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Georgia Performance Standards Framework for ELA Unit 6-8th Grade

Grade: 8  
Topic: Anecdotal and Saga Memoir Poems  
Instructional unit: Response to Literature  
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The task:
As teachers, we know that students write best about topics that are familiar to them. Historical fiction involves a memorable time in history; a memoir involves a memorable time in the life of the student as a way of recording his or her history. Nancie Atwell defines an anecdotal memoir poem as one that is about an experience that feels too small for a “full-blown” memoir when it is a brief, but important, incident. A saga memoir poem is about an experience that is too complex for a narrative when it is about changes that unfold over time or over several incidents. As an organizing structure, poetry may be a better form to use when the event does not fit the scope of a narrative.

After defining both styles of poetry, the teacher shares with the students the models such as Nancie Atwell’s Lessons that Change Writers:

- “The Loon Call” by David McDonald (anecdotal)
- “Makeover” by Erin Witham (anecdotal)
- “Impressionable” by Jimmy Morrill (anecdotal)
- “Five Days” by Ruth Langton (saga)
- “The Perfect Cake” by Audrey Stoltz (saga)
- “The Tale of Two Tails” by Nancie Atwell (saga)

Other Works:
- “Oranges” by Gary Soto (anecdotal)
- Learning to Swim by Ann Turner(book of poems)
- The Bronx Masquerade by Nikki Grimes (book of poems)
- Locomotion by Jacqueline Woodson(book of poems)
- The Keeping Quilt by Patricia Polacco(saga)
- Works by Karen Hesse

As the teacher shares these poems, the students will determine whether the poems are anecdotal or sagas, and they will also discuss author’s purpose for writing. Students will then brainstorm 2-3 incidences in their own lives that they could classify as anecdotal or saga events. If the teacher is utilizing Atwell’s Lessons, then the students can refer back to the Writing Territories or Heart Maps for ideas. Students will then choose one of the ideas to begin drafting.
Differentiation:
- The student will create an anecdotal record of a small memory.
- The student will create a comic strip of a small memory.

Focus Standard:
**ELA8W2.** The student demonstrates competence in a variety of genres.
The student produces a narrative (fictional, personal, experiential) that:
b. Creates an organizing structure appropriate to purpose, audience, and context.
d. Reveals the significance of the writer’s attitude about the subject.
THE LOON CALL

I push off from the dock
and the bow of the canoe makes a small wake
as it spears silently through the water.
I hear a loon call from the middle of the pond.
I whoop back, hoping to have my call returned.
Instead the loon disappears under the water.
I pick up my paddle and drift closer to shore.
I look down to the side of my canoe and see two whirlpools
too small to be my paddles.
Then the loon's webbed feet disappear under the canoe
and reappear on the other side.
The loon lifts its head and calls.
The sound that I have heard many times fills my ears
but never so close.
Slowly I lift my head
and answer back.

—David MacDonald
MAKEOVER

The silence of it is a wonder.
I watch it from the window, wanting to hear the silence,
know the cold.
So I drift outside and lift my head to the gray sky
and watch the snow fall down like frozen stars.
Large flakes cover me with their silence,
and I am transformed.
It starts with my eyes.

Cold flakes land like mascara on my eyelashes.
When I blink I see rainbows through the droplets.
I close my eyelids and snow falls thickly,
shadowing my eyes with silver.

Next the snow lays sparkling glitter in my hair,
each flake perfectly positioned.
The snow places two immaculate flakes on my ears—
diamond earrings.

More flakes land gently on my lips,
and I carefully rub in the pure sweetness of the snow.
I don’t need blush—
the sharp cold of winter has turned my cheeks rosy red.

And still through the silence the icy stars of snow fall.
My reflection in our window catches my eye.
I shimmer with delight at what the snow has done.
My face shines red, white, icy, wet.
Snow make-up transforms me,
contains me, frosts me
with simple beauty.

—Erin Witham
Tale of Two Tails

My problem with the new spaniel was
I wanted her to be the old one.
So I shopped for small bones,
a sunbleached orange coat,
freckles and feathers,
even a rare plume of intact tail if I
could manage it.
(I couldn’t.)
plumed a gentle mouth,
parlor tricks: the name of every toy
and visitor and neighborhood dog.
a head on my knee,
the shadow out of the corner of my eye
that found peace
wherever she found me.
I wanted to be adored again with a
sense of humor.

My problem was
I got Rose.
Rose digs catacombs in the backyard.
She runs away,
steals shoes and underwear
and bites me when I come after her.
chews sticks like they’re Tootsie Rolls,
shovers with me most mornings
uninvited,
lives with a green tennis ball cramped
in her jaws,
and to everyone she meets
presents her butt to be scratched
while our fingers itch
to touch her sweet face.

My problem is
I can’t see the old dog’s sweet face
anymore.
When I close my eyes I see Rose—
the way she listens to my voice with her
whole body,
how her eyes beg my lips to say stick,
the way she leaps to snag the green ball
every time,
how she sleeps propped on a pile of
pillows like Cleopatra’s spaniel,
the way she thinks: fresh water in her
dish is a big deal,
how she wakes up ecstatic every
morning
at her end of the bed
and wiggles up to kiss and kiss me,
the way she swims until she’s so tired
it’s dangerous,
how she’ll only come when I call Bacon!
and the summer people think it’s her
name,
and
the way I feel when she wags that
stump of tail—
when the Rosie flag quivers with joy
as my dog catches balls, chases sticks,
sees my car, sees it’s me,
when my dog sees me.

—Nancie Atwell