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Elizabeth Woody's "HomeCooking" Reels Students In

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Tony Wolk is the author of the novels Abraham Lincoln, A Novel Life, Good Friday, and Lincoln's Daughter, as well as a collection of short stories, The Parable of You. He has taught writing and literature at Portland State University since 1965.
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Elizabeth Woody's "HomeCooking" Reels Students In

Peter Thacker



How does a teacher best create classroom community? I have asked this question myself in the fall of every school year since 1971. Of course, I find different answers year-to-year, but I remember those answers best that have had the most influence on my students. For at least a decade at Cleveland High School, my guiding questions for students during our first unit of study were:

1) Who Am I? and 2) Who Are We as a Group? The shape of this unit changed at least slightly every year, and I still enjoy looking back through my files to discover those subtle, sometimes more dramatic, adjustments I made to better engage students. Perhaps the most significant addition to this unit was a personal narrative that addressed students' relationships with their grandparents.

I have found exploring parental relationships sometimes to be prickly. Though there are plenty of strong

parent-child relationships, from my students' histories I noted that fathers had often been abandoners and moms too close. Grandparents sometimes then provided the best entry into the goodness at the heart of the family.

My colleague Charlotte Pennington introduced me to the short story "HomeCooking" by Warm Springs tribal member Elizabeth Woody. Charlotte suggested reading the story aloud as a sweet initiation into intergenerational narratives, noting it could nurture students' memories of special times with their own grandparents. This story truly worked.

"HomeCooking" takes place in the shadow of Mount Hood, a legendary Oregon peak. Granma is cooking dinner as her granddaughter looks on. Granma grows wistful and begins a tale that suggests the beauty of long-lasting relationships.

The heart of this poignant story is Granma's relationship with Granpa, one founded long before humans walked the earth.

In the narrative, relationships span well beyond the here and now to encompass the surrounding mountains, trout, and the spirits that dwell within all living things, not to mention the places we dwell in. These all are intertwined with the very human interactions between granddaughter and grandmother, grandmother and grandfather, even

other relatives, so many that sometimes Granma does not remember their names. But, Granma does remember her husband and the mountains, the wrens that sing outside her window, and her granddaughter, the wily one who could force a chase as good as her mother before her, one that ended in Granma being too winded and too delighted to whip her. The heart of this poignant story is Granma's relationship with Granpa, one founded long before humans walked the earth. In Warm Springs lore, cloud-capped Hood "walked, lived, and lusted after a young woman mountain, fought with Wy-East for her in a time before the Changer came to have all this chaos beaded up into some monstrously big Dreamer design" (369).

Granddaughter hears of the amorousness of grand peaks. "Mountain love is a real shaky, fired-up affair. They push up great hilly ranges, bed over lakes, rub up against one another so wildly that it takes a year to cover up all that passionate rumbling and love talk."

And so it was, though less chaotic, with her grandparents, a

merging they wanted, symbolized by two cedar trees that they both planted, side by side, when they married. Saying to one another that these trees would grow together, like they would, intermingle their roots and branches as one, while still letting the winds of life blow between them (367).

Less violent this love, built for lasting, as natural distance and closeness mingle.

Catching, gutting, cooking, and eating trout infuse this story, in both the present and the past. In the old days, Granpa had his elaborate lures and "his science and some notion that he treated the fish better when he made some game out of it," (367) even if Granma and the kids would use grasshoppers, string, and a pin and be just as successful. You cannot help appreciate the quiet beauty of the humorous back-and-forths at every turn of Woody's story. There is play fighting, with Granpa twirling Granma around, her grabbing his pants, and him giving up. The story ends as Granma concedes that Grandpa was the better cook saying, "in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone, 'Your grandfather didn't marry me for my HomeCooking. I thought you always knew that'" (371).

The story is one that grows as you read. There is no great hook in the first paragraph, yet my students would listen and find the interior depth of relationship that they experienced with their own grandparents. The story became a model for their personal narratives. Though I have kept no writing samples, I recollect the loving interactions that flowed from student pens as they moved from free writes to final copy.

One of those students lived around the corner from me. He told about working on cars in his grandfather's garage, learning by doing, being praised for his every new learning. About ten years later, his grandfather was moved into the house across the street from his. Guess who was responsible for helping him as he aged?

"HomeCooking" illustrates the strength of tradition and family. Elizabeth Woody tells an intergenerational story naturally with respect, humor, and grace.

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Peter R. Thacker has been teaching at the University of Portland since 2003, following a teaching career in Portland Public Schools from 1976–2003.



Tim Gillespie Two Poems

LATE AUTUMN: PLOTING FOR SPRING

An eddy of dry leaves
scrapes down the street.
A rosehip still clings
where two branches meet.
Windskirl blows last leaves
across moss-spattered stones.

Don't dig up the theory,
but do plant some poems.

UP EAGLE CREEK TRAIL

Streamside's mild amble
climbs quickly to cliff-side, walls
towering skyward.

I hang to the line,
grasping rock-anchored cables
along the steep path.

At one-point-five miles,
Metlako Falls Overlook
Spur Trail slants creekward.

At two miles in, there's
riverfall rumble below.
Mist sprinkles my face.

I choose this way down,
drop to the pool just below
the Punch Bowl Falls din.

Above there's a shout,
and leaping through green air, a
man drops, legs cycling.

He splats in the pool
and surfaces, sputtering.
His friends laugh above.

Scores of flags flutter:
fern fronds ruffling in the wind,
clinging to cliffwall.

The creek loudly pours,
runs pounding and rocketing
away, downhill bound.

Full-throated creeksong
lifts along the canyonsides,
a peaceful uproar.

Tim Gillespie is a retired veteran of almost 40 years of public school teaching and a former President of the Oregon Council of Teachers of English. He was Co-Director of the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis & Clark College from 1984 to 1994 and finished his teaching career at Lake Oswego High School.