Doing Time: Notes from the Undergrad Short Guide

Doing Time: Notes from the Undergrad by Rob Thomas

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Overview

Community service projects are the connecting theme for ten short stories which feature twelfth grade students from Robert E. Lee High School. Required to complete 200 hours of volunteer work in order to graduate, each student reacts differently to his or her assignment. While most are apathetic and not enthusiastic toward their service and charity recipients, some students view the requirement as an opportunity to improve their own lives although not always altruistically. Candid character sketches presented as first person narratives reveal the diversity of teenage values, motivations, attitudes, and aspirations.

About the Author

Rob Thomas, the son of Bob and Diana Thomas, was born on August 15, 1965, in Sunnyside, Washington. When he was ten years old, his family moved to San Marcos, Texas. Because of this relocation from a rural to urban area, where he attended an inner city school with a multicultural population, Thomas experienced culture shock. This generated a feeling of being an outsider. Thomas first planned to be a novelist in junior high school. He played football for San Marcos High School, which helped him feel less like an outsider and enjoy school. He also played the bass with local bands. These experiences shaped his future depictions of jaded Texas teenagers and postmodern popular culture.

In 1983, Thomas graduated from high school then enrolled at Texas Christian University where he again played football. The next year, he transferred to the University of Texas at Austin. During college, he studied journalism because it promised a more financially secure career than fiction. Thomas acquired credentials for a teaching certificate and completed a bachelor's degree in history in 1987. He aspired to write for magazines such as Sports Illustrated and Rolling Stone. He began teaching at a local school in 1989.

As an adult, Thomas was a member of two rock bands. With five high school friends, he formed Public Bulletin in 1984.

That group was renamed Hey Zeus four years later. Thomas also played for the band Black Irish. He toured with his band in southern states during summers and wrote lyrics for several albums (Call Your Mom, 1989; Swimming Lessons, 1991; and Screen Door Kind, 1993). He devoted seven years to performing music instead of pursuing journalism because he had fun and he enjoyed hearing people sing along with lyrics that he had written. On his twentyeighth birthday, Thomas realized that he had achieved as much success as possible with the band and quit. At that time, he reconsidered his writing ambitions as a means to express his creativity. He decided to write what interested and pleased him and not for a specific audience.

By 1994, he was employed by Channel One, a national student news show based in Los Angeles, for one year. In his spare time he decided to write a novel by penning a page per morning at first, then increasing his productivity. Within ten months, he finished a draft of his first book, Rats Saw God (1996). Two months later, on June 12, 1995, an agent agreed to represent Thomas, and he quit his job to return to Texas. In October 1995, Thomas's agent secured a publisher, Simon and Schuster, and Thomas signed a two-book contract. Thomas's first novel was well received by critics and readers, winning the 1998-1999 South Carolina Young Adult Book Award and 1996 Austin Writer's League Violet Crown Award for best fiction. A 1997 top ten American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults, Rats Saw God was cited as an ALA Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Adult Readers, a YALSA Top Ten Best Book, an SLJ Best Book of the Year, and a New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age. It was also

chosen for numerous states' readers' selection lists. Thomas's success resulted in a multi-book contract.

Thomas was an advisor to UTmost, the undergraduate magazine for the University of Texas. While he taught journalism at Reagan High School in Austin, Texas, Thomas wrote Slave Day (1997) which was inspired by a video he saw at Channel One.

Slave Day was representative of Thomas's accurate depiction of jaded high school students and faculty and told from eight points of view. School Library Journal awarded Slave Day a starred review. Satellite Down (1998) was based on his experiences at Channel One, and protagonist Patrick Sheridan becomes disillusioned with his sudden media stardom and runs away to discover his roots in Ireland. Thomas traveled in Ireland to portray that novel's setting accurately. In contrast to his previous works, Green Thumb (1999) is a science fiction tale for younger readers but had similar themes as his other works. Thirteen-year-old Grady Jacobs, an above-average-intelligence underdog, can communicate with plants by controlling the movement of trees in the Amazon with a binary system of sounds which he uses as a language. He is striving to be respected and to prevail over antagonist Dr. Phillip Carter whose selfish work with giant trees is hurting the ecosystem. This book was supposed to be the first of a four-novel set featuring supernaturally-gifted protagonists.

Thomas was also a ghostwriter, using his dogs' names to form the pseudonym Everett Owen, of several books in the X-Files series.

Based on a chance remark made by his then girlfriend, Thomas wrote and published a short story, "Pet Stories," in the September 1996 issue of Seventeen magazine. This piece inspired a collection with the central theme of voluntary community service entitled Doing Time: Notes from the Undergrad (1997). Thomas wrote "Pet Stories" when he was in Ireland because the idea of needing a support group to survive pet bereavement intrigued him and "simply because it was a story I wanted to write." His editor encouraged him to write more stories exploring teenagers' attitudes toward volunteerism for a book-length collection. This anthology received critical acclaim, being selected for the New York Public Library's list of Books for the Teen Age and chosen as a Best Book for Young Adults as well as a readers' choice on state lists. Doing Time: Notes from the Undergrad was a Junior Library Guild Selection. Another anthology story, "Box Nine," first published on the Austin Chronicle Web site, produced a local writing award for Thomas. Other short stories he wrote include "The War Chest," also about community service, in Twelve Shots (Harry Mazer, ed. 1998) and "Sheep" in Trapped (Lois Duncan, ed. 2000).

