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Kaitlin Hooper
Lakeshore Middle School

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An Interview with Jewell Parker Rhodes: Social Justice and How to Cultivate It Through Book Selection

by Kaitlin Hooper

A note from the editors: In this issue of the Journal, in lieu of our typical book review segment, we are sharing an interview with Jewell Parker Rhodes, followed by short reviews of several of her books. We hope you enjoy this insight from the Author!

Jewell Parker Rhodes has written five middle-grade novels about historical and social events that bring up challenging issues for her main characters to tackle. Though these stories center on events such as Hurricane Katrina, the BP oil spill, 9/11, and American Reconstruction, her novels are still character driven, which helps children cultivate empathy as they experience the events through the eyes of these dynamic characters. She is “always writing books for the classroom” with the teachers in mind (Rhodes, personal communication, 12 July 2017). She states that all of her books revolve around a few main tropes: a connection to elders, folktales (magic and spirituality), multi-ethnic communities, boy and girl interactions, and an empowered “I” voice. All of these tropes create strong, resilient characters who take the reader on an adventure that tests the characters’ spirits and resilience.

During the last semester of my master’s degree, I sat down for lunch with Jewell Parker Rhodes. I was graciously awarded this opportunity through a graduate course I was taking at Oakland University titled Authors and Illustrators. The instructor for the course invited me to meet Rhodes because I was making a big transition in my teaching career—after four years at the high school level, I was switching to an at-risk interventionist position at a middle school in a new district. We agreed that Rhodes would be the perfect person for me to speak to because she writes for middle-grade readers and, like me, is also passionate about social justice.

Before meeting Rhodes, I had not read anything written by her. I spent weeks reading all of her



Kaitlin Hooper

middle-grade books and a few of her adult novels. By the time our lunch date came around, I was embarrassingly fangirling. As we sat down for lunch at a stylish seafood restaurant, I obsessed over what to order, where to sit, and how to start the conversation. Nervously, I picked a rather safe-looking shrimp jambalaya. Immediately after the waitress left, I wondered to myself, “Does Jewell think that I ordered that because most of her books are set in New Orleans? Did I do that subconsciously? Do I even like jambalaya?”

As the waitress brought us our bread, I explained to Rhodes who I was and what my future held for me. I told her that I had taught in a well-funded high school in a well-funded district in suburban Detroit for the past four years. Now, going into my fifth year, I’d be switching towns, districts, grade-levels, and content areas. “I’m ready for a change,” I said. “I need to work with kids who need me. I want to take on the challenge of working with the kids that have been pegged as at-risk.” This was her response:

I’m glad you’re doing that [teaching at-risk kids] because one of the revelations for me, since I’ve been going to schools all across our nation, is how variable education is and how unfair it seems to me.

The discrepancies and the continued racial segregation that happens in education, the lack of resources,

I think really is harmful to our kids and it's deeply disturbing. For instance, let's look at California that has both Malibu and Santa Monica, which are in the same district. They pool their PTA dollars and each school benefits from it. Now, the Malibu parents don't want any of their money to go to the poor communities in Santa Monica. They are actually trying to have their own school district. The interesting thing about this is that eventually all those kids will feed to the same high school, so why would you not want to have the entire student body be as educated as possible? This movement of communities legally forming their own districts from California to Tennessee, keeps the dollars within their own community rather than sharing with districts who desperately need them.

In areas where there's deep segregation and deep poverty, I think we're basically condemning many of those children to not having a chance at American opportunities, and that's really scary.

For me, it was interesting to hear the phrase “American opportunity.” Perhaps it's my age, my millennial-ness, or my use of social media, but I had a hard time getting on board with Rhodes's more positive image of America. I can feel it, students can feel it—partisanship and deep political divides have started to tarnish the image of “American opportunity.” I asked Rhodes, in this current climate in our society, did she think that she could keep up with the positive image she had of America and its many opportunities?

Yes, I do. I remember a point where I was in college thinking to myself I could keep becoming hard and not feel anything in order to survive all the bad things that were happening and all the bad stuff from my past history, or I could feel and I would hurt, but it would mean I was human. I remember making that choice. I do feel deeply about things, but it is also true that I'm still here—even though I was abandoned, abused, and didn't come from a great socioeconomic neighborhood. There were people who always helped me through. People who reached out a hand to me, and I was able to survive. I now have a family, a loving family, I'm 33 years married, and I'm a grandmother.

Even though I've gone through incidents of the Vietnam War, protesting it, the battery of Rodney King, the Black Power movement, all these things, I'm old enough now that I can see a pattern. I've seen such great social upheaval, and it's always going to be something. What matters is how we respond, and how we respond is trying to be more true to our American values. The thing with youth is that they haven't had enough opportunity to see this pattern happen continually.

