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Horses, Home, and Hope: Writing With Teresa Jordan

Martha Kruse

Dan stood in the doorway of my office, an unruly batch of wide-ruled notebook pages stuffed into the book he was holding. Nodding at the handwritten pages, he spoke slowly. "Now I understand how teachers get hooked on expressive writing." My colleague teaches freshman composition, a course devoted to the analysis and production of nonfiction essays. Students grapple with the canonical writers—Plato, Darwin, Stephen Jay Gould—and produce serviceable essays in response, pieces that are competent, but rarely inspired. How could a nonfiction text evoke such an enthusiastic reaction from Dan and his students? I looked at the book he was holding, Teresa Jordan's *Riding the White Horse Home: A Western Family Album*, and I understood.

In that first getting-acquainted week of a composition course, I ask my freshman students to tell me and their classmates something about their homes. Invariably, a student will ask for clarification: "Do you mean where we live right now, or do you mean *home home*?" This reluctance to confer the title "home" upon a temporary residence is but one of the themes Jordan addresses throughout her book, which, according to the back cover, belongs officially to the memoir/travel genre. In many of its features—a table of contents, a map of the area, a family tree, photographs, quotation of scholars, end notes—the book resembles a standard informational text. Yet in a prose style refreshingly free of nostalgia, Jordan also incorporates all the elements of the most engaging fiction as she narrates the life and slow demise of the Iron Mountain community of southeastern Wyoming. This memoir, arranged in

an impressionistic rather than chronological progression, reveals the gritty details of ranch living, the complicated existence of Jordan's female relatives, and, most movingly, the author's psychic and physical displacement from her home. Though the memoir is not addressed specifically to a young adult audience, these issues, as Dan discovered, invite empathetic engagement among older adolescents, making *Riding the White Horse Home* a worthy contender for inclusion in the high school or college curriculum.

The Shading of Generic Boundaries

If asked to distinguish between fiction and nonfiction, most students would decide that nonfiction deals with facts and fiction does not. Yet we know that students often approach texts unaware of the constraints and liberties inherent in these genres. I recall discussing a biography with a student who claimed that the text would have been more enjoyable had the author not decided to have the subject die. Conversely, students may approach a piece of imaginative literature as they would a textbook, uninterested in or unable to attend to aesthetic pleasures. Given the risk that inexperienced readers may ignore the traditional demarcations between fact and fiction, a teacher might question the wisdom of assigning a novelistic memoir such as *Riding the White Horse Home*. Yet this text provides an opportunity to foreground the shading of generic boundaries. Language arts educator Leila Christenbury claims, "The very question of what is fact and what is fiction, though actually a fairly so-

phisticated consideration, can lead students to understanding and debate" (159).

Nonfiction is usually associated with a dispassionate pragmatism; the reader approaches this genre with a highlighter rather than the pleasant anticipation of personal involvement. Yet recent directions in nonfiction, whether the results be designated *creative non fiction*, *literary journalism*, or *journalistic fiction* (Nilsen and Donelson 224) disclose an unapologetic interest in engaging the reader's emotions. The fusion of narrative techniques and information demands that readers evaluate the effectiveness of a text not only for its accuracy but also for its style, a quality which "allows reading to become an aesthetic experience rather than a fact-finding mission" (Carter and Abrahamson 82).

Finding One's Place

While *Riding the White Horse Home* can serve as a springboard for a discussion of literary genres, students probably respond more intently to Jordan's reflections upon her own place within the landscape she describes. Readers who have lived a rural experience can validate Jordan's descriptions of the ceaseless, body-breaking labor required to wrest a livelihood from the land. Stories of calving season, the precarious alliance between rancher and creditor, the loyalty of a yard dog—all will inspire nods of recognition from readers who share Jordan's sense of home. Urban students who struggle to even imagine the expansive landscapes of Wyoming will pick up an abundance of factual information regarding rural life, a culture frequently unrecognized or ignored even by teachers who strive to introduce their students to the experiences of diverse groups. *Riding the White Horse Home* is more than a piece of regional literature; it establishes common ground between rural/urban readership in its validation of local culture and the matter of finding one's place in the world.

One of the more poignant events in the memoir occurs when Jordan, a ten-year-old sixth grader, learns to be ashamed of her roots. Sent to town to attend school, young Teresa confesses to a fondness for country music and admits she does not

know the meaning of the word "queer." Her incredulous older (eighth-grade) roommate despairs of the younger girl's ever assimilating into "town" culture, saying, "Oh, God. I have my work cut out for me" (76). This moment proves an epiphany for Jordan:

In that moment, I experienced my first shame of place and perpetrated my first betrayal. The shame was not great, nor was the betrayal—who among us has traversed adolescence without begging to be picked up on the corner so our friends wouldn't discover that we had parents? Much of this is no more than a healthy move toward individuation. But it stands out for me as the first time I realized that success in the larger, more sophisticated world meant abandoning values I had learned at home. (76)