Interested in screenwriting, Thomas wrote an episode, "Explode," for the television show, "Space Ghost: Coast to Coast" which aired in 1996. Recognizing Thomas's insights regarding teen culture, Sony Entertainment's copresident invited him to write a script for the teen television drama "My So-Called Life." The show was canceled before Thomas wrote an episode, but his contact recommended him to the producers of "Dawson's Creek" for which he became a staff writer. He wrote two episodes, "A Prelude to a Kiss" and "In the Company of Men," which aired in spring 1997. Thomas

also wrote a screenplay, "Fortune Cookie," which was a romantic comedy about three couples on their first date at a Chinese restaurant receiving fortunes written specifically for them. This film premiered at the Hollywood Film Festival in 1999 and jump-started Thomas's television and film career. This script was the foundation of the television series, "Cupid," which Thomas created and was executive producer for when it aired on ABC in 1998 until its cancellation in 1999. At that time he worked for Columbia Tri-Star. Thomas signed a four-year television development deal with Twentieth Century Fox in 1999. David Kelley hired him as executive producer of the detective drama "Snoops," but Thomas quit before the season began because he disagreed with Kelley about creative aspects and did not think the position would advance his career.

He continues to write screenplays for films, including the script for the movie "Drive Me Crazy" based on Todd Strasser's young adult novel, Girl Gives Birth to Own Prom Date. In 2000, Thomas wrote the pilot for "The Sticks" about a south Texas minor league hockey team, but the network did not order that series. His pilot for ABC, "Metropolis," was not included on the fall 2001 schedule. That series features six friends five years after graduation from the University of California at Berkeley, showing how they had abandoned their idealism to deal with reality, but an automobile accident causes them to reexamine their lives.

Thomas lives in Hollywood Hills, California. His typical writing day produces three pages, which he strives to polish as he creates. Although he usually writes at home, Thomas frequently writes on a laptop in coffee shops. He reads everyday to keep current with news and cultural trends, and newspapers often stimulate his imagination. Thomas considers identifying the idea to build a plot around the most taxing part of writing, and particularly encountered this dilemma while creating Doing Time: Notes from the Undergrad. He held a contest on his Web site to name the anthology. His site archives many of his scripts, especially for unaired episodes. Thomas is writing a novel scheduled for publication in 2003 with Ellen Wittlinger, author of Hard Love, about the email correspondence between a teenaged boy and girl. Thomas is also adapting the novel, The Brothers K, by David James Duncan, and writing a screenplay for his book, Slave Day.

Setting

The central setting for this anthology is Robert E. Lee High School in Deerfield, Texas. Thomas introduced this setting in his novel Slave Day, and several of the anthology's major and minor characters first appeared in that book. This school is a base for students to depart from and return to as they fulfill their assignments. Action at the school is limited primarily to "Extension Four" because the story involves the interaction of its main volunteer, Jill Stephenson, with students in her school community.

"The Laser" also incorporates school locations and stresses the professional importance of Robert E. Lee High School to its administrators and employees. The college auditorium, where Randall muses about the validity and sincerity of community service, represents the goal of many of the high school students who view community service as a valuable addition to their resumes to earn admission to prestigious colleges. These Ivy League schools act as invisible settings that draw in the aspiring students. The Hill Country Military Academy and Prep School is present only as a threat for Dwight in "The Laser" to earn higher grades.

The opening story, "Shacks from Mansions," depicts the movement of a young boy from an impoverished Dallas neighborhood to the abundance and empowerment of the Dallas Cowboys training facilities.

Randall grows up in the South Oak Cliff neighborhood which journalists have dubbed "Little Rwanda" because of the high murder rate among African Americans. As an adult, Randall resents fellow student Costas Tobin who is from Highland Park which is only ten miles from Randall's home "but it might as well as have been Venus." Because he is also African American, Costas patronizingly tries to bond with Randall, referring to South Oak Cliff as "the hood." Neither boy's home would compare with professional football player Preston Moncrief's house in which Randall remarks, "You could've fit three or four of our houses in his." Preston lives alone in luxury with a "four-car garage," pool, and trophy room.

His house, however, is emotionally empty and not a home like Randall's house where Randall knows he is assured the unconditional love and support of his widowed mother.

The sense of home and family is also emphasized in the dwellings the student volunteers visit in "Box Nine" and "Blue Santa." No matter how dilapidated, cluttered, roach-infested, or smelly those places are, they represent the survival of people trying to do the best they can with their resources. When Teesha realizes her group is delivering food to her Gramma's house where she lives, Teesha comments, "I feel like I'm looking at it for the first time.

There's the tin roof. And the paint peeling off the sides. And the Granada on blocks."

Most of the students and their adult supervisors live in "fancy subdivisions . . . with names like 'Country Estates.'" Those places remain unseen but hint at being devoid of

the support and interaction Teesha receives from her family, including a brother who removed a dead snake from their house.

In "Loss of Pet," the Deerfield Public Library houses more than books. As a community center, it provides people a place in which to meet and discuss issues of importance to them through club meetings and support groups. Bereaved pet owners consider the LBJ Room in the library a safe zone where they can divulge their grief for deceased animals without being belittled by unsympathetic people. In contrast, the numerous places where character Tamara Reynolds lived with her mother or sought refuge from her stepfather are hazardous.

Fiona, a classmate and volunteer clerk, is surprised when she sees a slide that shows Tamara's bedroom. It is plain and unadorned, not frilly and sporting pictures and memorabilia boasting teenage social successes. Fiona hides behind file cabinets to observe the pet loss support group and learns that her assumptions about people are sometimes incorrect.

