Lesson Plans and Resources for Rodzina

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These resources are all available, both separately and together, at www.freelibrary.org/onebook

Please send any comments or feedback about these resources to Larissa.Pahomov@gmail.com.
ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

The materials in this unit plan are meant to be flexible and easy to adapt to your own classroom. However, for students reading the entire book, there are several themes that connect the stories. Students should be introduced to one or more the following key questions as they begin reading, and keep them in mind as they work through the book:

What makes a family?

What does a person need to grow up right?

How much independence should children have?

Many of the reader response questions and suggested projects relate to these essential questions. Students are encouraged to ask these questions not only of the characters of the book, but of themselves.
IN-CLASS INTRODUCTION

This lesson is designed to provide students with a one-class introduction to the book. The lesson can be used to start off a class reading of the text, or to encourage them to read it independently.

As a recipient of One Book resources, the Free Library requires that you devote one class period to introducing Rodzina to students, either using this lesson or your own plan.

1. Have students answer a few questions about their own families by typing up their answers to the following prompts or by filling out the attached worksheet
   - Who are the main members of your family?
   - What are the top things that they say or do that shows you they are your family?
   - If the people in the box above disappeared, who would you live with?
   - Where would you go? Do you think they could become your family?

2. If the are comfortable doing so, students can read their stories out to a partner, or trade papers and read silently.

3. Hand out copies of Rodzina. Read the introduction page (“I was ten years old…”) together.

4. Discuss: what new information do they have? Did anything surprise them?

5. Read the first chapter up to page 5, out loud or silently.

6. After reading is finished, discuss:

   - What is Rodzina’s situation? How did she end up in that situation? Why doesn’t she have any family to turn to?
   - How does her situation compare to what your situation is (on your chart)? In what ways would your situation be similar if you lost your family? In what ways would your situation be different?
   - Will she be able to find a new family? Does she need to find one to survive? Does the orphan train seem like a good way to find what she needs?
My Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who are the main members of your family?</th>
<th>What are the top things that they say or do that shows you they are your family?</th>
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<td>If the people in the box above disappeared, who would you live with? Where would you go?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Challenge + Page #</td>
<td>Analysis: how did it affect her?</td>
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Rodzina experiences several challenges on her trip west. When you discover one in the text, write it down. Then describe what she thought about it and how it affected her.
Joys for Rodzina

___________________________

Name:

Rodzina also has a series of positive experiences during her trip west. When you encounter one in the text, write it down, along with an analysis of how it affected her.

Positive event + page #  Analysis: how did it affect her?
ANALYTICAL ASSESSMENTS

1. Write a review of “Rodzina.” Describe what readers will gain from reading the book (without giving away too many of the details.)

2. Write an opinion essay on what you think about the orphan train Rodzina rides. Do you think the practice was a good thing for the children, or a bad one? Use at least three specific examples from the book to support your argument.

3. Choose one narrative from a real orphan train rider to read and compare to the story of Rodzina. How do the stories compare and contrast? What do they have in common? http://orphantraindepot.org/orphan-train-rider-stories/

CREATIVE ASSESSMENTS

1. What happens after the book ends? Write one more chapter to describe what happens with Rodzina and Miss Doctor when they arrive in California.

2. Pick one adult from the book -- Mr. Szprot or Miss Doctor, -- and write a letter from their perspective, explaining their actions to a friend or family member. Why did they end up on the orphan train? How did they feel about Rodzina and the other orphans?
ONLINE RESOURCES

Note: Additional print resources are listed in the back of the book.

VIDEO

PBS Documentary: The Orphan Trains
Information about the American Experience documentary.
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/orphan/

HISTORY

“Orphan Train” Historical Background
A short personal essay from the author that explains the context of the book, as well as her own motivations and interests in exploring this topic.
http://christinabakerkline.com/blog/my-next-novel/

Children’s Aid Society History
A book review that gives a detailed explanation of the history and intentions of the group that put children on the trains.
https://www.nytimes.com/books/first/o/oconnor-01orphan.html

National Orphan Train Complex
Advocacy group preserving the history of Orphan trains.
http://orphantraindepot.org/

Orphan Train Rider Stories
Written testimonials from riders who were sent in the 1900’s, 1910’s, and 1920’s.
http://orphantraindepot.org/orphan-train-rider-stories/
Orphan Train Historical Background

I am interested in exploring how people tell the stories of their lives and what these stories reveal (intentionally or not) about who we are. I am intrigued by the spaces between words, the silences that conceal long-kept secrets, the elisions that belie surface appearance. And I am interested in the pervasive and insidious legacy of trauma – the way events beyond our control can shape and define our lives. All of my books address these themes.