Today's political era is still shocking to those of us who have lived through an awful lot. I thought that at this age I would have more hopefulness. I'm sort of taken aback [over] why are we having this bitter partisan divide. I was getting depressed for a while, but our Constitution has been working, our judicial powers are working, our legislators are working, people protesting. Then I say to myself, “Oh, that's what I remember about America, that's what I did during Vietnam.” It's just another revolutionary social change era. America is still working even though it still hurts.

9/11, coupled with the financial crisis, scared a lot of adults and the way of life people were expecting...as they got older was suddenly under threat. The bailing out of Wall Street and not Main Street, the cost of higher education and getting ahead, the technological change, the global wave. It's industrial revolution meets political terrorism meets social upheaval—it's so much. I think a lot of us, even those who are protected or secure in their jobs and healthcare, still feel scared. You can just feel it walking out of the door in America. We can recognize that we fear for our future, fear for ourselves, but not letting it stop the critical thinking process.

The ideas that Rhodes shares here are not reserved for conversations with adults over lunch; rather, Rhodes wants to make sure that kids have access to the difficult information and ideas they may be presented with in the real world. She emphasizes empathy and compassion in her plot-driven novels to help break perceived barriers of race, class, gender, religion, and sexual orientation (Rhodes, 2015).

Must Read Texts

We're having this revolution in how we access information, technical change, social change, all that. All of these things are coming in a perfect storm so a kid can look up things and say, "what you said wasn't true." A kid can also read something so much more easily that isn't true, but it has the sense of truth because it's on a computer screen. It's this perfect storm, and that's why I did "Towers Falling" (2016) and "Ghost Boys" (2018) because I can approach these issues head on. "Towers Falling" and "Ghost Boys" come out of a real desire that I want teachers and parents to talk about the difficult things.

A lot of my books are about how—if we can tear down the cultural and social walls that have grown up between us or sometimes they're put there between us via our parents or by society in general—if we can pull those barriers down, everybody has an opportunity to get along and to really see one another. And that's been my message. It's not a naïve message, I don't think. I've seen it happen in a lot of people's lives and in my life in particular. My challenge is to write it, not to sugar coat it—to write about that struggle to get there. Billy and Sugar have to fight to be connected. Deja [a main character in Towers Falling] is very alienated and trying to act tough and defensive. So, through the continuing kindness of Sabeen or Ben [two other new students who befriend her], who recognize "oh she has an attitude but there must be something more there," and their patience with her and trying to really see her, [that's] where [books] have the benefit and the value for kids.

To me, it just takes time with other people. If we keep living in segregated neighborhoods, it lessens the idea that [educational equality] is ever going to happen.

This is one thing that Parker Rhodes's books do best: they show middle-grade students that bad things do happen, but also give them the tools to see that they can change the outcome of a bad situation. Her mission is to "write [her] very best. Children deserve no less" (Lyons, 2011).

I write to help children to be valiant and resilient and let them know that you will always make it through:

"always eventually the universe will shine down with love." We will make it through. The reason why I like to go to classrooms and Skype with kids is I'm very forthright about how I was a child of poverty. My grandmother raised me, and I wasn't expected to go to college, and I'm very honest with them. They see me as this happy person writing these happy stories knowing that happiness came from within and from working at it and being resilient. They see the children in my stories that are able to help adults, and that helps them see that they are able to figure it out and survive and do good in the world and be friends with everyone in the world.

The humor in my books helps a lot with making things more palpable. You can't frontload all the hardship. You have to use the character-driven development and other things that happen in order to take you on that roller coaster ride and get you ready for that experience.

Sometimes people come to books with a sense of what they think their kids should know or what they're ready for. What I'm able to do, I think a part of my skill, is to be able to tell real truths but in a way that is really kid-appropriate and help guide [them] through it. I think that's the teacher in me more than the writer in me. The teacher skill in the writing is what makes it work.

As teachers, parents, librarians, and booksellers, Rhodes implores us to increase our efforts to make sure that the books we are feeding our children are diverse and full of empathy. We want our children to read and write and "appreciate the diversity of their unique human selves. We must challenge the 'master narrative' and replace it with true inclusivity" (Rhodes, 2015). She expresses students' diversity experiences as social fluency that will help them shape a more just world.

I think people go into teaching and the arts to make a difference. I grew up with the sense of watching Black women like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker create their own voices as writers and how it could help shape the world that we lived in. That was a really big deal. That's what I want to do. Before I die, I want

to have a book that's always taught in the schools. I would love to have one of my books be taught in the classroom and just be their go-to book.

