



# ALL SOULS

## A Family Story from Southie

by Michael Patrick MacDonald

Guide written by Patricia Morrissey Rigley

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### A NOTE TO TEACHERS

Michael Patrick MacDonald and many of the residents of South Boston, Massachusetts, during the period of the 1970s and 1980s were adamant that they lived in the “best place in the world.” Yet, the incidents in MacDonald’s memoir *All Souls* reveal both the irony and the complexity of that belief. As your students read this book they also will recognize and discuss the fact that individuals, ethnic groups, and whole neighborhoods cannot be stereotyped. Within the poignant, brutal realities that shaped young Michael and his siblings there also were moments of incredible human spirit and family love.

*All Souls* is a true story for young adults, with the emphasis on “adult.” This is a complex memoir that contains the themes of poverty, racism, violence, and death set against intense family relationships and complicated historic decisions. The language is often rough as the author strives to be as truthful as possible about the South Boston life he and his family members experienced. Trust your students to be mature, compassionate, and insightful, and I believe many of them will agree with the majority of my students, who said this was the most unforgettable story they had ever read. Remind your students that this is one memoir about one family’s experiences and not meant to depict every individual’s life in South Boston from the 1960s to the 1990s. Ultimately, of course, *All Souls* is not just about a particular family or place. These dynamics exist

today for other families who live in other places and look nothing like the MacDonalds of South Boston. Kids from Chicago's South Side, from New York's Spanish Harlem, from LA's Compton have all said to MacDonald, "You told my story."

Allow your students to enter the world of the MacDonald family and the South Boston of Whitey Bulger, busing, Irish celebrations, youthful freedoms and early deaths, a very real, often confusing world that mixes anger and compassion, love and hate, trust and betrayal. Your students, like mine, will express empathy beyond their years. Michael MacDonald's brutal honesty and conflicted emotions will provide an incredible classroom experience through this poignant story of one family's tragedies and one young man's resilience.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Because *All Souls* is a complex story with numerous interwoven characters and events, this curriculum guide is designed to carefully lead students to fully comprehend all aspects of Michael's South Boston world, particularly the experiences of his family. However, the questions and assignments for each chapter should be flexible enough so that teachers can decide whether to use assignments for journal work, short essays, thesis statement/expository essays, Socratic dialogues, small-group research, or full class discussions. In many cases role-playing or individual-student presentations of information will move the story along. The curriculum also provides opportunities for additional research projects, some illustrations, and more complex critical-thinking assignments. The emphasis should be on the word guide, trusting that each teacher's skills as an educator and knowledge of his or her students will aid in choosing which approaches will provide the most insightful learning experience.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR PREREADING ASSIGNMENTS

1. One of the challenges in reading *All Souls* is the fact that there are numerous characters whose stories are interwoven. Assign each student in the class one character to chart as the plot moves forward from chapter to chapter. During each chapter discussion students can update the rest of the class on their assigned individual.

### The MacDonald Family

Ma (Helen, the mother)	Joe	Michael
Grandpa (Helen's father)	Frankie	Seamus
Davey	Kathy	Stevie
Johnnie	Kevin	
Mary	Patrick (who died as an infant)	

### Others

Whitey Bulger	George Fox	Coley
Dave "Mac" MacDonald	Bob King	

2. If someone said to you that he or she lived in “the best place in the world,” meaning his or her neighborhood/community, how would you imagine that place to be? Describe at least three aspects of this “best place” as seen through your eyes (the setting, the laws, the kinds of people, the educational system, the community activities, the values, etc.).

## CHAPTER 1—“ALL SOULS’ NIGHT”

*Time: 1994*

Prereading activity: Share some of the information from the 1994 *U.S. News & World Report* article Michael mentions in chapter 1. (David Whitman, Dorian Friedman, Amy Linn, Craig Doremus, and Katia Hetter, “The White Underclass,” *U.S. News & World Report*, October 17, 1994.)

