Literature and the Arts in Medical Education

Johanna Shapiro, PhD
Feature Editor

Editor’s Note: In this column, teachers who are currently using literary and artistic materials as part of their curricula will briefly summarize specific works, delineate their purposes and goals in using these media, describe their audience and teaching strategies, discuss their methods of evaluation, and speculate about the impact of these teaching tools on learners (and teachers).

Submissions should be three to five double-spaced pages with a minimum of references. Send your submissions to me at University of California, Irvine, Department of Family Medicine, 101 City Drive South, Building 200, Room 512, Route 81, Orange, CA 92868-3298. 949-824-3748. Fax: 714-456-7984. E-mail: jfshapir@uci.edu.

(Whose) Family Values?: A Literary Inquiry

Delese Wear, PhD

Literature is the lie that tells the truth, that shows us human beings in pain and makes us love them, and does so in a spirit of honest revelation.
Dorothy Allison¹

I don’t want to give Dan Quayle credit for motivating me to develop a syllabus on family values, but I do have to acknowledge that he does figure somewhat in my decision. Actually, it was Katha Pollitt’s² wonderfully intelligent and wry essay “Why I Hate Family Values” (wherein Dan Quayle’s thinking is astutely scrutinized) that prompted me to construct a literature syllabus that would examine US families in all their strengths and failures. Medical students, the majority of them with well-educated, middle-class backgrounds, often lack the perspectives and life experiences to understand, respect, and empathize with the vast array of families who live, think, and define health in ways outside the medical students’ frame of reference. Yet, students are often expected to communicate effectively and compassionately with families in all their varieties.

Pollitt’s essay, which articulated my own frustration at simplistic, moralistic recipes for “fixing” families, guided my selection of literature that would critically interrogate students’ conceptions of “good” or “normal” families. Stephanie Coontz’s study of the American family, The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap,³ also influenced the content I selected that would address changing conceptions and roles of families, determine who or what is driving the present preoccupation with family values, and examine who benefits (and who does not) from such conceptions.

I divided the 1-month, fourth-year elective into topics that we soon discovered overlapped significantly: “Families: (Some) Beginnings,” “Parent-Child Relationships,” “Conflicts in the Family,” “Violence in the Family,” “Grieving in the Family,” “Health Challenges to Families,” and “Love, Sex, and Marriage and the Family.” Each topic was illuminated by one or more readings from multiple genres—poetry, essay, memoir, short fiction, or novels. I chose this type of source material because fictional and first-person narratives are extremely effective in conveying immediacy, particularity, and divergent points of view. When we ask students to engage both intellectually and emotionally in the lived experiences of people unlike themselves, we are asking them to confront the implications of their own values as they provide care to others.

The 12 students and I met 8 hours a week for discussion of assigned readings. I provided students with organizers for reading, usually in the form of questions to consider while reading that later formed the basis of class discussion. For each class, students wrote a one-page

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personal response to one or more of the selections that forced them to identify and puzzle over their values and those expressed in the literature. Such writing, according to Richardson, is not just a “mopping-up” summary of what they’ve read but is a way of finding out about themselves, a method of inquiry. Below I cite and discuss selected literature that was most compelling and meaningful to students.

“Families: (Some) Beginnings” is a tricky topic if one’s intent is to unravel the notion that “real” families have a mother, father, and at least one child. That said at the onset, and reiterated throughout the class, this section included poetry that addresses abortion, childbirth, infertility, and miscarriage. Students responded most positively to selections from a beautifully crafted collection of essays, Wanting a Child. In particular, Bob Shacochis’s “Missing Children,” written from a male perspective, is:

... a story that has counted and recounted its years, its blood cycles, begging an ending that never arrives, becoming a small, private tale of weariness and despair, but equally of tenacity and hope ... a travelogue about a journey we took into the kingdom of science and beyond (p. 44).

In addition, Tama Janowitz’s “Bringing Home Baby” and Sophie Cabot Black’s “The Boys” provide, respectively, the joyful and often funny journey surrounding an international adoption and the issues particularly relevant to a lesbian couple’s desire to have a child.