In terms of moving out in the world, I think that all kids should be reading male, female, American, international—reading everything that they can get their hands on, but teachers sometimes teach the way they were taught. The best teachers are trying to think about how do I teach for what will be, because these kids will be living in the future. Some teachers and parents say that they can't teach or read a book to their kids because it isn't their child's world. Well, it's hog wash! Of course you can connect with it, you're a human being! It's all about character driven-fiction and empathy. Any child should be able to access that! We can't keep perpetuating this older standard.

This is one of the reasons that Jewell Parker Rhodes still goes to schools that ask her to come but cannot afford to pay her. She also gives books to schools and students who cannot afford to buy them. She knows it's important for students to see her and to speak to her.

Kids should be able to take a book home and read it underneath the covers and have their parents yell at them for being awake, reading. What I also worry about is kids not having libraries in their homes. What we're doing is losing this sense of an independent reader. Once you lose that, you start losing critical abilities like critical reasoning and researching and developing ideas on your own. They're missing those steps because they don't have the books.

If I hadn't had teachers and librarians who served me as a child, my life would have been so different. Historically people in my family have been caught up in drugs, teen pregnancies, or in jail. That could have been my life's path. People when they look at me think of me as sort of, "Oh of course you came from the middle class, literate background, and your parents were school teachers." No, no, no. None of that was true! I was just a smart kid, and there are a lot of smart kids we know out in the world. Every kid is gifted in some way.

Reading helped me feel empathy and showed me that the world was bigger than I thought. When I found out that Black people could write books, too, I started my writing career. This also affected how I raise my own children. We bought books before they were born. It has also affected my children who are now having children—it's a whole trajectory of humanity in our family. It changed all because good teachers taught me how to read and librarians made sure that I was fed with books.

As a teacher for the middle grades, it's often difficult to find new books for our students to read. Educators are not often afforded the luxury of time to do research and meticulously choose every book on their shelves, so we are left with what's already on our shelves and call it good enough. By doing this, we are perpetuating exactly what Jewell Parker Rhodes has warned us against: we are feeding our students stories with characters who don't look like them, and with characters who don't develop the plot to help our students find humility and empathy. Rhodes's books offer what our students need right now through diverse characters in ethnicity, culture and gender, and the empowered "I" voice that encourage empathy.

Her Books

Here, you will find a list of Jewell Parker Rhodes's current middle-grade novels with brief descriptions and suggestions for teaching. Recently, a colleague and I have decided to use Jewell Parker Rhodes's work as an author study for our seventh-grade students. Each text offers different angles for teachers to approach, from historical fiction to magical realism, but always with the characters driving the story.

***Block Party* (2016)**

This story has appeared in excerpts in different literature books for 6-12 grade students. This work is actually a piece of personal memoir that explores Rhodes's fondness for her childhood experiences in her Pittsburgh neighborhood. Though the text is accessible at a high school level, middle school students may need guidance with Rhodes's style and word choice.

Must Read Texts

How Teachers Can Use This Text

This short piece is an excellent way to springboard students into an author study, memoir modeling, and discussion of authors' craft choices. For example, the Teacher's College Units of Study for seventh grade include a unit that has students read multiple books by the same author. "Block Party" introduces students to the writing style of Rhodes at a higher reading level than her middle-grade novels, and with a little scaffolding, students will quickly be able to identify Rhodes's voice and style that echoes throughout her longer works.

Ninth Ward (2011)

Though Rhodes grew up in Pittsburg, her grandmother, whom she cites as her biggest influence, hailed from Louisiana. *Ninth Ward* is the first book in the "Louisiana Girls Trilogy." Twelve-year-old Laneshia, born with the gift of sight, lives in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans, Louisiana with Mama Ya Ya, the midwife that birthed her. With her mother dead and her "up-town" family wanting nothing to do with her, Laneshia spends her days as Mama Ya-Ya's daughter and granddaughter. The pair live in an old shotgun-style house without much money to speak of, but they have a happy life full of love. Laneshia befriends TaShon at school, though many students don't want to be her friend because they are afraid of her "gift"—the ability to see spirits. Mama Ya-Ya, too, has supernatural skills and can feel something bad approaching even before news of Katrina hits the TV stations. TaShon and his family evacuate to the Superdome during the storm, but Mama Ya-Ya and Laneshia stay put. They weather the storm, but Mama Ya-Ya, clinging to life, knows it isn't over. TaShon arrives back in the Ninth Ward too quickly after the storm; the levees break, and the waters rise. With TaShon and his dog Spot at her side, Laneshia uses her love of engineering and math to calculate how rapidly the waters are rising to help save herself and her friend. "The dynamics of the diverse community enrich the survival story. [Parker Rhodes's] decision to focus on one brave child humanizes the historic tragedy" ("Jewell Parker Rhodes (1954-)," n.d.).

