

Core Book

EVERYTHING SAD IS UNTRUE

A Guide for Classroom Teachers by Brita Beitler and Susan Dunn-Hensley



WHEATON
COLLEGE
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Art by Kristen Baurain

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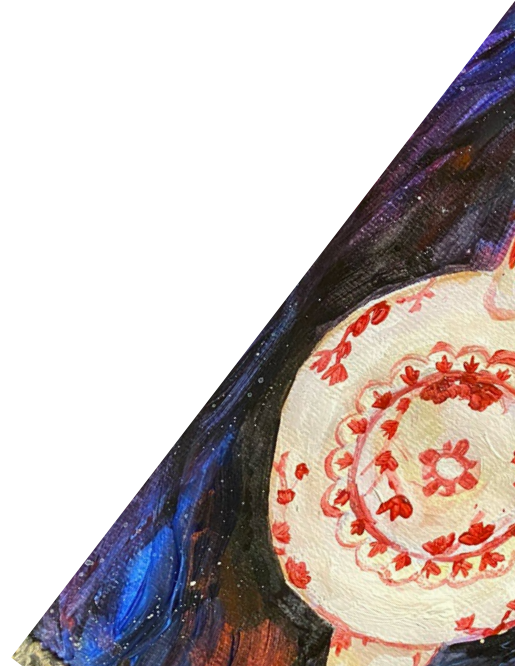
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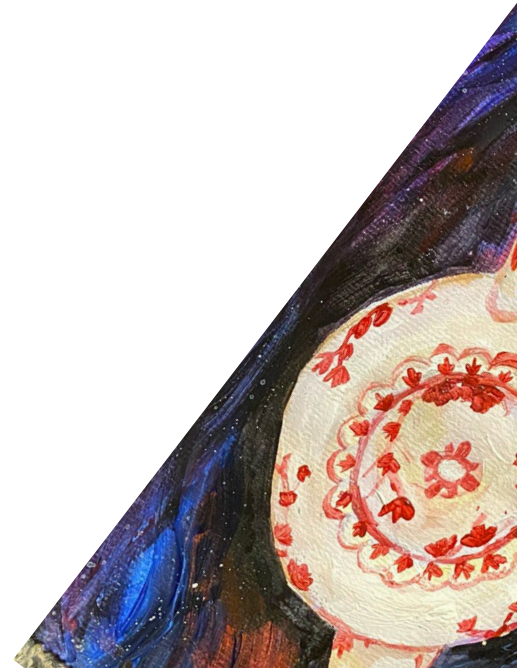
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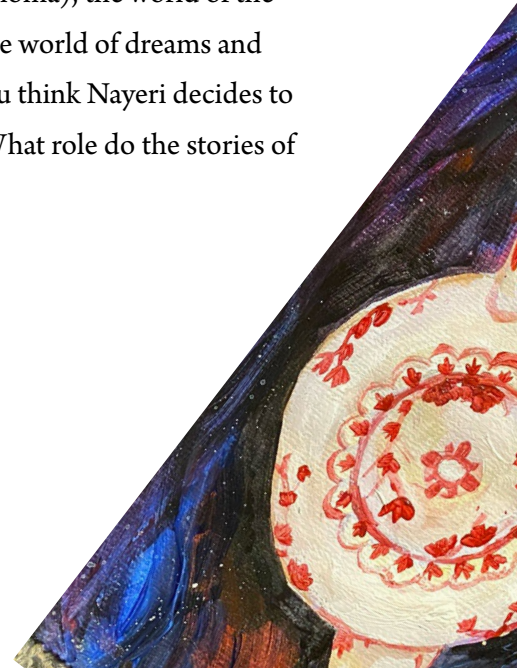
REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1.** Daniel's mother is willing to give up everything that she has (her home, job, friends, husband, and country) for her religious faith. Consider the types of things that are important to you. What would you be willing to sacrifice everything for?
- 2.** We all have a tendency to assume that our lives and our experiences are universal. In describing his experiences in the United States, Nayeri presents as foreign or even exotic many things that Americans consider normal or natural. What kinds of things does Nayeri find strange about the United States? What did his responses to American food and toilets suggest to you about the uniqueness of cultural experience?
- 3.** Marjane Satrapi wrote *Persepolis*, a graphic novel memoir about growing up in Iran, in part to dispel stereotypes about her homeland. In an Associated Press interview, Satrapi said, "The only thing I hope is that people will read my book and see that this abstract thing, this Axis of Evil, is made up of individuals with lives and hopes." In her introduction to *Persepolis*, she explains that she wrote this book to show that Iran is not only a country of "fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism." To a certain degree, Nayeri's book presents the same message. How does *Everything Sad is Untrue* dispel or confirm your views on Iran? In what ways does reading this book deepen your understanding and knowledge of Iran?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1.** Daniel Nayeri presents his identity as deeply divided. He is both Khosrou Nayeri and Daniel Nayeri. He has lived in Iran, Dubai, Italy, and the United States. What does Nayeri's divided identity look like in practical terms? How does his complex identity affect the way that he tells his stories? How does it affect the way that his classmates in Oklahoma respond to his stories? How does Nayeri anticipate his readers will respond to his stories and to his deeply divided identity?
- 2.** Nayeri's narrative engages deeply with the ways that people process memories and tell stories. Every writer of an autobiography has to deal with the imprecise nature of memory. Everyone has to deal with the fact that we tell our own stories from our own perspective. What makes these common problems of autobiographical writing more complicated for Nayeri?
- 3.** What role does Scheherazade play in Nayeri's narrative? How does he use her story to make meaning of his own? How are Nayeri and Scheherazade similar? Although Nayeri is not under the threat of death if he does not tell his story / entertain the reader, he consistently links his motivations for storytelling to hers. Building on this metaphor, consider what makes the telling of his story so important to Nayeri? What will he lose if he does not tell the story? What will happen if he does not remember?
- 4.** As the narrative unfolds, Nayeri weaves together three different worlds: the world of his personal past (Nayeri's memories of Iran, Dubai, Italy, as well as his early days in Oklahoma), the world of the book's present (Nayeri telling the stories of his memories to his class), and the world of dreams and stories of his family, his ancestors, and his Iranian homeland. A.) Why do you think Nayeri decides to interweave these worlds rather than present the story chronologically? B.) What role do the stories of Nayeri's family and his ancestral home play in the narrative?



