ALA Great Stories Club

Recommended discussion questions and activities for Sherman Alexie’s *Flight* in the wake of accusations of sexual misconduct

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Background

After Sherman Alexie’s *Flight* was selected for inclusion on the American Library Association’s (ALA) Great Stories Club “Empathy” reading list and piloted in libraries in 2017, the author was accused of harassment and abuse. Since then, he has both acknowledged that he’s “hurt people” and denied some of the specific accusations.

Alexie is one of a growing number of celebrities — including comedian Bill Cosby, rapper XXXTentacion, movie producer Harvey Weinstein, hip-hop artist Chris Brown, and former comedian/U.S. Senator Al Franken — who have been accused of a pattern of abusing and harassing women.

ALA’s Public Programs Office issued a statement about the inclusion of *Flight* as an optional title on this Great Stories Club reading list and is providing a set of discussion questions and activities intended for librarians to address the issues at hand with their readers through the thematic lens of the series.

Additional Context

Following the accusations against Alexie, the American Indian Library Association (AILA) rescinded its 2008 Young Adult Literature Award for *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and published an open letter to their membership expressing “full support for the people harmed by Sherman Alexie” and stating that “in rescinding this award, we hope to send an unequivocal message that Alexie’s actions are unacceptable.” Soon after, Alexie declined ALA’s 2018 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction, which had been announced for his book *You Don’t Have to Say You Love Me: A Memoir*.

Important context regarding Alexie’s conduct and its impact on Native writers and writing may be found via the American Indians in Children's Literature blog. We urge all Great Stories Club project directors to read these statements, share them with participating teen readers, and encourage conversation about the issues that they raise.

To find recommendations for the best books by or about American Indians, selected by Native people, please visit American Indians in Children’s Literature and the AILA Youth Literature Awards.

Additional suggestions for related activities and discussions are below.
Discussion questions and activities

Q1. Should we consume art — read books, listen to music, or watch movies — made by people who have been accused of a pattern of harassment, abuse, and assault?

Related activities:
- To respond, students could be asked to come up with a pro and a con, or they could be divided into debate teams. Or the class could annotate/critique/enhance arguments that have been made by others.

- Share the two statements below with your students, then ask:
  - Do you agree with these statements?
  - What do they leave out?
  - What do they need to address? What would you add?

  **Statement 1:** Many artists have done terrible things. Many founding fathers were slaveholders. What effect, if any, should that have on whether or not we continue to acknowledge and/or celebrate the work that they accomplished? Why or why not?

  **Statement 2:** From Roxane Gay (author of several best-selling books and rape survivor) “I no longer struggle with artistic legacies. It is not difficult to dismiss the work of predators and angry men because agonizing over a predator’s legacy would mean there is some price I am willing to let victims pay for the sake of good art.”

Q2. Some of the men who have been accused of harassment, abuse, and/or assault have publicly apologized. Does that suffice? Does it make a difference? What, if anything, makes an apology worthy of acceptance? When is an apology not enough?

Related activities:
- Figuring out what makes for a “good” apology (e.g., an acknowledgment of one’s own flaws, a real effort to understand the pain another has felt at your hands, and a good-faith effort to repair some of that harm) will raise questions that are central to our theme of empathy. As part of your discussion:
  1. Have students use the Frayer model to define a good apology. Then discuss whether a good apology is enough in a case like Alexie’s. If not, what else would have to happen?
  2. Have students think about apologies they’ve accepted and ones they’ve rejected. What criteria did they use to make their decision?
  3. If possible, you might draw on this YouTube series to introduce students to the idea of restorative justice to further extend the discussion on the relationship between reconciliation and empathy.

- Return to earlier discussions about what real empathy asks of us. There are moments in Flight in which Zits has to do the painful work of experiencing the reality of someone
else’s pain. When, if ever, does he find redemption for the wrongs he has committed? When, if ever, is he able to find forgiveness for the wrongs committed against him?

**Other introductory activities**

**Preparation**
As an introduction, you may wish to gauge what students already know about this topic and what their feelings are about the issue.

This subject may be especially sensitive and difficult for a student whose life has been affected by sexual abuse. Prior to beginning a conversation, have resources available to offer support. The Blue Bench’s mission is “to eliminate sexual assault and diminish the impact it has on individuals, their loved ones and their communities through comprehensive issue advocacy, prevention and care” and they offer online resources for those who need help. GSC project directors should also research local options to support those who are living with the effects of sexual abuse.

Begin by having students write about what they already know about sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement. You can have the class submit their thoughts anonymously by putting folded pieces of paper into a basket, or you can have them write publicly by using a graffiti board.

To prompt their thinking, you might start by asking:

- What have you heard or learned about sexual harassment?
- What do you know about the #MeToo movement?
- How do you feel about the movement?
- What questions do you have about this movement and the many issues it has raised over the past several months?
- Why might this be a difficult topic to discuss in class?

After students have had time to reflect, discuss all but the last question as a class. If students wrote anonymously, you might read aloud from some of the submissions to get the discussion started. As the class talks, highlight patterns in their feelings and observations and write down student questions on a poster so you can continue to address them over the course of the unit.

Finally, take on the last question. Why might this be a difficult topic to discuss? What barriers might there be to learning about this topic and discussing it as a group? Are there ground rules that should be developed? If so, what should they be?

Alternatively, or in addition to the exercise above, you can ask students to come up with a working definition of “sexual harassment” and/or “apology” using a Frayer model or some other vocabulary tool.

- What does the term mean?
• What are some characteristics associated with the term?
• What are some examples that would illustrate the meaning of this term?
• What are some non-examples? What is something that is decidedly not sexual harassment?

If you’d like an example as a starting point to critique or enhance, here is the *The New York Times* definition of harassment in the workplace:

“Sexual harassment in the workplace is an umbrella term that encompasses a range of unwanted behaviors. This includes nonphysical harassment, including suggestive remarks and gestures, or requests for sexual favors. Physical harassment includes touches, hugs, kisses, and coerced sex acts. … It can be perpetrated by anyone — a manager, a colleague, a client. The perpetrator or the recipient may be male or female. It does not need to occur inside the office.”

**Further reading**

• *The New York Times* has a great [collection of exercises](#) for thinking through this topic.

• Children’s literature professor Phil Nel also has quite a [good discussion](#) around the question of whether or not we should consume/teach the art produced by men accused of sexual misconduct and abuse.

• Sherman Alexie’s [apology](#).

• In addition to *Flight*, GSC project directors will receive 11 copies of *Pipestone: My Life in an Indian Boarding School* by Adam Fortunate Eagle and are encouraged to use this bonus title in their “Empathy” programming series.