ONLY AT THE MOVIES MARCH 22

A STUDYGUIDE BY MARGUERITE O'HARA

www.metromagazine.com.au
www.theeducationshop.com.au
Just like [Anne Frank], I knew the feeling of discrimination and to be looked down upon ... like her, ‘I sometimes feel like a bird in a cage and just want to fly away.’ The first thing that came to my mind was that Ms. G was right. I did find myself within the pages of the book, like she said I would.

Diary 36, The Freedom Writers Diary

**INTRODUCTION**

**FREEDOM WRITERS** is a film about a young, idealistic teacher, Erin Gruwell (played by Hilary Swank) and her class of racially mixed students at Wilson High School in Long Beach, California. It is based on a true story. The film is set in 1994 following the 1992 race riots in Los Angeles which were sparked by the televised police bashing of Rodney King. The film’s title refers to a book of the students’ writing, published in 1999, on which the film is based – *The Freedom Writers Diary*.

Erin Gruwell is ready to take on the world as she steps inside Wilson High School for her first day of teaching. Her class, a diverse group of racially charged teenagers from different walks of life – African Americans, Latinos, Asians, juvenile delinquents, gang members, and underprivileged students from poor neighborhoods – hope for nothing more than to make it through the day. On the surface, the only thing they share is their hatred for each other and the understanding that they are simply being warehoused in the educational system until they are old enough to disappear. Despite her students’ obstinate refusal to participate during class, Erin tries various means to engage them on a daily basis.

But then ghetto reality steps in to focus the picture. A racially motivated gang shooting witnessed by a Latina gang member in Erin’s class, and an ugly racial cartoon that Erin intercepts during class, become the most unwittingly dynamic teaching aids. They spark a transformation in the classroom, compel the students to listen and force her to take off her idealistic blinkers and take in the kids’ survival stories of their undeclared war on the streets. Erin begins to connect with them. She brings in music from the Hood, and literature from another kind of ghetto, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and with these simple tools she opens her students’ eyes to the experiences of those suffering intolerance throughout the world and the strug-
gles of those outside their own communities.

Knowing that every one of her students has a story to tell, Erin encourages them to keep a daily journal of their thoughts and experiences. After sharing their stories with one another, the students see their shared experience for the first time and open up to the idea that there are possibilities in life outside of making it to the age of eighteen. Based on a true story, Freedom Writers is an inspirational tale and testimony to courage, hope and the human spirit’s triumph over intolerance. As the students’ diaries transform from schoolwork into life preservers, Gruwell’s commitment to them grows and affects her in ways she did not imagine.

THE FILMMAKERS

Freedom Writers was written and directed by Richard LaGravenese and co-produced by Stacey Sher, Michael Shamberg and Danny de Vito. Hilary Swank was one of the executive producers.

CAST

Adults > Erin Gruwell – Hilary Swank • Scott Casey – Patrick Dempsey • Margaret Campbell – Imelda Staunton • Brian Gelford – John Benjamin Hickey • Erin’s father Steve Gruwell – Scott Glen

Students > Eva – April Lee Fernandez • Andre – Mario • Marcus – Jason Finn • Ben – Hunter Parrish • Alejandro – Sergio Montalvo • Sindy – Jaclyn Ngan • Jamal – Deance Wyatt

CURRICULUM RELEVANCE

Freedom Writers is a gritty, inspirational story about a group of students and their teacher that will have both relevance and appeal to middle and senior secondary students, particularly to students in years 9 and 10, the level of the students shown in the film. It should generate discussion about issues of justice, racism, gang violence, friendships and the role of schools and teachers in peoples’ lives. While many of these issues suggest a cross-curriculum approach, the film would be a valuable tool for generating discussion in English, SOSE (HSIE) and Civics and Citizenship classes. The soundtrack includes a number of rap music tracks, which will appeal to many students.

The first three student activities might be enough for some students to focus on, while other groups and older students may choose to pursue the issues raised in more detail through the other suggested activities. The film would also be a useful resource for tertiary students in teacher training courses, offering an alternative model for developing student focused courses.

GENRE

Freedom Writers is in the tradition of a number of films about teachers and students. Generally a young idealistic teacher is confronted with a class of teenagers who have become disengaged from conventional schooling. Issues of race and class often lie at the heart of these films. They include Blackboard Jungle (Richard Brooks, 1955), To Sir with Love (James Clavell, 1967), Stand and Deliver (Ramón Menéndez, 1988), Lean on Me (John G. Avildsen, 1989) and Dangerous Minds (John N. Smith, 1995).