Jill Stephenson also has her preconceptions about people and places proved wrong in "Extension Four." The adoption service for which she answers the hotline is actually the front for an aggressive anti-abortion campaign by her employer. She learns that often falsely-maligned places and services offer more compassion and support than programs publicly associated as morally superior. Dwight Salazar realizes that he values his Mexican family and culture when he visits Eli Escobar's home and walks in his Little Matamoros neighborhood to help that man improve his English skills for a promotion test at work. The family's house displays photographs and votive candles and is filled with scents of Mexican food and sounds of Mexican music which represent harmony, happiness, and family. Dwight is inspired to continue his service beyond its time limit, even though he should study for his own examination, and independently begins expressing himself in Spanish to his strict, pretentious father who denies the family's rural, peasant origins.

The Willows, the rehabilitation facility in "Half a Mind," provides romantic but socially awkward Laura Turtle a way to connect with her crush, Jason Leary, even though he has suffered brain damage in a motorcycle accident. She publicly feels socially fulfilled when she eats with him at Antonio's At the Falls, a popular eating establishment among high school students.

Other teenage diners mock Laura, while she unrealistically plans for a marriage with Jason based on the pulp romance stories she reads. Intoxicated by Jason's professions of love, Laura minimizes the burdens of providing shelter and support for a mentally disabled adult, as she plans on how to rent an apartment before buying a house.

Vans are used as settings in "Box Nine" and "Blue Santa." These vehicles suggest the mobility of the students versus the metaphorical paralysis of the people they help who are not integrated into society because they do not speak English, are unemployed, or disabled in some way. The radio station in "Cheatin' Heart" seemingly offers Miles skills and experience which might be useful for a future career but actually teaches him about

human behavior and asserting his rights when authority is misused. The bowling alley in "Ten Pins Down" represents how recreation is appropriated for fundraising and, inadvertently, raises Ben's awareness that appearances can be deceiving. The academically struggling Tommy Parks appropriately performs his community service with junior high students in the At Risk Program in "Turtles." By leaving the school setting for the Texas Renaissance Festival at Magnolia, the students are freed to achieve public recognition. Tommy realizes that he aspires for more than a minimum wage job at Thermon, the factory where his stepfather Dan works. He withdraws his application for summer employment in that warehouse filled with spools of tubing where jaded workers count down the days until retirement. He also longs to escape the mobile home park where he lives which he dispiritedly calls Tornado Bait Park.

Some settings and characters appear in two stories. Teesha visits the Escobar home in Little Matamoros. Mrs. Escobar only speaks Spanish, and her husband sits on the couch smoking a cigarette and staring at a Texas Rangers poster. In "Box Nine," the Escobar home seems dreary and hopeless.

Teesha and her peers seem scornful of its occupants and do not recognize their school's groundskeeper, Eli. When Dwight visits the house in "The Laser," he perceives the home as a warm, welcoming place. Out of gratitude, Eli Escobar has already given Dwight the football poster that Teesha saw.

Dwight carefully listens instead of ignoring the couple and is able to understand the Escobars' enthusiastic Spanish words telling him where their children were attending school or working. Unlike the food drive students who distance themselves from the Escobars, Dwight becomes integrated into their environment.

Social Sensitivity

Thomas's anthology raises many social concerns. Because the students are involved in providing community service to people who are needy in some way, whether from the deprivation of money, food, shelter, or the lack of empathetic people in whom to confide, the volunteers encounter various social issues. Responsibility, tolerance, and sincerity are crucial for successful service activities. Many of the students are cynical about their service and do not grow from their experiences, while others become aware of issues and concerns of people existing on society's periphery who otherwise would remain remote from their middleclass setting.

Poverty is probably the most widespread problem which confronts students. The volunteers express various reactions to poverty, from empathy to contempt. Some students often feel a smug sense of superiority to the people they are helping as revealed by belittling their homes or criticizing their reliance on foreign languages. Arrogance is seen in teenagers who are using their community service to win awards, improve their chances of admission to elite colleges, or to acquire property intended for charity.

In contrast, characters like Dwight continue serving even after they have completed the required hours because they truly care about the recipients of their assistance.

Altruism is an underlying theme. Few of the students depicted are acting out of sheer interest in other people or concern for their well-being. None of the students seems prone to a commitment to activism or to promoting greater causes. The immature students are more likely to be takers, or benefit in some way from their service, than givers. Theft of charity goods by the Key Club president demonstrates how some seemingly well-intentioned volunteers may actually feel entitled to compensation for their service work through some form of embezzlement.

Thomas contrasts the disenfranchised characters, whether from socioeconomic status or illness, with the privileged characters. Elitism prevents many community service participants from becoming aware of broader social issues or considering recipients as humans who are deserving of respect and courtesy. Jill Stephenson dismisses some clients as "notorious poor white trash."

Preston, who probably grew up in a situation similar to Randall's and should be empathetic, does not care how important he has become to shy, friendless Randall.

Being a role model to him only means achieving fame and remaining distant from fans; not nurturing a personal relationship.

Preston uses Randall to promote his public image as an athletic hero. Hypocrisy is present in many of Thomas's stories as characters' words and actions differ. Preston's nickname "The Thief" suggests that he has committed some crime other than being gifted at interceptions in games and owes society some form of compensation.

Lies and betrayal often reveal characters who consider themselves superior to those they consider weak, inferior characters that few people would want to emulate.

Racism is an ever-present social concern in this anthology, with African Americans often feeling excluded from mainstream student culture. Characters performing service note the race, particularly Hispanic and African American, of aid recipients. Dwight dismisses the school groundskeeper, Eli Escobar, with the demeaning name "Weedy Gonzalez" before he begins tutoring him.

As Dwight assists Eli with his English, he becomes aware and accepting of his own Mexican background, visiting the Escobar home and recognizing the universal concerns of all humans for family and security.