1. Copy one sentence from the opening paragraph of *All Souls* that foreshadows that the MacDonald family will deal with many tragedies.
2. In your own words describe where Michael found “the kids” during his walk through Southie.
3. Explain what Michael meant when he wrote that people in Southie had considered each other to be “family.”
4. What was the “outsider’s” image of Southie?
5. What were three of the hard facts revealed by *U.S. News & World Report*?
6. According to Michael, in what way did the Boston media allow Whitey Bulger’s activities to be “invisible”?
7. What were some of the reasons Michael felt compelled to “disguise” himself as he walked through Southie?
8. In your own words explain some of Michael’s inner conflicts about Southie.
9. Be specific in describing the negative and positive reactions of South Boston residents to the article in *U.S. News & World Report*.
10. As students read the description of All Souls’ Night at Gate of Heaven Church, each student should be assigned to share one specific speaker’s story.
11. Write your own reflection about the irony of the beliefs people Michael knew in Southie held about black people.

## CHAPTER 2—“FREEDOMS”

*Time: 1960s*

1. Using the first few pages of “Freedoms” as your guide, write a journal entry from Ma’s point of view about some of her experiences.

2. Give evidence from events described that violence is a “constant” from the early years of the MacDonald children’s lives.
3. Give evidence from events that show Michael also found humor in some of his family’s experiences.
4. Explain two examples that foreshadow Kevin was a “born provider.”
5. Life with Ma in 1967 in Jamaica Plain allowed the MacDonald children numerous freedoms. Describe three of these “freedoms.”
6. Write a short essay explaining why the visits from the social worker might be described as tragicomedies.
7. In the second half of this chapter Michael reveals how his relationship to his mother was significantly different from that of his siblings. Prepare a list of these differences to be shared in class.
8. In your own words describe:
  - a) events that led to Davey’s admittance to the Mass Mental facility;
  - b) the conditions that Michael witnesses at Mass Mental.
9. Michael has entitled this chapter “Freedoms.” Create your own title for this chapter and provide justification for your choice.

### **CHAPTER 3—“GHETTO HEAVEN”**

*Time: 1973*

1. Explain some of the key lessons regarding blacks and whites Ma had learned while living in Jamaica Plain.
2. Ma called it “heaven,” yet 8 Patterson Way in the Old Colony Project had its drawbacks and its own “street rules.” Describe the realities, the violence, the initiations as they affected these MacDonalds: Michael, Mary, Johnnie, Joe, Frankie, and Ma.
3. Michael describes a class hierarchy that existed in Southie (pages 60–62).
  - a) Create an illustration that depicts this hierarchy and also includes some symbols that were important to the residents.
  - b) List or draw some of the activities that engaged the young people.
4. Members of the MacDonald family have become involved in various activities now that they have moved into Southie. List the key activities of Joe, Kathy, Frankie, Kevin, Mary, and Michael.

5. In this chapter Michael writes that he believed “There’s no place like Old Colony.”

Using what you have learned in the memoir and especially what you read in the second half of chapter 3, make notes regarding this quote as you prepare for a Socratic dialogue.

6. Make a list of some of the key players as the busing issue begins in Boston and also a list of Southie neighborhood reactions.

### Additional Critical-Thinking Assignment

1. Throughout *All Souls* Michael writes honestly about the pejorative terms used for various ethnic groups. By reading and discussing Gloria Naylor’s personal essay, “Mommy, What Does ‘Nigger’ Mean?” students should examine society’s use of prejudicial language. (Gloria Naylor, “Mommy, What Does ‘Nigger’ Mean?” In *New Worlds of Literature*, edited by Jerome Beaty and J. Paul Hunter [New York: W. W. Norton, 1994].)

## CHAPTER 4—“FIGHT THE POWER”

*Time: Early to mid-1970s*

Note: Either before or during the reading of “Fight the Power,” students will need some background information regarding school integration in this country and busing in Boston in particular. A few options could be:

- ◆ segments of the *Eyes on the Prize* DVD/video that provide clear explanations and actual footage of both the events leading to busing and South Boston/Roxbury busing in particular;
- ◆ United Streaming (Discovery Education) access on school or home computers that breaks down these historic events into short segments;
- ◆ newspaper or magazine articles from the 1970s about school integration, Judge Garrity’s decision, the Massachusetts Racial Imbalance Act, and the essence of this decision in the United States Supreme Court;
- ◆ segments of other books written about the busing situation in Boston, such as *Common Ground* by Anthony Lukas and Ronald Formisano’s *Boston against Busing*. (J. Anthony Lukas, *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* [New York: Vintage, 1986]; Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s, 2nd ed.* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003].)