How Teachers Can Use This Text

On Rhodes's website (<http://jewellparkerrhodes.com>)

you can find extensive teacher guides, videos, links, and commentary on her books and the events that surround them. *Ninth Ward* (2011) layers different thematic topics through friendship, poverty, Hurricane Katrina, and the Ninth Ward. On her website, Rhodes herself has compiled resources that will help students understand more about Katrina and the Ninth Ward. Teachers using this text will want to pair it with non-fiction articles on New Orleans, poverty, and hurricanes. Kirkus Reviews (2010) wrote that "Rhodes's characters are likable and her story gripping...A good title for discussion when balanced with historical accounts of Katrina and her aftermath."

Conversations could develop around weather and hurricanes (science), but they could also revolve around New Orleans, poverty, and social class (social studies). Though this book involves the death of a loved one and a tragedy that affected millions in Hurricane Katrina, Rhodes is gentle with the reader, leading them through one tough situation to the next while Laneshia holds their hand the entire way.

Sugar (2013)

Many historical fiction novels of young African Americans tell the story of the horrors of slavery. Rhodes's *Sugar* is the one of the few that begins to tell the story of American Reconstruction and the Chinese immigrants brought here to work in the Deep South. "Rhodes exposes the reality of post-Civil War economics...In doing so, she illuminates a little-known aspect of the Reconstruction Era...Her prose shines, reading with a spare lyricism that flows naturally" (Kirkus, 2013).

Sugar, the main character in this novel set in Louisiana, is a hard-headed, stubborn girl of 10 who wants to know the "why" behind every rule she's given. Living in a community of former slaves at the Laura Plantation, Sugar's mother has passed away and her father has been missing since he went north. Sugar befriends Billy, the plantation owner's son, and quickly comes to understand the barriers that are between them. They connect over their love of adventure, but they have to fight everything and everyone in order to cultivate their

friendship. The former slaves become worried when a new group of Chinese workers come to the plantation. Sugar is brave and curious and quickly develops a friendship with a young Chinese man. This friendship, along with her friendship with Billy, create empathy and understanding in both Sugar and her new friends (Jones, 2013).

How Teachers Can Use This Text

This novel, rooted in extensive historical research, can take the reader and teacher down a rabbit hole of information. A rabbit hole, of course, because the novel retells several Br'er Rabbit tales said to have originated at the Laura Plantation itself. These stories can perhaps combine with other folktales of America to enrich and layer a unit on the Hero's Journey. Reconstruction and Chinese immigrants have an obvious connection to history and social studies, but some of these ideas may not be things typically discussed in depth in a middle school social studies course. This book gives us characters to help students feel empathy and understand that history is more than what is in a textbook. *Sugar* has one of the most extensive collections of teaching resources among her books found on Rhodes's website (<http://jewellparkerrhodes.com/children/sugar-resources/>). Here you will not only find a teaching guide, but FAQ, videos, links, and other resources.

Bayou Magic (2015)

The last book in the "Louisiana Girls Trilogy" follows 10-year-old Maddy in a more contemporary setting into the Louisiana bayou. Every summer, Maddy's sisters have spent the summer with their "Grandmere," and now it's finally her turn to spend some time on the bayou. Maddy begins to learn about her family's culture through food and stories that Grandmere shares. Bear, a new friend, takes Maddy on adventures through the bayou landscape and she comes to understand that she has a special gift. Maddy and Bear experience the tragedy of the BP oil spill together as it threatens their land.

Though this book has obvious magical realism elements, it still touches on specific social issues. "Environmental issues that have impacted and continue to threaten the Gulf Coast play a strong role, shaping

Maddy's understanding of humanity's connection to the fragile ecosystem" (Fredriksen, 2015). Rhodes invites the reader in to experience life in the bayou, the importance of fairy tales and folklore, and discusses deeper issues dealing with the environment.

How Teachers Can Use This Text

Rhodes's teaching guide offers exercises for language arts teachers but also incorporates guiding questions for use in social studies and science classes. This book could be an excellent point to start a unit on humanity's impact on the environment with younger students. The educator's guide, prepared by Betty Carter, an independent consultant and professor emerita of children's and young adult literature at Texas Woman's University, provides reproducibles, specific questions and exercises, and a look at author's craft decisions.