BACKGROUND BRIEFING AND GLOSSARY

Significant events in the history of the Civil Rights Movement in America, particularly as they relate to the changing composition of school populations, are outlined below. Freedom Writers is set in a school in California which is on the west coast of America, not in the southern states where many of the civil rights protests were centered. However, many of the events leading up to the Los Angeles race riots of 1992 are crucial background for understanding the events and attitudes shown in the film.

• Segregation – separation of people by colour, race or religion.
• Integration – bringing people of different racial or ethnic groups into unrestricted and equal association.
• Direct Action – political action which doesn’t involve elections or traditional government-endorsed campaigning.
Southern States of the USA – refers to the states defeated in the Civil War of the 1860s: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia. These states were fighting to preserve black slavery. They were often the last to comply with Federal anti-discrimination laws.

Desegregation of schools – in 1954, in a legal case known as ‘Brown versus Board of Education’ the segregation of schools, particularly between blacks and whites in the southern states of America, was legally challenged by The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In a landmark decision the Supreme Court ruled such segregation to be unconstitutional, thus opening the process of ensuring all public schools enrolled different races. This is the ruling – We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Despite this ruling, at the end of 1956, in some southern states, no black children attended a mixed school.

Challenging bus segregation – in 1955, a black woman, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white person in Montgomery, Alabama. Blacks had to sit in the back rows and give up their seats to whites. Her arrest for violating Alabama’s bus segregation laws galvanized Montgomery’s blacks, who boycotted the city’s buses for 381 days. A federal Government ruling had declared segregated transport was unconstitutional in 1955. In 1956 the United States Supreme Court declared the bus segregation laws unconstitutional.

Freedom Riders – the title of a film (and of a book on which it is based) is a tribute to the activities of those who fought for civil rights for black Americans, including ‘the freedom riders’. In 1961, as part of the battle for equal rights, a group of black and white protesters, including Dr. Martin Luther-King, rode segregated buses across the southern states of America to protest against racial segregation. When they reached their destination, usually a heavily segregated town, they would organize sit-ins. Sometimes they were ambushed and attacked by white youths and by the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist organization that often engaged in violence to achieve their ends. The freedom riders gained a lot of publicity for the Civil Rights cause.

Busing – starting in 1971, following a controversial court judgement to integrate students into public (government) schools, students were bused into schools with predominantly white or black students to assist in the desegregation of schools. Early in Freedom Writers, Margaret Campbell, the teacher who has been at Wilson High school for many years, talks about some students spending 90 minutes being bused across town from their homes to attend Wilson High School. She claims that the school’s integration program has cost it ‘seventy per cent of its scholastic record’. School integration programs, while having widespread support in the community, are still opposed by some groups. While opposition is sometimes based on the time taken to bus students to a more distant school outside their neighbourhood, others attribute declining academic standards to the busing program.

Rodney King – In 1991 a young black man, Rodney King, was bashed by a number of Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers on the street after being stopped in his car. The incident was captured on video and shown around the world on television. In March 1992, the four police officers charged over the beating appeared in court and were found not guilty of using undue force. The verdict triggered massive rioting in Los Angeles which lasted for three days.

The Los Angeles Riots – In March 1992, massive race riots erupted in Los Angeles and other American cities. More than fifty people were killed, 2000 injured and hundreds of businesses were looted and damaged. The King incident and subsequent acquittal of the police involved fuelled underlying existing racial tensions which were already running high in an area of high unemployment.

Terms used in the film to indicate different year levels of secondary schooling in the American school system – Freshman and sophomore refer to years 9 & 10, while junior and senior high refer to Australian years 11 & 12.

While it is important to be aware of the background to this film, it is also important to understand how difficult the task was for some schools now required to work with a range of students of different races, many of whom carried resentments and attachments to warring gangs based on race. As the film shows us, it took enormous dedication and a willingness to try different approaches by both teachers and students to redirect negative energy into positive achievements.
1. Do students at your school form friendships based on ethnic lines, i.e. do people from the same racial background sit together in class or form tight-knit groups?

