

The Freedom Writers Diary Study Guide

The Freedom Writers Diary by Freedom Writers

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Plot Summary

Erin Gruwell is a first-year English teacher at Wilson High School in Long Beach, California. Although she was a student teacher at Wilson High the year before, this year she would teach on her own. Not only would she teach on her own, as a teacher with little to no seniority, she was given the "unteachable" students, those who are more concerned with gang activity and matters of "turf," rather than the study of Shakespeare, subjects and predicates.

Wilson High is located in a so-called "safe" neighborhood in Long Beach, California, just a few miles from the Pacific Ocean. Its "safe" location, makes it a desirable educational institution, so much so that many students will take two to three buses just to get to that particular school. This means that wealthy students will attend classes along side poor kids from the projects. Gruwell states that every race, religion and culture is represented.

Throughout the years, the predominately Caucasian population at Wilson has evolved radically to include African Americans, Latinos and Asians who now comprise the bulk of the student body. Although Gruwell stated that she initially (and naively) wanted to ignore skin color and cultural differences while student teaching, she was immediately confronted with both.

What happened next created a turning point for both teacher and students. After a student created a large lipped caricature of a particularly difficult student named Sharaud, Gruwell pointed out that caricatures were a common tool of the Nazis during the Holocaust. When not one student knew what the Holocaust was, Gruwell immediately changed teaching strategies and eventually began teaching these so-called unteachable students information to which they could relate, presenting titles that teach tolerance such as the Anne Frank's diary, Schindler's List and Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo.

As time goes on, Gruwell uses all the resources at her disposal to make history and literature come alive for these students. They visit the Holocaust Museum and the Museum of Tolerance. They also travel to Washington D.C. to meet with the US Secretary of Education. They meet Miep Gies, the woman who sheltered Anne Frank and her family during World War II, and raise money to fly Zlata Filipovic from Europe to California. Filipovic is their own age and survived the Bosnian war and eventually got her diary, Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo published.

Throughout their high school years, each student in Gruwell's class kept a diary. After the classroom received computers, they started keeping a class log as well. Each student anonymously posted entries into the group file, eventually creating a massive missive of entries. These entries would eventually be pared down into what would become The Freedom Writers Diary.



This explains the unique layout of this book. Each chapter begins with an entry by Erin Gruwell. The following entries are simply numbered, including no identifying information about the author whatsoever. It's this unique story telling style that makes for a very powerful book.

As each entry advances the "story" told throughout this text, we get to watch events unfold through various points of view. The raw writing style is often abrasive, yet captivating. As each writer chronicles the events during this four-year period from freshman to senior, the reader is carried on many waves of emotion as each student portrays their life, and the awakening of the Freedom Writer within themselves, as they progress through Wilson High.



Foreword

Foreword Summary and Analysis

The foreword to *Freedom Writers Diary* is written by Zlata Filipovic, the author of *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo*. Zlata's *Diary* chronicles Zlata's life from an innocent, young girl to a wizened teenager after living through some of the Bosnian war.

During this portion of the text, Filipovic urges the freedom writers to continue to use their voice to "write, create, to fight stereotypes, and live up to the name of true Freedom Writers."

She parallels her experience during the Bosnian war with the everyday experience of each of the Freedom writers. She does this by stating that because of circumstances beyond their control, both Filipovic and the writers could label themselves as "victims." She says it would be "easy to become a victim of our circumstances and continue feeling sad, scared, or angry; or instead, we could choose to deal with injustice humanely and break the chains of negative thoughts and energies, and not let ourselves sink into it."

Filipovic left Bosnia before the war ended. Having survived the horrors of war has made her a hero to the Freedom Writers, each of whom are in the process of surviving their own, personal war. She congratulates them on breaking the cycle of violence in their own lives and encourages them to continue using the power of words to continue their healing process.

She also congratulates Erin Gruwell, the Freedom Writer's teacher, for taking on the challenge of making a significant difference in these students' lives. Although Filipovic acknowledges that evil cannot be completely erased from the world, she says that everyone can change the way they deal with it, encouraging each person to rise above it and inspire others to do the same.

Zlata Filipovic sets the tone for *Freedom Writers Diary* by drawing the first parallel between warfare and everyday life in Long Beach, California. This is a theme that runs through the entire text of this book. Filipovic's book was one of the first texts to connect with these so-called unteachable students, who would someday become the Freedom Writers.

Although Filipovic herself didn't immediately recognize the parallels between her life and the Freedom Writer's lives, when she did realize the connection, she was quick to embrace that connection. She was a major inspiration in helping each Freedom Writer maintain their own diary and was a driving force in "reaching" these students on not only an intellectual level, but an emotional level as well.



Chapter 1, Freshman Year - Fall 1994

Chapter 1, Freshman Year - Fall 1994 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 1 begins with Erin Gruwell's entry outlining how she came to Wilson High School in Long Beach, California. She student taught at the institution the year before but wasn't prepared to experience the hierarchy of teaching, meaning she, at the bottom of the hierarchy, would teach Freshman English to the "unteachable" students.

While student teaching, Long Beach was dubbed the "gangsta-rap capital" by MTV due to its depiction of guns and graffiti. However Gruwell sees a different Long Beach, one that is relatively safe, one where students will take multiple buses just to receive their education at Wilson. Today, the formally predominately white school has transformed into a culturally diverse environment that now includes African Americans, Latinos and Asians making up the majority of the student body. Economically, it's very common for a "rich white kid" to be seated next to a student from the projects.

On page two, the reader meets Sharaud, who is the butt of a bad joke. A classmate drew a racial caricature of him, exaggerating his lips. When Gruwell sees the picture she goes "ballistic" stating that this kind of picture was used by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

When not one student knows what the Holocaust was, Gruwell is shocked. She goes on to ask whether any of the students had been shot at. Nearly all raised their hands. She immediately throws out her carefully-constructed lesson plans and decides to make tolerance the core of her curriculum.

Because she doesn't have any financial backing as a student teacher, Gruwell moonlights as a concierge at the Marriott Hotel and sells lingerie at Nordstrom's in her spare time. With this funding, she takes her students on field trips, such as to the movie Schindler's List in Newport Beach. After reading an article about her class, Thomas Keneally, the author of Schindler's List invites them to hear him speak, which led to the class eventually meeting Steven Spielberg, the director of the movie that was based on the book.

Despite the success the class achieves, the school decides to dismantle it because Gruwell was "making the other teachers look bad." Seniority dictated that she, coming in as a first year teacher, wouldn't be able to teach a Senior-level class, which is what this class was. So, feeling lucky she has a job, she embarks on her first year of teaching a new "crop" of "at risk" freshmen.

Convinced that if someone like Sharaud could enjoy her class, she believed anyone could. She ends her diary entry by saying, "I wonder how long it's gonna take a bunch of feisty fourteen-year-olds to come around?"



The following diary entries are exceedingly condensed. Each is written by an anonymous author and are included because they advance the Freedom Writers story in a very unique way.

Diary 1: The author believed that "odd" was a three-letter word. Today they discovered it has seven letters: G-r-u-w-e-l-l. The author plots how long this "preppy" teacher will last at Wilson High. S/He gives her a month.

Diary 2: This author is the only white male in the class. He establishes the deep racial divide the school experiences, going into detail as to where each group gathers together in their own "section" and eats lunch with their own "kind." The reader meets the "Distinguished Scholars Class" and discover they are predominately white. This author plots to get out of Gruwell's class.

Diary 3: We meet a student who is currently on probation, whose sentence was either boot camp or Wilson High School. Again, the reader is introduced to the notion of separate sections of the school for separate races. The reader also gets a taste of the pervading violence, particularly the gang war, taking place in Long Beach.

