Papa's point of view:

*I just want everyone to be happy and safe.  
Why is it so hard to keep my faith?  
That bird of Panchito's,  
Ay dios mio!  
I could only see red,  
Poor bird ends up dead.  
I'm trying, can't they see?  
Oh, what's becoming of me?*

*The squawking, the squawking,  
No one will stop talking,  
More cigarettes, more pills,  
More bellies unfilled.*

Papa's unfulfilled dreams for his family was a recurring theme throughout the Life History:

*Our hopes and our dreams,  
Fall apart at the seams,  
I can't help them, I'm failing,  
Can't work and I'm ailing.  
I give up, why bother,  
A poor excuse for a father.*

However, the writers also examined Papa's deep pride at this son's ability to continue his education despite the family's constant migration for work.

*I am broken, I am useless  
I am sorry I have failed us.  
I am beyond proud of you Roberto  
Education always pays off mi'jo  
Too bad Mama and I never got the chance  
To go to school, to learn and advance.*

In the end, the writers did not look for a tidy, easy ending to Papa's Life History. When the family is deported at the end of the memoir, there is no neat, happy ending to their story. The memoir ends there, leaving the reader with no closure. The writers also circled back to the theme of the broken American Dream:

*We've been deported, la migra has won  
A nightmare replaced our American dream  
I'm sorry I failed you.  
Oh Say I can't see....*

As students moved from initial postings about their character, to subsequent Padlet postings, group discussions, and finally to writing a script, their understandings of the character changed and their responses became more nuanced. In studying students' online dialogue, Ziegler, Paulus, and Woodside (2006) found four aspects of meaning making: noticing, reinterpreting, theorizing, and questioning assumptions. Students studying *The Circuit* questioned assumptions they had about the parents having more children and why it was difficult for the boys to learn English. In moving towards deeper understanding of their character, their responses also revealed the complexity of empathy.

But it also gave the students what Morson (2015) calls “novelistic empathy” -multiple ways of thinking and feeling that allows them to escape from the narrow image of self. As readers become practiced in *feeling with* a character and began to take on that character's perspective, this research suggests that creating and performing Life Histories might indeed lead to an increased empathy and understanding of others in the real world (Anderst 2015).

## Conclusion

Looking across Guatemala, Maryland and Rowan University, these Life Histories pushed readers to deeper interpretive understandings of texts. Rymes (2003) believes that, “What a story can become is contingent on when and where a narrative occurs, who is eliciting it, and who is listening” (385). This research argues that readers must not only recognize who is telling the story but also find ways to closely identify with the storyteller. The work with Life Histories suggests that talk about story, collaborative writing and dramatic performances create empathy and a deeper understanding of difference. When readers take on the persona of other, when they write the stories of other and perform their narratives, they develop an empathy that helps them to become one with that person or character. And in the doing, they move beyond simply seeing others through their own lens. Life Histories can foster empathy and understandings in ways that mere reading cannot. They awaken readers to the realities of lives different from their own and push readers to question assumptions about poverty, race, and other biases, often of which they are unaware. And in awakening an empathetic stance, Life Histories invites readers to examine their actions and to embrace the assumption that “every single human is equally worthy of respect and dignified treatment” (Hartman 2015, 75).

Finally, if educators want students to understand the potential as well as the problems of empathy, they should neither assume students will become attuned to others simply by reading nor insist that readerly empathy is always false. Instead, educators should emphasize that empathy is “multidimensional, flawed, fascinating, and inescapably—for better and worse—at the heart of social relationships” (Jurecic 2011, 12).

*Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?*

*-Henry David Thoreau*

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