

Literature: The Great Equalizer

By Meadow Pike

It is common knowledge that literature is a window into what human beings believe to be their purpose, and every piece of literature has something to teach its readers. The function of literature has an especially important purpose in Perry High School's service learning program (PSL), which is to teach its students about love, equality, resilience, and connection through experiences carved into writing. In Allison Trentanelli and Mark Soeder's class, students in the honors and regular course will read four books: *The Other Wes Moore* by Wes Moore, *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls, *Heroine* by Mindy McGinnis, and *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom.

The first book PSL students read, *The Other Wes Moore*, takes them on a journey through two young men's lives. While both men share the same name, they are taken on very different paths based on the environments and opportunities presented to them. One ends up as a very famous author through discipline and accountability, and the other ends up imprisoned for a crime he still denies fault in. Trentanelli would describe this book as one exploring the definition of "equality." Since both men were born in the same time, near the same cities, the extreme difference in outcomes of the Moore's lives is of special interest to PSL students. Students spend the first few weeks of the class observing and discussing the "what ifs" of each Moore's life, such as "What if the Other Wes Moore never moved cities?" and "What if the narrator was never faced with racial violence?"

Moving to the next book PSL students will explore, *The Glass Castle* is all about growing up in poverty and escaping the culture of poverty, but still remembering the effect it had on one as a human being. Written in the style of a memoir, young Jeannette Walls and her siblings grow

up bouncing from town to town, with two very eccentric parents who teach them that every object and person has a purpose and a role to fulfill. Walls reflects on her life, and notes how it has translated into her adult life, and how she treats people in her relationships, as well as how she overcame the obstacles presented to her.

During the second quarter of the year, the PSL students read the book *Heroine*, which is a fictional story based on a true experience of a high school athlete with hopes of going D1, but her dreams are put on hold when she gets in a car accident and is prescribed OxyContin. Readers experience her journey through becoming addicted, and how it effects her dynamics with friends and family. The further she falls into her heroin addiction, the more she loses those who she cares most about.

Finally, PSL students start off their third quarter reading the philosophical “slice of life” novel *Tuesdays With Morrie*. Albom’s novel follows Morrie Schwartz, an old man suffering from ALS whose only wish is to share the meaning and purpose of living as he realizes what dying feels like. Students discuss the purpose of life and how to lead a fulfilling life throughout one of the busiest times in their lives - senior year - as well as how to balance their lives. Trent and Soeder ask them to question their lives, and check up on themselves weekly with philosophical questions such as “Are you at peace with yourself?” and “Are you the person you want to be?” *Tuesdays with Morrie* is Trent and Soeder’s favorite of the books they read in class because it is “timeless.”

Trent and Soeder use these prose pieces because they believe that literature serves as a way to “identify with and carry [experiences and passion] with us” and humans “learn through story, we learn as children through story... it’s one thing to have statistics and numbers, but when you can put a human story behind something... it adds power.” By allowing the students to

connect with other stories besides the statistics they are taught in class, Trent and Soeder are able to teach one of the most important life lessons: “empathy.” Literature puts the reader into the shoes of the writer, or the character in the novel itself. In this way it functions as a different form of service, “when you walk in the shoes of a stranger you learn things you never knew you never knew... and that’s the power of service... [which is also] the same power of literature.”

Students may recommend books to add to the curriculum, but there must be a direct connection with the content in class. Trent and Soeder are open to any level of maturity or content, so long as the content can teach the students a valuable lesson. Most of the recommendations they have received in the past have been from college freshmen and sophomores, who read in their classes and pass it back down to their previous teachers as a point of interest.

PSL is a great program that teaches through traditional methods as well as project-based learning and real-world experience, and many students coming out of the program can testify that PSL was their most meaningful class at Perry High School. Part of this is due to the great leadership of Trent and Soeder, who tirelessly work together and communicate constantly about the students and the work being done in both the classroom and the community. The other reason PSL is so effective is due to the students' effort, which is partially achieved through reading these books, pulling the lessons from them, and applying them to their own lives. Books can be an amazing connection between people of all demographics, and PSL is just the beginning to these connections built with others.