Diary 4: Violence escalates at Wilson High when a fight breaks out. The author of this diary entry doesn't know who started it, but they participated in the fight when they were hit in the face. The reader receives more information about the "race war" taking place at Wilson and how it spreads into the streets of Long Beach after school.

Diary 5: This entry is a significant. For the first time, the reader witnesses what some students need to endure to attend Wilson High. This student calls each new day the "continuation of a nightmare." Each day after school the writer is chased by older "fools" carrying bats and knives. Although s/he tries various routes home, the "fools" manage to find him/her, always either threatening to, or managing to beat up the writer.

Finally, the writer gets \$25 and purchases a gun. After school, they begin their journey home. The thugs are waiting for them. As they begin to call him/her names, s/he pulls the gun out of their backpack. Before long, a full-fledged gun fight ensues, after which the thug disappears, never meeting again. This prompts the writer to state, "I'm not afraid of anyone anymore. Now I'm my own gang. ... All I know is that I'm not gonna be the next one to be killed."

Diary 6 - 8: These writers detail, in a very matter-of-fact manner, the funeral of one of their friends. The friend died while purchasing candy at a local store. After providing details on how the friend died, the writers pour out their hearts, questioning the senseless death. One student finds a gun in the alley and "straps" it next to their body. The writer mentions the war between races and acknowledges that it will never end. The next writer provides more details about the race war raging in Long Beach. S/he talks about getting jumped and spending time in the hospital, yet how it was all "worth it." Finally, an anonymous girl outlines her pledging to a sorority. An extremely violent initiation, the reader is allowed a glimpse into the act of pledging, along with the casual way sexual favors are treated by the males in this group.



Diary 9 - 11: These entries illustrate the unique way in which Gruwell connects with her readers. The first writer doesn't like to write. In this entry, the reader is introduced to one of Gruwell's teaching methods: drawing. When this student wouldn't write, Gruwell allowed them to draw what they cannot verbalize. This student mentions how most teachers say "I'm here to help," but don't follow through on that promise. Evidently Gruwell is the exception to this rule. The next writer shows how Gruwell doesn't shy away from difficult topics. The reader is introduced to Proposition 187, along with the author's opinion on it. The writer points out that a "187" is police code for "murder." The student struggles with dyslexia. The reader gets to observe how Gruwell connects with this student.

Diary 12 - 13: This writer discusses Durango Street. S/he also outlines how they wound up in Juvenal Hall after a violent fight. The second author expands on the Durango Street theme, expressing their reaction to Gruwell's lesson plan of recreating the story as a play. This method of teaching was particularly powerful for this student.

Diary 14: This author describes a short story called, "The Last Spin" concerning rival gang members and how they relate to the story.

Throughout this first chapter, the reader is inundated by the raw reality of living in Long Beach. Each diary entry builds on the last, each creating a mosaic of a miserable, violent life, followed by even more misery and violence. Clearly, there is no way out for these students except death. This theme is made abundantly clear as many of the entries elude to the fact that death is the only way, a very honorable way, out of their current situation.

By now, the reader is very accustomed to the colloquial writing style and has encountered more than one curse word along the way. The writing reads more like dialog and less like journalistic writing. I think this was the intent.



Chapter II, Freshman Year - Spring 1995

Chapter II, Freshman Year - Spring 1995 Summary and Analysis

Up until now, the reader is probably pretty impressed with the overall positive tone of the student diary entries concerning their education and are equally impressed with Gruwell's teaching style. When Chapter Two, begins with the words, "Ahhh, I'm so frustrated!" it's a bit of a surprise.

According to Gruwell, the previous semester was interrupted by race riots and walk outs. Although she's frustrated with their stubbornness, she states that she's even more stubborn to get them to learn. Sharaud, who is now a senior, agrees that her class is "bad" and is testing her every step of the way. Gruwell laments that she rarely receives homework from her students and when she does, it's usually wadded in a ball so the student can avoid the unacceptable stigma of being a "schoolboy." Gruwell sadly reports that not one of her students' parents showed up for "Parent Night." She hopes she can hang in there until June.

On a bright note, the reader is now introduced to John Tu, a self-made millionaire, who has offered to help support the class.

Gruwell ends her entry with a resolve to get "down and dirty" since she intends on teaching Shakespeare soon.

Diary 15 - 16: This writer outlines how Gruwell is teaching Romeo and Juliet. She compares the Capulets with the Latino gangs, and the Montagues with the Asian gang. The second writer compares herself to Juliet. She compares and contrasts her relationship with her boyfriend with the relationship between Romeo and Juliet.

Diary 17 - 18: This writer introduces the "Peanut Game," designed to teach that no matter what a peanut looks like, it generally tastes fantastic. This writer then chronicled how she is beat up after school on a regular basis because she's overweight. The second writer doesn't like the "Peanut Game" because s/he isn't a peanut. But then they warm to the idea, the concept overwhelming them, when they realized that the peanuts can represent people.

Diary 19: This writer expresses sadness over the Oklahoma City bombings and relates it to what they've been studying in class.

Diary 20 - 22: This entry describes a class trip to the Museum of Tolerance as well as the panelist discussion afterwards. Each panelist came from a different country and experienced intolerance first hand. The student writer found the process very inspiring. The second student expands on the Museum of Tolerance field trip as well as the discussion of the panel on diversity. The students met various panel members and had



the opportunity to have dinner with them after the program. Here, the writer of entry 22, tells the reader that she feels like Cinderella, having experienced a fancy ball. She introduces us to John Tu. He's described as a very attentive and patient man, contrasted by the writer's father, "Tu gave me more attention in seven minutes than my dad has given in seven years" (44).

Diary 23: This entry marks the end of Spring 1995. This writer states that s/he has "changed" thanks to Gruwell. When nobody cared for this writer, Gruwell did. As the writer details spotty school attendance and a 0.5GPA, the writer credits Gruwell for making them believe that they had potential. Nobody had said this to this writer before and it affected them profoundly. With higher grades, this student is excited to return to school in the fall because "you never know what exciting things will happen" (46).

This chapter continues the style of the one that preceded it. While the tone of the students has become more positive towards education, it's surprising to note how frustrated Gruwell appeared in her entry. While the students seem more positive towards their education, the reader can note a hint of indignation in their writing as they begin to parallel intolerance, war and suffering with their everyday life experience.



Chapter III, Sophomore Year - Fall 1995

Chapter III, Sophomore Year - Fall 1995 Summary and Analysis

This chapter begins with an eye-opening entry by Gruwell. She reveals that some of the teachers dislike her and her teaching style. They're offended because of the media attention Gruwell's students receive, the same students the teachers openly criticize.

Gruwell draws a parallel between the stereotype her students deal with and the treatment she's receiving from her peers. They call her "hot shot" and call John Tu her "sugar daddy." She states that she understands why almost half of new teachers leave teaching within the first few years of beginning their career.

She went so far as to interview for a new position at another high school, but her principal called her on it. "All the teachers are out to get me," she stated. However her principal pointed out that her sophomore English class would be disappointed if she wasn't there on the first day of school. Gruwell caught the hypocrisy of her near-decision because "all" the teachers were not out to "get" her; most were either supportive or merely complacent about her class.

During her year of teaching Sophomore English, she retains most of her original students. She also received a new "crop" of students - the kids nobody else wanted. She states that her class has become a "dumping ground for disciplinary transfers" (49). Because of the violence these kids live with, many find death by 16 more believable than a high school diploma. Gruwell decides to change this mentality.