2. Make a list of the different ethnic backgrounds of students in your class. Many are likely to be Australian citizens whose family migrated to Australia from another country.

3. What are some of the advantages in attending a school with students from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds?

4. How significant do you think each of the following are in achieving successful educational outcomes
   a. Family background
   b. Family attitudes about the value of education
   c. The school you attend
   d. The teachers you have
   e. Your own ambitions
   f. Your friends’ attitudes to school

5. Students often have very positive memories of a teacher’s influence in their lives, particularly from their time in primary school. What qualities are important to you in teachers?

6. Do you think it would be preferable to have fewer teachers in secondary schools teaching the majority of your subjects so you had contact with fewer rather than more teachers?

7. What would be some of the practical difficulties for schools and students in organizing such a system?

8. How would you feel about having to attend a school some distance from where you live as a way of ensuring a mix of racial backgrounds?
9. Does gang violence organized on racial lines exist in Australia? If you believe it does, explain what you think are the reasons for such groups forming. Give examples you know of, either from experience, or through media reports, of how such groups operate?

10. Do you believe that black Australians have equal educational opportunities to white Australians?

11. What do you know about Anne Frank? Have you read her diary?

12. Here are some reasons why people keep a diary. Re-order them to best match why you might keep a diary and add any other reasons you think are important.
   a. Recording personal impressions and feelings
   b. Ordering your thoughts
   c. Compiling a written record of a period in your life
   d. Having an opportunity to express secret thoughts and feelings

**STUDENT ACTIVITY 2**

**WATCHING THE FILM**

Here is a list of things to look for as you watch Freedom Writers. Read through these questions before watching the film and make notes on some or all of them as you watch or afterwards.

**Beginnings**

- What are your initial impressions of Erin Gruwell? How is she dressed and what does this tell us about her? Why are her pearls such a focus?
- Describe her first conversation with Margaret Campbell before school starts. What contrasting attitudes and experience are shown here?
- Eva, a Latina student, fills in the student perspective in a voiceover as we see images of the 1992 Los
Angeles riots. How do both the voiceover and the file footage establish the background of this story?

• How do the students respond to Erin on day one? How do they organize the seating arrangement in the classroom?
• What does Eva’s letting gang members into the school grounds tell us?
• Describe Erin’s husband and her father’s reaction to her distress in the early weeks at Wilson High.
• What is the violent incident involving Eva that shows the audience how dangerous the world of racially based gangs is?
• How does Erin react to the racist drawing being passed around the class? What is it about this drawing that she finds so offensive?
• Which period of recent world history does she draw on to teach her students about both gangs and racism?
• Did any of the students know what The Holocaust was?
• What percentage of her students acknowledged being shot at as part of the turf wars?
• What is the response of Erin’s Head of Department to her request for more relevant texts for her students, including copies of *The Diary of Anne Frank*?
• How did the classroom exercise in honoring friends who have died as a result of street violence bring the group together?

**Commitment to change**

• What does Erin decide to do to fund her own educational projects?
• When the journals for diary-writing are offered to the students, what does Erin tell them about their purpose and how she, as the teacher, will use them?
• How does Erin’s father become involved in her teaching the students?
• Describe the excursion to the Simon Wiesenthal Holocaust Centre.
• What do the voiceovers and images of students disposing of weapons and writing in their journals suggest about the changes happening in their lives?
• What are some of the things students wish for when they speak to their toasts for change?

• What impression does the visit of Miep Gies, the woman who hid Anne Frank from the Nazis, make on the students? How does her story inspire them and how does she respond to their stories?

• What dilemma does Eva face about the upcoming court case?

• What are the consequences for her in speaking the truth about the shooting?

• How are we shown the transformation taking place in Erin’s classroom 203?

• What practical assistance is Erin prepared to offer Eva?

Triumphs and setbacks

• What are the consequences for Erin’s relationship with Scott, her husband, of her commitment to her students?

• How do the school authorities respond to Erin’s request to continue teaching this group of students the following year?

• How are Erin’s colleagues at the school presented and contrasted with her approach to teaching? Do you think this is a fair presentation or are some teachers stereotyped?

• What happens to Andre? How does he change during the year with Erin Gruwell?

• What is the outcome of Erin’s and the students’ wish to remain together for the final years of their schooling?

