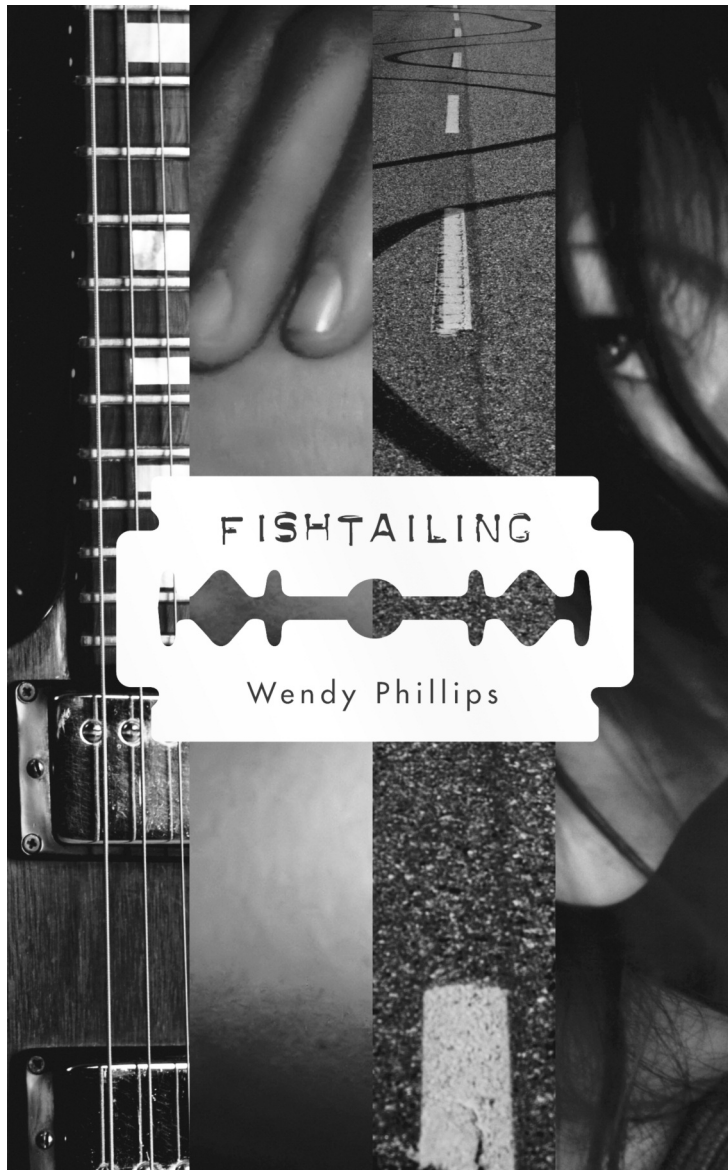


Teacher's Guide

FISHTAILING



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FISHTAILING

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Plot Outline

Natalie, a worldly student who has had “difficulties with peer relationships” at her previous schools, launches a calculated psychological assault on the lives of three of her new classmates, with devastating effect. The students tell their stories in their own poetry, written in English class with Mrs. Farr, a well-meaning but sometimes misguided teacher. In the end, Miguel, a refugee from Central America, dies; Kyle is left physically battered; Tricia is an emotional wreck; their teacher is devastated. Although she succeeds at manipulating her classmates into a dramatic situation in which she seems to be the only victor, Natalie too is a victim. Unable to overcome the ongoing neglect and childhood sexual abuse she has suffered, she is sent away yet again, but we fear for Natalie as much as we do for the kids at the new school.

Reading the Book

Fishtailing is a high-interest book that will appeal to students across reading levels. Students should read the entire book for pleasure before the class embarks on a more intense study of the book.

Reading alone:

Fishtailing is a quick read; a strong reader will finish the book in a few hours. Weaker readers may prefer to read in groups or as a class.

Reading in groups:

Form reading groups of 4-5 students. Each student should choose a character: Tricia, Miguel, Natalie, Kyle, Mrs. Farr, or Ms Nishi (these last two minor roles may be read by one student, or read in turn by the students playing the other characters). Together they should read aloud the poems of their character to the group.