1. Throughout this chapter Michael expresses his very conflicted feelings about the events he witnesses in Southie, his siblings’ and neighbors’ actions, and his own behavior. As you read make a list of his positive and negative feelings regarding specific events.

2. Choose one of the following and write a headline and a newspaper article describing details of this event. Students will share these articles in class. (Some students may choose to research additional information about these events.)
  - a) Kevin's rock-throwing incident (also depicted in the photo earlier in the book)
  - b) National Boycott Day
  - c) The Rabbit Inn incident
  - d) The violence against the Haitian man and the follow-up incident in Roxbury
  - e) The Michael Faith incident
  - f) The St. Patrick's Day (1975) antibusing parade
3. Listen to/look at the lyrics of "Fight the Power" by the Isley Brothers and write a reflection regarding:
  - a) the irony of these lyrics being used as an antibusing anthem;
  - b) the various possible meanings of the word "power" for those involved in busing and for the residents of South Boston.
4. The busing incidents affected members of the MacDonald family in various ways. Be specific in listing what is happening to Kevin, Kathy, Frankie, Mary, Ma and Coley, and Davey.
5. At the close of this chapter Davey, who admits to his own paranoia, states:

"They don't want you to know what the enemy looks like, so you can end up killing each other, or yourself, in the frenzy. You become your own worst enemy!"

Note: This idea of "who the enemies are" resonates throughout the book. Davey's quote can provide the impetus for a powerful Socratic dialogue students can enact when they reach either the end of this chapter or the end of the memoir. Students should identify and discuss both real or perceived enemies (e.g., Whitey Bulger, Judge Garrity) and abstract ones (e.g., poverty).

## **CHAPTER 5—"LOOKING FOR WHITEY"**

*Time: 1975–1978*

1. Discuss how the arrival of Seamus, his baby brother, affects Michael's attitude regarding South Boston.
2. Michael writes, "No one made us feel better about where we lived than Whitey Bulger . . . He was the king of Southie." Be specific in listing both the reasons and the evidence that Whitey had more power than elected politicians.
3. In your own words describe how at the age of twelve Kevin is introduced to the drug trade and what some of the specific results are of this involvement.

4. The busing situation means that Joe now attends Charlestown High School. Discuss how this switches from being a positive to a negative experience.

Note: The attack on “a black lawyer in a suit” mentioned in chapter 5 involved a man named Theodore (Ted) Landsmark and occurred in 1976. A photograph of the incident by Boston photographer Stanley Foreman won the 1977 Pulitzer Prize for Spot News Photography. Students will find details and the photograph online or can view the incident on United Streaming. (Encourage students to keep the assailant in mind, as he will appear later in the book.)

5. Discuss how boxing could be a positive activity but becomes a negative one for Frankie.
6. Discuss the background of George Wallace and his visit to Southie.
7. Explain what is now happening in the lives of these MacDonald family members: Michael, who is ten years old; Kevin, who is now in the eighth grade; Kathy, who is a teenager; Davey, who is twenty-two; Joe, who is twenty-one; and Ma.
8. Contrast two incidents involving drugs, one concerning Michael and the other Kevin.

## **CHAPTER 6—“AUGUST”**

*Time: 1979*

1. Referring back to chapter 5, make a significant connection between the month of August and Michael's brother Davey.
2. Michael writes the he “still felt comforted by the popular line that Southie was the one place ‘where everyone looks out for each other.’” After you read this chapter choose one of the following pairs and provide evidence that their actions prove Michael's statement.
  - a) Ma and Kathy
  - b) Michael and Davey
  - c) Frankie and Kevin
  - d) Frankie and Davey
  - e) Michael and Seamus and Stevie
3. After reading the final pages of chapter 6, write a reflection regarding Davey that includes the following:
  - a) foreshadowing in earlier incidents;
  - b) Davey's religious images and their significance;
  - c) the evidence Michael found on the roof;
  - d) Michael's guilt;
  - e) your own thoughts and feelings.