• Make a list of some of the texts and approaches Gruwell uses to engage her class e.g. the visit to the Holocaust Museum, visiting speakers etc.
STUDENT ACTIVITY 3

CHARACTERS

Describe the part each of these individuals takes in the film and make an assessment of how convincing and believable you found each one. In the final column, rate the performance of each actor taking the part from one star * (not convincing) to five stars ***** (excellent). See Table 1.

CASTING FOR THE FILM

The filmmakers went on a nationwide search for kids to bring The Freedom Writers and their stories to life. LaGravenese, the director, says they saw more than 2000 kids ‘because I wanted real kids and honest performances’. Some like April Hernandez who plays Eva, and Mario, an established rap performer who plays Andre, have a background in performance, but others had never acted before. Jason Finn, who plays Marcus, one of the ‘writers’ who has been living on the streets, has a similar life story to his film character. He had dropped out of school but decided to drop back in and joined a video class where he gained a part in a student film called Mercy Street. A teacher from his previous school suggested he audition for Freedom Writers. After three auditions Jason was chosen to play Marcus. Jaclyn Ngan who plays the Cambodian girl Sindy and Sergio Montalvo, who plays Alejandro, were also novice actors.

As part of the rehearsal process Swank and the actors playing the students visited the Holocaust Museum where they all met with the Holocaust survivors who appear as themselves in the film.

THE REAL ERIN GRUWELL

Freedom Writers is based on the true story of Erin Gruwell’s experiences as a young teacher at Wilson High School. Below are extracts from her account of her experiences, which are depicted in the film by actor Hilary Swank.
Choosing Wilson High School:

I really wanted a school that had diversity, which had been affected by the riots and could be this wonderful eclectic mix of races and economics and cultures. On paper, Wilson seemed to be perfect because it was this fusion of affluent kids and abject poverty, and included every ethnicity under the sun with kids who could be headed off to Harvard or off to jail.

Making connections with students’ lives:

When I made the parallel between this note [the caricature of a Negro face] and the propaganda from the Holocaust, I got blank stares from my students. I remember trying to draw these parallels between pain and discrimination, but these terms were not something they understood … Even though all my students had experienced discrimination themselves they didn’t understand it when put into words. I started yelling and screaming and for the first time my façade cracked. I was no longer perky; I was no longer the cheerleader. In that moment of seeing me so passionate and so angry, the students kind of sat up and thought, ‘Wow, she’s really serious’.

Teaching philosophy:

I wanted my students to realize that each and everyone of them had an odyssey of their own, their own kind of journey, and so I wanted to make every single lesson relevant to what they already knew, and to create some kind of bridge to validate who they were and where they came from. I was hoping to bring them across that bridge and teach them that education is a great liberating force and will equalize the playing field. Being educated didn’t mean that they had to disregard who they are and where they come from, but it was important for them to understand that there was a whole world out there.

STUDENT ACTIVITY 4

PRODUCTION VALUES

1. How is contemporary music, particularly rap music, used in the film?
2. At certain points in the film, we see a number of overlapping and dissolving images to show a number of changes in the students’ lives. How effective did you find this visual shorthand?

3. How does the footage of the 1992 Los Angeles riots mesh with the contemporary world of the school?

4. Hilary Swank has already won two leading actress Oscars for her roles as Brandon Teena in Boys Don’t Cry and for her performance as the leading character in Million Dollar Baby. How crucial do you think her performance as Erin Gruwell will be to the success of this film, artistically, at the Box Office and at film Award ceremonies?

STUDENT ACTIVITY 5

TAking IT FURTHER

1. Film reviewing. When we read reviews of films or hear them on TV or radio, we may sometimes find them similar to our own response but at other times disagree strongly with the reviewer’s interpretation and opinion of the film. Investigate some of the reviews of Freedom Writers found on the site listed here: http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/freedom_writers/

   On this site there are a number of reviews of Freedom Writers. The main page gives the opening lines of each review. Choose three that seem to offer different perspectives, open each one to read the full review and decide which of the three comes closest to your response to the film.

2. One of the things that drew us to making this film was the notion that one person can really make a difference ... Erin Gruwell is a hero like anybody else can be a hero. She was frightened but saw that something had to be done and couldn’t turn her back on these kids. She empowered them with the tools to essentially help themselves. (Stacey Sher, Producer)

   How do you think students like those in Gruwell’s class will develop their opportunities without their teacher’s presence to guide and encourage them?