This year, she ordered *The Wave* by Todd Strasser, *Night* by Elie Wiesel, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, and *Zlata's Diary: A child's Life in Sarajevo*. Zlata Filipovic is the same age as her students, so Gruwell hopes her students will connect with this book in a very special way. The books will not arrive for a while so Gruwell decides to concentrate on short stories and plays to which the students can relate. Her aim is to help the students realize that life mirrors art.

Diary 24 - 25: The first day of school for this student is rough. Having been evicted from home, he and his mother live at a pastor's house. He boards the bus at 6:00 A.M. At 6:45, he boards another bus that will take him directly to school. 7:10 A.M. he arrives at school anticipating teasing because he's wearing last year's clothes. Instead he's greeted by friends in his English class. He feels better, awaiting the adventure of the new year. He states that Gruwell's class is the first on his schedule and his problems will melt away because he is "home."

Student writer number two misses the first day of school because s/he has sinus surgery. S/he also reveals that s/he has cystic fibrosis. Although the writer has been on the transplant list for over six months, s/he doesn't know about survival. While in the



hospital, s/he states that because of Gruwell, school is one of the only things that she loves.

Diary 26 - 27: Gruwell creates a role-play with the play *Twelve Angry Men*. The writer parallels the play with the OJ Simpson trial. Ironically, the student has a brother awaiting his own murder verdict. Without the "Simpson Dream Team" of lawyers, his/her brother was sentenced to serve 15 years to life in prison.

Diary 28 - 30: In this significant diary entry, a member of the Distinguished Scholars requests to be transferred to Gruwell's class. Gruwell dresses in costumes to make learning fun, and during her Camelot and King Arthur unit, she told the class that everyone who passed the test would be eligible to take a class trip to the Medieval Times restaurant. The writer of Diary 29 mentioned that the more they participated in the class, the more they realized they didn't care about the reward because the material itself was so fascinating. Although the student passed the test, one of the chaperons forbade them from going on the trip because s/he wasn't dressed "appropriately." The teacher eventually apologized but this student resented the action. Gruwell agreed with the student on this count.

Gruwell often connected with her students in very special ways. In Diary 30, we meet a student who is teased unmercifully because of her bad eyesight. Gruwell told the story of Sharuad and how his story made her a better teacher. This student hopes her teasing will make her a better person as well.

Diary 31: The books arrive today. Students arrive at class with a table full of champagne glasses and bottles of apple cider. Gruwell passed out bags from Barnes & Noble containing their reading books for the year. For many students, this is the first time they've owned a book of their own. Gruwell announces that they're holding a "Read-A-Thon for Tolerance." The books included in their bag include: *Night* by Elie Wiesel, *Wave* by Todd Strasser, *Anne Frank's Diary*, and *Zlata's Diary*.

Diary 32 - 34: These entries prove interesting because they take a break from the student's academic life and zero in on their home life. The first recites the killing of the "cholos", or mentors, in the neighborhood. The second is a turning point for this writer when she, as the eyewitness to a murder, goes against her own people, her own blood and identifies the killer as one of her "friends." She will face ramifications for this "betrayal," but she is willing to do so because she didn't want to frame an innocent person.

The next writer is feeling disappointed in herself because she's a closet drinker. She feels Gruwell will be disappointed if she finds out. The writer draws a parallel between what she is doing to herself and what the Nazis did to Anne Frank.

Diary 35 recites the story of when the writer stole some makeup and got caught by the store security officer. She horrified her parents and now feels "stupid" because she was trying to impress her "so-called" friends. She vowed never to steal, or do something so



stupid, again. She states that she "threw away her own pride and good judgment trying to become someone I'm not" (70).

Diary 36 - 38: This student wonders why they have to read stories written by people who don't "look like" them. S/he's talking about Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl. To their surprise, they discovered the book very moving, even experiencing anger when Anne dies. Diary writer 37, agrees, finding much in common with Anne Frank and Zlata Filipovic. They find a connection with them because all three of them keep diaries.

The writer of diary 38, draws similarities between the Holocaust, WWII and their everyday life. S/he states that they're living through a war, specifically the L.A. riots. Both Zlata, Anne and this writer had to hide for safety reasons; all heard bombs and screams. This writer lost childhood innocence. The writer marvels that they have so much in common.

Diary 39: This difficult entry outlines the molestation experienced by the women in Bosnia and parallels that experience with her home life. Although the writer was molested by her father's friend, she'd repressed the memories until she read a Peter Maass article in Vanity Fair drawing comparisons between the war in Bosnia and the Holocaust. This article affected the student deeply because it made her aware of how history repeats itself.

Diary 40: A new student has joined Gruwell's class. Feeling as though they didn't understand the class discussion, another student gave them a copy of Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo. This entry demonstrates how the class engages in lively discussion concerning the material they're covering. It's during this discussion that someone brings up the idea of bringing Zlata to America. This student is stunned when Gruwell takes the suggestion seriously. The entry ends with the students writing warm invitations to Zlata.

Gruwell is clearly gaining a reputation among students as well as faculty. She continues to gain new students in her class, some of these students requesting to be transferred from the Distinguished Scholars class.

Although the students are still covering some very sensitive issues, the style of writing is becoming more refined, less cursing, less anger. They're entranced with the concept that other people throughout history have experienced similar situations. The parallels between the Holocaust, the Bosnian war and what they call the "race war" is equally interesting to them. They have a clear connection with Gruwell and appear to respect her. The reader can sense that this respect is beginning to spread to other people of authority as well.

This section of the book still contains multiple points of view. Yet, the point of view as a unit is becoming a bit more cohesive as the students don't view each other so much as a particular race or religion, but as fellow classmates.



Chapter IV, Sophomore Year - Spring 1996

Chapter IV, Sophomore Year - Spring 1996 Summary and Analysis

This chapter begins with the official letter the class wrote inviting Zlata Filipovic to Long Beach. Written by student Tommy Jefferson, the heart-felt letter outlines how life in California is similar to the war Filipovic lived through. Tommy lists the people close to him who have died in this "undeclared war" in America. He asks for Filipovic's help in dealing with the death of his friends and wonders how he can become free from this war.

The chapter continues with Erin Gruwell's twice-yearly entry. After their "champagne" toast kicking off the "Read-A-Thon for Tolerance," she witnessed a transformation in many of her students. She states that her once-apathetic students seemed to have turned into "scholars with a conscience." In fact, one of her students finished all the books on her reading list within two weeks. When she called his parents to tell them the good news, the father was clearly befuddled to receive a positive correspondence concerning his son.

Gruwell gathers all the student letters inviting Filipovic to America and types them into the computer. Gruwell is concerned that Filipovic won't, or will not be able to come, and is worried about the impact that will have on her students. Citing concerns about finances, the students start raising money to purchase a ticket for Filipovic.

Gruwell realizes that nobody seems to know where Filipovic is. She spends time tracking her down, finding out that she may be in France or Ireland. She sends an invitation package to both countries. She receives quotes for airline tickets, gets local restaurants to donate gift certificates and gets the Marriott where she works as weekend concierge to donate two rooms if Filipovic accepts the invitation.

Meanwhile, Gruwell receives word that Miep Gies, the person who housed Anne Frank and her family, is coming to California to help commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Anne Frank's diary. Gruwell invites Gerda Seifer, a Holocaust survivor from Poland, to speak to her class. Then she receives word that Gies has changed her schedule so she can speak to her class as well.

Diary 41: It's one thing to read a book; it's another to look into the eyes of someone who experienced what was written in that book. The visit of Gerda Seifer affected the writer of this diary entry in a profound way. The story of Anne Frank came alive as Seifer recited her year of living in a cellar awaiting liberation from the Nazis. This writer knows exactly what it feels like to be unable to go outside due to violence. The writer vows that they won't repeat the mistakes of others and will stand up for what is right.