Reading as a class:

Students should take turns reading one of the characters; they may trade off roles at several points during the period. The teacher could read the parts of Mrs. Farr and Ms Nishi.

Discussing the Book

After the students have read the book for pleasure, go back and read through the book together, taking time to think about and discuss the characters, their lives and problems in depth, and giving the students the opportunity to talk about poetry and experience writing their own poems. This time, have the students read through each poem aloud, and as you come to the end of each poem or group of poems, ask the students to comment on or ask questions about the poem. Some poems are straightforward and may not need much (or any) discussion; others are best considered as a group.

If your students find it difficult to start talking about literature and poetry, you may choose to generate discussion with some of the following questions, at least until they become more comfortable with sharing their own ideas and begin to take over the questioning and commenting function (with guidance and input from the teacher as required). This list of discussion points covers section one of the novel, but it may be best to withdraw gradually from introducing points as you progress through this section. If necessary, have the students sign up to comment and lead the discussion on particular pages in sections two to four.

Page #	Discussion Points
9	When you first started reading the book, did you have any ideas about whom Tricia was referring to? What do you think now that you've finished the book?
10	The title of the book appears in this poem. What does "fishtailing" mean? How does it apply to the young people in the book? Miguel's poetry contains a lot of fish imagery. Why does he identify with fish?
11 - 13	In this part of the book, we meet Natalie. She has had "difficulties with peer relationships." How did you feel when you first read the poem on p. 12? And when you got to the one on p. 13? Why did Natalie think the new school would be "like shooting fish in a barrel"? Was it something about the teachers or the students that made her think that? What did she hope to achieve? Did it turn out that way?
14	This is our first meeting with Mrs. Farr. Is she a good English teacher, or is she just completely clueless? What makes a good English teacher?
15	What do you make of this? What does "carefully friendly" mean? Tricia doesn't seem to feel at home in either of her parent's households (see also p. 59). Can a blended family ever be a comfortable place?

Page #	Discussion Points <i>(continued)</i>
16	When Kyle says “Her hair from the back is like black velvet,” he is using a poetic device. What’s it called? Does it help you visualize her hair? Who’s he talking about?
17	What can you say about Miguel’s former life by reading this poem? How would you fare, going to his country? Do you know any of the things that he does?
18	Is Natalie just feeling sorry for herself? Shouldn’t she be happy for her mom? Couldn’t she cook something better for dinner herself?
19-20	How do you feel about dissection in biology class? Why is Miguel so good at it?
21-23	How would you classify these kids at this point? What group/crowd would they belong to?
24-26	Kyle’s Feelings Poem is plagiarized, yet the poem he wrote earlier about Tricia’s hair is pretty good, as is the one he writes about Miguel on p. 26. Why didn’t he hand in one of these poems? Should Kyle have been given a 0 for plagiarism, or given another chance? Are sports a suitable topic for poetry? Is it easier for Kyle to write poetry about physical, down-to-earth things than it is to write about an idea or a feeling? Is it effective?
27-28	Knowing what you know about Natalie, are you surprised that Miguel seems to be falling for her? That Kyle is interested in Tricia? Could it have been the other way around?
29	Obviously, the ring of cuts around Natalie’s legs is not caused by cats. Why does Tricia accept Natalie’s explanation? Also, if Tricia can see it, why doesn’t the gym teacher notice?
30	Why is this a good poem? What makes it good?
31-32	Even Kyle calls his Feelings Poem “nursery rhyme crap,” and he knows his “black haired poem” (p. 16) is better because it is what he meant. Why is this a bad poem? What makes it bad? What does he mean when he says a poem is a bucket of bolts?
33-34	Miguel is writing about a feeling – fear – but his poem doesn’t mention his feelings. How does he convey that feeling of fear? How do we know that he felt afraid? What is he afraid of?