## CHAPTER 7—"HOLY WATER"

*Time: Early 1980s*

1. Michael writes that Ma was tough, and there are numerous incidents in the book that prove her emotional and physical strength. Discuss the ones that you found most significant.
2. Although Michael tells people that "Old Colony was the greatest," there is powerful evidence that Old Colony is, in fact, a dangerous place. List some events to support this fact.
3. Be specific in describing some of the effects drugs have
  - a) on young members of the South Boston neighborhood;
  - b) on Kathy MacDonald.
4. Students should assume the role of one of the young people who visited Kathy: Timmy Baldwin, Julie Meaney, Frankie McGirk, Tommy Dooley, Betty LeClair, Okie O'Connor, Brian Biladow, Michael Dizoglio, and Stephen Dizzo. Students should describe their visit to Kathy and their fate.
5. Pretend you are Michael searching in Kathy's room for more insight about your sister. Explain how three of the items you find help you to understand her better.
6. As this chapter closes Kathy is in rehabilitation learning how to walk again. There is tragic irony in the destination of these "walks." Explain.

## CHAPTER 8—"STAND-UP GUY"

*Time: 1980s*

1. Make a comparison chart indicating how Frankie and Kevin seem to be heading in dramatically different directions in life.
2. "No one was more powerful than Whitey," Michael writes. As you read chapter 8 list the illegal activities involving Whitey Bulger.
3. In Michael's second book, *Easter Rising*, he credits music as a positive influence on his life. What do you learn in chapter 8 about his other early influences?
4. Discuss the evidence that at this point in their lives, Johnnie, Joe, Kevin, and Frankie seem to be "getting out" of the negative aspects of their neighborhood.
5. July 17, 1984, Ma's fiftieth birthday, ironically brings one of the MacDonald family's worst tragedies. After reading the details about Frankie, Kevin, and the robbery, write either a newspaper article or a newspaper editorial about these events.



Note: At this point in the memoir students have learned about the myths and the realities concerning Whitey Bulger and his activities in South Boston. Students could be assigned to research current articles to update the class on more recent details and his status on the FBI's Most Wanted list.

## CHAPTER 9—"EXILE"

*Time: Late 1980s–early 1990s*

1. "Ma was on a mission," Michael writes. Explain at least three of the positive ways Ma tries to stave off the sorrow for her deceased children.
2. Discuss Michael's dream. In what eerie way does it haunt him and also affect his desire to "just come and go in this neighborhood"?
3. "South Boston has one of the lowest rates of reported crime in the city, along with Charlestown and East Boston." Using the information from chapter 9 as well as details from earlier chapters, use this quote in preparing for a Socratic dialogue regarding the truth or fiction of this idea.
4. During the 1980s the facts and the fiction of Whitey Bulger's "protection" of and concern for Southie began to be exposed. Create a chart that separates some of the fiction once believed and the facts being revealed.
5. As he witnesses the raccoon incident, Michael believes that "this is the greatest place to grow up," yet other events involving Seamus, Stevie, and Kathy seem to prove the opposite. Discuss both the negative and positive characteristics of Southie in this time period.
6. In this chapter Michael describes the complex issues that resulted from what was deemed "forced housing." Prepare a list of these issues for a class discussion.
7. "And the whole neighborhood tried to shield itself from the ugly truth," writes Michael. Now that you have read most of the book, write an expository essay based on this thesis statement: In his memoir *All Souls* Michael MacDonald reveals many of the "ugly truths" about growing up in "the best place in the world." Choose three to five specific incidents to use as evidence.

Another option is to have students write an essay about Southie as "the best place in the world" to grow up. Early in the book, talking to a reporter about "all those beautiful dreams and nightmares," Michael says, "I'm thinking of moving back." Why would he want to do that?

