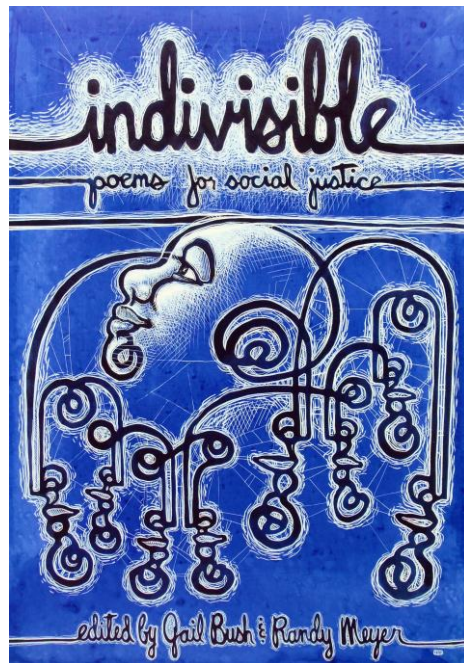


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Indivisible: Poems for Social Justice

Teacher's Guide

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Indivisible: Poems for Social Justice

Indivisible is a poetry anthology that provides the opportunity to combine teaching poetic devices and poetry writing with the themes of American identity. It poses essential questions about history, justice, and American culture. This guide can be used to help teachers structure thematic units on American literature and history.

As students examine the poems and their meanings, encourage students to consider how word choice, imagery, syntax, creative punctuation and repetition give meaning and unity to the poem to support their understanding of poetry as a distinct form. Poetry, as an art form, is meant to be read aloud. Opportunities for rereading both silently and aloud enhance fluency and comprehension as confidence builds.

The brief poet biographies at the end of the book provide context for each poem and serve as an opportunity to consider how identity and history shape our perceptions of what it is to be an American.

OPENING EXERCISE

These may be used at the start of the unit or throughout to generate discussion and to clarify students' perspectives on the issues discussed in the book.

Objective: To establish core American values and to examine the gap between our ideals and the reality of our shared history—to encourage students to consider where they stand both literally and metaphorically.

Values Clarification: Establish for students that you will be conducting an exercise that allows them to think about American values—what we stand for as a culture and what they individually believe. Post signs around the room in different spots that say: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Strongly Disagree, Disagree* and *Neutral*. Read a statement from below and have students move to the place in the room that approximates how they feel about the statement. Then, approach each group and have one or two students explain why they are standing where they are. Be sure to note words and phrases that are used multiple times and where there is majority agreement or disagreement on each statement.

- America is a land of opportunity.
- Americans have the most freedom of any people.
- Everybody has an equal chance in America.
- American history shows a commitment to justice and liberty.
- Americans value freedom above anything else, for example, success or fame.
- Having people from many different cultures makes America stronger.
- Racism is no longer an issue in America.
- It is patriotic to protest against your government.

At the end of the exercise, write key words and phrases on the board. Point out student differences and pose questions about how identity or history might affect how you responded to the statements. Students are asked to add big ideas that they feel are missing from a discussion on American values.

Brainstorm definitions and associations with *Indivisible* and read the first epigram in the anthology. Discuss where that poet might stand in relation to these statements. How does Turner challenge what it is to be American?

BOOK CHAPTERS

To differentiate student instruction, teachers can select which poems in each section to use, depending on students' motivation and interest, reading level, and vocabulary.

1. "LIBERTY WAS MISQUOTED"

Objective: Students will: begin to distinguish between our ideals as American and the challenges of American history.

Activity: Brainstorm words, phrases, and concepts typically associated with America and write on board. Either as an entire class or in groups, read the poems in the first chapter and write key phrases on the board in a separate column. Compare and contrast the two lists.

Essential questions:

- How are our ideas similar or different from the way the writers depict America?
- How important is our identity and history to how we see America?
- How is this message different in a poem than an essay, article or history book?
- What does it mean to say, "liberty was misquoted"?

Poetic Device: In what ways, do the poet's take "liberty" (poetic license) with punctuation or get across their message? How does this contribute to form?

Assessment: Found Poetry: Students will bring in a newspaper article that deals with a current event in America. Using only the words on the page have students construct a poem that communicates how they see America. Encourage creative use of punctuation as well as attention to syntax and repetition. Students will write a paragraph explaining their choices and how the meaning of the article has changed in its poetic form. (You may wish to choose a famous speech or specific article, rather than allowing for student selection, or have both options available.)

2. "WE ARE ALL GETTING BURNED"

Objective: Students will: understand how point of view affects our feelings and attitudes toward America and to begin to think about the diversity of voices in America.

Activity: Have students brainstorm a list of all the people who make up America, then group into categories (i.e. race, ethnicity, gender). Are any categories missing? Why are some

categories left out? Are their particular associations or stereotypes associated with these groups? Negative or positive? Are some identities more or less important to us? How are we each more than one identity?