Page #	Discussion Points <i>(continued)</i>
35-37	<p>If you got a note like this from a teacher, would you know what it meant? Why is Mrs. Farr unhappy with the negative feelings expressed in Miguel's Feelings Poem?</p> <p>What does Mrs. Farr mean by "an uplifting moment of redemption"? Why does she want him to reconsider his point of view? Would changing the point of view and including an uplifting moment of redemption actually make the poem more effective?</p>
38	<p>Would you change the way you look to fit in? If you could wear whatever you wanted, what would it be? Would you want other people to copy your look?</p>
39	<p>What is preventing Natalie from killing herself?</p>
42	<p>What do you think of Kyle's latest poem? What does he mean by "hum."</p>
47	<p>Who is Tricia talking about? How has Tricia been changed? How is it possible to change so fast?</p>
49	<p>What does Miguel mean when he says his mother nudges him? What are the shallows? Who is belly up?</p>
50	<p>Is Tricia's mother right about Natalie? How would you feel about your mother's actions if you were Tricia? Is Tricia in trouble? Is her friendship with Natalie making it worse or better? (See p. 53 and 54 as well.)</p>
51	<p>What's going on here? Why are Kyle's wheels spinning at the end of this encounter?</p>
55	<p>What do you think of Kyle's Grammar Poem? Do you think it turned out well, despite it being a "grammar poem"? Do you know all these parts of speech and poetic devices?</p>
58	<p>Is this a poem? How much does it tell you besides what's written in the four lines?</p>
60	<p>Is the location of the date significant? How does the poem make you feel – what mood does it evoke? Does the mood change as the poem progresses?</p>

Fishtailing Assignments

Character Study (p. 10)

As you read through the novel together, have the students keep a list of traits and significant experiences for each character as these are revealed in their poetry. Depending on your students' skills, this may be a common list posted on the board or a personal list in the students' binders. If it is a common list, have students take turns adding to the board lists throughout the period. These character traits are often not spelled out; they have to be inferred from the character's words or actions. If the posting student misses something, other students (and the teacher!) should be encouraged to point out character traits that they think should be added, and why. Be sure to give students time to copy from the common list into their binders at the end of every period.

Near the end of the novel, ask students to analyze the character traits of each character and determine which traits are positive and negative, which traits make them attractive to others (not always positive!), which traits are shared by various characters, and if any of the characters change over the course of the novel.

Fishtailing Journal

Journaling gives students the opportunity to respond personally and thoughtfully to issues they encounter in the novel. Journal entry topics should arise naturally from class discussion or individual responses to particular pieces. A handout is attached offering suggested topics, but it is only a starting point for students as they explore their feelings about the book. Students should be encouraged to write on topics that interest them. The page numbers on the handout refer to the poem in which the issue arises.

Before students begin their *Fishtailing* Journal, establish with them whether you will respond to their writing or whether it is a personal reflection only, and whether it will be assessed in any way or whether there will be a set number and length of journal entries required.

Pablo Neruda (p. 33)

Pablo Neruda is a world-famous Chilean poet who wrote about love and politics. It is well worth reading some of his poetry in class. After reading and talking about a few of Neruda's poems together, have the students read Neruda's poetry on their own, select one, sign up on a presentation form, and present the poems to the class, with expression and appropriate volume, speed, phrasing, pacing, eye contact., etc.

Students should make a copy of their poem and mark it up like an actor would a script. Pauses (marked with a /, or a // for a long pause), for example, are particularly important in reading poetry. Usually, there should be no pause at the end of the line unless there is a punctuation mark there, like a comma or a period. They should also underline words they want to emphasize in their reading. They can also indicate places where they want to speak slowly or quickly, loudly or softly, using a system of arrows, boxes, triple underscores, wavy lines, etc. You may want to have them hand this in after their presentation.

This process of preparing to recite poetry will help the students when they present their own poems to the class at the end of the unit.

Political Connections (p. 33)

Working in groups or alone (depending on class size), have the students go online and answer the following questions.