Aware of my interest in identifying and affirming the values of rural culture, Alice, one of my students who is preparing to teach English, shared with me her response to Jordan's book, which had been assigned by her literature professor. Alice, herself the daughter of a rancher, had discussed with me the tensions she sensed between her academic scholarship and her rural upbringing. In a written response to *Riding the White Horse Home*, Alice noted that Jordan's text echoed her own ambivalence about the life she was moving from and the career she was moving toward:

It is harvest time. Even as I struggle to focus on my homework, my father is planning his way into the field in the next few days, setting in motion the last weeks of corn-picking and preparing to ride the pasture to gather up calves, make the fall sales, and prepare for the winter ahead. Every fiber of my body, every cell and tissue, wants to be there now, have wanted to be there for the umpteenth years of college I have had to be away. And yet, the harvest season this year will find me deep in my classes, devouring Shakespeare, Emerson, and ironically, Jordan, with great pleasure. I love my student life, and I would not trade the experience I

have had here at the university for anything. . . except, perhaps, for knowing where I fit.

As they approach their high-school graduation, adolescents realize that despite the familiar yearbook exhortations to “Stay just the way you are” and “Never change,” their decisions to attend college or enter the workplace will inevitably alter them. Teachers have always relied upon imaginative literature to provide students with vicarious experience which they may one day apply to their own lives, but good nonfiction can lead young readers to an “awakened understanding” (Carr 205) of their present selves.

Pre- and Post-writing Assignments

In my work with beginning college students, I have discovered that most of them are convinced that culture is something that other people have, or something that resides “somewhere out east” in museums, but not in their neighborhoods. *Riding the White Horse Home* lends itself to a number of pre- or post-reading writing assignments which encourage students, no matter what their backgrounds, to reflect upon their families and cultural underpinnings. Students can, of course, be invited to respond expressively to the text in whatever manner they wish. Teachers concerned with academic writing, however defined, can also structure assignments based upon the traditional modes of discourse, including process analysis, description, and classification. Each of the suggestions listed below allows students and their classmates to reflect upon what it means to be from a particular “home home” even as they prepare to negotiate, or may already be participating in, their own possible displacement from that setting. Each option requires the writer to access her own authority, and the writing that results is likely to resonate with a sense of personal ownership.

1. On page 13, Jordan writes, “I was raised to be Western, which is to say stoic.” Replace “Western” and/or “stoic,” if necessary, with adjectives

that accurately describe you. Are the adjectives compatible? Do they still apply to you?

2. Writing of one of the men who worked on the ranch, Jordan notes, “He could *do* things.” Describe a physical task that your life has prepared you to do. How would you describe the importance of this accomplishment to someone who does not share your background?

3. On page 32, Jordan says, “There are a few rules to ranching that mustn’t be broken.” Replace “ranching” with an occupation you are familiar with. What are the “rules,” spoken or unspoken, of successfully performing the duties of that occupation? Why is it important that these rules be followed?

4. Justifying her instinctive killing of a rattlesnake, Jordan explains, “Where I was raised, rattlesnakes are a threat” (83). Replace “rattlesnake” with an appropriate noun and explain how the presence of that entity threatens one’s well-being.

5. Jordan’s friends admonished her for killing the rattlesnake, an animal now unable to fulfill its role in the ecosystem. Can you recall a time when something you did puzzled people who did not know you? How would you explain your actions to an observer who does not share your prior experiences?

6. Ranch life in Wyoming is not an easy existence. Jordan writes, “It never occurred to me that the men and women I grew up with were courageous.” Replace “courageous,” if you wish, with an equally descriptive adjective and describe how the men and women you grew up with exemplified that characteristic.

7. Wondering how or if the lives of her female relatives intersect with or inform her own, Jordan says, “I grew up with three stories for women.” Does this statement accurately reflect your own experiences? Did you grow up with more or fewer stories for women or men? Where do you see

yourself in those stories?

Betty Carter and Richard Abrahamson, authorities in the area of nonfiction for young adults, suggest questions which help readers focus upon the specific characteristics of this genre. The following questions encourage students to return to the text and consider issues of authorship, authority, translation to non-print media, and implicit promises between the nonfiction writer and the reader:

- What segment, portion or focus of this book would make a good documentary? Why?
- What steps do you think the author followed to research and write this book?
- Look at the title and jacket of this book. What do they indicate the book will be about? Do they give a fair representation of the book's content? (185-187)

Just as *Riding the White Horse Home* bridges the gaps between fiction and nonfiction, it also speaks to students who are struggling to discover their own place between the past and the future. Yet it is a hopeful book, describing Jordan's ultimate healing and the possibility of locating one's self within the multiple landscapes of a lifetime. These remembered and possible landscapes are fertile sites for reflection among adolescent readers and their teachers.

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About the Author

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