

The Big Questions:

Using junior literature to spark discussion of ethical questions

By Adrian Fogelin

My interest in using literature to teach ethics began with a volatile conversation with the nine-year-old girl next door, one that let me know the moral value she was being taught at home: race prejudice. “Crossing Jordan,” the book that grew out of that disturbing conversation, begins with a child who is being taught prejudice, but who, in the course of the story, learns from her experience with the new family next door that prejudice is wrong. Cass becomes tolerant, but more than that she comes to like and respect her African-American neighbors. Since writing “Crossing Jordan” I’ve only become more convinced of the power of children’s literature to build character and nurture ethical behavior.

Think about it. From our earliest stories: fairy tales, fables, and legends, we have used story to teach the shape of our society to its newest members. In these complex times we can’t provide children with out-of-the-can responses, but we can help them develop the reasoning skills that will enable them to make wise choices.

The middle school child is the perfect age to engage in a debate on ethics. Their ability to reason is fairly developed and they are interested in arguing what is right and wrong, fair or unfair. Take on this project in the spirit of debate. If you provoke passionate discussion and engagement you’ve succeeded.

To get students thinking about ethical values have the group create a list identifying them. The following list is from the website of the Heartwood Institute: www.heartwoodethics.org.

Note: Heartwood Institute designs curricula that use literature to teach ethics. Check their website for books on the subject. The list is a bit daunting but Heartwood boils the list down to the following essential attributes: **courage, loyalty, justice, respect, hope, honesty and love.**

Once your class list is created ask them which value they think is most important and have them defend their choice.

When you begin to read literature with your students have them identify which values are important in each of the books.

Altruism
Balance
Benevolence
Bravery
Caring

Friendliness
Generosity
Gentleness
Genuineness
Goodness

Prudence
Receptivity
Reliability

Charity	Grace	<i>Resilience</i>
Cheerfulness	Gratitude	Resourcefulness
Citizenship	Happiness	Responsibility
Cleanliness	Helpfulness	Resolution
Courtesy	Honesty	Reverence
Commitment	Honor	Righteousness
Compassion	Hospitality	Sacrifice
Consideration	Humaneness	Self-control
Cooperation	Humility	<i>Self-esteem</i>
Decency	Idealism	
Dedication	Independence	Selflessness
Dependability	Industry	Sensitivity
Determination	Initiative	Simplicity
Devotion	Integrity	Sobriety
Dignity	Joy	Spirituality
Diligence	Kindness	Sportsmanship
Diplomacy	Manners	Steadiness
Discernment	Mercy	
Discretion	Moderation	<i>Stewardship</i>
Discipline	Morality	Strength
Duty	Nobility	Straightforwardness
Empathy	Nurturance	Sympathy
Enlightenment	Openness	Tact
Enthusiasm	Optimism	Temperance
Fairness	Patience	Tenderness
Faith	Patriotism	Thankfulness
Flexibility	Peace	Thoroughness
Focus	Perseverance	Thoughtfulness
Forgiveness	Persistence	Tolerance
	Politeness	Trustworthiness
		Understanding
		Unselfishness
		Virtue
		Wisdom
		Worthiness

Note: italicized attributes are my additions. This list is reproduced with the permission of the Heartwood Institute.

In putting together the list of suggested titles I tried to select stories in which at least one of the following criteria was met: the ethical question was central to the plot (i.e. “On My Honor”); the process of the character working out the ethical question is clear (i.e. “Crossing Jordan”); the book is guaranteed to provoke discussion of an ethical question (i.e. “Nothing But the Truth”), or the book took on a widely held societal belief (i.e. “Shiloh” and “My Brother’s Hero.”)

Suggested titles:

Crossing Jordan by Adrian Fogelin

Ethical values: tolerance, respect, friendship, justice

Synopsis: When a black family moves in nextdoor, Cass's father builds a fence saying, "It's better not to mix." When the new family turns out to have a daughter who, like Cass, is twelve and loves to run, Cass has to come to terms with her family's prejudice and decide for herself whether to risk a friendship with someone her father considers off-limits.

Discussion questions:

- β Parents and other adults try to teach you what they consider right and wrong. Do you agree with them on everything?
- β Cass hid her friendship with Cass from her father. Was that okay?
- β When do you think Cass and Jemmie became real friends?
- β Was prejudice a family value in the black family as well as in the white?
- β Why is Mr. Bodine prejudiced? Do his reasons justify his behavior?

The Goats by Brock Cole

Ethical values: loyalty, kindness, respect

Synopsis: In a prank that is a long-standing camp tradition, Howie and Laura, two unpopular campers, are taken to an island in the nearby lake. Their clothes are stolen and they are left overnight. They are the designated "goats." It is very shocking and scary to both kids, especially Laura, but the two of them manage to make their way to shore. Unwilling to return to camp they band together to take care of themselves until Laura's mother comes to get them.

Discussion questions:

- β Are there things you have done as a member of a group that you would not have dared to do alone?
- β Does calling the Goat Island prank a "tradition" excuse the kind of thing that happened to Laura and Howie?
- β Why were Laura and Howie chosen to be the goats?
- β Do Laura and Howie see themselves as goats?
- β Do you agree with Calvin when he says, "If you see you're going to get popped in a fair fight, don't fight fair."