1. Where is Central America?
2. What countries does it include?
3. Choose one Central American or Caribbean country and describe one of its violent conflicts: Name of country, when the conflict happened, which groups were fighting, what were the causes of the conflict, and how it affected the people. The information should fit on a large index card (provided by the teacher), so choose the information you want to include carefully, paraphrase, use point form, etc.

Rate My Teacher (end of parts 2 and 4)

Have the students rate Mrs. Farr on the basis of easiness, helpfulness and clarity, as if they were her students rating her on one of the teacher-rating sites on the internet. They should make a rating at two points in the book, near the middle and at the end of the novel, and include a comment with examples from the book to justify their rating.

Allusions (p. 125)

After reading Mrs. Farr's comments on Kyle's poem (and her note to Ms Nishi), ask the students "What is an allusion?" Once the class has worked this out together, ask them, "What is the purpose of an allusion?" They may have no idea, they may think it has something to do with plagiarism, or they may know that its real purpose is to enrich the poem by linking it a historical event or person, or to remind readers of the ideas or emotions in an earlier work of literature or poetry.

Either alone or in small groups, have the students read Shelley's poem "To a Skylark" and compare it to Kyle's "Poem about Poetry" on p. 125, especially the "structural pattern" Mrs. Farr says that Kyle has copied. Ask them to look for similar words and ideas; to look at the rhyme scheme and the meter. They should list any similarities they see as well as what they think is different about the two poems. In a final paragraph, ask them to consider whether this allusion to Shelley's poem adds value and meaning to Kyle's poem, or if it is a form of plagiarism, as Mrs. Farr suggests in her memo.

Parents (end of part 3)

Ask the students to describe the relationship that Kyle, Tricia, Natalie, and Miguel have with their parents (one paragraph for each of the four characters). Next, have them analyze which relationship seems healthiest and which seems to be the most destructive. Finally, ask them to decide which one most closely resembles their own situation.

The Whole Truth and Nothing But (end of part 4)

Ask the students to trace what happens on the Friday night of Natalie's party in a report to the police. They will need to set out the chain of events clearly and show how one thing led to another. Trace the events from beginning to end, quoting as evidence the poems of the various participants.

Handout – *Fishtailing* Journal

Friends (p. 29, 110)

Do you have a friend or acquaintance who engages in self-destructive behaviour like cutting, excessive drinking or drug use, talk of suicide, etc.? Do you feel your responsibility to protect their privacy outweighs your responsibility to help them by telling someone like a parent or teacher?

Sharing Feelings (p. 35/p. 132)

Mrs. Farr has asked the students to write a Feelings Poem – a poem about their feelings – but she doesn't seem to like how some of her students feel. She is unhappy with the negative feelings expressed in Miguel's Feelings Poem on p. 35 – it makes her feel unsafe. She expresses the same fear in response to Natalie's poem on p. 132, but we know it has nothing to do with her. Why does she take it personally? How should a teacher respond when she discovers problems in her students' lives?

Privacy (p. 35/p. 132)

Was Mrs. Farr right to discuss her students' work with others? Should students' writing be treated as confidential?

Teachers' Words (p. 35, 66, 70)

What should Mrs. Farr have said to Miguel in response to his Feelings Poem, or to Tricia or Natalie about their Social Commentary poems (p. 66, 70)? Write a better response to one of the poems (remembering too that English is Miguel's second language).

Friends (p. 92-99)

Natalie pushes Tricia in ways she does not want to go, yet Tricia seems to admire her. Have you ever had a friend who was very different from you? What made you want to be their friend? Did your friendship change you in any way?

Child Abuse and Neglect (p. 113)

Natalie has suffered from child abuse and neglect, but nobody suspects it, although she writes about it in her poem on p. 69 and on p. 111. Once again, Mrs. Farr misses the chance to connect with her students and responds in an authoritarian way. On p. 113, she accuses Natalie of trying to draw attention to herself by including "violent, nihilistic details" in her poetry. She seems determined to believe that everything her students write is fiction. On p. 138, she says that she can teach her students to write, but that's it – she can't deal with their adolescent crises. Is that enough? The abuse is not Natalie's fault. She has asked for help. Is she to blame for her behaviour in the book? Does Mrs. Farr hold any responsibility for what happens?