Like my four previous novels, my novel Orphan Train is about cultural identity and family history. For the first time, however, I am undertaking a project that requires a large amount of historical, cultural, and geographical research. My novel traces the journey of Vivian Daly, a now-90-year-old woman, from a small village in Ireland to the crowded streets of the Lower East Side to the wide-open expanses of the Midwest to the coast of Maine. Her life spans nearly a century, encompassing great historical change and upheaval.

Change has been the defining principle of Vivian Daly’s life, and from a very young age she learned to adapt, to inhabit new identities. For many reasons, she has told no one about her early life: her difficult childhood in Ireland and the lies and secrets that propelled her, alone, toward a frighteningly open-ended future. She spent her entire adult life minimizing risk, avoiding complicated entanglements, and keeping silent about the past. But now, through a series of events, she encounters a stranger who wants to know her story. As Vivian begins to face the truth about what happened long ago, the past becomes more and more present for her. Vivian’s recollections come in tiers: her turbulent adulthood in the Midwest; her early life on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, living in a tenement; and finally, her childhood in Kinvara, on the western coast of Ireland.

Orphan Train is a specifically American story of mobility and rootlessness, highlighting a little-known but historically significant moment in our country’s past. Between 1854 and 1929, so-called “orphan trains” transported more than 200,000 orphaned, abandoned, and homeless children – many of them first-generation Irish Catholic immigrants – from the coastal cities of the eastern United States to the Midwest for “adoption” (often, in fact, indentured servitude). Charles Loring Brace, who founded the program, believed that hard work, education, and firm but compassionate childrearing – not to mention Midwestern Christian family values – were the only way to save these children from a life of depravity and poverty.
The children, many of whom had experienced great trauma in their short lives, had no idea where they were going. The train would pull into a station, and townspeople assembled to inspect them – often literally scrutinizing teeth, eyes, and limbs to determine whether a child was sturdy enough for field work or intelligent and mild-tempered enough to cook and clean. Babies and healthy older boys were typically chosen first; older girls were chosen last. After a brief trial period, the children became indentured to their host families. If a child wasn’t chosen, he or she would get back on the train to try again at the next town.

Some children were welcomed by new families and towns. Others were beaten, mistreated, taunted, or ignored. They lost any sense of their cultural identities and backgrounds; siblings were often separated, and contact between them was discouraged. City children were expected to perform hard farm labor for which they were neither emotionally nor physically prepared. Many of them, first-generation immigrants from Italy, Poland, and Ireland, were teased for their strange accents; some barely spoke English. Jealousy and competition in the new families created rifts, and many children ended up feeling that they didn’t belong anywhere. Some drifted from home to home to find someone who wanted them. Many ran away. The Children’s Aid Society did attempt to keep track of these children, but the reality of great distances and spotty record-keeping made this difficult.

I became interested in the story of the orphan trains because my husband’s grandfather, Frank Robertson, was rumored to have been a train rider. It was believed that he traveled on an orphan train from New York to Jamestown, North Dakota with his four siblings when he was ten years old. In the course of researching this family lore, I found that although orphan trains did, in fact, stop in Jamestown, and orphans from these trains were adopted there, the Robertson clan came from Missouri. But my interest was piqued, and I started researching this period in history.

After reading newspaper clippings, I began searching the Web for more information. I found first-person accounts, orphan-train reunion groups, and historical archives. That research led me to New York Public Library, where I found original materials: lists of orphans from foundling hospitals, handwritten records, notes from desperate mothers explaining why they were abandoning their children. I found that approximately 145 orphan train riders are still alive in the United States; orphan-train reunions are still being held in towns across the Midwest. A novel began to take shape in my mind.