Holly's Secret by Nancy Garden

Ethical values: loyalty, honesty, sensitivity, tolerance

Synopsis: When Holly leaves New York City for a home in rural Massachusetts she decides to become "Yvette," a more feminine girl who will fit in better—and one who does not have two lesbian mothers. The deceit makes Holly feel less and less like herself, and it hurts the

two mothers she loves. In the end she tells her new friends the real story, aware that she will have to live with the consequences.

Discussion questions:

- β Do you use expressions that might offend people, like “that’s so gay!” And what do you mean when you say them?
- β Have you ever done something you didn’t really want to do just to be accepted?
- β What do you think of the statement, pretending to be who you aren’t makes you invisible?
- β Holly reinvented herself when she moved to Massachusetts. Is it okay to do that?

Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli

Ethical values: kindness, friendliness, courage

Synopsis: When Maniac Magee runs away from the warring aunt and uncle who are raising him he becomes a local legend: a kid who can outrun, out throw, and out hit anyone, and who appears and disappears at will. In truth, he finds places for himself where he can on both the black and white sides of town, crossing a boundary that few others dare to. His courage and refusal to acknowledge the difference others see as so important enable him to begin to bring the two sides of his community together.

Discussion questions:

- β Make a list of the groups in your school and what makes someone a member of the group—and what would keep someone from being a member. What might happen to someone who tried to cross the line? What would be gained if the barriers were down?
- β Maniac Magee says everyone has a story. That’s how he finds out that Grayson, who seems to be nothing more than a handyman at the local park, was once a minor league pitcher. Collect a story from someone about their lives, something you never suspected.
- β In the story everyone but Maniac sees color as something that divides people. What traits make you see someone as “different” from you? Do those differences automatically put you on your guard.

My Brother’s Hero by Adrian Fogelin

Ethical values: courage, responsibility, empathy, cooperation

Synopsis: Ben Floyd is tired of being the responsible kid, the one who looks out for his younger brother, Cody 24-7. He wants to try his hand at adventure, the kind that requires guts and daring. On a Christmas break spent at an uncle’s marina in the Florida Keys he gets his chance. When he, Cody, and a local girl named Mica get lost at sea, Ben discovers that surviving genuine danger requires cooperation, not heroics. He is filled with remorse for scaring his parents and becomes aware of the dreadful consequences actions can have. He learns the real meaning of the word hero.

Discussion questions:

- β Is being brave something that you need to prove, and if so, how often and how do you do it?
- β What do your parents make you responsible for? Do you think it's fair?
- β Which was more important to the kids' survival when they were lost at sea: courage or cooperation?

My Louisiana Sky by Kimberly Willis Holt

Ethical values: loyalty, empathy, compassion, duty

Synopsis: Tiger Ann is being raised by her retarded parents and her take-charge grandmother. When her grandmother dies she must choose between remaining with parents who embarrass her and need her care, and moving in with her glamorous aunt.

- β Tiger's grandmother says, "People are afraid of what's different. That don't mean different is bad. Just means different is different." Are there people who scare you because they are different? Is the feeling justified, and if not how could you overcome it?
- β Does your family ever embarrass you? How do you handle it?
- β Did Tiger make the right decision when she chose to stay with her parents? How would her life have been different if she had chosen to move in with her aunt?

My War With Goggle-Eyes by Anne Fine

Ethical values: fairness, empathy, unselfishness, commitment, manners

Synopsis: Kitty tells the story of her trials and tribulations with her mother's boyfriend, Gerald. Before she ever meets him Kitty knows she hates Gerald. When he becomes a fixture in the house she refuses to be even marginally polite to him. Over time, though, Gerald brings discipline and accountability to Kitty's chaotic family and Kitty comes to see the value of his kind, steady ways. There is a strong subplot concerning Kitty and her mother's commitment to the antinuclear movement which explores the issue of advocating for a cause.

Suggested questions:

- β Kitty hates her mother's boyfriend, Gerald, but even though he is nothing like Kitty, over time she finds things about him to like. Think of someone you dislike and name three good things about them.
- β Should your parents pay you for doing chores or do you think that doing chores is just part of being a family?
- β Is it Kitty's right to be rude to Gerald since she dislikes him and doesn't want him in the house? Whose feelings matter more, Kitty's or her mother's?
- β Is Kitty's mother right when she says that taking part in a cause is more important than a clean room?

- β Kitty cares deeply about getting rid of nuclear weapons. What big thing do you think needs to change about the world and what are some practical things you could do at your present age to make that change happen?

Nothing But the Truth by Avi

Ethical values: fairness, objectivity, respect, obedience, patriotism

Synopsis: Phillip Malloy is kept off his school's track team by a D from Miss Narwin, his tough but fair English teacher. In homeroom, which he also has with her, he starts humming the national anthem along with the tape played over the intercom when the rule requires "silent attention" during the music. When he does it repeatedly he is suspended. By the time the news media get a hold of it the story is, "Student Suspended For Patriotism." The story is picked up nationwide, ruining Miss Narwin, and forcing her into an unwanted retirement.

