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Next: Transgressive Literature

GONE FAR :

A JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES WITH ACHAK

Mary Curran-Hackett

�You have to make books come alive!� is what Pulitzer Prize-winning author Dave Eggers excitedly said to me over the phone one Sunday afternoon last February while discussing his latest book, *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng.* During an interview I was conducting for a *Writer's Digest* article, Dave and I had digressed into a conversation about how difficult it is to get students�even college students�to read. And I am not just talking about �reading� books, articles or the homework they are assigned�but really *reading,* and by that I mean connecting with, understanding and partaking in the experience that the writer has created for them. As instructors we may think that assigning a book, examining the students at the end of the quarter and discussing our *own* thoughts (or those of theorists' even more narrow and nuanced points of view) may seem enough. But the bottom line is that most students in literature classes don't give a damn about what their professors or any other theorist has to say�they're having enough trouble getting through the book�or the credit hours necessary to graduate.

Am I underestimating the students in our classrooms? I don't think so. According to a survey done by the National Center for Education Statistics, only 31 percent of college graduates can read a complex book and extrapolate from it (Romano A12). From my own anecdotal experience, I have not witnessed even such a *high* percentage of such accomplished readers. When I survey my own classes on the first day of every quarter, more than three-fourths of my students admit to having never read a novel in its entirety. Many students admit to never reading at all, and I have had several seniors confess that until they took my class they had never, not even once in college, read a book for their classes�literature included. But one could argue, �Thirty-one percent? Well those well-read students are in my highly esteemed school, so I don't have to worry about those other slackers.� Newsflash: Those remaining 69 percent who can't read and understand the content of the book, let alone the theories to extrapolate from, are most likely sitting in our classrooms, too. Now compound the problem of lack of understanding with the lack of reading on the whole. According the market research of Jenkin's Group, an independent book publishing and marketing company, less than 50 percent of adults, college students included, read at all. In fact, one-third of high school graduates never read another book the rest of their lives, and 42 percent of college students never read another book after graduating (Jackson). Yet, add to this yet another conundrum: Students in today's classroom don't feel like they even have to read what you're assigning them. It is, after all, one's right to do whatever one wants to do. Jean Twenge in her 2006 book *Generation Me* defines GenMe as those who were born from 1970 to 2000 and who, with their limitless amounts of self-esteem and can-do attitude, as well as prodding from their Boomer parents, have come to the college classroom with the notion that they can cherry-pick assignments, grades and even reading assignments, because in 2008, after all, there is always a movie, Web site or previously written paper, easily searched for on Google or Wikipedia, available as shortcuts. And if getting students to read, into the classroom and even paying attention isn't enough of a challenge, add to this the recent movement on college campuses: Students for Academic Freedom, who, with their founder David Horowitz, are on the prowl for any teacher with a seemingly liberal agenda. Present a book that might question the authority of or human cost of war�and suddenly we're treading some pretty shark-laden waters. Assigning Elie Wiesel, Ernest Hemingway or Tim O'Brien is now a downright hostile, unpatriotic, leftist attack on students' liberties. Add to this problem-sea of sorts the Stanley Fish notion that literature in the classroom's only purpose is to impart information and doesn't need to have an outside �purpose� or intent to change, enhance or otherwise persuade. To use Fish's own words: *Save the World on Your Own Time* will you! (Also the name of his latest book.) This is yet another argument for theorists to row over, while students are left utterly confounded, if not bored to tears, all the while asking, �So what is the point of reading�let alone, literature?� before they even bend back the binding of the overpriced, highlighted, worn-out paperback book.

In his book *Why Read?* Mark Edmundson nobly attempts to answer the question, �What is the point of literature?� and it is his answer that I feel most drawn to. He argues that "Literature is our best goad at new beginnings" (3). And he adds that the entire point of a liberal arts education and teaching literature in college is, he argues, "to give students an enhanced opportunity to decide how they should live their lives" (Edmundson 5). As instructors, professors, teachers, and even graduate students, we tend to think that everyone is equally interested in *our* grandiose ideas and theories as they relate to a certain book or topic. The reality is students (most of them) don't care about those (at least all of our most precious) ideas. But they do care, they care a lot, about themselves and how they should go about living their lives"both in and after college. I, as a teacher and a person, experienced my own *passage* and journey out of instructorhood into the lives of my students and their reading experience when I decided to teach a course that tracked the passages of individuals in and out of war"especially one person in particular, Sudanese civil war survivor, Valentino Achak Deng, whose nickname in his refugee camp was "Gone Far," because of the extreme distance he traveled to get to safety. Luckily for me, we all"my students and myself"had *gone far* too on our own journeys"and came out all the wiser because of it.

It was nothing less than serendipity that Dave Eggers agreed to be interviewed by me, and it was his and Valentino's generous and giving spirit that led to Valentino getting on a plane and coming to speak to my class for the journey to really take place. But before Val arrived to speak to my class and before the journey was complete, I have to back up and describe—albeit briefly—the structure of my class.

