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# Rethinking Novel Studies:

## An Alternate Approach

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Based on Kelly Gallagher's book **Readicide**: *How Schools are Killing Reading and What We Can Do About It*

There is something unique to English teachers, distinctive from others in the teaching profession. Perhaps it is their appreciation of books as a vital tool to teach us about our place in this world and the people in it. Maybe it is their commitment to the artful communication of ideas; the sense that words, when linked in clever ways, enter the domain of poets and philosophers. English teachers live in this junction between opening minds and communicating ideas in poetic, passionate, and defensible ways. These professionals put themselves out there daily in that vulnerable place where subjective thought is critiqued and hidden meanings revealed.

These teachers, perhaps more than others, are at that intersection that Parker Palmer calls “the dangerous intersection of personal and public life.” They are exposed to “...a daily exercise in vulnerability.” He says, “The things I teach are things I care about – and what I care about helps define my selfhood,” Parker Palmer (1998).

In this highly personal space English teachers enter the classroom with a mission to broaden students' experiences; to equip them with the skills and tools necessary to both understand the world around them and communicate their sense of themselves within it.

One considerable tool at the disposal of English teachers is the novel study. There are numerous ways to teach and reach students through novels; this document examines novel studies through the lens of author Kelly Gallagher, an American English teacher who has authored titles on the subject.

In the accompanying table, you will see numerous recommendations for teaching novel studies and the rationale behind each of those suggestions.

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| Recommendation:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Rationale:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
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| <p>1. Choose a novel that is <b>slightly above students' independent reading abilities</b>.</p>                                                                                                                                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Teachers have a duty to challenge students with complex novels and long works. We are English teachers, not English assigners, and as such, we are paid to get in our classroom and present texts that stretch our students' thinking. It's not the difficult novels that are the problem, it's how they are taught that is the problem.” (<i>Readicide</i>, pg. 57, Gallagher)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <p>2. Provide a <b>framework for removing supports</b> throughout a novel.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Begin with a <b>Guided Tour</b>.</li> <li>Move to a <b>Budget Tour</b>.</li> <li>End with a <b>Self-Guided Tour</b>.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Carol Jago- (<i>from Readicide</i>, pg. 79, Gallagher)             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Guided Tour</b>: Beginning of the book - ‘We frame the text before students read it. We provide a specific purpose for reading each chapter. We design close readings that enable kids to delve deeper than surface-level reading. We model to students how we would read the text. In short, we give students a hands-on guided tour of the front half of the book. We craft lessons so that students have ample time to discuss their ideas and their confusion, both in small-group and whole-class settings.</li> <li><b>Budget Tour</b>: About halfway through the novel, Jago argues, we should shift to the budget tour mode. In other words, we should begin to step out of the process and begin requiring our students to take the journey on their own. Once students have enough framing, once they have become familiar with the rhythm and structure of the text, once they have begun to make sense of this unfamiliar world we have immersed them in, then it is time for the teacher to step to the background and allow them to read the text on their own.</li> <li><b>Self-Guided Tour</b>: Teachers should not hold the hands of their students all the way through the novel. If the front half of the book is taught properly...students should be equipped to read the second half of the book with much less assistance from the instructor.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |

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| <p>3. Read books in larger chunks with fewer interruptions.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “<b>Read-i-cide</b>: noun, the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools. (<i>Readicide</i>, pg. 2, <i>Gallagher</i>)</li> <li>● “... through intensive over analysis of literature and nonfiction. ...[the] love of reading [is] squashed by the constant over teaching, the constant teacher-induced interruptions, the constant chopping up of great books. (<i>Readicide</i>, pg. 59, <i>Gallagher</i>)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <p>4. Find value in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Draft Reading, the “<b>Big Chunk/Little Chunk</b>” <b>Philosophy</b>”</p>                                                                                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Students will rarely glean any more than a bare literal meaning of text during the initial read, one which Kelly Gallagher states is “foundational before deeper reading can occur.” He adds, “most students will only discover the deeper, richer level of comprehension found in a second-draft reading through the guidance of a teacher.” (<i>Readicide</i>, pg. 97, <i>Gallagher</i>.)</li> <li>● “If students aren’t directed to read small chunks of text closely, they will never learn to reach deeper levels of analysis. However, if we chop up the books and have them analyze too many segments, they will succumb to readicide. It is a delicate balance” (<i>Readicide</i>, pg. 99, <i>Gallagher</i>).</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <p>5. Recognize that <b>messages</b> in perennial novels, the ‘classics’, <b>still have relevance in today’s world</b>. For example: William Shakespeare, Harper Lee, or S.E. Hinton, have novels which are historical in time frame but can resonate strongly with ties to the modern world.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Recognize the difference between liking a text and gleaning value from a text. Students may or may not like the novel, but I want all of them to understand the value that comes from reading it—a value that will help them become smarter people long after they leave school.”</li> <li>● “...when I read ‘tsunami’ curricular guides: they direct teachers to chop up novels into so many pieces that novels are destroyed. ...The value comes when we use this great book as a springboard to examine issues in today’s world. ...these themes found in the novel are universal.” (<i>Readicide</i>, pg. 69, <i>Gallagher</i>)</li> <li>● In 1968 Kenneth Burke coined the term “imaginative rehearsals,” explaining that through reading books, young people are provided with opportunities to practice with the complexities of the world around them before they enter the adult world.</li> </ul> |