Break into groups and have each group read (and reread) the poems in this section. Students will then read the biography at the back of the book which provides information about the poets' lives.

Essential Questions:

- How do the poets' backgrounds contribute to their perspective?
- Who is the "we" in "we are all getting burned? Does prejudice hurt everyone and not just those discriminated against?
- How do the poets reverse or flip images to help the reader see a new point of view? (i.e. Christmas lights become search lights in a "Bilingual Christmas" and in "The Handicapped" an epileptic fit is described as "ascending to the heaven of earth"?)
- How do the poets contrast the way they feel and experience their culture as opposed to how it is represented in history and popular culture?
- Many of the poems pose a role reversal. How is this meaningful to understanding point of view?

Poetic Device: What are the most powerful images and words that convey the poets' meaning?

Assessment: Students will select a favorite movie, book, or television show and think about one of the minor characters that are portrayed. Students will consider their viewpoint and think about how the show might be different if they were the main character? How might the story change if told from the perspective of that person? What is included or excluded based on their viewpoint?

3. "GIVING SECRETS AWAY"

Objective: Students will: think about ways they can develop more empathy for those with different experiences.

Activity: Write the opening quote on the board: "You have to see/Other people's lives/ Before you recognize your own." Have students disagree or agree in writing. Do they think others see them as they are? Or only a part of them?

Essential Questions:

- Each poem conjures a specific moment or time. To what extent are these intended to be representative? Are they isolated or common?
- To what extent do people approach difference with either fear or disdain in the poems?

- Do you have to experience something to understand it? Or can poetry be a way to access these feelings?
- What happens when people are forced into silence? Why do they fear speaking out?
- Are the poems a way to “break the silence”? Why or why not?

Poetic Device: In what ways do these poems tell a story? How is the poet also a narrator whose expectations change as the poem progresses? How does this challenge the reader to think differently? (i.e. In “Windshield” how is “cruelty” used in two different ways? In “St Peter Claver,” how does the meaning of St. Peter change when she sees the holy cards?)

Assessment: Students will write about the way teenagers are perceived. Are the words and associations negative or positive? Are they justifiable? Who represents them this way? Have they every felt that others see them through this lens? Or been treated differently because they are a part of this group? Are they seen as an individual or just as a member of that group? How does this impact how you see yourself? Discuss how other age groups are perceived (senior citizens, for example) – ask the same questions.

4. “THE SIGNALS WE GIVE”

Objective: Students will: consider the different between seeing someone as a member of a group as opposed to an individual.

Activity: List the various social groups typically at a school—list some of the traits associated with each. Consider whether one person only belongs to one group or whether they have these traits simply because they are a part of a group. What are the negatives of categorizing people? Who is given the power to use these labels? How is it that people give us signals about who they are?

Essential Questions:

- How does the tone of these poems shift?
- What are the problems with labels? What do they do to each person—the person who is labeled and the one doing the labeling?
- Do the poems give us a way to respond to difference without fear? If so, which ones?
- What advice do the poets give about how to respond to differences among us?
- What is it that unites us?

Poetic Device: Consider the use of repetition for sound, emphasis, and meaning.

Assessment: Write about a time when you felt unfairly judged or labeled. Discuss all the details, recreating the scene. When, where, who, what, why? Describe what happened and how you responded. Which of the poems best encapsulates how you felt? Which best describes how you

responded? Would you respond differently now? Why or why not? Extension: Use the same assessment prompts about a time when the student judged or labeled others.

5. “THE NEXT THING TO HAPPEN”

Objective: Students will: consider our similarities as Americans and how we can participate in creating the ideals in which we believe.

Activity: Write ‘political correctness’ on the board and brainstorm what students associate with it. Is it negative or positive? Do it help us to communicate or hinder our ability to understand each other? Who should get to determine the names/labels that are used? Who does?

Essential Questions:

- How important is language and self-definition to justice?
- Can words change our world? Is the “pen as mighty as the sword,” as Amina Baraka suggests?
- How are words connected to action?
- Do the poems suggest different places for us to stand or the same shared space?

Poetic Device: Consider how each poem is grouped into stanzas. How are they similar or different to paragraphs? Does each of the poems have their own organizational scheme? How does it affect your reading of the poem?

Assessment: Repeat the opening exercise and ask students to consider how their responses to these statements have changed through reading the anthology.

Students will select one statement and discuss how three different poets from the anthology would respond, using support from the text. Students will conclude with their own response, either supporting or challenging the poets’ perspective. This may be in the form of an editorial or a poem. It should address where they have been, where they stand now, and what they see as their role in moving forward, who they are becoming.

Maureen Smith has taught high school and college English. She has an M.A. in Education and in Women’s Studies, with an emphasis in literature, from the Ohio State University. Her graduate research focused on the influence of the oral tradition in African-American women’s writing. She has lead book groups across Chicago for the past ten years.