Armed with the knowledge that getting students—even college students (and even some English majors) to read is a feat within itself, I was going to wage a classroom war of my own. I was determined to make sure every single student in the class did three things:

1) Read all the texts completely—not skipping one word, sentence or paragraph.

2) Come to class engaged and prepared to fully extrapolate ideas, topics and concepts from the text. No one would pass if they did not read every book; therefore, they had to receive a passing grade on daily quizzes and journals and write a complete, in-depth and "extrapolated" ten-page paper on at least two texts. And finally:

3) They had to, without question, by the end of the course have formed some idea about their own life—as well as the global human condition—*vis-à-vis* literature.

I knew that in order to hook my students on reading, I had to find a topic on which every single student would undoubtedly have an opinion, and if not a preconceived notion, at least an iota of the impact of such a topic. Not surprisingly, in 2006 and 2007, for obvious reasons, I chose the topic of war. I had designed a curriculum that was in many ways inspired by one of my favorite Irish poets— William Butler Yeats, who in his poem "Under Ben Bulben" humbly suggests (in not so many words) that all of life, and therefore literature, can be summed up in two categories—that of "race and that of the soul." I knew the way to hook my students would be to link this notion of "literature" to their own lives—who we are, where we are from, where we are going—the stuff of which we are made throughout it all. I also wanted to point out that through literature we find that despite our race, our homeland, our disparate languages and religions—we all possess a soul, or more aptly, a spirit. Ironically, however, it's often our race, homeland, disparate languages and religions (or one could argue our "civilizations," as Samuel Huntington pointed out in his 1993 article and later book) that lead to war—something my students were quick to point out. Combining the notions of *homeland* and *soul,* I went to another famed Irish writer, James Joyce, who more or less remarked, "It is in the particular that we find the universal." In other words, as Mark Edmundson also points out in *Why Read?* , the most important thing reading literature imparts is the notion that when we read we can see, he says, "glimpses of the self—and too, perhaps of a world—that might be, a self and world that [we] can begin working to create" (5). Or more succinctly: *It is in the universal we also find the particular.* With these two notions to guide us as a sort of "roadmap" for the journey, my classes and I have embarked upon a passage of our own to examine the *particular* lives of people affected by war—our own included, but especially those in literature. I thought it would be a fitting topic for a world weary from war. Furthermore, I thought a good dose of perspective might come in handy these days (without, I hoped, it coming off too preachy). I also thought that the class could fly under the radar of the truly adamant Students for Academic Freedom, who might sniff even a whiff of antiwar b.s. in the classroom—or at least as they perceived it to be.

Teaching, we know, isn't done in a vacuum. I was mindful that while teaching this course students would be coming to it with their own baggage for the journey—fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, lovers, or even themselves, victims of our most current worldwide wars. I also knew that the students would come to the class with their own notions of war. In fact, I had several students who had been soldiers in war zones—from Vietnam, Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. Therefore, I knew the topic itself would be raw and ever-present on the minds of my students. I also had to be sure to offer a variety of war experiences and that I, a middle-class, white woman from Connecticut, had very little, if any (other than my own grandfather's and brother's service), experience with war. (I dreaded and prepared myself for the inevitable "What the hell does she know about war?") So I chose my texts cautiously and decided on an assortment of memoirs and novels, including a few from Tobias Wolff and Tim O'Brien, who honestly, but differently, conveyed the American soldier's modern war experience. I also wanted to incorporate unique and otherwise foreign war experiences. So I included stories with foreign perspectives as well as those from child soldiers (e.g., *Long Way Gone* , whose author Ishmael Beah also came and spoke to my students). I knew the stretch would be a fictional narrative of a nonfictional account of the life of a boy torn apart by war in a far-off land like Sudan. Nevertheless, I put *What is the What,* the now-controversial "true story that is called fiction," on the syllabus.

Although a seemingly straightforward survival and redemption tale of a young, innocent "Lost Boy" trapped in the Sudanese civil war, it revealed itself as truly the great American novel and served as a launching pad for numerous topics in the college classroom. Suddenly, the students who admitted on the first day of class that they had never read anything beyond a short story or poem or an article in *Cosmo* were asking me questions about postcolonial policy, the consequences of the imperial scramble for Africa, the post-World War II Berlin Conference, immigration, displacement, violence, survival, loss, racism, just to name a few. Extrapolate they did.

