

Wizner, Jake. *Worth Writing About: Exploring Memoir with Adolescents*. Stenhouse Publishers, 2015. 171 pages. ISBN 978-1-62531-048-4.

Reviewed by Melissa Nivens

Jake Wizner is best known for his hilarious young adult novels, *Castration Celebration* (2009) and *Spanking Shakespeare* (2007). Shakespeare Shapiro, the title character in *Spanking Shakespeare*, spends the novel pondering the miserable details of his young life for a memoir assignment that all high school seniors must complete. After reading Wizner's new instructional text, *Worth Writing About* (2015), it is clear that Mr. Wizner's own students must have inspired his debut novel. Wizner, a middle school teacher turned novelist, has assigned a memoir unit to his eighth graders for almost twenty years; therefore, he knows first-hand the struggles of teenagers as they explore who they are and where they have been. *Worth Writing About* offers a master class for middle school instructors in teaching the memoir genre to young writers. This latest text uses Wizner's classroom experience in New York City's Salk's School of Science to share concrete strategies and models for teaching memoir. His instructional text engagingly explores the value, challenge, and reward of teaching memoir to young writers.

Wizner begins by addressing the nay-sayers because he was once one himself. Prior to creating this memoir unit for his eighth grade classroom he questioned, "Was it possible that thirteen-year-old children had had enough meaningful experiences and the necessary distance from those experiences to be able to write reflectively about them? What would I have written about at that age?"(9). But now, after almost twenty years of teaching his memoir unit, he introduces the assignment by telling his skeptical students, "that at the end of the unit most of them will have produced the best piece of writing they have ever produced, and many of them will have come to see themselves and their lives in

new ways” (9). With certainty he promises his students and his readers, “I know it...because it happens every year” (9).

I admit, as a former middle school teacher, I was skeptical too. Sure, students can write those quick personal narratives that state standardized tests often require. After some practice with hooks and sensory details, students can crank out a page or two about a time they learned a lesson or had a change of heart. But a ten-page, full-out memoir? I wasn’t so sure. After reading Wizner’s text, especially the words of his students, I am now a believer in the power of memoir writing in the middle grades. The student samples that he includes in his text prove that eighth graders really can write beautiful and meaningful memoirs.

Wizner understands that teachers are bound by the state-mandated objectives for language arts, so he begins by clearly showing how memoir writing fits into the Common Core State Standards. ELA-Literacy Objective W8.3 requires that students “write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.” The subsequent areas under this key objective call on students to “engage and orient the reader by establishing a context” (W8.3A) and “use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, and reflection” (W8.3B). Certainly, it is easy to see how a memoir unit would fit nicely into the standards set forth by our state legislatures. However, Wizner does not rely solely on these standards to justify his memoir unit. In fact, he smartly argues that while the Common Core Standards are important, they should not “eclipse all other ideas about the purposes of education and the many objectives we have as teachers” (10). And with that reminder, he sets out with the rest of the book to reveal how much more memoir writing can bring to middle school classrooms than just meeting the narrative writing objectives.

First off, he outlines five reasons why he teaches memoir. One of his key reasons is that middle school students are often already struggling to answer the question, “Who am I?” The memoir unit allows students to “look back, take stock, and think deeply about

the choices they have made, the identities they have tried on, and the young adults they are becoming” (11). This perhaps sounds romantic, but Wizner is not alone in seeing the value of reflective writing from students. Kathleen Blake Yancey writes, “reflection is dialectical, putting multiple perspectives into play with each other in order to produce insight...reflection entails *looking forward* to goals we might attain, as well as a *casting backward* to see where we have been” (6). A unit such as Wizner’s allows students to do just this: look where they have been in order to consider where they want to go.

Further, Wizner also explains that memoir writing is accessible to most students and builds community in the classroom. He finds that students are comfortable writing about something that they know: themselves. They find satisfaction in learning more about themselves and their classmates. By the end of the unit when the students share their stories, classmates begin to see each other in different and often more positive ways. He illustrates this discovery by including not only student memoirs but also their reflections on the process of writing such a personal piece.

Beyond those first two important points, he shows how memoir encourages students to read more nonfiction texts. Wizner shares excerpts from Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Adam Bagdasarian’s *First French Kiss*, Tobias Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life*, and several others in his text and in his classroom. He notes that his students begin picking up memoirs to read for pleasure rather than the typical YA fantasy novels (13). Even so, I was somehow surprised at the titles he suggests for his students. Some memoirs like Tina Fey’s *Bossy Pants* or Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* might involve themes that are a little sophisticated for some middle school students. However, Wizner’s use of these texts seems to encourage authentic voice from his students. They do not shy away from difficult topics like drugs, divorce, race, or abuse, and they discuss them with an uncensored perspective that might include foul language or coarse descriptions. Using both professional mentor texts and outstanding student models are key to his memoir instruction. This practice is so much a part of his

pedagogy that he not only includes a list of mentor texts but also an entire appendix devoted to several student excerpts. He invites his readers to share these models with their own students as they begin memoir units in their classrooms.

