

# MEMO

Random High School  
626 High School Lane  
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To: Principle Kerr

From: Touching Spirit Bear Group TSBG

Subject: WHY TEACH TOUCHING SPIRIT BEAR

We chose Touching Spirit Bear for the beginning of freshmen year because of the standards it covered, the community it created, and the stigma it might help erase. In total, nine different Michigan State Standards for ninth grade, are reached by the unit we created for Touching Spirit Bear. Naturally, this novel seems to lend itself to ninth grade education simply for the sheer number of standards cover but also the type of standards covered. The nine standards covered by our book unit are as follows: 1.2- Use writing, speaking, and visual expression for personal understanding and growth. 1.3- Communicate in speech, writing, and multimedia using content, form, voice, and style appropriate to the audience and purpose. 2.1- Develop critical reading, listening, and viewing strategies. 2.2- Use a variety of reading, listening, and viewing strategies to construct meaning beyond the literal level. 3.1- Develop the skills of close and contextual literary reading. 3.2- Read and respond to classic and contemporary fiction, literary non-fiction, and expository text, from a variety of literary genre representing many time periods and authors. 3.4- Examine mass media, film, series fiction, and other texts from popular culture. 4.1- Understand and use the English language effectively in a variety of contexts and settings. 4.2- Understand how language variety reflects and shapes experience. As you can see, a number of these standards concern growth and development of a literary skill something that the sometimes-straightforward writing style in Spirit Bear lends itself to easily. A novel like Touching Spirit Bear allows students to ease into critical reading strategies, cultural awareness beyond the literal level (2.2) and examining mass

media such as the authors blogs (3.4) but most importantly it gives them the tools to tackle these standards when they reappear later in the year. Standards like, 4.2 are almost directly addressed in the novel, how actions/words/history can shape experience giving the students a solid base of understanding for the rest of the year. The many projects that accompany this unit, from the totem pole to mock circle justice help students conceptualize the novel and accomplish standards 1.3, 2.1, 4.1. To recap, this novel covers nine separate state standards for ninth grade and would be an excellent addition to any ninth grade classroom.

We also believe that *Touching Spirit Bear* will be great for the ninth graders because of the overarching message of the novel and classroom community exercises that go along with this novel. This novel deals a lot with forgiveness, community, blame and responsibility which are all important lessons for a classroom. This novel deals a lot with history and sharing which will also get students to know each other at the beginning of the year. It is always awkward those first few weeks but necessary to get the students talking, we'd prefer to do this with a novel than a name game or another icebreaker that seems unrelated to our subject. We also believe that the placement of this novel at the beginning of the year has the power to break the stigma of the multi-cultural book. It seems in schooling that multicultural books are often found in a unit and confined there for better or worse. This gives students a misguided impression of culture- the idea of 'other' and creates a binary in their minds. Similar to the cultural diversity credit we had to take in college everything that falls into the 'culturally diverse' is now deemed 'other' whereas integration of those texts into 'regular' English classes would eliminate the stigma. Placing a multi-cultural book at the introduction of class rather than in a unit of multicultural novels would still allow students to focus on the lessons, characters and story but prevent them from being trapped by the cultural differences. This is ultimately why we believe this novel is great for ninth grade.

Some may believe that the lessons and repercussions

in this novel are not realistic as most people in our society do not have the opportunity to go to Circle Justice instead of facing jail time. However true this may be, students still have the opportunity and ability to learn the lessons that Circle Justice has to offer, such as the processes of healing and forgiveness. In addition, some may hold the belief that forgiveness and justice are portrayed as being too easily achieved throughout the book.

However, *Touching Spirit Bear* is a young adult novel and, for the sake of length and time allotted to read, it is reasonable that the author carved these two elements in the way he did. Also, it is crucial to remember that justice and forgiveness varies from person to person; people take different amounts of time to heal and forgive than others. Moreover, this book still teaches the values of justice and forgiveness in which students should aim to emulate, which is not easy to fulfill. As students explore the ideas of justice and forgiveness, they can begin to question why or how the book depicts them as too easy and why they are harder to achieve in real life, giving the students a chance to develop their own ideas about these issues.

The strong points this book has to offer are numerous.

First, the main character, Cole is fourteen, which is around the age of the high school freshman who will be reading it. In addition, as mentioned above, the book offers ideas and representations about the issues of justice and forgiveness. By reading this book, students can question the forms of justice they currently know, reflect on the new form of Circle Justice and decide on how many chances a person should get to right a wrong. With forgiveness, they can relate Cole and Peter's ways of forgiving with their own and meditate on what it means to forgive. Another strength this book offers is the process of healing. Students can explore the various ways of healing (physically, mentally, spiritually, etc.) and delve into the idea of how someone begins the healing process. Lastly, Cole's isolation on the island leaves him in state of self-reflection. From this, students can discover how they themselves can self-reflect.

They can embark on a journey of self-reflection and

improvement as Cole did throughout the novel in order to better understand themselves and their actions.