Diary 42: Today the students meet Miep Gies. The student writer calls her a "true hero" because Gies hid Anne Frank and her family during the Nazi occupation. As Gies tells her story, the students cry. Gies pulls the students into the story by telling them that she thinks about Anne every day, something the students do as they recall all their fallen friends and family.

Diary 43: The next student writer shares a beautiful poem written by Vincent Guilliano, January 9, 1991, answering the question, "If you could live an eternity and not change a thing or exist for the blink of an eye and alter everything, what would you choose? (87).

In response to Diary entry 42, the student rose to state that Gies was their hero. Gies disagreed saying that the students were heroes, and they shouldn't allow Anne's death to be in vain. It was here that the class decided that Anne's message of tolerance was to become their message.

Diary 44 - 48: This student announces that Zlata Filipovic is coming to speak to their class. The entry buzzes with excitement that someone of her stature would take time to speak to a high school class. Zlata does, indeed, arrive, and on March 24, 1996, the students and their families meet at the Marriott Hotel in Newport Beach to meet Filipovic and her parents.

The students discover they have a lot in common with Zlata. They have best friends. They all like music and wear similar clothing. Another student muses that she envied Filipovic's friendship surviving the war, considering her parents tried to prevent her friendship with someone who happens to be white. She details her father's prejudice against her best friend.

The class gathers donations, medicine, clothes and toys, for the people affected by the Bosnian war. During the question and answer portion of Filipovic's speech, someone in the audience asked if she were Croatian, Muslim or Serbian. Filipovic responded that she was a "human being." This moved the students, one of which decided she'd use the same answer when asked her ethnicity.

Another student detailed his life in Peru before his family came to America. Filipovic's story resonated with him because the terrorist struggle in Peru has resulted in many similar stories. He talks about his first days in U.S. schools and the difficulties he faced because he didn't speak English. He ends his entry speaking about the scars terrorism has carved on his soul.

Diary 49: The students spend a whole day with Filipovic. The reader discovers that Gruwell has formed a group called "Dream Team Moms." These are women who have adopted Gruwell's class. It's this group of people that chaperon the group trip to the Museum of Tolerance where they receive a private tour. While there, each participant receives a passport with the photo of a child's face. As they proceed through the tour, they follow the life of that child. At the end of the tour, they discover the child's fate. Many students cried. Afterwards, they visit a fancy restaurant and finish their day with a



private screening of Schindler's List followed by a private reception for Holocaust survivors and the students.

Diary 50: This entry tells us that not all is perfect in Gruwell's class. This student reveals that the "little baggie of white powder" has been calling their name. Filipovic has left, and this student is filled with guilt for indulging in her drug habit. They're worried about what Gruwell will think if she finds out what this student has been doing. The entry details this person's habit and the difficulty of quitting crystal meth.

Diary 51: Basketball for Bosnia is an event to raise funds for food and medical supplies for kids in Bosnia. With over 500 people in attendance and a half-time talent show, the student found this activity to be very enjoyable. The concept of "family" rather than a "class" is raised for the first time in this entry. This student struggles with weight issues and states that Gruwell's class is the first time in her academic career where she really feels as though she fits in. She views the class as her family and enjoys the chance to express herself and be a "star."

Zlata's Letter: Filipovic writes a letter to the class thanking them for their hospitality. It's clear by the language she uses that she feels a connection with the students.

Diary 52: This student's life is crumbling when s/he discover a photo of their mother and a man they don't recognize at a hotel together. The student takes this information badly. The student wants to view Gruwell's class as a surrogate family but realizes they may be split up next year. S/he states, "This can't be happening to me. Now both my families are falling apart" (105). Gruwell is working to keep the class together.

Diary 53: This student announces that the class will have Gruwell as their teacher next year. She evidently had to fight for the right to teach a Junior level class without the seniority needed to teach a higher level class. This student writes that Gruwell's class was once known as the "Ghetto Class" because the students tended toward the minority. However there is now a waiting list to get into her class, much to the delight of this student.

This chapter ends with a thank-you note from Miep Gies thanking the students for their hospitality.

Throughout this chapter, the reader can observe the class grow closer and begin to form family-type bonds. What is particularly interesting is that these students are not only becoming more respectful of each other, but that mutual respect is spilling into their other relationships as well as the community. The tone remains colloquial, although the language is also becoming far more respectful. The multiple points of view enhance the story and give the reader much to ponder as each unique voice propels the story forward.



Chapter V, Junior Year - Fall 1996

Chapter V, Junior Year - Fall 1996 Summary and Analysis

This chapter begins with Gruwell taxiing down a runway in France. She's spent the summer touring Europe and viewing places such as the Tower of London, as well as Anne's attic. Along with traveling Europe, Gruwell taught a seminar at National University. At the end of the seminar, the dean of NU offers her a job. Through teaching education classes at NU during the week and working at the Marriott on weekends, she raised the funds to go to Europe to visit Zlata and Miep. She forged strong friendships with these two remarkable women while visiting them. This year, Gruwell hopes to make American Literature come to life for her students and acknowledges that last year will be hard to top.

Diary 54: We meet a student, one who was taking AP English, who has transferred to Gruwell's class. As the only African American in many of her classes, she tired of continually being asked for the "black perspective" on various issues. After getting asked that question one too many times, she requested the transfer. She ends her entry by saying that she feels as though she's no longer the designated "national spokesperson for the plight of black people" and has replaced it with "spokesperson for Joyce Roberts" (114).

Diary 55: This writer tells the heartrending story of watching their grandmother die from severe burns, allegedly inflicted upon her by their father. What happened is that their father poured kerosene on her and lit the kitchen stove. The student saw most of the event. They watched their father arrested and knew that their life had changed forever. Through reading Emerson, the student decides it's time to become self reliant.

Diary 56: During this entry, the reader receives another glimpse into the typical life of these students. The reader gets to observe the anatomy of a fight as well as how the violence spreads from person to person and eventually escalates from a punch here and there to a full-fledged beating. This student pondered the violence they witnessed and wonders why they didn't do anything to stop the cycle. They conclude that they weren't very "self reliant" and hopes nobody from class finds out.

Diary 57: The book continues its "self reliant" theme in this entry. The student writes that they were supposed to write the letter grade they felt they deserved, then write a comment on why they felt they deserved it. The student wrote "F." Gruwell responds by getting in the student's face and demanding to know why s/he gave herself a "F." She notches up the emotion, cursing at the student for dramatic effect, to help the student realize that their education is a team effort, when they grade themselves an "F" they're giving her an "F" as well. This impresses the student and s/he decides to take decisive action to become self reliant.



Diary 58: As the class reads *The Catcher in the Rye* and discuss the suicide that occurs during the story line, this student reveals that s/he has been tormented by clinical depression. Suicide is on this student's mind "24/7" even attempting to take her/his life. They would have succeeded if the knife had been sharp.

Diary 59: This student wasn't initially impressed with *The Catcher in the Rye*. She thought the cover looked boring and wondered, "What can this book teach me?" After reading the ending, the language J.D. Salinger used caught her attention and she started reading. This person related to the character, Holden, who this student feels is a conformist. In an attempt to not be a conformist, she ran off to Las Vegas. Needless to say, her parents weren't impressed with her action and grounded her.

Diary 60: This student rejoices in his entry because he's just been offered a job by John Tu. Gruwell doesn't engage in much character development in this book, always allowing the student's diary entries to build on what the reader knows about a particular character. John Tu is one of these characters who has remained in the background, silently funding many activities, never receiving much recognition. However, he does shine in this post.