3. What about Australia?

   In any society where there are people of different ethnic origins living together, some tensions and
even direct conflict are inevitable. While the racial mix in Australia is different to that shown in Freedom Writers, there have been a number of examples of conflict apparently precipitated by racial identity.

a. List any violent incidents you know of that have been triggered by racial hostility.

b. Conduct a class discussion about what part racial tensions played in the 2005 Cronulla beach riots in NSW, the Macquarie Fields riots, the Palm Island protests and riots following the death of a young Aboriginal man in police custody and the recent confrontation between Australian Serbs and Croats at the 2007 Australian Open Tennis.

c. To what extent are issues about racism, gang violence and ethnic tribalism concerns in Australian schools?

d. How successful is the integration of students from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds in many Australian schools?

e. To what extent does the easy access to weapons, particularly firearms, in American society, contribute to the seriousness of street and territorial disputes?

4. Social Justice Issues

In 1963 Martin Luther-King, American Civil Rights Leader, said in one of his most famous speeches, known as the I Have a Dream speech,

… one hundred years later [after the American Declaration of Independence declared that all men are created equal], the Negro is still not free...the life of the negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination ... the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.

(The full text of King’s speech about the ongoing consequences of racism can be accessed at http://www.usconstitution.net/dream.html)

Erin Gruwell’s students are partly the product of a long history of racial and social inequity. With one exception, the white student Ben, they are from African-American, Latino, Asian, and Mexican backgrounds. They are described as under-privileged and under-educated, with a history of criminal activity and/or drug dependency, family members in jail and involvement in gang-life and violence. Self-segregation seems to dominate their behaviour and ethnic tribalism becomes their means of survival.
Successfully integrating groups of people by creating educational opportunities that meet their particular needs is only one part of the solution to changing social attitudes and building a fair society. What practical measures would you institute in schools to ensure that all students were able to reach their potential and pursue their goals?

5. ‘The film is about challenging intolerance, because intolerance is the fundamental thing that sparks a Holocaust, gang wars, drive-by shootings or any form of racism.’ (Stacey Sher, Producer)

a. Do you think it is reasonable to link the Nazi Holocaust, a government coordinated act of massive genocide against mostly Jewish people, to the situations experienced by the students in this film?

b. In Australia, as in other countries, ‘hate speech’ or ‘incitement to racial hatred’ is seen to be a serious issue. Increasingly, governments are legislating to make these practices illegal and subject to legal charges and sanctions. Do you believe such legislation needs to be strengthened?

c. How does pride and loyalty to your birthplace and racial origins turn into extreme nationalism, dangerous fanaticism and racial intolerance?

REFERENCES AND OTHER RELATED MATERIAL

BOOKS

- The Diary of Anne Frank, Numerous editions and translations of this book have been published.

FILMS

- Babel (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006) – Golden Globe winner for Best Film. This is a film about global connections between rich and poor, between developed and third world economies and about the use of firearms. Through three interconnected stories we see inequity, poverty, wealth and privilege, and the ways in which human connections and disconnections exist globally.

(See also the list of films in the Genre section in this guide.)
USEFUL WEBSITES

• http://www.freedomwriters.com.au
  This site provides a range of resources about the film Freedom Writers including the trailer, 
  photo gallery, soundtrack, production notes, synopsis, cast and crew, a competition, this study 
  guide and much more. (Accessed 18 January 2007)

• http://www.multicol.lib.org/homework/civilrights/
  This site provides a range of resources about the Civil Rights Issue and the desegregation of schools 
  in America. (Accessed 18 January 2007)

• http://www.freedomwritersfoundation.org
  The official Freedom Writers website. (Accessed 18 January 2007)

  Transcript of an interview with Erin Gruwell, Jason Finn, a student actor in the film and Maria Reyes, 
  one of the real-life Freedom Writers. (Accessed 16 January 2007)

• http://www.myhero.com/myhero/hero.asp?hero=e_gruwell
  Information and images about both Erin Gruwell, her students and the heroes she used to inspire her 

• http://www.amazon.com/Freedom-Writers-Diary-Teacher-Themselves/dp/038549422X
  Amazon website where you can go inside The Freedom Writers Diary and read extracts from the text 
  as well as see the image of the racist caricature which catalyzed Gruwell’s teaching for tolerance ap-

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