As with every novel, there lie some weaknesses. Some may argue *Touch Spirit Bear* is too easy and obvious of a read for ninth grade. Yes, it is a fairly easy read, but it is an excellent book to start the year because it represents understanding, acceptance, and the foundation of a community. Also, the focus will be put on the issues presented instead of the style. Another weakness is that the book seems to legitimize Cole's crime against Peter because Cole was beaten by his father. This weakness is an excellent teaching moment. First, it teaches that everyone comes from an unknown background that cannot be assumed. It is impossible to know where someone's life story without the person expressing it, therefore, it should not be assumed. This weakness also teaches that everyone is responsible for his/her own actions. For example, Cole most definitely had to pay for what he did to Peter. The last weakness presented in this novel is that some claim it does not hold true to the Tlingit culture. This weakness will be made known to the students in order that they understand that. In addition, this provides an opportunity to teach, research and understand the true culture of the Tlingit tribe.

*Touching Spirit Bear* concerns two extremely different cultures, the American life (based out of Minnesota), and Native life (Tlingit tribe). The presentation of how other cultures affects our everyday culture of students in the USA today brings in an interesting perspective of life. Students have an opportunity to expand their horizons while learning good life lessons that will help them well into the future concerning violence, family, and trust. There are a lot of information that can be used that is already out there to help prepare lessons and an overall unit. A movie has been made that reenacts the book so that allows visual learners an opportunity to understand the text better. There is also many articles like in National Geographic, about Spirit Bears that will improve understanding about the Spirit Bear in the book. It talks about background and what the animal is

actually like. There is also an online activity that was designed by students to help with the context of the book. It's possible to have students create their own game or even to use it to help their understanding. This book just gives students an opportunity at a realistic look at a difficult situation in life coming from their age bracket. It allows students to open up to an opportunity for growth and would be very advantageous to use it in the classroom.

Ben Mikaelson faced a few struggles on his way to becoming an award-winning novelist. In growing up in South America, Spanish was his prominent language and English was his source of adversity. He faced terrible problems with the spellings and grammar rules found in the English language even through college. However, he loved writing and telling the stories of life. It took a college professor applauding Mikaelson's ability to make him laugh and cry within his story, even with the grammar skills of a fifth grader, to give Mikaelson the confidence to turn this passion into a career. One of Mikaelson's mantras began to be "Writing is storytelling! The story is what holds the magic and power. The story is why we created language."

The stories that Mikaelson creates include themes present in the lives of the children and young adults who would be reading his work. *Touching Spirit Bear* shows the views of what bullying can do to both the bully and the person being harassed. Mikaelson experienced harassment first hand while being a white boy in South America. Racial slurs followed him through school in the form of name calling and would even have mud smeared across his face while being held down to cover his whiteness. These experiences, as well as, the ones in high school in the United States where he remained an outsider, helped in his molding of the characters within his stories. *Touching Spirit Bear* highlights those experiences and not only provides insight into Mikaelson himself but, also possibly allowing readers to reflect on their own actions. Moments of reflection for characters can provide moments for change in readers and it is a facet Mikaelson finds important enough to

include in all of his works.

Not only does Mikaelson include personal experiences, he also includes lots of moments for himself to interact with students. Ben Mikaelson's website provides lessons and activities for teachers, as well as, opportunities for teachers to bring him into the school or classroom. Mikaelson uses his time in the classroom in order to inspire students who struggle to never give up, that they must persevere for their passion. He mentions that when students ask him how to become a better writer, he answers, "Go out and live! You can't pour water from an empty bucket. Experience life. Then never quit writing about it!" This prospect of being able to connect author to student is one that can be very beneficial and should be implemented in the classroom as much as possible.

Ben Mikaelson and his works have not only been nominated for many awards but have won many as well. His books *Rescue Josh McGuire*, *Sparrow Hawk Red*, *Stranded*, *Countdown*, *Petey*, *Red Midnight*, and *Tree Girl* won 16 awards and were nominated to win almost 40 more. Looking at *Touching Spirit Bear* specifically, Ben Mikaelson received 10 awards, one of them being the YALSA Best Book for Young Adults, ALA in 2002. It also was nominated to win 15 other awards. More notably Mikaelson was the winner of the International Reading Association Award and the Western Writer's Golden Spur Award. Scholastic and Troll Book Fairs have deemed his books wonderful enough to include them on their book fair lists. Some of his books have even been optioned for screen use to spread the "magic" of Ben Mikaelson including *Rescue Josh McGuire*, *Petey*, and *Touching Spirit Bear* while others are being recorded for audio tape. With Ben Mikaelson being the animal lover that he is, has even been a guest star on Jack Hanna's Animal Adventures.

The reviews for Mikaelson's *Touching Spirit Bear* seem to be what's come to be expected of his works, these reviews include:

- "Mikaelson's portrayal of this angry, manipulative, damaged teen is dead on."

- School Library Journal (starred review)
  - “[Cole's] solitary life on the island is just the ticket for Paulsen fans, who will appreciate the survival story.”
- The Bulletin
  - “Mikaelsen paints a realistic portrait of an unlikable young punk.”
- Kirkus Reviews
  - “An excellent companion to Gary Paulsen’s Hatchet and Allan Eckert’s Incident at Hawk’s Hill.”
- ALA Booklist
  - “[Cole’s story] will fascinate young and old, and have everyone waiting for the sequel.”
- Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA)

Each of these reviews applaud the writing and storytelling skills of Ben Mikaelsen and can be a great reminder of why his works should be read and why we can’t wait to teach them.

Hope to hear from you soon,  
Sincerely,

Touching Spirit Bear Group