



BRIAN TAYLOR FOR THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

My students walk the same mythic landscape as the characters Toni Morrison or Tobias Wolff have etched into my imagination.

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THEY wear me out, then I miss them. They deliver their final exams or walk off with their graduation gowns draped over their arms, saying thank you—for writing that recommendation letter or telling me about the honors program or advising me on my thesis. And sometimes: For sending me to counseling after my panic attack. For giving me an extension after I was mugged and hospitalized. For talking with me about what I couldn't say in front of the other students.

They're public-university students, sometimes first- or second-generation immigrants, often the first in their families to go to college. And they come with experience.

When the summer kicks in, their life stories drift back to me, eclipsing, for sheer drama, the fiction or journalism we discussed in class. There was the student who had been raped by her father and grew up dodging bullets in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, literally crawling to the bathroom some nights for fear of being hit. Every morning she

ate a corn mush her mother concocted because their food stamps had been cut off; every night she went home to a phalanx of thugs who blocked the door of her building to let her know they thought she, the only college student in her complex, sucked.

She was initially a weak writer, and I graded her harshly. But she was smart and determined. An economics professor simultaneously recognized her talent and we both encouraged her. Within a year, she had won the college's most prestigious fellowship, along with a highly competitive national fellowship; she joined the student senate and began writing for the campus paper. Later, when she sat in my office showing me her personal essay and asking for a letter of recommendation, the picture of a fresh-faced, dedicated, and well-spoken coed, it was like having the triumphant narrator of some impossibly tragic memoir come to life and tell her story. Alice Sebold's *Lucky*, a memoir of her rape as a college freshman, paled by comparison. Yet she said reading *Lucky* in my class had changed her life. Just thinking about it, she said,

was the only reason she was able to get out of bed some mornings.

LITERATURE often unlocks their stories. In my course "Women, Literature, and the Body," I asked my students to respond to Shelley Jackson's hypertext narrative, "My Body: A Wunderkammer," by writing about any part of their own anatomy, as Jackson had, from her athlete's shoulders to her "alien" feet. A Nigerian student wrote a paean to his penis, then blithely volunteered to read it aloud in class. "It's short," he began. "I mean the essay," he laughed, with a wink in my direction. When he finished, the students reacted with either hilarity or—heads down—burning embarrassment. Then he revealed that as a child he'd been molested by a babysitter and it had taken him years to feel good about his body. The students froze as the essay's meaning shape-shifted before them, until a classmate leaned over, smiling, and threw his arm around him. Eve Ensler be damned—I had never heard a man

celebrate his sexuality with such raw honesty. It was phallogentric, and it was beautiful.

I try to open their minds, and they reciprocate, sometimes with an expression of suppressed mirth at what a college professor cannot know.

After we read Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's *Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx*, I asked my students—rhetorically, I thought—how to fathom girls and women who repeatedly get pregnant in an effort to snare their boyfriends. A student who had done just that offered the answer: You're young, poor, and stupid, and it's the only chance you've got. In a discussion about family values, a perky communications major explained that though her stepfather was a drug dealer, he insisted that his children eat breakfast and do well in school. "He doesn't take drugs," she said, adding with a snort, "though he did spend a little time in the federal penitentiary." A brilliant writer (now finishing his Ph.D.) wrote an essay in my memoir class in which he described Father's Day in his Bronx neighborhood, an occasion when most boys make pilgrimages to Rikers Island. And an Iraq vet—active duty—who lingered after class one radiant spring afternoon told me about the time she was commanded to walk from Iraq to Iran: I envisioned car bombs going off behind her; she described the awesome beauty of the Iranian landscape she entered. I sometimes wonder if she was sent back to combat.

They all go, of course, striding back into the pages of their lives, but some of them linger on in my memory as vividly as the characters we contemplated together in the classroom: the former Crip who may or may not meet retaliation for turning his back on the street; the Panamanian immigrant who taught herself English by reading the Bible, now studying at one of the best graduate journalism schools in the country; the Uzbek woman—a girl, really—who escaped marriage to a stranger when her family won the visa lottery and came to the United States.

They walk the same mythic landscape as the characters Toni Morrison or Tobias Wolff have etched into my imagination. But they're real. And they're proof that for many students, public education isn't merely a matter of self-improvement; it's a means of survival. ■