The Escobars' generosity reminds him of his grandparents and their dreams for their descendants. When "Mrs. Escobar brings us each a plate of migas and tortillas," foods Dwight has previously disdainfully discarded, he realizes, "I didn't know eggs could taste this good." Some characters are xenophobic (fearful of things that are foreign, including people), such as Ben, who makes jokes referring to Nadia's country and is repulsed by her unshaven armpits— which is considered acceptable in European culture. Homophobic behavior and social harassment is hinted at in "Loss of Pet." Students are ostracized for committing perceived social wrongs or unfairly labeled by vicious gossip. As some students mature while performing service, respect for an individual's rights to make their own decisions without fearing retribution is emphasized.

Grief is presented as an often unrecognized social issue, particularly when the person is mourning an animal which many people dismiss as unimportant. Abuse is represented in several ways, whether physically, such as the black eyes of the romance readers at the library, or emotionally, such as students like Dwight being threatened with exile to a military school if they do not meet their parents' rigid expectations. Tamara becomes homeless, seeking shelter from friends, due to her mother's verbal assaults and her stepfather's potential for sexually abusing Tamara.

Literary Qualities

The ten stories in this anthology share similar literary techniques to attain a thematic unity. Thomas's use of first-person narration makes the students' experiences more intimate to readers who learn about the fictional teenagers through their revelations based on their individual points of view. Perception is an important literary element in that each character interprets his or her community service according to his or her context and interests. If the characters switched assignments, each would offer different opinions than the ones that Thomas presented about the people they are helping, their adult advisors, and the tasks. The anthology as a whole presents multiple viewpoints which create a comprehensive discussion concerning the role of community service in education. Thomas accurately captures the language teenagers speak and the philosophies they believe while enlightening readers without being didactic.

Thomas presents each story as if it were a conversation the reader is overhearing. His screenwriting talent is evident as each story is divided into scenes driven by dialogue and voice. The narratives seem almost confessional as each protagonist confides his or her true, uncensored feelings regarding the service he or she performs. Although Randall fears that the reports might be sugarcoated to appease faculty, the accounts seem to be brazenly realistic. Each story is a vignette distinguished by characterization and plot development. Individual voices are apparent due to the dialogue, vocabulary, and phrasing Thomas uses to achieve characterization, such as jargon ("radical") and dialect ("brotha").

Popular culture references to Ruffles, Mountain Dew, Game Boy, Six Flags, and The Empire Strikes Back occasionally date the stories as belonging to Generation X, while achieving a sense of familiarity with readers who can identify with the normalcy of these teenagers trying to cope with high school and their teenage years. The literary technique of including newspaper articles helps plot advancement. Tommy pens mock rap sheets for the students he coaches for the play, providing readers clarifying characterizations for the cast, and jokes that he should include that information with mug shots in the program. All of the details seem accurate except that Nadia, the Belgian exchange student, might have actually spoken Flemish instead of French.

The character sketches create moods.

Often subtleties expose characters' vulnerabilities and reveal that people's appearances can be deceiving. Thomas respects his characters by depicting them realistically through their candor about their lives and vivid descriptions of their settings. Some of the characters use profanity or crude references to express themselves.

Others are sexually active or spread rumors about other students' alleged promiscuity.

Drugs are readily available, as hinted at when students comment that Jason was already in trouble prior to his accident.

Various emotions contribute to the tone of the stories. Characters are sometimes humorous and witty and readily self-deprecating. Some are eccentric, while others are prone to exaggeration. Thomas portrays teenage angst through darkly satiric and ironic situations. Plot twists surprise readers and characters as the true natures of people are revealed.

Themes and Characters

The themes of service and time are evident in each story as characters are expected to dedicate a specific portion of their senior year in high school helping other people in some manner. The anthology's title, Doing Time: Notes from the Undergrad, implies that the service is viewed as being punitive and comparable to a prison sentence by many of the participants. Some characters consider required service as another high school ritual and do not take it seriously. They live on the periphery of both teenage and adult spheres, belonging to neither, and endure a culture which fosters antagonism, causing many characters to expect hostility not kindness. Most characters are flawed in some manner and learn more life lessons outside classrooms by interacting with people through forced service. Although they are often insecure and disillusioned, many of the volunteers become introspective due to their service and think about the people and situations they encounter even if such thoughts do not profoundly change their lives.

While serving, many of the students experience more than they expected, as they are confronted by moral dilemmas, which raise their consciousness, and they realize that people have similar worries and concerns despite seeming different. Some discover basic truths about themselves, including their talents and abilities, and about others as they gain an awareness of a bigger community, are freed of preconceptions, question their beliefs, and develop a public identity through service during the transition from adolescence to autonomous adulthood. Others remain ignorant and retain self-defeating behaviors that prevent them from reconciling with and becoming fully integrated into society and attaining their full potential. Community service helps some students realize that people are imperfect and cannot be controlled, thus necessitating flexibility and tolerance to achieve effective conflict resolution and accept others.

This anthology's introductory story is crucial in establishing a framework for how community service is perceived by its participants. Although Preston Moncrief's community service is court-ordered, his attitude and approach toward serving his hours is comparable to the high school students required to perform service for school. The distinct voices of teenage protagonists are presented in the nine reports that Randall, an African-American college student, evaluates for a social work class. The narrators are a sampling of 310 senior high school students who have fulfilled community service assignments in order to graduate. They had some choice in choosing their service, volunteering for favored organizations or specific institutions due to personal interest or selfish agendas.