After a class party at the Bruin Den, this student offered to drive John Tu to his car that was parked a number of blocks away. Tu accepted. The student drove Tu to his car in his '78 Oldsmobile, embarrassed because he only has one seat in the front. Tu simply responded by saying that it "felt like a limousine" while stretching out his long legs. This was when Tu disclosed that he was too poor to own a car in his youth; he rode a bicycle. When they reached his car, Tu offers the student a job.

Diary 61: This entry discusses misogyny. Gruwell analyzes the cover of Snoop Doggy Dogg's album with cartoon characters representing a male and female dog. Gruwell finds the way these characters are placed very interesting, considering the male dog is resting on top of the dog house, the female dog is under the male dog, inside the house, with her hind quarters exposed. Throughout the cartoon, the female dog is referred to a hoochie and ho. This writer asserts that men will not respect women until women start respecting themselves more.

Diary 62 - 66: In these entries, we peek into the lives of more students. As the students read *The Color Purple*, a plethora of memories stream forth. A student writes about sexual abuse in entry 62. Diary 63 outlines physical abuse. A student's mother is abused in diary 64. Entry 65 details a heartrending story of homelessness, drug abuse and abandonment by the student's father. Entry 66 recites the death of Kevin, one of the student's brother. Kevin was diagnosed with a brain tumor and eventually succumbed to the disease.

The tone of this chapter darkens. The highs of visiting dignitaries is instead replaced with studies and the daily task of school. While the class still functions as a family, the newness of the experience has been replaced by a deep, genuine caring for each other. The reader will get a sense of this shift as they read through the text. Ironically, it is Gruwell herself who engages in the most cursing this round, when she's convincing her

student not to give himself a "F" for the class. If her purpose was to ignite a fire under the student and get him to care about his school work, she did accomplish that goal.

Generally speaking, the book uses flashback extensively throughout the diary entries. Gruwell's entries generally recap the chapter that preceded it. Often the students use flashback as a tool to help the reader become immersed in their world. This is a particularly powerful tool, since the majority of the readers of this text wouldn't otherwise understand the tie-in between WWII and the so-called undeclared war these students live with every day.



Chapter VI, Junior Year - Spring 1997

Chapter VI, Junior Year - Spring 1997 Summary and Analysis

Ms Gruwell announces the birth of student journals. With Zlata Filipovic as their muse, the students will begin compiling their diaries into a collaborative book. The class is staying late to work on the project, often staying until seven or eight o'clock each night. This causes an interesting situation. Because it's so dangerous for them to go home after dark, many times Gruwell drives them home after they finish.

Because of the danger these students live with, Gruwell has decided to allow them to remain anonymous as they write their journal entries. John Tu graciously offers to supply the classroom with 35 new computers.

Many of Gruwell's students have pulled their grades from Ds and Fs to As and Bs. Tu and Gruwell drafted a contract stipulating that once the computers arrive, the 35 students with the highest GPAs will win a computer when they graduate. Gruwell contacted an attorney who reviewed the contract.

Gruwell states she'll try to arrange for her students to meet Anne Frank's best friends named Jopie and Hanneli (Lies).

Diary 67 - 68: The first entry the writer laments that she kept quiet and didn't offer to sing during Jopie and Lies' visit. She parallels the experience with women who are beat up by their husbands and don't say anything. She vows that from now on she will not remain silent. In diary 68, the reader meets a new transfer, or a "lucky one." Ironically, although Gruwell's class was once termed "remedial," this student is concerned that their writing skills are not up to par with the rest of the students.

Diary 69: In this entry, the reader gets more insight into the class assignment to create a "book of events that have changed our lives." This student is not enthused because s/he feels there is much that need to be suppressed. Living in the projects isn't a "Brady Bunch" experience, and this writer goes into great detail of their life. They feel that writing about the pain will only make it worse.

Diary 70 - 71: The computers have arrived and Gruwell has given them permission to use the machines for projects in other classes. This student has watched her/his grades rise as s/he has come to care about their classes. Gruell shared an encouraging letter she received from Miep Gies. This letter reminds the student of all they have in common with Gies.

Diary 72 - 73: The students are not only writing their compilation of diary entries, they are also editing them. In diary 72, the student editing the story discovers there is another person in the class who has been sexually abused. Diary 73 outlines the



experience of a girl who has experienced an abortion along with the editor's reaction considering his girlfriend has had an abortion as well.

Diary 74 - 75: These two entries are a pivotal point in this book. Working on this project has helped many of the students create a purpose for their lives. In Diary 74, the student decides to become more like Rosa Parks and "make a difference" in her world. Diary 75, echoes this idea. During Black History Month, Gruwell introduces them to Rosa Parks and the Freedom Riders. The Freedom Riders racially integrated a bus and traveled from Washington D.C., through the deep South. When they arrived in Montgomery, Alabama, Jim Zwerg was the first off the bus and was brutally beaten by members of the Ku Klux Klan.

While discussing the Freedom Riders, the class decided to call themselves the "Freedom Writers" to honor the courage and conviction of the racially-mixed bus that dared break antiquated Alabama laws.

Diary 76: The reader has the opportunity to peek into the life of a Freedom Writer. After reciting a bloody story involving their mother, the writer declares a new zeal for the project since adopting their new name. The tentative title for their book is An American Diary... Victims of an Undeclared War. The class has decided to bind it and present it to the United States Secretary of Education.

Diary 77 - 92: The class has decided to raise money for their Washington D.C., trip and are preparing poems to recite once they get there. Their hope is to remain strong and focused like the Freedom Riders before them. When they arrive at the capital (for many this is their first foray outside Long Beach), they visit Arlington Cemetery, the Lincoln Memorial, walk down Pennsylvania Avenue and visit the Holocaust Museum. The students find the holocaust museum particularly moving as they pass through cattle cars and view photos of human beings stacked like fire wood.

On their fourth day there, they met Richard Riley, the Secretary of Education. He was deemed "cool," and they give him a copy of their manuscript. They also shared a poem written by one of the Freedom Writers. They hold a candlelight vigil for the family and friends they lost to violence. They also form an "unbreakable chain" and march out of the hotel towards the Washington Monument.

They fly home in a "Freedom Writer Only" plane heavy with fatigue and wondering what life in Long Beach will be like once they get home.

Diary 93 - 95: The Freedom Writers return home to violence. A local young man had allegedly raped and murdered a seven-year-old girl in a Nevada casino. This writer knows the alleged attacker and writes about him. With the media bombarding the school with questions, the Freedom Writer adventure is forgotten and violence trumped their positive experience in the media's eye.

Diary 96 - 98: As the Freedom Writers prepare for their Senior year, one of them is elected Senior Class President. But all is not perfect. It appears as though the Freedom Writers may be disbanded their final year of high school. The writer of diary 97, is filled

with angst considering losing his/her academic family. Everything is resolved in the next diary entry when it is revealed that the class is once again going to be able to spend their Senior year together.

The tone of The Freedom Writers Diary continues to mature as each writer's focus is slowly pivoting from the past and is now primarily focused on the present. The trip to Washington D.C., was the highlight in many of their lives, many of them having never left Long Beach prior to their excursion out East. As they mature, their writing matures as well. While the writing is still very colloquial, the importance and vastness of their tolerance message is beginning to sink in. They're realizing they've given themselves a large assignment and seem quite willing to take up the task.

Despite their triumphs in the classroom, some of these students still suffer in their home environment. While the Freedom Writers give them the opportunity to have an academic family, the constant questioning whether their class will be disbanded each year clearly causes angst. This is reflected in the writings pertaining to this subject.



Chapter VII, Senior Year - Fall 1997

Chapter VII, Senior Year - Fall 1997 Summary and Analysis

As usual, Ms Gruwell begins this chapter with an analysis of what has gone on since the last she wrote. She reports that getting permission to teach Senior level English was difficult. Considering she has less seniority than many of her peers, and teaching higher level English classes requires seniority, getting permission required going to the superintendent and president of the Board of Education. But she succeeded and will, indeed, teach the class their final year at Wilson High School.