“Conflicts in the Family” overlaps easily with most topics examining families. I thought Pat Conroy’s novel The Prince of Tides would be able to cover the most ground: poverty, illness, divorce, and violence, all embedded in family pride and fierce love spanning three generations of the Wingo family. One of the many organizing threads that evoked an ongoing discussion in class was narrator Tom Wingo’s observation in the prologue: “In families, there are no crimes beyond forgiveness” (p. 8). The class came to no conclusions or agreement on this assertion, even as we witnessed abundant forgiveness between family members in the book. Allison’s Bastard Out of Carolina is also a superb intergenerational account of a poor white family (not to mention a painful female coming-of-age narrative) whose loyalty to each other is, most surely, a family value worth emulating.

Two literary portrayals of violence against women are noteworthy. Anna Quindlen’s novel Black and Blue provides a much-needed portrait of a middle-class, well-educated professional woman who spends years of abuse at the hands of her police officer husband. Written in the first person by Fran, the abused woman, the novel confronts all the clichés and platitudes leveled against women who stay in abusive relationships, in this case a woman who seemingly has the resources and skills to leave long before she did. In contrast to Fran’s life, Pat Murphy’s short story “Women in the Trees” is a dreamy portrayal of an utterly isolated rural woman who finds solace in images of women in the trees surrounding her house. Although she is without money, family, friends, or social support, held prisoner by her violent, angry husband, these fantasies comfort her and urge her on.

Because of the particular ethnic composition of my students—nearly half are Asian/Pacific Island Americans—I chose to focus heavily on cultural conflicts between parents and children. Chitra Divakaruni’s short stories “The Word Love” and “A Perfect Life,” from her collection Arranged Marriage portray the vital and often clashing cultural issues confronting many Asian Indians who have one foot in North America and the other in India. Other selections include Tillie Olsen’s “I Stand Here Ironing,” a mother’s painful, loving apology to a scarred daughter raised during desperate emotional and economic times for the mother; Richard Bausch’s “What Feels Like the World,” the story of a grandfather raising his granddaughter after the death of her mother; and Flannery O’Connor’s classic story, “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” that portrays the deeply complicated and ambivalent relationship between mother and son.

“Grieving in the Family” has countless literary possibilities. The novel I find most beautifully and subtly crafted is Russell Banks’ haunting The Sweet Hereafter. Linked together by a school-bus accident that killed a dozen children from a small town in upstate New York, the four narrators of the book include an earthy, matter-of-fact bus driver who adored all “her” children; a widowed Vietnam vet who was following the bus, waving at his two children; a “permanently pissed off” lawyer who has his own personal tragedy following him; and a 14-year-old beauty queen crippled by the crash on whose testimony the ensuing lawsuit hinges. Experiencing the tragedy from four aching and distinct perspectives, students became less inclined to believe that grief can be generalized or theorized by stages.

Health matters—disabled bodies, sick bodies, hurt bodies, tormented bodies—are addressed in all the literature cited to this point, but much remains to be said about health challenges within families. Here the literary focus is less on an individual’s illness and more on a family’s response to a loved one’s illness. One of the strangest and most evocative readings in this section is Doris Lessing’s The Fifth Child. Here, an idyllically happy couple are bringing up four healthy, cherubic children when the fifth child, Ben, is born with some kind of horrible physical and mental defect.
The wonderful home life of the family is eventually destroyed, the couple’s marriage disintegrates, and at story’s end, the plight of adolescent Ben is uncertain. The notion that no one can ever anticipate such an event or how one will respond to it is painfully evident and often unsettling to medical students on the brink of their carefully planned lives and careers. Other readings where illness is situated firmly within family settings include several striking accounts of breast cancer: Alicia Ostriker’s “Scenes From a Mastectomy,”16 Safiya Henderson-Holmes’s “Snapshots of Grace,”17 and Sandra Butler’s and Barbara Rosenblum’s “Cancer in Two Voices.”18

As we moved through these and other readings and discussions of the literature, we examined ourselves and often refined our conceptions of family values. Loyalty, responsibility, and love were the words that students came back to again and again. Starting with these values instead of traditional family templates changes the conversation in essential ways. Here, literature was the catalyst for this change that involved a more fluid, contextual, and ultimately humane view of what “family” can mean. Literature provides a more fully imagined world than what any of us in medicine can ever provide to students—and certainly a more compassionate world for families than any provided by contemporary US politics.

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References