It's Your Future (p. 143, 162)

Do you have a talent or interest you don't tell people about? Do you know what you want to do after you finish school? Do your parents have different ideas?

Your Deepest Feelings (p. 163)

Should students' creative writing be evaluated for marks, or assessed in any way? Why or why not?

Poetry = Passion (p. 179)

When writing about the fight, Natalie says, "It was so passionate / it was poetry" (p. 179). Later she calls it "her best performance poetry" (p. 184). In your opinion, is that what poetry is – passion? Performance? Why or why not?

Suicide (p. 185)

After enduring so much in his young life, why do you think Miguel killed himself after the party?

Monsters (p. 191)

Do you think Natalie is a monster? Explain.

Poetry Starters

Students should be given time to write their own poetry throughout the novel study. These assignments, which are similar to the poetry assignments the students submit in their English class in the novel, may be given intermittently with free writing time. Some assignments they will find difficult; some will produce amazingly effective results; but all will encourage students to begin playing with words during free writing time.

Starting to Write Poetry (p. 34)

Everybody's felt fear at some point. Ask the students to remember a time they felt really afraid. What happened? As a starting exercise in poetry writing, have them jot down words and phrases that would help people visualize their experience. Have them focus on actual, concrete things – both describing the things that made them feel afraid and the way their body reacted to the feeling – rather than trying to describe the feeling itself. Remind them to think not just about what they saw, but also their senses of hearing, smell, taste and touch.

Grammar Poem (p. 55)

In groups of 2-4, using the format set out on p. 55, with Kyle's poem as a guide, have students try writing their own Grammar Poem. Near the end of the period, have students read their poems to the class.

Feelings Poem (end of part one)

Have students write their own Feelings Poem, about anything that caused them to feel something – joy, worry, despair, love, hope, etc. Remind students that just because they are talking about feelings doesn't mean they aren't supposed to be talking about something real and concrete. They should think about what they felt, what caused the feeling, and how that feeling expressed itself (physically, verbally, emotionally, etc.).

This is free verse, so students should not use rhyme at the ends of the lines. They should decide what structure suits the subject of their poem; they may use their own structure or allude to another poem by copying its structure. They should use other poetic devices such as repetition, metaphor, alliteration, allusion, internal rhyme, personification, symbolism, etc. as they see fit to enrich their poetry.

Social Commentary Poem (p. 64, 69)

Have students write a poem about a problem they see in society today. On their own, students should quickly brainstorm twenty words they could use to describe the problem. Ask them not to use any of the words on their list in their poems. Instead, students should think about the concrete effects of the problem. What really happens to a person affected by the problem? How can people fight back?

Celebration Poem (p. 96)

Human beings gather to celebrate many different things, in many different ways, but we all celebrate something, and we share in some of the same traditions and rituals of celebration: the big dinner, the giving of gifts, the special ceremony. Ask the students to remember a special event or holiday celebration. Students should think about and jot down words to describe the event: what that holiday actually means to them: the meaning they find in it, what they hate about it, love about it, how it affects their daily existence, how other people are affected by it. Students should make it as personal as possible.

Students' poems can take any form they like, as this is free verse, but suggest that they might want to try contrasting the public celebration with their personal response to it. They can do this mid-way through the poem or throughout.

Allusion Poem (p. 125)

Have the students read the work of several famous poets (on their own, either in the library or online, or from a selection that you provide) and find one whose message or phrasing they admire. Suggest that they not worry about trying to find an obscure poem – with allusions, the more well known the poem, the better! Next, have them write a poem that, with a similar theme, includes some kind of allusion to the earlier work – a repeated phrase or structural elements that people will recognize and link with the other poem.