She's determined that her primary focus this year will be to get the Freedom Writers to think about their future, particularly go to college. College is a foreign concept to many of Gruwell's students. Since she's basically "mom" to 150 college-bound kids, she's enlisted the help of 75 graduate students, who will be paired with two Freedom Writers. The Freedom Writers will be a "case study" for the graduate students and the grad students will mentor the Freedom Writer on how to prepare for college. To help finance college for the Freedom Writers, Gruwell has set up a nonprofit organization called "Tolerance Education Foundation." All gifts are tax deductible and will go towards educational expenses.

Diary 99 - 103: Not much has changed in the students' private lives. The first writer declares her/his fear of going to college, yet realizing that living in the projects has made the writer strong. In the end s/he admits that s/he has endured too much to give up the thought of an education. The next writer details her/his eviction notice. Without a place to live, this student may not be able to finish high school—forget about college dreams. The next writer is in the same position. Their landlord is demanding \$800 from the student or the whole family will get evicted. This could potentially put their college dreams on hold. Another student may not be able to go to college because she/he is an illegal immigrant. Diary writer 103, is the first to announce that she'll go to college. She'll not only go to college, but she intends on becoming the first Latina Secretary of Education. She goes on to write a poem stating her intent.

Diary 104 - 105: These entries chronicle the process by which Gruwell inspires the students to choose a college. She begins by having them list their dreams, not realistic dreams, but their wildest dreams. This method clearly works because in the next diary entry, the writer declares that s/he will break the cycle of ignorance and not only graduate from high school, but will "take the road not taken" and graduate from college as well.

Diary 106: Gruwell brings in her National University mentoring team. The reader gets to experience a student's reaction to the mentoring and see how other people affect the Freedom Writers in a positive way. The mentor in in this entry drives the writer, an



aspiring engineer, to the Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena. This inspiring trip cements her desire to continue her education.

Diary 107: In this entry the tables are turned and the Freedom Writers become mentors for students at Butler Elementary School. Butler is located near a dangerous gang-filled park in Long Beach. They displayed a video documentary, played an ice breaker game and talked about their experiences. The Freedom Writers promised to return to Long Beach after they receive their college educations.

Diary 108 - 109: The Freedom Writers continue receiving media attention. In this entry, a writer named Nancy Wride published a story about them in the Los Angeles Times. This has prompted a deluge of mail and so much media communications that one student must act as receptionist each class period. The Freedom Writer college fund is continuing to grow. They also receive correspondence from prison inmates

Diary 110: This entry chronicles the experiences of a young Freedom Writer, who attempts to visit his father. Since the writer had never met his father, he wants to know if he looks like him, if he's tall and if they share any interests. After days of asking his mother to meet his father, she finally relented. When the day came to meet his father, he got turned away.

Diary 111: This entry chronicles another version of the female sorority pledging. This young woman compares and contrasts the pledging experience before she'd studied tolerance and after her studies had enlightened her to the affects of pledging and hazing. Watching the proceedings made her question her popularity and wonder what kind of world would value the outcome of such an event. In the end the writer decides that popularity "always has and always will take its toll on people" (216).

Diary 112 - 113: These entries represent "slice of life" entries where the author muses about the time he/she almost lost her father, who had been shot. Another details how one student's mother died after a serious illness.

This semester marks a maturation in the Freedom Writers tone. As they prepare for college, some of the students wax nostalgic and write essays pondering those they've lost either physically or mentally. But rather than use a tone of frustration, the tone tends more towards philosophical. The students still use flashbacks as a tool to help the reader relate to their plight, but mostly the students seem rather apprehensive, yet optimistic about their relative futures.



Chapter VIII, Senior Year - Spring 1998

Chapter VIII, Senior Year - Spring 1998 Summary and Analysis

This final semester starts off with a bang when the Freedom Writers come back to school after Christmas vacation with the news that they won the Spirit of Anne Frank Award. The book states that the award honors "those who have followed the courage of their convictions to step forward and actively confront anti-semitism, racism, prejudice and bias related violence in their community" (222). The catch however, is that the Freedom Writers must accept the award in person, and they must arrive in New York within the next few days.

What was unusual about this award is that the Anne Frank Center will only award the prize to individuals. However, since the Freedom Writer application was so "amazing," they ultimately garnered the award.

While they were scheduled to visit New York, Gruwell scheduled an interview with Connie Chung, so the Freedom Writers could appear on Prime Time Live. With all this publicity, Gruwell states she felt like a mockingbird, dive-bombing anyone who would disrupt the dynamics of her classroom. She continually attempts to shelter the kids from people she feels is disingenuous or who have ulterior motives.

Diary 114 - 123: GUESS has offered to fly 45 students to New York to accept their award. Students who want to be included on the trip must write essays, and Gruwell will select the winners. Gruwell's employment at the Marriott garnered her rooms for her students. After accepting their award from actress Linda Lavin, the students headed to Broadway to watch *The Diary of Anne Frank* starring Natlie Portman. They also meet Peter Maass, the person who wrote an article about Zlata Filipovic in *Vanity Fair*.

It's while they're in New York that they acquire a literary agent named Carol who found a publisher, Doubleday, for their manuscript. Doubleday also published *Anne Frank, the Diary of a Young Girl*. The name of the Freedom Writers manuscript has now become *The Freedom Writers' Diary*.

Diary 124 - 128: Life goes on for the Freedom Writers. This entry chronicles how one of the writers got kicked off the basketball team during their senior year. She acknowledges that she's got an attitude and can be sarcastic and mouthy. Although she states she can't be a "conformist," the coach disagreed and wouldn't reinstate her. Despite this student's setback, the next diary entry outlines another student getting chosen to present a speech to California Senator Barbara Boxer. Another student discovers that although he's been diagnosed with ADD, the Freedom Writers embrace him. With the confidence he's gained, he'll be heading to college next year. Another student comes out of the closet as a lesbian and finds the Freedom Writers accepting of her as well. Meanwhile, another Freedom Writer is crowned Prom Queen.



Diary 129: The Freedom Writers have won another award: the American Jewish Committee's Micah Award for fighting injustice in society whose motto is, "Whoever saves one life saves the world entire" (247). After winning this award, this author has vowed to be "silent no more" and turn in a relative who raped a young girl to the authorities.

Diary 130 - 135: The students prepare for graduation, reminiscing about all they've learned in Gruwell's class. Students win awards such as "All American;" another has been chosen to play on a major league baseball team. One student is heading to UCLA, while another wishes that high school wouldn't end. Another student has a bright future, but discovers she's pregnant. She plans on rearranging her plans and fit college in her schedule.

Diary 136 - 142: The students win another award, this time the Southwest Airlines Freedom Fighter Award. As the 35 computers are awarded to the top 35 students (out of 150), one Freedom Writer discovers that her father pawned her favorite gold charm to purchase cocaine. As the students prepare for graduation and practice their speeches, many are the first in their family to graduate. The student with Cystic Fibrosis has received a double lung transplant and will graduate with the class. Each writer is amazed at the progress they've made and are generally hopeful for their future.

This was a poignant chapter, bittersweet because the reader realizes that these fine writers will graduate and complete the manuscript. As they've matured, they recognize the stupidity of senseless violence. But most of all, each has received the most tremendous gift anyone could give: the gift of communication. And these kids can communicate unlike anyone their age.

The tone is uplifted with a hint of sadness as they contemplate the separating of their academic family. Each recognizes the gift s/he received in having Erin Gruwell as their English instructor. Each seems to recognize the power s/he now wields when it comes to the battle for tolerance.