Towers Falling (2016)

Asked by her editor to write this book, Rhodes originally said no because of the technical and emotional topic of this book. She spent months thinking and dreaming, and as she was on a plane on the way to London, she suddenly felt as if she had to write this book. She wanted the new citizens of tomorrow to know about our history, and, of course, she's never shied away from telling a challenging story (Teachingbooks.net, n.d.).

In this novel, fifth-grader, Dèja enters a new school after her family has moved to a group home in Brooklyn. Dèja's father is immobilized and it is up to her mother to support the family of five. At her new school, Dèja meets Ben, whose father is an Iraq War veteran and Sabeen, whose family is Turkish and Muslim. "Through Dèja's interactions with classmates from a range of backgrounds, . . . readers will develop a richer understanding of what it means to be American, as well as the interconnectedness of the present and past" (Publishers Weekly, 2016).

Much like our students today, Dèja, Ben, and Sabeen were born after the attacks happened. The question arises: "How do we talk about an event that seems so current to us, yet so distant to our students?"

Must Read Texts

How Teachers Can Use This Text

School Library Journal states that “this is a welcome contribution to children’s literature, on a topic not many authors have broached for this age group, and it will function well as a teaching tool. It reads easily and offers educators the opportunity to not only address the events of September 11 from a historical perspective but also from a social one” (Okeson, 2016).

The book lends itself to classroom use almost intentionally. The comprehensive teacher’s guide on Rhodes’s website will help guide students through before, during, and after reading activities. These include things from building background information, creating poetry, making art, looking at social units, and questions for after reading. The guide was prepared by Erica Rand Silverman and Sharon Kennedy, former English teachers and co-founders of Room 228 (www.rm228.com), along with Kelly Hoover, a Colorado elementary school teacher. It offers reproducible content ready to be used with this text to facilitate conversation and deepen character analysis and can be found here: <http://jewellparkerrhodes.com/children/resources/>.

Ghost Boys (2018)

Rhodes’s own description of her book during our interview says it best:

Ghost Boys addresses racial bias. I really do believe a lot of times we don’t “see,” we just make a stereotype. People will say well “I’m not racist,” but that doesn’t mean you don’t have racial bias because our culture has imagery ingrained towards racial bias. Instead of hoping our problems will go away (and they don’t seem to be going away!), we need to have conversations where kids can understand that you can check for racial bias. It doesn’t mean that you’re perfect or imperfect, it’s much more nuanced and we have to talk about it. Jerome’s story is just about a young Black kid being murdered, but then it connects with Sarah, the White police officer’s daughter. We also have Carlos. Carlos is from San Antonio and heard that Chicago schools were bad, so he brought a toy gun to school to keep away from bullies. To me, this story opened up and enriched the feeling of friendship and empathy

even more. We are such a stew. Why do we have to say “this just belongs to me culturally?” We are all interdependent: that’s what we ought to be writing about.

Ghost Boys was inspired by the shootings of Tamir Rice and Trayvon Martin. In Rhodes’s experience as a young mother, it was Rodney King. Before that, it was Emmett Till. Sarah, the White officer’s daughter, can see both Jerome and Emmett Till’s ghosts. This story, says Rhodes, will be one of the first and only stories to talk about Emmett Till’s true story after Carolyn Bryant confessed that Till did not make advances towards her. This book, much different in content and context than Rhodes’s other novels, is a new journey for this author.

How Teachers Can Use This Text

Because the text blends both historical aspects and current events, this text can be used across curricula and units. Again, English language arts and social studies could pair up to do a comprehensive unit spanning from Emmett Till, to Tamir Rice, to our character Jerome. Though this subject is much harder to discuss given its violent nature and political polarization, Rhodes’s track record with gently handling difficult, tragic topics will most certainly hold true with this piece. Little, Brown and Company offers an extensive teaching guide for students ages 10 and up. This guide was developed by educator and bookseller Rebekah Shoaf of Boogie Down Books, with research by Steve Jozef and contributions by teachers Rachel Bello, Eric Burnside, Maziel Concepción, Alicia Lerman, Liz Madans, Sheilah Papa, Audrey Salazar, and Rebecca Seering. These resources focus around Civil Rights, prejudice, classroom discussion suggestions, and projects that are age appropriate. You can find these plans at <http://jewellparkerrhodes.com/children/resources/>.

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Author Biography

Kati Hooper is a teacher at Lakeshore Middle School in Stevensville, MI. She currently works with at-risk students as a reading interventionist and also teaches two general-education ELA classes. She resides in St. Joseph, MI with her husband, Nick and son, Elliott. She can be reached at khooper@lpslancer.net.