**CHAPTER 10—"JUSTICE"***Mid-1990s*

1. Discuss the evidence that Johnnie had “gotten out” of Southie and also the reasons he got “pulled” back into Old Colony.
2. After reading chapter 10 work in small groups to take notes and role-play.
  - a) Group 1 should re-create the chaotic scene as Stevie is taken to the police station and interrogated by Detective O’Leary and then taken to juvenile lockup.
  - b) Group 2 should re-create the events leading to Tommy’s death as described to Michael and Johnnie by Stevie and Seamus.
  - c) Group 3 should create two short scenes based on information on pages 237–39: (i) a presentation of the FBI report about the test results regarding the firing of the gun; and (ii) a re-creation of Steven’s conversation with the dispatcher on the tape cassette.
  - d) Group 4 should present evidence and scenes from the first trial.
  - e) Group 5 should present the evidence, witnesses, and verdict of the second trial.
3. Rather than rage or despair about the justice system, Michael, Kathie Mainzer, and Muadi DiBinga turn their negative experiences into an attempt to work with residents in poor communities to bring about positive change. Discuss their backgrounds and their program.
4. Michael writes, “Charles Stephenson helped restore my faith.” List the evidence revealed by this diligent attorney that resulted in Stevie’s exoneration. Michael calls Charles Stephenson the only example he’d ever seen of what it means to be a father. Students could also write about Stephenson as the only adult male hero in the book.

**Additional Critical-Thinking Assignment:**

1. Read the poem “The People, Yes” written in 1936 by Carl Sandburg.
  - a) Make a list of ten different lines that connect to various “people” in *All Souls* and explain these connections.
  - b) Choose a stanza to use as the inspiration for creating an illustration that connects Carl Sandburg’s poem to Michael MacDonald’s memoir. An option will be to explain these connections to the class.

**CHAPTER 11—"VIGIL"***Time: 1996*

1. Discuss the positive and negative effects of gentrification in South Boston.

2. "That's the real Southie," Michael writes in the final chapter. Throughout this memoir the reader learns that the "real" Southie is a complex neighborhood beset by negative influences and attitudes but also rich with human compassion and incredible resilience.

Prepare this quote, "That's the real Southie," for a final Socratic dialogue examining what you have learned through Michael's memoir about these complicated aspects of South Boston, Massachusetts.

### **Additional Critical-Thinking Assignments:**

1. Research other articles and interviews connected to the publication of *All Souls* and report this information to the class.
2. Read the poem "The Low Road" by Marge Piercy.
  - a) Write an essay in which you use quotes from the poem that connect with some of the themes (injustice, inequality, prejudice, etc.) in *All Souls*.
  - b) Use the poem for a Socratic dialogue or full-class discussion.
  - c) Create an illustration of quotes from the poem combined with positive and negative symbols of *All Souls*. An option will be to present and explain this illustration to the class.

### **ADDITIONAL LITERARY WORKS WITH THEMES AND/OR EVENTS THAT CONNECT TO ALL SOULS:**

#### **Poems:**

Preface to *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman  
 "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost  
 "We Real Cool" by Gwendolyn Brooks  
 "Autobiography in Five Short Chapters" by Portia Nelson  
 "On Turning Ten" by Billy Collins  
 "The Dream of Now" by William Stafford

#### **Short Stories:**

"Hunger" by Richard Wright  
 "Fear" by Gary Soto  
 "Eleven" by Sandra Cisneros  
 "Teenage Wasteland" by Anne Tyler

#### **Plays:**

*Dead End* by Sidney Kingsley  
*Rent* by Jonathan Larson

**Autobiographies:**

*Manchild in the Promised Land* by Claude Brown

*Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas

*Makes Me Wanna Holler* by Nathan McCall

Look at the songs within *All Souls* (from Irish tunes to Janis Joplin's "Me and Bobby Magee"—"Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose"—to the Isley Brothers and later disco tunes, all of which were included in this book for their significance, foreshadowing, and so on) and write about how each song relates to events in the story or foreshadows an event or tragedy, or sums up a character's thinking.

**ABOUT MICHAEL PATRICK MACDONALD**

Michael Patrick MacDonald helped launch Boston's successful gun-buyback program and is founder of the South Boston Vigil Group. He has won the American Book Award, a New England Literary Lights Award, and the Myers Center Outstanding Book Award administered by the Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights in North America. His second book, the highly acclaimed memoir *Easter Rising*, was published in 2006, and will be available in paperback from Houghton Mifflin in March, 2008. He is currently writing the screenplay of *All Souls* for director Ron Shelton. MacDonald lives in Brooklyn.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE**

Pat Rigley has taught sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade English in Boston, Brookline, and now Newton. She developed this study guide directly from the positive and often poignant classroom experiences of her eighth-grade students as they read and discussed Michael MacDonald's *All Souls*. She also wrote a study guide for Beacon Press's *Fist Stick Knife Gun* by Geoffrey Canada.









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