



USING FICTION TO TEACH HUMAN RIGHTS

‘It is through literature, not simply literacy, that we learn to understand and empathise ... Through literature, we can find our place in the world, feel we belong and discover our sense of responsibility. Amnesty International understands this very well.’

Michael Morpurgo



Many children’s novels and even picture books possess great power to open up new worlds and inspire a capacity for empathy. Being able to empathise makes it easier to be kind, tolerant and willing to consider other points of view. It makes it harder to adopt prejudiced stances, helps to guard against aggression and conflict and may even encourage people to take positive action on behalf of others. It also helps young people to put their own problems in perspective. These are all values that lie at the heart of human rights – and we can find them in novels and picture books for children.

‘If, by reading ... we are enabled to step, for one moment, into another person’s shoes, to get right under their skin, then that is already a great achievement. Through empathy we overcome prejudice, develop tolerance and ultimately understand love. Stories can bring understanding, healing, reconciliation and unity.’

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Stories, memoirs and picture books are a great resource to help personalise human rights that may otherwise seem abstract. They can awaken students to new worlds and challenging situations. At the point of caring about Anne Frank’s fate, for example, young readers want to know what can be done to

stop it happening again. Fiction, too, can be used to provoke discussion that permeates many areas of the school curriculum and creates different ways of working together and understanding each other.

In Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch tells his children, ‘You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view [...] until you climb into his skin and walk around in it’. Adult readers recognise his hope that the children will grow into compassionate and tolerant people. But young readers can see this too. Harper Lee’s novel has become a byword for human rights values and many adults cite it as the most formative book in their teenage years - the story that had the greatest impact on their daily behaviour and helped to shape their lives. It is an object lesson in fiction that inspires profound understanding of what human rights really mean.

But *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not alone. At Amnesty International UK we have a programme of work on fiction that develops awareness of core human rights values. We are also producing a series of teachers’ notes on particular novels and picture books – including Michael Morpurgo’s *Shadow*, Henning Mankell’s *Secrets in the Fire* and Bob Graham’s picture book *How to Heal a Broken Wing*.

Picture books can be a source of great wealth in human rights education. Kindness, gentleness and tolerance are some of the positive faces of human rights in action, as is the willingness to stand up and say no in the face of injustice. Even Paddington Bear can be used to talk about refugees and to explore the resilience of the human spirit. For author Michael Bond 'part of the inspiration for Paddington Bear was rooted in my childhood memories of seeing trainloads of small children arriving in Reading with a label around their neck and all their possessions in a small suitcase when they were evacuated from London at the start of the last war. His best friend, and the one person in the books who really understands him, is Mr Gruber, who is a refugee from Hungary.'

Fiction has real power to further human rights education. A well-stocked class library is an instant and constant resource for raising human rights subjects, providing openings for teachers and children to explore and frame issues in new and interesting ways. Books allow the language of human rights to permeate the school environment. More than this, novels and picture books can be invaluable in establishing emotional distance from a topic, making difficult or sensitive subjects much more approachable. It is much easier and less threatening for a child to talk about a character in a book than it is to talk directly about their own feelings.

This teaching resource has been created to inspire you to welcome human rights into your classroom. We hope that it will enable you and your students to open up new worlds and to discuss and debate the stories in all their many-layered depth.

But please note that our selection of books is not definitive. We encourage you to use these books as starting points. We would welcome your suggestions for other books, and always invite feedback from you as to how your students respond.

'Amnesty mobilises thousands of people who have never been tortured or imprisoned for their beliefs to act on behalf of those who have. The power of human empathy, leading to collective action, saves lives, and frees prisoners. Ordinary people, whose personal well-being and security are assured, join together in huge numbers to save people they do not know, and will never meet ... Unlike any other creature on this planet, humans can learn and understand, without having experienced. They can think themselves into other people's places.'

JK Rowling

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