

Wisdom in Education

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 3

5-1-2008

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Recommended Citation

Cannaday, Jessica (2008) "Erin Gruwell and The Freedom Writers: Two Books Reviewed," *Wisdom in Education*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/wie/vol4/iss1/3>

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Abstract

Two books, “The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them,” by the Freedom Writers and Erin Gruwell, and “Teach With Your Heart,” also by Erin Gruwell will be reviewed herein. Together, they weave an integrated tale of discovery and self-actualization. This is true for both the students who undergo catharsis with diary entries in “The Freedom Writers Diary,” and for Ms. Gruwell who learns more deeply about who she is as a teacher, a professor, and a person, through a heartfelt journey to help 150 at-risk students find authenticity in learning in “Teach With Your Heart”.

Keywords

teaching, freedom writers, book review

Author Statement

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Erin Gruwell and The Freedom Writers: Two Books Reviewed

Jessica Cannaday, Wisdom in Education, Contributing Editor

Two books, “The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them,” by the Freedom Writers and Erin Gruwell, and “Teach With Your Heart,” also by Erin Gruwell will be reviewed herein. Together, they weave an integrated tale of discovery and self-actualization. This is true for both the students who undergo catharsis with diary entries in “The Freedom Writers Diary,” and for Ms. Gruwell who learns more deeply about who she is as a teacher, a professor, and a person, through a heartfelt journey to help 150 at-risk students find authenticity in learning in “Teach With Your Heart”.

The second of the two texts, “Teach With Your Heart”, though written later, may best be read first, as it discusses in depth the experiences Ms. Gruwell encounters as a new teacher of English at Woodrow Wilson High School in gang-ridden Long Beach, California. The book details Ms. Gruwell’s struggles in finding common ground with students, with whom on the surface, she appears to have little in common. In it, Gruwell describes her actions as a new student teacher, and her overwhelming need - to form relationships with and make learning real to, her struggling learners. In the text, Gruwell emotionally depicts her motivations in working two jobs in order to provide new literature for students who have never been allowed to use the school owned books, as well as her determined attempts to fundraise for trips with her students. Gruwell discusses her varied attempts to broaden the limited experiences in which society and life have pigeonholed her “at-risk” students. They travel together to The Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and Europe where they meet a young author from a war-torn country and travel to sites relevant to the life and death of Anne Frank, the author who first inspired these students to read.

Further, in “Teach With Your Heart” Gruwell is able to give the reader a brief glimpse of her own unwavering need to right the wrongs and inequities in a school system where some students experience covert racial and socio-economically based tracking. Through Ms. Gruwell’s guidance and mentorship, the students start to keep journals about their own lives and the class readings, and in doing so they find parallels between characters’ lives (such as Anne Frank, Romeo and Juliet, and Zlata) and their own.

“Teach With Your Heart” continues Ms. Gruwell’s story through three more years at Woodrow Wilson High, a failed marriage, inspirational meetings with good-hearted philanthropists, miraculous trips to far-off destinations, the publication of the Freedom Writers’ Diary, a failed congressional bid, the beginnings of both a professorship and a public speaking career, the death of her father, and the making of the Freedom Writers movie. Continuously throughout the tale, the students of room 203 never lose their central position in Ms. Gruwell’s narrative, nor do they lose their place in her heart, as is evidenced in the work of the Freedom Writers Foundation and the establishment of scholarships and a bachelors degree program for Freedom Writers at CSULB (California State University Long Beach) where Ms. Gruwell has taught.

In *The Freedom Writers' Diary*, which is logically read next, the reader is able to experience individual students in "Ms. G's" room 203 in their own words. These students describe intense life events through diary entries in which they compare their own lives to the struggles of teenage characters who have also experienced tragedy and hardship. Over the course of four years in Ms. Gruwell's classes, the teens become agents for change in their community. They travel to Washington, D.C. to meet with U.S. Secretary of Education Riley; and through writing and fundraising, they meet holocaust survivors as well as Zlata, a teenager who lived through and wrote about the war in Bosnia. The Freedom Writers were further able to travel to New York and attain some notoriety by being featured on a television news story with Connie Chung.

The Freedom Writers' stories are clearly inspirational. When Erin Gruwell, began her first teaching position at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California, most of the students had already given up on themselves and did not give much credence to Ms. Gruwell's own chances at success in the classroom. The journals the idealistic young teacher persuaded her students to keep over the years they spent together, show the influences of the gang culture, homelessness, abusive families and drugs, yet the reflective process was also clearly therapeutic and motivational.

The Freedom Writers have presented their stories in book form, conference presentations, television and newspaper interviews, and even a feature film starring Hilary Swank. However, the most significant success of their story, this reviewer would suggest, is that upon graduation from Woodrow Wilson High School, all 150 of them attended college, and Ms. Gruwell now trains teachers, representing hope for the future of education and an ambassador for change.