Poetry Slam or Celebration (end of novel)

Have students select and recite one or two of their best poems at a class Poetry Slam or Poetry Celebration (which resembles a slam but without the element of competition attached to it). If you like, have them create or gather visual materials to support their presentation. Students should memorize their poem if possible so that they can focus on reciting with expression and power. As with Pablo Neruda's poems, students should make copies of their poems and mark them up like an actor would a script. Once again, you may want to have them hand this in after their presentation to ensure that they put some thought into the presentation.

Fishtailing Essay Questions

These essay questions are designed to be written at the end of the unit.

1. Natalie has experienced terrible childhood abuse and neglect. Miguel has also suffered almost unbelievable trauma as a child. Describe Natalie and Miguel's childhood experiences and compare how they have responded to them psychologically and emotionally. What happened to them, and how does it affect their thinking and behaviour today? Use quotations from the poems to prove your points.
2. Each of the teenagers has problems communicating with his or her parents. Examine the problems in the relationship of each teenager to his or her parents, giving examples from the book, and discuss how this could have affected what happened at school and with their friends.
3. Tricia changes over the course of the novel. What is she like at first in her relationship to her parents and teachers? How does she change? Using examples from the book, explain why is she so vulnerable to accepting Natalie's ideas about life.
4. In what way is each of the students in the book "fishtailing"? Illustrate your points using examples from the book.
5. The adults in this book – the teacher, the parents, even the counselor – seem almost clueless about what is going on in the lives of the young people. Give examples of this and discuss how this contributed to the tragedy.
6. The poems of each student are very different: Miguel's poems are more political and violent but full of symbolism; Natalie's poems are almost chilling; Tricia's poetry is introspective and lonely; Kyle's is passionate and searching. Compare the poetry of two of the students, including content and tone, the kinds of metaphors they use, the words they choose and the way they write. Give examples from the book to prove your points.

Mini-Lesson

Fishtailing and Free verse

Opening questions: What makes writing poetic? What is a poem?

There are many different kinds of poems, and most of them have set forms that poets have to fit their thoughts into – sonnets (both English and Italian), haiku, blank verse, free verse, odes, epigrams, etc. etc. You probably wrote shape poems and acrostic poems when you were in elementary school (and probably you haven't written a poem since!).

When he first starts writing poetry, Kyle explains that his motorcycle has form, it “fits together / neat and smooth / bolts and casings / pistons and pushrods / everything in place,” but that “a poem was just a bucket of bolts” (p. 32). He has feelings, but he doesn't really know how to express them in poetry. He thinks that poetry has to rhyme, but the results don't please him – it's “nursery rhyme crap.”

Most of the poems in *Fishtailing* are written in free verse. Free verse has become the most popular modern poetic form because it doesn't really have a form. It doesn't rhyme. It doesn't have a set metre (so no feet or iambic pentameters here!). There is no structure into which the words have to fit, and as a result, it allows for individual self-expression in a way that other poetic forms do not. The poet is free to structure the poem as he/she sees fit. This allows the poet to focus on meaning, mood, and message.

All good writing tells the truth about life. Writers have to be brutally honest about their own feelings and emotions and experiences because all of us readers have felt what they are feeling and we know when they're telling us the truth about life (or not).

Just because there is no set form doesn't mean it's easy. Writing free verse requires thought and time. Word choice is important, because the right word or phrase expresses the poet's true meaning rather than just because it happens to rhyme. Rhyme is not forbidden, particularly internal rhyme – in the middle of lines rather than at the end – but other poetic tools are still important: alliteration, allusion, metaphor, the placement of line breaks, the structure of the lines. So there is structure, but it's structure that the poet chooses to set for his or her poem, not some arbitrary rule made up hundreds of years ago.

The voice of the poet will come through in the poem. For example, eventually you'll find you can often tell who wrote the poems in *Fishtailing* without looking at the name in the title. Each poem may have a different tone – sad, triumphant, worried, dreamy, etc. All these things help to set a mood – the overall feeling you get when reading the poem, whether it's a sense of joy or evil, innocence or weariness.

Mini-Lesson

Thinking Metaphorically

Opening questions: What's a metaphor? What's a symbol? Why are they such a big deal in poetry?