Randall, who is bitter about how he was treated as the recipient of community service when he was a child, criticizes schools who require kids to be "set loose on the community, blindly colliding, if only momentarily, with real people living real lives."

He questions how people "ever really understand 'charity' or 'service' if they've only been on the giving end of it," stressing "I've been on the other side." Cynically, he comments how people are altruistic "to make them feel good" as a "Chicken soup for

the soul" and forget the recipients, and that "Those lives keep going long after the kids have reduced them to a line on a college application."

In "Shacks from Mansions," Randall describes himself as a shy, bookish, bed-wetting eight-year-old who is afraid of strangers and "weak in a neighborhood that devoured its own." Because his father died, Randall's mother enrolled him in the Big Brothers program so that he could benefit from a male mentor. She cares about her son and trys to do her best for him. He later realizes that he did not appreciate her and "It took me years to figure out what a smart lady my mother was." Randall is thrilled when Dallas Cowboy football star, Preston "The Thief" Moncrief, is assigned as his Big Brother. Preston is confident and outwardly seems to care genuinely for Randall, showering attention on him, spending large sums of money playing video games with him, and taking him to amusement parks. He insists that Randall also sign pieces of paper presented by autograph seekers and gives him the nickname "Bug" because of the goggles he wears to help him not blink when catching a football. Preston drives a Jaguar and attracts attention wherever he goes. Randall realizes that other people "wish they were me" and "It was a strange feeling, but I decided I could get used to it."

He is aware that people hate him because of Preston's focus on him and that most people did not think Randall deserved to be part of Preston's world.

Randall's nemesis, Stephawn Coleman, represents everything that Randall is not.

Stephawn is athletic and bold, which impresses Preston. When Randall is bloodied by a thrown football, Preston decides to coach him and abandons their recreational pursuits. Internally, Randall admits, "I hated being afraid of sports: the collisions, the speed, the energy, the emotion." Hoping to watch a movie with Preston, Randall is disappointed when Preston takes him to the football team's training facility instead, but passively does not voice his apprehensions. At the training center, Preston transforms from his pleasing public social personality. Randall remembers that suddenly "He was down to business, and business was making an athlete out of me." Randall endures agility training and conditioning, noting "All I had to do was ignore the pain, and I'd been practicing that my whole life."

Preston sets performance goals for Randall, telling him he will be rewarded with one of Preston's game jerseys if he achieves them.

Preston also encourages him to make a wish list to spend income he might earn in the future as a professional athlete.

Randall caddies for Preston at a charitable golf tournament, and Preston puts his arm over Randall's shoulder while being interviewed for television. After Randall successfully plays football during recess, tackling Stephawn, he feels confident that he will achieve his final goal to earn Preston's jersey, fantasizing about wearing it to school and gaining respect. He is attached to Preston, declaring, "Preston was my best friend, my big brother." Preston, however, physically and emotionally abandons Randall.

He does not return Randall's phone calls.

An angry Randall unfairly blames his mother for Preston's neglect.

When Randall sees Preston on television referring to community service for his "troubled off-season," he is confused. Later, Randall realizes that Preston used him hypocritically to retain his public image as someone who cares for children and his community. Randall's innocence, trust, and selfperception are damaged because "before Preston Moncrief I didn't know shacks from mansions." This experience makes Randall distrustful of people's motivations as they tell others "what they wanted to hear." He assumes that most of the students' reports will be supportive and praise community service like his own evaluation may be because he knows the professor, Dr. Shiring, expects to read positive assessments.

The students depicted in the other stories range from selfish, greedy teenagers, like the Key Club president, motivated to serve to promote themselves and obtain goods; to aloof, uninterested students, like Teesha Tupac, who are pressured to participate; to those with some altruistic leanings, like Dwight, who think they are doing the right thing. Some students are misguided, like Laura, who thinks she can heal Jason and win his love. Jill Stephenson admits "Most of my friends hate their Com Serv assignment, but this is something I believe in." She even began volunteering before her senior year when hours did not count.

On the other hand, Ben is irreverent toward his community service, seeing it more as entertainment and a way to seduce the foreign exchange student the boys had been ogling. Teesha represents students who both engage in service projects and also benefit from them. She is hostile toward her assignments and has to be pressured with the threat of not graduating to participate. While she knows that her Gramma will be proud of her for completing high school, the selfloathing Teesha is embarrassed by her house and hopes that nobody recognizes her face in any of the framed pictures displayed.

Internally, she realizes that for years her Gramma has been transforming boxes of donated goods into Thanksgiving feasts unidentifiable as charity food.

In "Loss of Pet," Andrew belittles the people who are mourning deceased pets and lacks empathy for what he considers a trivial concern. He also exhibits this attitude in his disrespectful treatment of the librarian whom he calls The Bun, whose name he does not consider important to learn nor the professional standards she strives to uphold. Both Andrew and Fiona stress that they are clerks and not librarians, feeling that they can transfer problems to someone else and are only responsible for answering the phones. They are not committed to their assignments nor do they envision a future in library or related careers. Fiona explains how she and Andrew consider themselves "slave labor" and distance themselves from the public whom they refer to as "they" and disregard as constantly wanting to know obscure details. Fiona and Andrew spend their service time doing homework because they do not consider themselves obligated to "actually have to lift a finger every now and then."

Dwight, in "The Laser," also tries to combine service with schoolwork by requesting to read his required books for his service recording audio books.

Initially, Fiona is amused that Tamara Reynolds, considered one of the most popular girls in school, arrives to attend the pet loss group. She immediately pages Andrew, knowing he will delight in Tamara's participation. Although Fiona is enlightened that Tamara's life is imperfect, she is unable to stand up to Andrew or realize that any effort to convince him of the truth would be wasted on him because he is not capable of understanding people beyond stereotypes, as evidenced by his opening statement that he could kill an Arab. Andrew and Fiona have formed their condemning attitudes because of what they refer to as "The Rot," or decline of human civility towards others.

