



Teacher's Guide

The Book That Changed My Life

edited by Diane Osen

About this Book

Every reader can name at least one book that changed his or her life—and many more beloved titles will surely come to mind as well. In *The Book That Changed My Life*, fifteen of America's most influential authors discuss their own special literary choices. These unique interviews with National Book Award winners and finalists offer new insights into the many ways in which the experience of reading shapes the act of writing. Robert Stone on Joseph Conrad's *Victory*, Cynthia Ozick on Henry James's *Washington Square*, Charles

Johnson on Jack London's *The Sea-Wolf*—each approaches the question of literary influence, while offering rich and wonderful revelations about his or her own writing career. James Carroll, Don DeLillo, E. L. Doctorow, Diane Johnson, Philip Levine, David Levering Lewis, Barry Lopez, David McCullough, Alice McDermott, Grace Paley, Linda Pastan, and Katherine Paterson are the other distinguished contributors to this collection of informed, insightful interviews.

About this Guide

This teacher's guide will help you get the most out of this book in your literature, writing and journalism classes. The 15 interviews demonstrate the range of books that have affected a wide variety of writers. Students will learn about these writers and their diverse backgrounds, which often inspires them to read a book by an author. Teachers should instruct students to read one, several, or all of the interviews; this depends on what the curriculum limits and time frame allows. You should review the essays to see which match their syllabus, or group the interviews by gender, ethnicity or genre.

This guide has several sections to help you. The **Discussion and Writing** section puts books into the hands of students and asks

them to make their own connections between the interview and the book they've read. The **Essays** section gives several possible writing topics, and can also be used to stir class discussion. There is also a Discussion Guide at the back of the book to consider discussion points or essay topics; however, many a clever student will have already read these. The **Beyond the Book** section launches students into the world to interview others about books that have had an impact on their lives.

This guide is written with the hope that students, and teachers, will feel the intimate, personal connection between themselves and the books they love.

Discussions and Writing

- Read *What Work Is* by Philip Levine, a collection of poems. Levine's book deals with themes of race, religion, education and work. It is appropriate for juniors and seniors.
 - Read *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Patterson, a novel. Patterson's book deals with themes of imagination, tragedy, suffering and loss. It is appropriate for freshmen and sophomores.
 - Read *Middle Passage* by Charles Johnson, a novel. Johnson's book deals with themes of race, slavery, freedom and religion. It is appropriate for juniors and seniors.
 - Read *Brave Companions: Portraits in History* by David McCullough, a collection of historical essays. McCullough's book deals with science, architecture, pioneers in their field, aviation, etc. It is appropriate for freshmen, sophomores and juniors.
1. How does reading the interview prepare you for reading the work of the author? What insight does it give you?
 2. What connections can you make between what the author said and what the author wrote?
 3. What books that the author read have *you* read? How does sharing the same body of knowledge (a book) help you understand someone else? How does it help you understand the writer?
 4. Imagine the writer's voice as you read the interview. What does it sound like? Do you hear the same voice in the book they wrote? How is it the same? How is it different?

For more questions and teaching ideas for this book, visit the teacher's guide section of our website:

www.randomhouse.com/highschool

Essays

1. Don DeLillo said he became a writer when he was looking down a street in Maine (p.14). Pick an object or a place and write the story of it. Include details of the object or place, but also go outside of that object or place for more information. Hint: Use details from your own life to tell the story.
2. E.L. Doctorow's father tricked him into reading *The Green Hand* (p. 24). Write an essay about a situation where you were led to experience something new and unusual by a teacher, parent, family member or friend. It could be reading a book, tasting a new type of food, seeing a show, or going to a new place.
3. Charles Johnson says that many writers begin with a different discipline (p. 35). Write an essay about something you spend a lot of time doing, such as sports, ballet, karate, card collecting, video gaming, drawing, etc. The goal of the essay is to write what inspires you to spend the time on this discipline.
4. Diane Johnson wanted to be a flight attendant (p. 45). Write an essay about a career you would like to pursue. You must explain why your personality is suited to this particular career.
5. Barry Lopez noted a contrast in his youth between living in California and New York (p. 86). Write an essay contrasting two moments in your childhood: one when you are interested in your environment; and the other when you are interested in ideas. Compare how your physical surroundings affect you with the way something in the realm of the mind affects you.
6. David McCullough says that in writing history, imagination combined with a full knowledge of the subject is key (p.104). Choose a person from history and write an essay about a mundane moment in his/her life. Put as many details from that era as you can into the essay. Reading other material about the time the person lived will help your writing.

Beyond the Book

1. Conduct an interview with another student in your classroom. You want them to answer the question, "Which book (or books) changed your life and why?" Follow Diane Osen's example for interviewing. To begin, you might even use the same questions that she asks the writers.
2. Conduct an interview with an adult outside of your school community. Your question is, "What book changed your life, and why?" Again, follow Diane Osen's questions to start.
3. Attend a book signing/reading by an author. Be prepared to ask the author a question during the question and answer period, or as they sign books. Make sure your question is specific to the book, such as, "Why did you make character X do what he did in chapter 11?" Try to avoid general questions such as, "Why did you write this book?" A specific question might lead to a general response. A vague question might receive no response at all.
4. Find an interview on-line or join an author chat online. Again, prepare by reading something by the author and ask a specific question. How does the author respond? Is there a type of question that launches the author into a fuller answer? Is there a type of question that stunts the conversation?

About The National Book Foundation

The National Book Foundation's mission is to raise the cultural appreciation of great writing in America. Founded in 1989, the Foundation seeks to fulfill this mission through The National Book Awards and through its unique educational outreach programs. These programs, featuring National Book Award authors, allow communities to participate in the writing life of the nation by reading and writing together. Proceeds from book sales are returned to the National Book Foundation. You can learn more about the organization on their website: www.nationalbook.org

About the Editor

Diane Osen is also the co-editor of *The Writing Life*, a National Book Foundation anthology published by Random House in 1996.

About the Author of this Guide

The book that changed the life of David Scott was Irish poet Seamus Heaney's first book of poems, *Death of a Naturalist*.

Sidebar

CONDUCTING AN INTERVIEW

Interviewing is an incredibly important skill that combines preparation, listening comprehension, and revision. This short section gives tips on interviewing.

1. Prepare in advance. Learn as much as you can about the subject you will interview. If you are interviewing a classmate or an adult in your community, you may *think* you know them. But expect surprises. Each person is a wealth of information and the best narrator of his/her own life story.
2. Record the interview. Whether you use audio or video recording, you should always take notes on paper. It forces you to concentrate and it lets the subject know you are attentive to their responses. It also gives you the chance to write down questions you might want to ask later, or go back to follow up on something the subject wasn't clear about.
3. Transcribe the interview. This is the most difficult part. Set up your recording device near your computer. Type in the entire interview. Go back and read it looking for themes, groups of ideas that are similar, places where the subject repeated him/herself.
4. Edit. Cut out all the material that doesn't directly answer the question you asked. Your job is to make the subject's language flow smoothly. You also want to edit your questions down to the most concise wording.