GENRE FOCUS: AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Definition: What is autobiography?

An autobiography is the story of a person's life written by the person himself or herself. C. Hugh Holman's *Handbook to Literature* observes that the term autobiography can apply to many types of life writing including memoirs, diaries, journals, and letters. Although all of these forms involve a person writing his/her own story, the types are distinct. Diaries, personal journals, and letters are normally examples of personal writing not intended for a public audience. Memoirs and autobiographies are written for a wider audience

What is the difference between memoirs and autobiographies?

Holman's *Handbook to Literature* defines memoir as, at least in part, a work that deals with "public events and noted personages other than the author" (49). Meanwhile, autobiography "is a connected narrative of the author's life, with some stress laid upon introspection" (49).

What are some examples of famous autobiographies?

St. Augustine's *Confessions*

The Book of Margery Kempe (first autobiography by an English woman written in 1440)

Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

Autobiography of Mark Twain

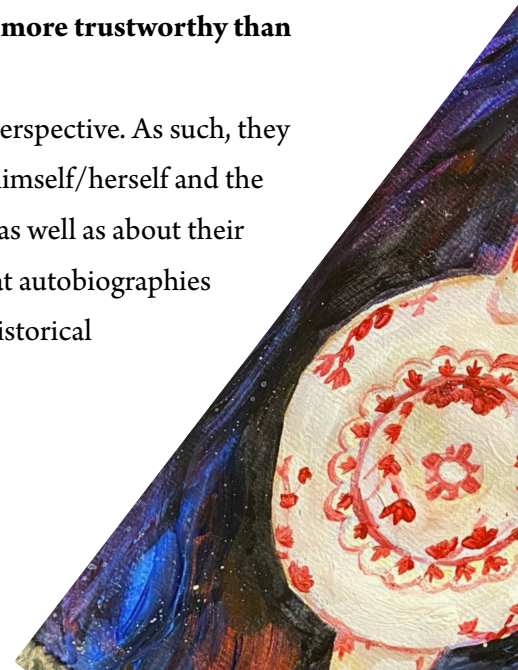
John Henry Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*

Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Since an autobiography is a person's own words, should we consider it as more trustworthy than a biography?

Yes and no. Autobiographies present the life of a person from his or her own perspective. As such, they will give us an in-depth account of what the person believes to be true about himself/herself and the world around him/her. Autobiographies tell us about events in a person's life, as well as about their community, culture, and historical period. However, we have to remember that autobiographies only provide one perspective on the author, the events of his/her life, or the historical period in which he/she lives.