Undoubtedly, through the use of literary examples, Wizner is able to provide evidence for his students that they are completing a writing task that could occur outside of school. So many school writing assignments are based in made-up situations and audiences that end up silencing students or producing artificial responses. Seth A. Parsons and Allison E. Ward argue that students should complete assignments that mimic tasks that are completed outside of school. They write that these “authentic activities contextualize students’ learning, which promotes motivation” (463). The memoir unit is one such authentic writing task that reflects a real world activity and illustrates the value of literacy beyond the school classroom. The honest responses from his students reveal an ownership and investment in the assignment that is not always present from young writers.

Finally, Wizner proclaims that, “memoir writing changes lives” (14). Once more, this might sound idealistic, but again the memoirs themselves and Wizner’s observations of his students make this bold claim undeniable. When describing a reluctant writer, Ryan, Wizner says:

The memoir unit did not transform Ryan into a model student, but when he was working on his memoir, I witnessed a level of focus and engagement that I had not previously seen. I watched him writing and rewriting, reading things he had written out loud to hear how they sounded...wanting to talk to me about things he was struggling with. (117)

Later Ryan himself reflects on his memoir and says, “the feelings are real so even if the student isn’t a good writer you can still understand what the person is trying to make the reader see” (119). Ultimately, “Ryan embraced his memoir as a vehicle to grapple with his own identity and sense of self, and he emerged

from the writing process with feelings of pride and academic accomplishment that had been in short supply throughout his middle school years” (119). Such an experience sounds life changing, indeed.

After offering justification for memoir writing in the middle school classroom, as expected, Wizner offers insight into how to teach the craft of memoir writing. He includes chapters on combating the reluctant writer by offering thought-provoking prompts. He explores teaching inventive figurative language and the importance of perspective. He gives sound advice on how to write a compelling lead or thoughtful conclusion. He gives guidance on holding constructive one-on-one conferences. He recommends assessment and evaluation approaches and confronts the challenges of differentiating instruction. All of these smart strategies are grounded in recent research from the likes of Kelly Gallagher’s *Write Like This*, Kirby and Kirby’s *New Directions in Teaching Memoir: A Studio Workshop Approach*, and Katherine Bomer’s *Writing a Life: Teaching Memoir to Sharpen Insight, Shape Meaning—and Triumph over Tests*. Wizner offers prompts, activities, and even a rubric that teachers could take straight to their own classrooms. However, as previously mentioned, the most compelling part of Wizner’s text is not his nuts-and-bolts of teaching but his incorporation of professional model texts and the powerful and often raw words of his own students.

Truly, the model essays are the strength of this book. With each writing strategy, Wizner offers professional mentor texts and student examples that use the techniques he describes. In Chapter 5, Wizner introduces the term *understory* (57). Essentially, this term refers to the underlying meaning of the story similar to theme when discussing fiction writing. Toward the end of the chapter he shares Vincent’s story, *Bumper Cars*, in its entirety. On the surface this story is about a four-year-old boy spending the day at Coney Island with his mom. It contains predictable memories of the train ride, the hot dogs, the roller coasters, the bumper cars, and even a tense run-in with a lady on the way home. But the story is more than hot dogs dripping with ketchup or the thrill of

ramming one bumper car into another. The students recognize that this eighth grade boy really writes a story of a mother's love and her fierce protection as illustrated with its final image, "On the ride home, I fell asleep, my cotton candy plastered cheeks resting lightly on my mother's shoulder, her hands resting lightly on mine" (71).

In her new book *Story: Still the Heart of Literacy Learning*, Katie Egan Cunningham explores why stories matter and whose stories count. She says:

We live in a time where stories exist where they always have: inside the walls of our homes, outside our front doors, in our backyards, on our playgrounds, in the pages of books, in the brushstrokes on canvas, in the imaginative play of children, and in the lyrics and rhythms of songs. Yet, today we are free to tap into and curate stories in new ways. (1-2)

Jake Wizner has found these powerful stories in his students, and his memoir unit convinces his students that their voices and stories matter. He has found a way to get reluctant students motivated to write. He gets teenagers writing in ways that help them see how their experiences matter and shape the adults they are becoming. What's more is that he presents their stories and his classroom strategies in a practical way. His suggested lessons and ideas are easily transferrable to any classroom. Undoubtedly many teachers are already teaching the personal narrative; however, this text challenges its readers to dig deeper and get students to go beyond a page or two of superficial details about ordinary events. *Worth Writing About* gives teachers the tools they need to begin a memoir unit and persuades them to find the real stories hidden within their young writers as they approach the brink of adulthood.

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