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| <p>6. <b>Link novel's themes with other text.</b><br/>(Second novel, poetry, movie, advertisements, short stories, etc.)</p>                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryanne Wolf discusses the importance of producing “bi-textual” readers—students who garner reading from a number of different sources. “Reading...real-world articles builds our students’ knowledge capital so that when they graduate they will have a better chance of comprehending our world.” (<i>Proust and the Squid</i>, pg. 49, Wolf 2007.)</li> <li>• Kelly Gallagher in <i>Readicide</i> says, “I use the rich short stories and poems in the anthology to augment the novels my students are reading. My students read both long and short pieces, because I want them to exercise all regions of their reading brains.”</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <p>7. <b>Share the end goal at the beginning:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why read this particular book?</li> <li>• How can you help them frame the novel?</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Finding flow in academic text...is much more difficult [than recreational books] I almost always provide a purpose for their reading before they read the assigned large chunk. Because reading a new novel or work of nonfiction can be overwhelming, I ask my students to focus on only one or two elements while they read. I provide a specific purpose for the reading that scaffolds students toward the final exam essay.” (<i>Readicide</i>, pg. 100, Gallagher)</li> </ul> <p><b>Recognize the importance of framing</b> (steps taken before the reading commences.)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A preview of the final exam essay question so as to provide a very specific reading purpose for the novel</li> <li>2. Vocabulary preview to help with archaic language</li> <li>3. Discussion of historical context of the story</li> <li>4. Background on the author and what he was trying to accomplish with this work</li> <li>5. Anticipation guide to help students begin recognizing the universal truths found in the novel.</li> <li>6. A discussion on why we are reading this book and the value it offers to the modern reader.</li> </ol> <p style="text-align: right;">(Readicide, pg. 97, Gallagher)</p> |

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| <p>8. <b>Split reading time</b> into 50% <b>class novel</b>, 50% <b>pleasure reading</b>. Decide that there is value in reading for one's own interests in order to foster life-long readers.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “If we are to have any chance of developing a reading habit in our students, they must be immersed in a K-12 “Book flood” –a term coined by researcher Warwick Elly (1991). Students must have ready access to a wide range of interesting reading materials.” (Readicide, pg. 32, Gallagher.)</li> <li>• “By providing a wide and deep reading experience, we actually help students raise their tests scores. “ pg. 35, Readicide, Gallagher</li> <li>• There is a “strong correlation between time spent reading and performance on standardized reading tests.” (Anderson, Wilson, Fielding- 1998)</li> <li>• <i>To Read or Not to Read study</i>: Students who read the most for fun scored the highest on standardized reading tests. (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <p>9. Keep <b>all readers</b> (struggling and others) engaged within the classroom with <b>highly interesting novels</b> for their own <b>pleasure reading time</b>.</p>                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “If students are to read for fun, they need fun books to read. Many of them. They need immersion in a book flood, and because many of our students come from print-poor environments at home, that book flood needs to be found at school.” (Readicide, pg. 52, Gallagher)</li> <li>• Struggling readers “are often placed in remedial classes where the pace is slowed and where the reading focus moves away from books to a steady diet of small chunks of reading. In an effort to “help” prepare them for reading tests, we starve readers. Rather than lift up struggling readers, this approach contributes to widening the achievement gap.” (Readicide, pg. 33, Gallagher).</li> <li>• “They must have interesting books to read. Bring books to the students, surround them with interesting books daily” (Readicide, pg. 84, Gallagher)</li> <li>• Jon Scieszka-author of <i>The Stinky Cheese Man</i> and other high interest books suggests expanding the definition of personal reading to more than novels— but also nonfiction, graphic novels, comic books, magazines, online, audiobooks). Scieszka reasons, “Teachers often accelerate the death spiral by insisting that all reading be academic in nature and that each book students read must be sliced and diced in a million different ways. The death spiral ends in readicide.” (Readicide, pg. 85, Gallagher)</li> </ul> |