Why does the limited perspective matter?

As any police detective will tell you, if three people see a car accident, they will tell three different stories. People see the world from their own perspectives, influenced by their personal experiences, knowledge, and cultural background. An autobiography presents what the author has seen, knows, or believes. An autobiography will tell us a great deal about the author, but it will not provide a definitive example of the author's entire community, identity group, or nation.

BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE: UNDERSTANDING AND VISUALIZING THE RICH HISTORY OF PERSIAN CULTURE AND MODERN-DAY IRAN

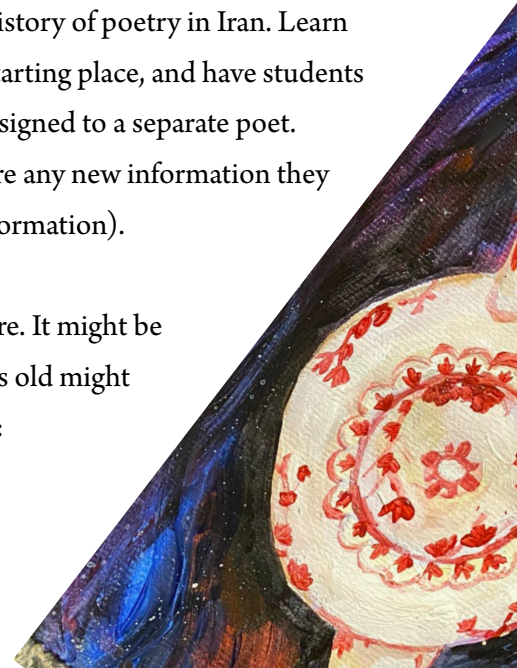
Many of the details about Iran and the elements of Persian culture that Daniel explains in the story may seem very different from or may not be well-known or understood in a Western, American culture. It may be difficult for a reader to grasp the importance of history and place that Daniel left behind as a young boy. Take some time as a class to learn a little more about the different things that he mentions through the book. If you'd like students to keep a record of the information they learn that is interesting to them, consider using this [Double Entry Journal Template](#), then have a [T-Q-E Discussion](#) as a class after looking through these resources:

Persian Stories. Daniel references Scheherazade frequently in the story. Learn more about her story here: [1001 Nights](#).

Persian Rugs. Daniel refers to rugs multiple times in the book, but we may only understand rugs within our own context. Learn more about the history of Persian rugs here: [Understanding Persian Rugs – Two and a Half Millennia of Silk and Wool](#).

Persian Poetry. In addition to ancient stories, Daniel also references the rich history of poetry in Iran. Learn more about classical poetry here: [Classical Persian Poets](#) (Consider this as a starting place, and have students complete a [Jigsaw](#), with groups, or individual students within a small group, assigned to a separate poet. Students can teach about their poet, present a poem they have found, and share any new information they learned from subsequent sources they searched for after reading this initial information).

Persian Architecture. Daniel speaks about how beautiful his home and city were. It might be difficult for us to understand what a home or building that is hundreds of years old might look and feel like. You can learn more about Persian/Iranian architecture here: [Famous Architecture in Iran](#).

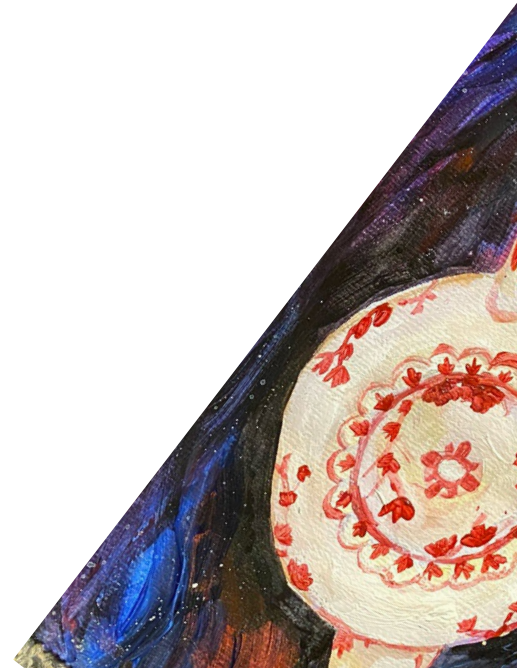


Persian Food and Hospitality. Hospitality is very important and very different in Iran than it is in the United States. Here are a few sources to help you better understand the history of food and “etiquette,” or the ways hosts and guests are expected to act toward one another in Iran:

- [New York Times: Persian Cuisine, Fragrant and Rich With Symbolism](#)
- [Traveler’s guide: Iranian Etiquette for Hosts and Guests](#)
- [BBC: The Persian Art of Taarof](#)

Religion in Iran. Religion in Iran is very different now than from Ancient Persia, and even took a significant historical turn in the events that Daniel describes in the book (including the danger that his mother faced as a Christian in Iran after 1979). Learn more about the history of religion in Iran here: [Learning about religion in Iran](#).

Explore. Want to see more? Look at this [virtual tour of Iran](#)



SETTING THE STAGE: “CORRIDOR OF VOICES” PROCESS DRAMA FOR BUILDING EMPATHY

What is “process drama?”

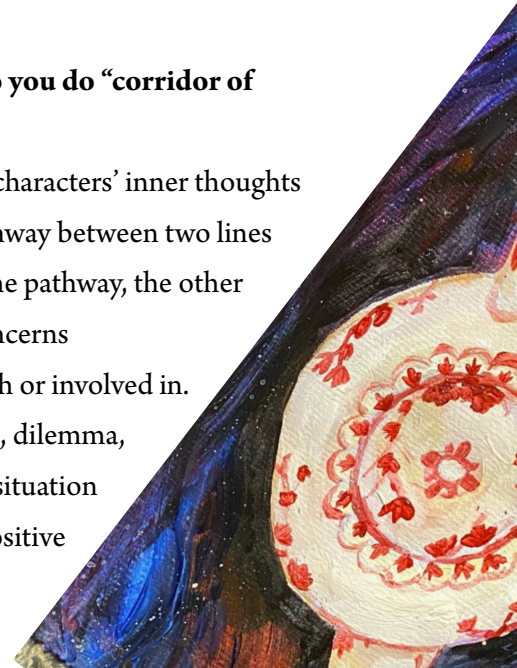
“Process drama can play a powerful role in language arts and social studies curricula and be an important tool for the ‘non-arts teacher,’ particularly when studying literature and cultures unfamiliar to students. Through improvised dramas, students experience issues personally, providing a deeper connection to the content. The march on Selma, the first Thanksgiving, and the California Gold Rush are but a few moments in history that students can experience through process drama. Teachers also find that writing can be facilitated as students describe the roles they are creating and events they are experiencing through letters, newspaper articles, diaries, and stories. During this classroom opportunity, students gain a greater understanding of the material as they recreate different historical periods, people, and issues. Process drama is not about ‘acting’ but about attitude, experience, and empathy [emphasis added]. It is a complex tool, but one that unlocks the classroom and offers teachers depth and breadth across the curriculum” (Retrieved from [The Kennedy Center, Process Drama: Taking a Walk in Someone Else’s Shoes](#)).

Build empathy through process drama.

“Process drama provides a method for teachers to develop empathy in students. The goal of process drama is to give students an effective way to walk in another person’s shoes... Students are assigned roles and act out situations without a script. Teachers provide a framework for where the conversation can go, giving students a specific topic to discuss or challenge to resolve. Students consider these issues from their character’s perspective, which is often someone quite different from the student ‘actor’” (Retrieved from [Fresno State University, Process Drama and How to Teach Empathy in the Classroom](#)).

“Corridor of Voices” is one kind of process drama. What is it, and how do you do “corridor of voices” with a group? ?

“The Corridor of Voices or Voice Alley strategy focuses on the exploration of characters’ inner thoughts and feelings. This strategy involves a student/character walking through a pathway between two lines made up of other students. While this student/character is walking through the pathway, the other students verbally express their own thoughts, advice, emotions, and moral concerns about a particular topic, issue, or experience that the character is going through or involved in. This strategy is used to focus on the character who is facing a difficult decision, dilemma, or situation. The voices on the outside may first present the negative side of a situation and how the character might feel, and then with the same issue, present the positive