This book provokes a response. There are 384 reader reviews for it on Amazon. I like it because it deals with a very modern ethical problem. What happens to the truth when it is churned through a media more interested in shock than in getting the facts straight? On a micro scale this has always been a problem for children: it is easier to believe the sensational story your friend tells you—and pass it on—than it is to make an effort to find out the other side of the story. This is, essentially, a story about the power of gossip.

Discussion questions:

- β Do you think that it is fair that one D on his report card keeps Phillip off the track team? Should the school make an exception for him because he is such a good runner?
- β Do you agree with Phillip's father when he says, "If God gives you a ticket, you better use it." If you have a talent is it your responsibility to develop it?
- β How important are rules? Can you break a rule if it is really stupid?
- β Phillip's parents say that no matter what, they're on his side. Should your parents be on your side no matter what?
- β Do you agree with Phillip's father when he says, you have to stick up for your rights? If you do, how far should you go to do it?
- β How do you define patriotism? Is anyone in the book acting genuinely patriotic?
- β Philip's goal when he began humming the national anthem was to get moved out of Miss Narwin's class. What were the unintended consequences of his actions?
- β Did the newspaper and other news media give a fair and balanced account of the situation?
- β Do you "check your sources" before passing on a rumor? Do you make an effort to hear the other side?

On My Honor by Marion Dane Bauer

Ethical values: responsibility, honesty, prudence, trustworthiness

Synopsis: The plot of this story is so stripped-down that the ethical questions are the story. Joel and Tony set out to climb Starved Rock Bluffs. Tony is the daredevil, Joel is reluctant so when Tony stops on the way to the bluffs and suggests a swim in the Vermillion River Joel says yes, even though he knows the river is polluted and dangerous. What he doesn't know is that Tony can't swim. Tony drowns when Joel dares him to swim out to a sandbar in the middle of the river. Is Joel responsible for his friend's death?

If you are using this book as a read-aloud, or are having the students read set chapters, stop them immediately after the drowning and ask them to say what they would do if they were Joel.

Discussion Questions:

- β Name some ways in which Joel acted responsibly.
- β What could Joel have done to change the outcome?
- β Are there ever times when you want adults to set limits? Give examples.
- β How do you feel about giving and taking dares? What does a dare prove?
- β What do you mean when you make a promise? Is it ever okay to break one? If so, give examples.
- β Was Tony's death Joel's fault?
- β Does "feeling bad" about something that has happened do any good?

Probably Still Nick Swansen by Virginia Euwer Wolff

Ethical values: empathy, compassion

Synopsis: Nick Swansen goes to school like everyone else, but he reports to room 19, Special Ed. The hope of the students in room 19 is to Go Up (be mainstreamed). After Nick's friend Shana Goes Up he invites her to the prom. Although she says yes she never shows up at the dance.

- β Do Nick's parents seem to understand him? How should they treat him differently?
- β Do any of Nick's observations about his parents resemble ones you've had about your own parents?
- β Nick overhears two adults calling the students of room 19 droolers, even though none of them drool. What does it tell you about the name-callers?
- β What kind of labels do you use for people who are not like you?
- β Dr. Willis tells Nick that no one's completely okay, is that true?
- β Explain Shana's behavior. Was it justified?
- β Are there any areas in which, like Nick, you feel like a dummy? How do you handle it?

Shiloh by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

Ethical values: Honesty, responsibility, humaneness

Synopsis: When Marty Preston realizes that his surly neighbor, Judd Travers, is abusing his new hunting dog he builds a pen in the woods on his parent's property and hides the dog.

Discussion questions:

- β Did Marty steal Shiloh?
- β What rules do the people in this story follow (i.e.: stay out of other people's business; people can do whatever they want with their own property). Do you agree with those rules? Name some of the rules in your community, school, or family.
- β Should Marty have turned Judd Travers in for shooting a deer out of season instead of using it as a bargaining chip so he could keep Shiloh?
- β Marty saved Shiloh, but what about the other dogs Judd was abusing? Does Marty have to try to help them too?

Shiloh Season by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

Ethical values: forgiveness, kindness, compassion

Synopsis: This book is the third in a trilogy that begins with "Shiloh." In this book Judd Travers is drinking heavily and he has become a real danger to Marty Preston, his family, and his dog, Shiloh. When Judd is badly injured in an accident, Marty is torn between being glad because it will keep him from hurting anyone, and compassion for a man who has so little love in his life.

Discussion questions:

- β Do you agree with the statement: a little kindness will fix almost anything wrong with a man?
- β What do you think is the difference between truth and gossip? How do you turn gossip into truth?
- β Did Marty do the right thing by trying to be friendly to Judd Travers? Did he put himself or Shiloh in danger by doing it?
- β What are the risks when you reach out to someone? What are the rewards?

This list is a work in progress, and just a small sampling of possible titles that can be used. If you have any titles you particularly recommend please send them to me through my website: www.adrianfogelin.com.