Epilogue

Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Written by Gruwell, the reader gets a sense of how life is going for the young Freedom Writers. Some attended Community Colleges, while others entered major universities. Freedom Writers have spanned the U.S.A. from Massachusetts to Hawaii. The first semester went just fine for some; it was overwhelming for others. But they endure. Each is doing well, moving forward, and some are pulling family members along with them such as mothers, fathers and relatives who "went astray."

Gruwell resigned from Wilson High and is now teaching at California State University, Long Beach as a "Distinguished Teacher in Residence." She's teaching new teachers how to create new Freedom Writers and developing a college course to help educators hone their craft.

Sadly, one of the Freedom Writers, the student stricken with cystic fibrosis, passed away when his body rejected his lungs. However his mother reports that her child had three goals, get his driver's license, to graduate and go to college. He achieved all three thanks to the Freedom Writers.

Gruwell leave the reader with this thought: The Freedom Writers are the third leg of a relay race. The first leg was started by Anne Frank. Zlata then took the baton when she wrote her book. The Freedom Writers took the third leg. She then challenges the reader to pick up a pen and become the next catalyst for change.



Characters

Erin Gruwell

Erin Gruwell is a first-year English teacher. Because she doesn't have any seniority in the school system yet, she's give the tough students, the "unteachable" ones. Other teachers tell her to let them slide by, wait until she has more seniority, then begin her teaching career once she has "good students." Ms Gruwell decides on a different strategy.

While teaching at Wilson High, she discovers that her students are unacquainted with the Holocaust. She embarks on transforming her teaching style to one that her students can better relate. This causes her to choose books with characters in similar situations as her students. Her theme becomes not one of teaching English, but using English to teach tolerance.

She quickly learns that she won't receive any financial backing to purchase books for these students, so she becomes a weekend concierge at a local Marriott Hotel and eventually works part time in the lingerie department of Nordstrom's along with her scheduled teaching duties.

Gruwell teaches this same group of students for an unprecedented four years. Along the way, she invites dignitaries such as Zlata Filipovic and Miep Gies into her classroom. Her students go on multiple field trips, many of them leaving Long Beach for the first time in their lives, to places such as Washington D.C. and New York where they receive the Spirit of Anne Frank Award.

Gruwell has gone on to found the nonprofit organization, The Freedom Writers Foundation. Its goal is to share the Freedom Writers Method with schools across the globe.

The Freedom Writers

The Freedom Writers are a group of 150 students, many of them initially labeled "at risk." Many are gang members; most live with horrific home conditions; some are homeless; many have issues with drug use, many of them feel the likelihood of dying before their 16th birthday is greater than graduating from high school.

If they were to graduate, most would be the first person in their family to do so. Education isn't valued in their home life; survival is. These children have been raped, abused and beaten; they carry weapons and have their personal possessions stolen so family members can purchase drugs.

When they arrived in Gruwell's class, most were oblivious to history, literature and lacked any cohesive writing skills. However, once Gruwell made the material relevant to



their experience, they dive into the education process with enthusiasm. She taught these students for four full years, and the students began to gain a more scholarly reputation.

As the group of students matured, the class attracted "main stream" students and even some "Distinguished Scholars" from AP classes. Eventually the school established a waiting list for students wishing to become Freedom Writers. Ms. Gruwell required that these talented writers keep diaries during their entire high school experience. They eventually edited the entries to form *The Freedom Writers Diary*. Because of the dangerous life they experience on a daily basis, each contributor remains anonymous, each entry posted by number rather than by name.

Zlata Filipovic

Zlata Filipovic wrote *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo*. She began writing her diary, which would later become the before-mentioned book before the war in Bosnia as a record of her childhood. She didn't intend that her diary would chronicle the Bosnian war.

However, after war broke out, she states her diary become more than a place to chronicle her daily experience; it became her "friend," a place to pour out her questions and sadness, a place to funnel her fears, and a place to leave those fears forever.

Her book inspired the students in Ms Gruwell's class to begin writing their own diaries. Ms Filipovic traveled to Long Beach to visit the Freedom Writers their Sophomore Year, Spring 1996.

Anne Frank

Anne Frank is the author of the famous book, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. Frank and her family lived in an attic during World War II, and were eventually captured by the Nazis. Ms Frank died in a concentration camp. Her diary inspired the Freedom Writers profoundly. In January 15, 1998, the Freedom Writers won the Spirit of Ann Frank Award in the Outstanding Youth Award category.

Miep Gies

Miep Gies was Otto Frank's secretary and the person who found Anne's diary. She hid Anne Frank and her family in her attic while they awaited liberation from the Nazis. She came to America on the 50th anniversary of the Anne Frank diary. She changed her schedule to speak with the Freedom Writers.



Gerda Seifer

Gerda Seifer is the first Holocaust survivor to speak with the Freedom Writers. She's the person who told Gruwell that Miep Gies was coming to California.

Sharaud

Sharaud was the student who Erin Gruwell met her first year of teaching. Another student created a large-lipped caricature of Sharaud prompting Gruwell to comment, "This is the type of propaganda that the Nazis used during the Holocaust." When none of the students knew what the Holocaust was, Gruwell immediately changed teaching strategies and the "Freedom Writers" were born.

John Tu

John Tu is a wealthy, American businessman, who funded many of the Freedom Writers' activities. Tu was born in poverty but became wealthy through education and founding a software company. He eventually offered one of the Freedom Writers a job.

Peter Maass

Peter Maass is a journalist for Vanity Fair who wrote an article about Zlata Filipovic.

Jopie and Hanneli (Lies)

Jopie and Hanneli (Lies) were Anne Frank's friends. They visited the Freedom Writers their Junior year.



Objects/Places

Wilson High School

Wilson High is located in a "safe" neighborhood of Long Beach, California. Because of its location, and because of its solid reputation, it has become a desirable educational institution for students from all walks of life. Many students travel many miles and must board multiple buses to attend school there.

Museum of Tolerance

The Museum of Tolerance, located in Los Angeles, California, is a museum holding artifacts and stories of stereotypes, prejudice, genocide and intolerance in the hopes of bringing history to life for all who visit.

Holocaust Museum

The Freedom Writers toured the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C.

Bosnian War

Zlata Filipovic created the bulk of her book, *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo* during the Bosnian war.

The Attic

The place where Anne Frank and her family lived until they were captured by the Nazis during World War II.

Auschwitz

A Nazi concentration camp used to house those who opposed the Nazi regime as well as those the Nazis deemed "undesirable." Many people died while incarcerated in Auschwitz and the level of violence inflicted in these camps was staggering.

Freedom Riders

The Freedom Riders were a group of Civil Rights Activists in the 1960s. Inspired by Rosa Parks, they boarded a racially-integrated bus and traveled from Washington D.C. throughout the deep South. When they arrived in Montgomery, Alabama, Freedom Rider Jim Zwerg, was viciously beaten by a mob of Ku Klux Klan members.



New York City

New York City is where the Freedom Writers accepted the Spirit of Anne Frank Award.

Washington D.C.

The Freedom Writers traveled to Washington D.C. to present their manuscript to the Secretary of Education. While there, they toured the city.

The Spirit of Anne Frank Award

Spirit of Anne Frank Award honors, "those who have followed the courage of their convictions to step forward and actively confront anti-semitism, racism, prejudice and bias related violence in their community."

The American Jewish Committee's Micah Award

The Freedom Writers have won the American Jewish Committee's Micah Award for fighting injustice in society whose motto is, "Whoever saves one life saves the world entire."

Southwest Airlines Freedom Fighter Award

The Freedom Writers earned the Southwest Airlines Freedom Fighter Award their senior year.