The pair is jaded, but Fiona awakens to realize that judgmental Andrew is part of the problem too. Characters in other stories are also judgmental, declaring that aid recipients should not smoke or have babies.

Teesha is disgusted by her white peers' comments about people they have given food to and tries to shut out their words by closing her eyes and despairingly wonders "what made segregated schools such a bad thing." When one of her classmates suggests that she resembles a girl in a picture at her Gramma's home, Teesha says, "We all look alike," effectively emphasizing the theme of prejudice permeating everyone's observations and statements.

Adults in these stories are also complex.

The teachers, advisors, and sponsors who interact with the teenagers have differing motivations and agendas. Dwight's father, Dr. Hector Salazar, the superintendent of the Deerfield Independent School District, promoted the idea of community service, "his pet project," to the school board, emphasizing that, "It's time for the students of Lee High School to give something back to Deerfield!" Yet, he is not supportive of his own son's volunteerism. Officer Davis in "Blue Santa" willingly donates an expensive stereo he had bought for his family's Christmas when there are not enough gifts to distribute because the Key Club president stole one and lied about its omission.

Miss Amenny, known as Miss A to Tommy Parks, does a favor for him by relieving him of his service cleaning bedpans at the hospital to coach delinquent junior high school students in a play instead. She saves money the troupe earns at performances and uses her connections to arrange financial aid for Tommy to attend college in order to study drama. He purchases roses for her and has his cast sign a card to express their gratitude for her unwavering support.

Mrs. Carlson attempts to make Dwight feel better when his audiotape recording service at Texas Central University is cancelled due to his lack of inflection, by saying, "They're just very picky up there. You know how snotty they can be at colleges."

Mr. Lansing in "Box Nine" is brusque with students, making snide comments to urge them to be more enthusiastic. In Laura's opinion, Dr. Ruiz seems unsympathetic and cold toward her romance with Jason, attempting to separate them at The Willows then

terminating Laura's service. Readers realize that Dr. Ruiz is professional, showing Laura x-rays of Jason's skull in order to make her face reality. Lou Ann in "Extension Four" is exposed as a manipulative woman who horrifies pregnant teenagers with grotesque films and pressures them to place their infants up for adoption.

Students often are disrespectful of adult authority figures. They make a prank telephone call to Barb Ann "Honey" Jessup during her radio show, which promotes high moral standards for teenagers. Hurtin' Dick, the ribald alias of yearbook editor Damien Collier, invents outlandish prob lems, such as being the "only male bulimic in Texas" who has been addicted to crack and is suicidal, to perpetuate a "harrowing teen soap opera" on the Honey Show to make Jessup seem foolish. This ruse exemplifies the high school students' disregard for people suffering real problems and despair. The disk jockey in "Cheatin' Heart," Cole Clay Ellum, is narcissistic, obscene, and unfaithful. He demeans Sid by saying he is only an intern and valueless and thus must follow Cole's orders. Sid avenges this careless treatment when Cole's negligence creates an out-of-control situation, during which Sid inadvertently broadcasts himself singing raunchy lyrics for which Cole, not Sid, is blamed.

Parents range from nurturing and helpful, like Randall's mother, to punitive like Tamara's mother—who not only took her own life away from her daughter and did not protect her from her stepfather's prurient interests, but devastated her by killing her beloved poodle. Tamara reveals how her mother constantly belittled and emotionally abused her. The poodle Blitzen, on the other hand, guarded her and was a constant and consistent companion she could trust. Jill Stephenson gains respect for her unknown mother who put her up for adoption, realizing "My real mom," in contrast to other altruistic parents who charge charity to credit cards, "probably could have taught us something about sacrifice." Jason's parents desperately seek medical care for their troubled son. Community service can also be therapeutic and cause students to reexamine their values.

Teenage parent-to-be Rhonda Washington benefits from friendships she receives from volunteers and maturely sets an example for her peers of how to nurture not condemn, which helps transform Jill's previously rigid beliefs.

Recipients vary from the truly needy of aid and assistance, to middle class and wellto-do people who have suffered losses they need to discuss while seeking moral support. While most community service recipients are grateful, many prove problematic.

At the convalescent hospital, Jason harasses Laura and others who visit him. He often calls her "Girl" which indicates how his brain injury has effected his socialization skills. In contrast, Mrs. De La Rosa in "Box Nine" hugs the students who deliver her box of food and pours cups of lemonade for them. Tamara in "Loss of Pet" truly seems to benefit by sharing her story about Blitzen and releasing her anguish through wailing. While improving his English, Eli Escobar teaches Dwight about respect for his true ethnic heritage, not the false manufactured story that Dwight's father promotes.

In "Turtles," Tommy directs reluctant, uninterested at-risk teens in a self-described "Robin-Hood-meets-Quentin Tarantino production." Frustrated by the teens' lack of cooperation, Tommy writes a version specifically for them without a "single soliloquy," explaining "1 just drop in a few jokes and lots of cocky one-liners." The students fight each other and resist wearing tights and costumes. They are disrespectful of Tommy, and Zo Roland who plays Robin Hood, criticizes, "If you're the big success story, it don't look like we got much to look forward too." Tommy threatens to quit if the students continue to ignore his instructions, saying he would prefer cleaning bedpans than putting up with their nonsense.

They then begin cooperating and fully engage in the process, cleverly improving their performances with improvisations such as using ketchup packets to simulate blood.

