

Jeremy Knoll

How 'Homegoing' Has Changed My Teaching

In the nearly two decades I have been in the classroom, teaching literature and writing has never felt more vital. Since November, I have struggled to be positive, to take what I see as a deterioration of the United States' core beliefs and find a positive way forward.

Right now we face a public narrative that erodes empathy rather than embracing it; many of our country's most empathic enterprises are threatened. That undermining had me feeling a bit hopeless when my wife handed me Yaa Gyasi's debut novel, *Homegoing*. After reading it, I find myself doubling down on my efforts to root the study of literature and written expression in an emancipatory impulse.

The novel begins in the 18th century within the walls of a British castle on the Gold Coast (now Ghana) in Africa. Two women born of the same mother meet very different fates—one marrying a British officer and one being enslaved and held in the dungeons below her sister's feet. From there, the book alternates chapters following the descendants of these two women across time and continents. Both lineages are filled with tragedy and subjugation, and both have moments of beauty and grace.

To me, a white male who has benefitted from both my skin color and my gender, the story resonated with much of what I see around me. I thought of the stark contrast between the education I received growing up in Haddon Township, New Jersey, and the educational opportunities offered to kids living just 10 minutes down the road in Camden. The story made me think about the systemic discrimination that is the foundation of our country's history, and how that history has shaped movements like Black Lives Matter. It made me think about undocumented immigrants, whose life circumstances are so different from mine simply due to the geographical chance of birth. It made me think about refugees trying to flee war and people

incarcerated in overcrowded U.S. jails. It made me think about unemployed factory workers and people piecing together minimum-wage jobs.

Teaching in a relatively affluent, largely white high school, I have always been troubled by a lack of empathy I see in some of my students. Too often in conversations about injustice or unfairness that spring up from the books we read, my students seem unwilling to acknowledge the advantages they have been given over so many others in our society. Beautiful schools, well-appointed science and computer labs, free tutors and test-prep classes and relative safety, to name a few. Many students seem to believe that they are where they are simply due to their merits, that a history of systemic discrimination has nothing to do with it. People who struggle must simply work harder, some of my students believe, failing to acknowledge that those who struggle have to travel farther to achieve the same ends. I fear that attitude is a large part of the reason we find ourselves in an empathy-deprived society.

I am not talking about creating sympathy; I don't want my students to feel bad for or pity anyone. I am talking about teaching empathy. I want them to be able to understand the feelings of those whose experiences look nothing like their own. So, after reading Gyasi's remarkable book, I am reinvigorated to show my students the advantages they have *and* foster their understanding of the inequities in a system that prevents so many others from accessing those same advantages. But awareness isn't enough: I want to develop young adults who use the advantages they have been given to stand behind and work alongside those who have not.

I am asking my seniors to think and write about justice. What is justice? What does it mean to get justice? Is justice the same for everyone in this country? Should punishment for criminals be punitive or rehabilitative? The first time I asked them that last question, most said strictly punitive. Now, after days of debate, after watching Adam Foss' TED Talk on the role of a prosecuting attorney and Dan Pacholke's TED Talk about allowing inmates to live fulfilling lives, many are changing their minds. Some are seeing prisoners as people for the first time. Others are now looking at all

sorts of questions through a more empathic lens. Still others have taken my suggestion and are picking up *Homegoing*.

Now, more than ever, I want my students to view literature as a reflection of our world through which they may bear witness to the atrocities of the past and present and the remarkable ability of the human spirit to persevere, evolve and overcome. Now, more than ever, I want them to write in ways that help them find their own voices and illuminate the power those voices have when raised to amplify the voiceless.

Knoll is a writer and English teacher at a public school in New Jersey.

After reading Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing, this teacher is doubling down on his efforts to root the study of literature and written expression in an emancipatory impulse.

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