Themes

Empowerment

Throughout *The Freedom Writers Diary*, the Freedom Writers moved from the victim mentality to an empowered mentality. As the students studied various authors and realized they were not alone in their pain, they become more philosophical about their situation and took steps to improve their environment.

Once they began to conquer the "us versus them" mentality and see each other as human beings rather than Latino, Black, Asian or White, the move from victim to empowerment occurred rather quickly. As the reader peruses the diary entries in chronological order, it's quite apparent that this shift is taking place.

It's often said that empowerment is a growth process that is never ending and self initiated. This is certainly the case in this instance. As the Freedom Writer group began to experience success and build their confidence, they increased their positive self image. As their positive self image increased, they experienced more success. As they went through this process, they reversed the downward spiral they were currently living in and turned it into an upward spiral that empowered each individual person as well as the group.

Connection with the Past

Each student who entered Erin Gruwell's class felt she had nothing to teach them. Book learning is of little use in the streets. It was common for young children of the projects to be unable to spell, yet they could recite rap music word for word. It wasn't until Gruwell was able to connect literature to her student's current life experience that she was able to trigger their healing on a physical, emotional and spiritual level.

Physically, each of these kids lived in abject fear. Reading their diary entries, the reader is left with a "scared animal" image in their mind, a creature who lives on instinct, continually afraid that today will be their last. Long term fear creates physical damage, and each of these kids suffered from that physical damage. These students lived in a stunted emotional cycle of fear, hatred, rage and revenge. Living in an environment such as that wreaks havoc on any spiritual growth, and these students did indeed suffer from spiritual starvation.

Their life experiences up to the point of taking Ms. Gruwell's class is probably why when confronted with a story as powerful as Anne Frank's, these students devoured her story, clung to it and recited it long after the lesson was finished. Realizing the universal aspect to their personal stories seemed to give these students a direction in which they could funnel their frustration. It was through this powerful connection with a child from another era that pulled these kids out of their cycle of anger and into the upward spiral of success.



Similarities Between Modern life in Long Beach, California a

Nobody likes to hear that the most prosperous nation in the world has an undeclared urban war occurring within its borders. In fact, as the reader peruses the pages of this book, s/he may at first glance toss aside this notion rather than face the fact that it may, indeed, be true.

But as the story unfolds and as the personal stories roll in, one after another, the evidence piles higher and higher until the reader is forced to consider that perhaps, we, as a nation, have a problem. Depending on where the reader lives, this war may seem far enough away to not merit attention.

However, as this book so poignantly points out—when hundreds of students are "thrown away" and considered unteachable, then this undeclared race war will eventually become a very big problem, which the entire nation must face now or deal with dire consequences later. When a young child knows more about guns than an adult; when an innocent child is shot while choosing candy; when students refuse to learn because they don't feel an education is important or even relevant in their daily lives, then we must consider the notion that our nation is currently in an undeclared war that must be resolved through careful negotiation and tactics that Gruwell so eloquently displays throughout *The Freedom Writers Diary*.

Style

Perspective

The Freedom Writers Diary is told from multiple points of view. Each chapter begins with Erin Gruwell's point of view. After that, each chapter is filled with a minimum of nine and a maximum of 32 anonymous entries, each with their unique point of view.

The perspective at the beginning of the book is quite emotional, very colloquial with liberal use of curse words. The earthy tone vividly illustrates the anger these students possess and lends a believability factor the book wouldn't have if more proper language were used.

As the book progresses, the style of writing matures. While each entry is still as passionate as the earlier diary entries, the students are clearly learning the techniques of clear communication, along with techniques they can use to not offend the broader audience. By the book's end, the students skillfully tell heartrending stories without the drama of cursing and colloquialism.

Tone

The overall tone of The Freedom Writers Diary is very casual. While the sections written by Erin Gruwell are a bit more formal, the bulk of this book tells each writer's tale through their own eyes, using their unique language. Many of these students were considered "unteachable" by Gruwell's fellow teachers and many had never written before. Yet, the honesty and enthusiasm for writing clearly shines through each anonymous entry.

Because this project was originally a personal diary, the students use colloquial language. They also recite many events from their life that could potentially cause the reader discomfort. Subjects such as incest, dyslexia, misogyny, molestation and abuse are frankly discussed. Yet, because each sub-section tends to be short, these potentially uncomfortable moments are generally brief and assist the reader in understanding the personal, unique world of each writer.

The intended audience for this book is the general public. Nearly everyone will benefit from hearing from these talented individuals and their unique story will certainly move the reader on a deep, emotional level. The Freedom Writers hope to inspire an army of people who will take up the pen and join their ranks. Whether or not the book will achieve this purpose remains to be seen.

Structure

The Freedom Writers Diary is separated into eight chapters, one for each semester from Fall 1994, until graduation at Spring 1998. Each chapter is divided into sections, the first of which is always written by Freedom Writer's teacher Erin Gruwell. The following sections of each chapter are written anonymously by a member of the Freedom Writers. Each section does, however, advance the story albeit through the eyes of various story-tellers.

While the structure can be confusing at first, once the reader becomes accustomed to so many points of view and unique and various voices, and once the reader is prepared for the roller coaster ride that each (sometimes) horrific story reveals, this is a very enjoyable book. It will surely evoke emotions as many of the vignettes unfold, sometimes horrifying, sometimes mildly amusing, always heart felt.

Quotes

"Unfortunately, I have realized that we cannot completely erase all the evil from the world, but we can change the way we deal with it, we can rise above it and stay strong and true to ourselves." Zlata Filipovic, Forward, XVIII

"This is the type of propaganda that the Nazis used during the Holocaust." Erin Gruwell, Chapter 1, Page 2.

"I feel as though chaos is stalking me, sliding its slimy tentacles into every crevice of my life." Anonymous Freedom Writer, Chapter 6, Page 188.

"I want to write his story so others will know his death was not in vain." Anonymous Freedom Writer, Chapter 6 page 150.

"I have a dream that... little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers." Martin Luther King Jr. Epilogue, Page 273.

"I always thought that "odd" was a three-letter word; but today I found out it has seven, and they spell G-r-u-w-e-l-l." Anonymous Freedom Writer, Chapter 1, Page 6.

"Unfortunately Anne Frank was never free. It makes me wonder if I'll ever be." Anonymous Freedom Writer, Chapter 3, Page 68.

"That's when it all became crystal clear. Anne's message of tolerance was to become our message. At that moment, I became like the fire, and like the lightning, and like thunder." Anonymous Freedom Writer, Chapter 4, Page 89.

"Do not let Anne's death be in vain." Meip Gries, Chapter 4, Page 89.

"I'm a human being." Zlata Filipovic, Chapter 4, Page 93.

"I feel your pain - you're not alone." Anonymous Freedom Writer, Chapter 6, Page 152.



Topics for Discussion

Discuss tolerance. In what ways does discrimination occur in everyday life? Does reverse discrimination exist? If so, give examples of how it occurs in daily life.

Do you believe that the war-torn lives of Zlata Filipovic and Anne Frank can be compared to life in urban America today? Explain and give examples.

Do you think that your classroom can achieve the status of the Freedom Writers? How would you need to change your study habits to make this a reality? What can your teacher do to make this a reality? How can you carry on the legacy of the Freedom Writers?

Can you relate to the Freedom Writers? How does your life parallel theirs, how does it differ?

If you could change one thing about life in urban America, what would it be? How can you help make this change?

Discuss the language used in The Freedom Writers Diary. Does the colloquial use of language distract from the message or enhance it. Explain.

Discuss the point of view. Does the multiple points of view enhance or distract from the message of this text. How? Explain.