At the fair, the students experience their first success and are stunned by the applause they receive. With "looks of wonder plastered across their faces" they stand backstage because Tommy has not taught them to bow in rehearsals. They quickly catch on how to acknowledge their audience and symbolically hold out hats, often concocting tear-jerking stories about being orphans, to collect money like the characters in the play, taking from the rich to share with the poor. Over several weeks, the group "developed a bit of a cult following" then performed informally for the joy of it in their school parking lot. Aware of broader opportunities, they express eagerness to study drama with Miss A in high school.

Tommy uses his small salary to buy the students presents, and they carve a bow from ash for him.

Some peers are judgmental of other students performing community service, such as Tiffany Delvoe, the gorgeous school goddess in "Half a Mind," who criticizes Laura's physical appearance and interest in helping Jason whom Tiffany, his former girlfriend, dismisses as ruined. In "Extension Four," female students at Robert E. Lee High School become angry when they feel that Jill Stephenson has betrayed their privacy by not being discrete about who consults the adoptive services agency, Lifeline, where she volunteers. Leslie Aitken, editor of the school newspaper Rebel Yell, writes an article revealing the hypocrisy of so-called confidential services for pregnant teens which causes Jill's alienation. Public humiliation is a typical punishment for teenagers whom others think have abused authority accorded them by their service assignments. Rumors are frequently used as weapons to discredit and victimize.

Topics for Discussion

1. Compare how adults and teenagers are depicted in the stories. Who seems the most charitable? Who acts the most selfishly?

2. Are the racial depictions in the stories accurate or distorted? Do the AfricanAmerican, Hispanic, and female characters' voices seem authentic? Why or why not?

3. How is each student changed, positively or negatively, by interacting with the community? Does their service seem to be most helpful to others or themselves? Does the service satisfactorily meet recipients' needs or is it insufficient? Who is to blame if it is lacking?

4. What stereotypes are perpetuated by the stories? How do the popular culture references reinforce these stereotypes? Do they enhance the narratives?

5. Which story is the strongest? Which one is the weakest? Could any of the stories be omitted or does continuity exist throughout the anthology? Is community service a strong enough theme to link the stories? How do the stories' titles enhance the collection? Are any of the books that the characters read or the plays they participate in significant to plot development or characterization?

6. How does the first story relate to the others? Is it necessary to establish a framework for readers, or is it distracting? Does the narrator's revelations about being the recipient of community service seem out of sync with the other narrators giving community service?

7. Does the anthology inspire readers to participate in community service, or would it make people feel more cynical about such endeavors? Why or why not?

8. What types of familiar community service do the students not perform? Is this omission symbolic? Why do you think Thomas selects the service projects that he includes in the anthology?

9. Do the stories seem dated and regional, or could they have universal appeal to readers living in other times and geographic places?

10. Does Thomas portray community service more as an opportunity or as a punishment? Discuss how the stories would differ if the students volunteered to help and were not required to assist others.

11. Discuss the role of humor in the stories. Should the students always act seriously?

12. Is maturity essential for successful service to others? How can immaturity both benefit and damage helpful intentions?

Does the college-age narrator of the first story seem to have more perspective and wisdom about community service than the younger students who follow, or could they offer him advice?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compile a list of public and private junior high schools, high schools, and colleges with community service as a graduation requirement. Are any of these schools near where you live? If so, interview students and advisors to learn about what types of services are performed and for what duration service is required. How do students perceive community service? Did any students select that school specifically because of the community service requirement?

What is the success rate for completion of projects? Has anyone not graduated because he or she did not complete required community service? If no schools with community service requirements are near your home, find articles and details about one, such as Iowa Wesleyan College, in print and in Internet sources and contact the programs' advisor to collect information to write a report.

2. Pick one story, and write an epilogue about the character five years after completing his or her required service. Has the experience changed him or her significantly? Is he or she more giving and tolerant or stingier and judgmental?

3. Prepare a journal entry describing the type of community service you would volunteer to perform and the type which you would only do if you were required. Explain your choices and motivations.

4. Write a short story from the point of view of one of the recipients of the students' service. Would that person be as jaded as the students or more hopeful?

5. Compose a poem or music lyrics to express one of the students' rage and insensitivity toward their school, community, and peers for some community service related problem. Then, write a poem or lyrics by a character praising the program. Which creation seems most convincing? What might service recipients include in similar poems or lyrics?

6. Research the history of community service, including voluntary, assigned, and punitive projects. When has community service been the most popular and why? How are emergencies catalysts for community service? Discuss the role of volunteers in communities' educational, cultural, social, and political networks. When, where, and why did schools first implement community service projects? Has community service always been a part of penal systems?

7. Evaluate each student's performance and assign grades, explaining why you decided he or she deserved a specific score. How could they have improved their service?

8. Should any of the community service participants have been punished for taking items or being disrespectful to recipients? Write an essay describing what you think would be appropriate ways to deal with each person.

9. Discuss the importance of responsibility, accountability, empathy, and altruism for successful community service.

Are these characteristics innate, or can they only be learned through experience?

10. Compare how varying socioeconomic and ethnic groups in the United States and other countries take care of people who need financial assistance or have other charitable concerns such as being fatherless, injured, or grief-stricken. Are most relief systems based on community service? What qualifications are necessary for employment in organized service and relief organizations such as the International Red Cross?

For Further Reference

Del Negro, Janice M. Review of Doing Time: Notes from the Undergrad. Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, vol. 51 (December 1997): 141. This review comments on the "emotional intimacy" Thomas creates with his characters. Del Negro states that the anthology "would make . . . an interesting starting point for character studies in English class."