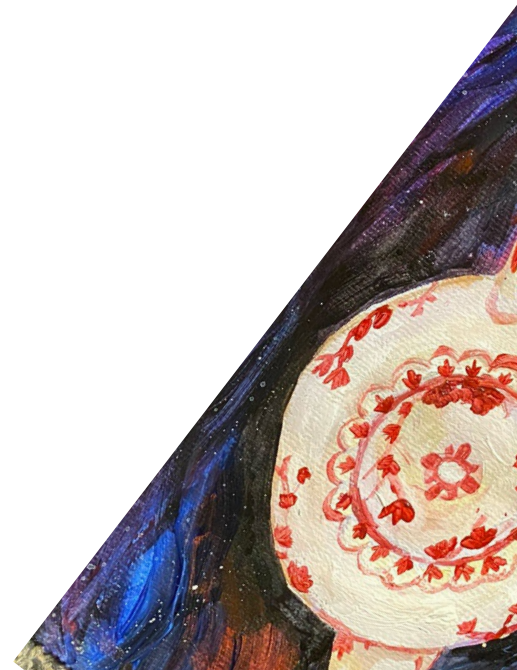
side. Teachers may or may not wish to have the student/character make a final decision after passing through the corridor of voices and explain why they selected this decision (e.g. what influenced them)” (Retrieved from [Drama Strategies for the Primary/Junior Classroom](#)).

“Corridor of Voices” Prompt and Protocol

Getting Started: Begin your group session with a discussion question: When Daniel moves to Oklahoma, he attends a new school. Of the people he encounters, who are you in the story? One of the boys or girls in the class? The teacher? Daniel? Now imagine that you are in the classroom when Daniel arrives. After reading the story, you have learned how he feels and what he has experienced before arriving in Oklahoma, but the children in his class were just learning his story. Knowing what you know from the book, how would you want Daniel to be received in your classroom?

Next: Participants, take ___ minutes to write out a question, thought, welcome message, or response that you might say if Daniel were a new student in your classroom. Then, form a Corridor of Voices. One student can take the role of Daniel, while everyone else forms the corridor. “Daniel” will move down the corridor as each student imagines they are speaking to Daniel as he enters their classroom. Each student gets a chance to say their message to him.

Conclusion: Come back together as a whole group and discuss these questions. What was different about this moment than what happened in the story? Do you feel like Daniel’s classroom, his teacher, and/or classmates in Oklahoma practiced hospitality in the story? What makes you say that? In what ways is our space one that welcomes newcomers? What do we still have to learn about one another?



FURTHER RECOMMENDED READINGS

Expand your understanding of different themes in Everything Sad is Untrue with this list of suggested books.

***A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah**

This memoir tells the story of Beah's life before and after the civil war in Sierra Leone. In the course of the conflict, Beah loses his home, family, friends, and even his identity. Eventually, even though he is only thirteen years old, he is forced to fight for the government army. At sixteen, UNICEF rescues him, and he must begin the process of healing and recovery.

***Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi**

This autobiographical graphic novel tells the story of Marjane Satrapi's childhood in Iran during the time of the Iranian Revolution.

***Inside Out and Back Again* by Thanhà Lai**

This verse novel autobiography tells the story of the author and her family's flight from Vietnam and her first year as a refugee in the United States.

***Refugee* by Alan Gratz**

This novel tells the story of three different children from three countries and three different time periods who are fleeing their homes as refugees. The story tells of the different reasons for fleeing, from political or religious persecution, but also tells of the commonalities that unite humans across time, borders, and beliefs.

***Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan**

This fictional novel tells the story of Esperanza, a young Mexican girl forced to leave her home after the murder of her father. She and her mother flee to California to start a new life during the Great Depression.

***The Arrival* by Shaun Tan**

This graphic novel takes the reader on an immigrant's journey through a series of images to help readers understand what it might feel like to leave one's family and travel alone to a completely unfamiliar country.

***They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky: The True Story of Three Lost Boys from Sudan* by Alephonsion Deng, Benson Deng, and Benjamin Ajak; with Judy A. Bernstein**

This true story is an account of three boys who fled their homes during the massacres in Sudan's civil war. These "Lost Boys" survive harrowing odds to make it to America.



More books lists from other sources:

- The Horn Book Guide: [YA books for World Refugee Day](#)
- The ALA Booklist: [The Refugee Experience for Teens](#)
- United Nations: [Must-read Books to Understand Refugee Experience](#)
- New York Public Library: [16 Books About Refugees for Kids and Adults](#)
- Read Globally: [10 Kid's Books About Iran Culture and History for Kids, Tweens, and Teens](#)
- Asian American Writer's Workshop: [100 Essential Books by Iranian Writers](#)