Writing poetry asks you to look at the world and see it in a new way, to understand the significance of ordinary objects and actions and to tell others what you have discovered about the world around us. Metaphors and symbols are useful because they say a lot about something in very few words – readers attach the deeper meaning to the metaphor on their own. Metaphors are useful outside poetry too – think about how often they are used in the world of sport and business: “The game’s still in the first quarter”; “We’re on the ropes”; “She’s quarterbacking our plan.”

Some symbols are common – we almost always suspect that dead leaves blowing around mean something’s dying. We know that dawn means a rebirth of some kind. Black means evil. The road is our future. What are some other common metaphors that we all understand? Take a moment now to brainstorm some of these with the class.

The poet’s job, though, is to give us new ways of looking at the world, and to do that, you have to think of new ways to understand the world around us. For example, look at the desk in front of you. Some might see it as a prison, holding the students against their will. Some might see it as an elevator, allowing them to rise up in the world. Some might see it as armor that protects their privacy, others as a throne from which they rule the class. Some might see it as a straightjacket, preventing them from learning about what interests them, or alternately as a launching pad to the future.

Look around you. Choose an object, any object. Quickly write down its physical properties: what does it look like, smell like, taste like, sound like, feel like? Now what does it do? What do we use it for? What is its purpose? Does it have any emotions associated with it? Could it be used to describe a person you know? Now a harder question: How could it be used to solve your problems? The world’s problems? Share your ideas with a partner and the class as a whole.

Now think about a person you care about. List a few of their important characteristics: stubborn, conceited, luxury-loving. How could you describe them to someone who doesn’t know them. Start with, “S/he’s like a _____.” Choose an animal that shares that person’s basic character – a bulldog, a magpie, whatever. Now choose another person and describe them using an inanimate object – a mirror, a machine, etc. Now choose a third person and describe them using some aspect of the physical world – the seasons, the weather, the earth, etc.

Finally, the hard part. Think about an emotion. How does it really feel to feel that way? You will be tempted to think of songs you’ve heard or other poems you’ve read, but try not to. Look around you. What concrete objects around us could be used to describe what that feeling is like? Is loving that person like eating a cheese sandwich? Why is it like that? Explain your metaphor in as many lines as you like. You will be close to having a poem.

Mini-Lesson

Central America – Miguel’s Experience

Miguel has been deeply affected by the strife in the Central American country in which he was born. It is unlikely that your students will know much about the political and social history of the region. If you choose not to do the Political Connections assignment, choose a point during the novel when Miguel is writing about his past life to give a mini-lesson on the political situation in Central America.

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the ruling military juntas in several Central American countries – propped up by foreign interests, bankrolled by the CIA, and supported by right-wing vigilante death squads – waged war against left-wing guerilla forces opposing them. Violations of human rights were commonplace. Civilians were subject to executions without trial, forced disappearances, and torture. This is Miguel’s experience of life before he came to Canada. It is a struggle that claimed the lives of his mother and father. He now lives in Canada with his uncle’s family, but they remain involved in supporting the guerrillas in their home country.

We are never actually told which Central American country Miguel comes from. The book may refer to:

- The 12-year civil war in El Salvador, which ended in 1992
- The 36-year civil war in neighbouring Guatemala, which ended in 1996
- The successful Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in 1978, followed by years of war with the US-backed Contras
- Honduras, which has experienced over 300 civil wars and disturbances since it gained its independence from Spain in 1821.

There are a few AV resources available on this topic, including “If the Mango Tree Could Speak,” a Canadian film that features teenagers from Guatemala and El Salvador talking about war.

You may also wish to distribute or read to your students the summarized translation of “Guatemala: Memory of Silence,” particularly the Conclusions, sections I and II, “The tragedy of the armed confrontation” and “Human rights violations, acts of violence and assignment of responsibility,” available at <http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/report/english/conc2.html>, so that they have some idea of what it was like and can see that Miguel’s poems reflect the lived experience of his family and others in the region.