Devereaux, Elizabeth, and Diane Roback.

Review of Doing Time: Notes from the Undergrad. Publishers Weekly, vol. 244 (September 22, 1997): 81. The reviewers criticize that the anthology consists of "thinly connected stories" and "barely scrapes the surface of how work affects young people." Thomas "relies on hip lingo and details from movies, television and music to carry his narratives forward" this makes his handling of such serious subjects as neglect and abuse within families, racial discrimination, teen pregnancy and poverty seem off-handed. Concludes that "characters and language ring true," but "one-sided perspectives" often "belie the complicated issues involved."

Warns that some passages and language may be too mature for younger readers.

Lesesne, Teri S. Review of Doing Time: Notes from the Undergrad. Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, vol. 41 (March 1998): 494-95. Lesesne recommends the anthology because "With his finger on the pulse of adolescents, his ear open to their language, and his heart attuned to their vulnerability, Thomas is able to create characters readers will not only recognize, but will actually care about as well."

Rausch, Tim. Review of Doing Time: Notes from the Undergrad. School Library Journal, vol. 43 (November 1997): 124. This starred review describes the stories as "wellwritten, interesting, provocative, and humorous, and often have surprise endings" in which the "characters accurately reflect contemporary young adults and the dialogue is both realistic and amusing." Suggests each story can be "useful to stimulate classroom discussion."

Shoemaker, Joel, "Rats Saw Rob: An Interview with Rob Thomas." Voice of Youth Advocates, vol. 20 (June 1997): 88-91. This interview provides insightful details about Thomas's early writing efforts and the influences and motivations that shaped his first novel.

Tanier, Vera E. Review of Doing Time: Notes from the Undergrad. Social Education, vol.

62 (April/May 1998): S5. Offers the following praise: "The pure voice of teen language, culture, and sensibilities comes through as ten [nine] high school students respond to their involvement in 200 hours of mandatory community service."

"Thomas, Rob." Something about the Author, vol. 97. Detroit: Gale, 1998. This entry offers limited biographical information about Thomas with a list of resources prior to the publication of Green Thumb.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Thomas published two of the stories in Doing Time: Notes from the Undergrad prior to compiling the anthology. "Pet Stories" appeared in the September 1996 Seventeen magazine, and "Box Nine" was posted on the Austin Chronicle Web site. His short story "The War Chest" in Twelve Shots (Harry Mazer, ed. 1998) features a high school student whose community service assignment is at a nursing home where he listens to an elderly veteran's war stories and copes with his use of a historic gun.

Several characters from Doing Time: Notes from the Undergrad were featured in Thomas's novel, Slave Day (1997). His keen sense of teenage and school culture and talent for presenting unique, authentic voices was displayed in his first novel, Rats Saw God (1996), in which Steve York presents his self-analysis in a first-person narrative. He also has to complete a specific assignment, albeit writing a personal account not participating in a service project, to graduate.

Greed, narcissism, and other traits true to adolescent behavior were key to characterization and plot development in Satellite Down (1998).

Volunteerism and community service, such as characters becoming candy stripers or raising money for relief funds, are frequently depicted in series books, featuring such characters as Judy Bolton, Cherry Ames, Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys, and the members of The Baby-Sitters Club, in the late-nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century. Informal community service is a theme in some modern young adult novels such as Chris Crutcher's, Whale Talk (2001), in which The Tai Jones, known as "T. J.,"deals with his AfricanAsian-Euro ethnicity while helping others who are socially, athletically, and intellectually challenged. He encourages his peers to participate in sports, particularly swimming, to develop self-esteem. His family shelters a group of siblings to protect them from an abusive, racist stepfather. Characters in Laurie Halse Anderson's books often are service-oriented. In Speak (1999), the Marthas are a high school clique who form their identity around food drives and other altruistic efforts. In Anderson's Fever, 1793 (2000), volunteers help victims of a yellow fever epidemic by nursing patients, caring for orphaned and abandoned children, and preparing food for the homebound. Novels Anderson wrote for the Wild at Heart series, published by American Girl since 2000, feature teenage volunteers who assist in a veterinary clinic and also tackle social problems related to animal abuse and public health.

Most fictional accounts of community service depict characters who have received punishments for infractions and are not volunteers. The protagonist of Joan Lowery Nixon's Nobody's There (2000), is assigned community service after throwing a rock at her father's girlfriend's house. She then meets a senior citizen who involves her in solving crimes concerning the victimization and scamming of elderly people. In Matt Christopher's Baseball Turnaround (1997), the main character Sandy shoplifts, and his baseball-related community service helps him achieve new perspectives about his life.

Teenage culture and adolescents' sense of duty and community are explored in the stories in Lisa Rowe Fraustino's Dirty Laundry: Stories about Family Secrets (1998). Jaded, cynical characters, similar to those found in Thomas's anthology, are found in the young adult classic, J. D. Salinger's, Catcher in the Rye (1951). Modern young adult novels, such as Ellen Wittlinger's Hard Love (1999), feature protagonists who would recognize the universality of Thomas's characters and situations. Other authors whose works complement discussion of Doing Time: Notes from the Undergrad include Joan Bauer, particularly Hope Was Here (2000); Paul Zindel; Chris Lynch; Francesca Lia Block; and Cynthia Voigt.

Related Web Sites

Thomas, Rob. http://www.hieran.com/rob/index3.html Accessed May 2, 2002.

This is the author's own site which contains some biographical information, a list of the author's books, his music, and screenplays. It also includes a FAQ section where you can find out how the author gets his ideas for a story and what tips he has for aspiring young writers.

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