My own background is partly Irish, and so I decided that I wanted to write about an Irish girl who has kept silent about the circumstances that led her to the orphan train. “People who cross the threshold between the known world and that place where the impossible does happen discover the problem of how to convey that experience,” Kathryn Harrison writes. Over the course of this novel Vivian moves from shame about her past to acceptance, eventually coming to terms with what she’s been through. In the process she learns about the regenerative power of claiming – and telling – one’s own life story.
In *Orphan Train*, Vivian Daly’s first-person, past-tense account of her experience on the orphan train and her journey from Irish-Catholic immigrant to Protestant Midwesterner alternates with the present-day, present-tense, third-person-limited story of Vivian’s life on the Maine coast. (I have quite a bit of experience with this kind of autobiographical narrative, and am intimately familiar with its quirks, subtexts, and possibilities. Some time ago I wrote a nonfiction book with my mother called *The Conversation Begins: Mothers and Daughters Talk about Living Feminism*, for which we interviewed, and created first-person accounts for, more than 60 women.) The present-day story takes place over six weeks; the narrative arc of Vivian’s history encompasses 90 years.

**Orphan Train Rider Story: Marguerite Thompson** http://orphantraindepot.org/orphan-train-rider-stories/marguerite-thompson/

The Larsons had two sons other than Teddy. My new Papa was a big man with a moustache and a kind face. The Larsons were of the upper class in that area. They had a lady that came and washed the clothes on a wash board. Another lady made all of our clothes except for our underwear. Mrs. Larson (Mama) would make all of our underwear.

My new home was a big two story house with 10 rooms, but we didn’t have any electricity. The house was beautiful inside. I didn’t have a bedroom of my own; I slept on the couch in the front room on a feather mattress Mama would take out of her closet every night. After a few weeks, she said I could do it myself. The boys had bedrooms upstairs. Teddy and I were not permitted to use the bathroom. We had to use the outside toilet, and on Saturday we would drag a galvanized bathtub from the back porch and put it by the cook stove.

Mama didn’t like my New York accent at all. She wanted me to talk like they did, so I was slapped quite often in the mouth. Sometimes I would wonder what I had done wrong.

I had only been there a few weeks when Teddy brought out a china doll to play with. He said it was his and I couldn’t play with it. Well one day I found it and took outside and broke it. I got my first whipping.

They rented out three of the bedrooms to salesmen. When I was six, Teddy and I started school. When we came home from school, we had to wash the dinner dishes from noon. Then we had to go upstairs and make the beds, dust mop the floors and clean the bathroom. We didn’t dare use the toilet, she said it took too much water. By the time we got through with that, it was time to set the table for supper. I always only had one helping put on my plate. Teddy and Charles always had milk to drink with their dinner, but she said I couldn’t have any.

They had two cows and a lot of milk, and Teddy and I would deliver it both morning and night. Charles (age 14) went with us a few times until we could do it on our own. Sometimes I went by myself, especially if it was cold. One morning on my way to school, it was so cold that the sidewalks were very icy, and I slipped and fell. One bucket of milk hit the sidewalk, the lid blew off, and half of the milk spilled out. Well, I got up, put the lid back on, and set it on the porch where it was supposed to go. The lady called my foster mother and wanted to know why she didn’t get a full quart of milk. When I went home at noon, my foster mother
told me about it and wanted to know if I drank some of it. I told her what had happened, and she said I was lying. Then she got the rawhide whip and didn’t even care where she hit me.

Between the ages of six and eleven I got many whippings. I can truthfully say I never got enough to eat. When I would come home from school and go to the pantry to get a piece of bread and butter, she said I was stealing it, because I didn’t ask for it.

Once a year, Mr. McPhealy would come from the New York Foundling Home to see how I was getting along. I had to tell him fine. I would have to speak a piece for him, or poetry as it is called now. The name of it was “Looking on the Bright Side.” Then I had to dance the Irish jig for him, and when I was through, I was excused. I would go outside and cry and wish he would take me back with him. I wanted to tell him the truth about how I was treated, but I couldn’t. Still, she would whip me if she thought I was lying. I often wondered why Papa Larson didn’t ever have anything to say about the way she treated me, but it seemed to me like she ruled the house.”