All the students read the book (the average grade on the post-read quiz was 100), and the conversation about the book and various topics within were nothing short of a miracle. But the true milestone in our journey came when Val came and spoke candidly to the class about his thousand-mile trip on foot from Marial Bai, Sudan, to the refugee camps of Ethiopia and later Kakuma, Kenya, and then his arrival and journey to the bright lights and big cities of the United States of America, where he was scheduled to land on, of all days, September 11, 2001. The students were captivated not just by his broken, though surprisingly eloquent English, but also by how the story they had just read was real. As Valentino spoke of his horrific days in Sudan in the mid-1980s—the slaughter of his village, the separation from his parents, the long journey across the deserts and jungles of Africa—barefoot, naked, hungry and alone, all the while running from murahaleen (Khartoum-sponsored militiamen on horseback), not to mention the illness, death and eventual burial with his own hands of his beloved and best childhood friends, suddenly the words spoken first by Valentino and later written by Dave Eggers, "It was a broken world, I knew then, that would allow a boy such as me to bury a boy such as William K.," hit a remarkably sharp and sensitive nerve (Eggers 200). Literature, it seemed, had after all, as Dave Eggers had hoped, had come startlingly and vividly *alive* . It stood before my students and spoke beyond the pages. The world that they had imagined in some far-off and remote part of the world had crashed into theirs. A journey of a thousand miles that united—of all things—souls.

With the students engaged, fully reading and experiencing the life of Valentino Achak Deng, and then meeting him and actually seeing him, they broke through those previously tall and intimidating barriers of academic pretensions and expectations, and suddenly they were at the point where they could move beyond Valentino the character in the book, to the person in real life, to what Valentino himself described as the "microcosm" of the devastation and destruction and loss that afflicted millions of his countrymen. In other words: *the particular had become universal*. The *self and the world* had merged. During my interview with him, Valentino said,

> It would be a disservice to the Sudanese who deserve to have their stories shared, even if it is in the

> form of my life as a microcosm of theirs. I believe the more people who know about what happened in Sudan in the 1980s and what's happening in Darfur, Sudan, now, the more I'll feel my life has a purpose.&#65533; I don't believe I'm among the Sudanese who have suffered the worst. I was separated from my family, and that was painful. I saw people dying, and I buried people and did a lot of things a child should not do. But compared to other people in my life, I know I was lucky. And that's the reason why it's good to tell what happened in my life. I'm happy this book is out and that people will read about it. But they shouldn't think about only me but the 2.5 million people who have died, the hundreds of people dying in Darfur now and others in the world exposed to many dangers. This will help us respond to world issues. (Curran-Hackett 69)

The story and journey of Valentino Achak Deng begs many questions, and in turn, affords many answers. Every college student who reads this book, ultimately, walks with Valentino through the deserts and jungles of Africa and weeps for him and his countrymen as they meet and face new and seemingly insurmountable challenges both in Africa and here in the U.S. Without exception, this piece of literature, above all others I have used in the classroom, has made the most profound impact on my students, prompting many to act within the community and the world. One student, so moved by the story, wept and held Valentino and exchanged e-mail information, pledging to use the knowledge he gained from reading the book to inform his own Muslim peers. Other students joined local and national organizations committed to ending the genocide in Darfur. Others simply reported that this was in fact the first book they &#65533;ever truly read&#65533; (a instructional feat within itself). Valentino's Facebook page is evidence alone of the connection he has made with college students throughout the U.S. and abroad. Thousands of his friends on Facebook &#65533;poke&#65533; or &#65533;high five&#65533; him every day and talk about how profoundly the book touched their lives. One Facebook group even exists called *Valentino Achak Deng Spoke at My School and Rocked My World.* Available for speaking engagements, Valentino would gladly come to speak to your class, too. In fact, he is making a new list of tour stops right now. His foundation, The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, is currently raising money for the rebuilding of his destroyed village in Marial Bai, and with the simple purchase of the book itself, the money, otherwise allocated to the publishing company (McSweeney's&#65533;Dave Eggers own), is put toward the foundation. Valentino is, in essence, a living, breathing text&#65533;a virtual marker of a life hard fought and won. I know that his visit and the book will undoubtedly have the same effect on students' lives all over the country.

Overall, my students embraced the story and brought their total minds and hearts to class each week and learned all over again that regardless of race, country, language or religion&#65533;it is the soul, the fragile, vulnerable, but ever perseverant and indefatigable human soul, that unites us, connects us, emboldens us and gives us hope to move forward, to grow, to believe and most importantly to change and make better the world.

When (and if) we ask students again, &#65533;What is the purpose of literature?&#65533; inevitably we will get a variety of groans and answers ranging from, &#65533;It's meant to entertain&#65533; to &#65533;It's a requirement meant to bore the crap out of us.&#65533; But if we ask a student, &#65533;What is the purpose of reading this *particular* piece of literature?&#65533; the answer is a resounding variation on the post-World War II promise: So that we may &#65533;never again&#65533; let this happen to our progeny, to our world, to our universe. In the footsteps of great writers who moved a society to change (sorry, Stanley Fish)&#65533;from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*&#65533; Eggers and Deng bring forth another great American story, and another journey of a thousand miles that leaves us no other option: change. And in order to change&#65533;one must *know* . In order to know&#65533; one must *learn.* And in order to learn&#65533;one must *read.*

What is the What is a good place to start.

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