



Dear Educator,

Milkweed Editions has developed a series of teaching guides to encourage students to enter books with pleasure and insight—to enjoy as well as understand them.

We began by asking classroom teachers what would help them to teach novels and anthologies. The teachers said they wanted open-ended questions for use in guiding students to read more deeply. They also asked for exercises in teaching writing. Their third request was for assistance in teaching with a sensitivity to the needs and goals of multicultural education. The guides were conceptualized to serve those requests.

Literature opens up the classroom to a larger world and to disciplines beyond its own. So we developed the guides while keeping other disciplines and directions in mind. We also asked Dena L. Randolph, a leader in the field of multicultural education, to comment on the role of literature in education. Her introduction follows.

The guides were developed and written by people who are both teachers and writers. Each guide offers extensive step-by-step writing exercises. The key to successfully using the exercises in your classroom is to take time for the whole process: time for warm-ups, time to brainstorm before writing, time for the writing itself, and time for reading the writings aloud.

We hope that the guides will help you in your teaching. Feel free to use only those parts of them that are relevant to your needs. Jot your own thoughts and lesson ideas in the margins. And, as one teacher interviewed said, “Don’t try to do too much. The main thing is to read and enjoy the books. Enter the stories of the people in them. Pass on your excitement to the students.”

*Roseann Lloyd*

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*Looking for Home: Women Writing about Exile* (poetry)

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To order additional copies of *Aquaboogie* or any of the above books and their teaching guides, please phone or mail your order to:

Milkweed Editions  
430 First Avenue North, Suite 400  
Minneapolis, MN 55401

Fax: (612) 332-6248  
Phone: (612) 332-3192  
(800) 520-6455

We welcome your comments and suggestions for our Teaching Guide series. Please write to us, "ATTN: Teaching Guide Series," at the Milkweed Editions address listed above.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS TEACHING GUIDE

Julie Landsman is a teacher and writer who lives in Minneapolis. For fourteen years, she has taught in inner-city public schools in special settings for students who have difficulties in the classroom, as well as in regular junior and senior high schools. In fourteen secondary schools, she oversaw a program meant to help students unable to succeed either academically or behaviorally in their classes. Landsman has run support groups for failing high school students and for teachers looking for new ways to reach disillusioned or unmotivated students. She has traveled around the country speaking to groups of teachers and administrators, presenting positive ways to work with students who often fail in traditional classrooms. She also teaches creative writing and children’s literature to teenage parents.

Julie has published her essays and poetry in numerous small press magazines and anthologies. Her book *Basic Needs: A Year With Street Kids in a City School* was published in September 1993 by Milkweed Editions, and most recently she has edited the anthology *From Darkness to Light: Teens Write about How They Triumphed Over Trouble* (Deaconess Press, 1994). She has won a number of writing awards in Minnesota, including a State Arts Board Grant, a Loft McKnight Grant, and two Jerome Travel Writing grants.

She is married and has one son, a college graduate.

## Multicultural Education in Literature Classes

Education theorists offer philosophical answers to the question of why we should pursue the ideal of multicultural education. But philosophy, statistics, and changing demographics aside, the most compelling “why” for most teachers is increasingly evident in our classrooms. Our students are coming from a variety of ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds. Their families are just as diverse. The world is made smaller by technology, yet it is an increasingly complex place. Defining one’s self is not an easy undertaking. The faces of America’s future are the faces in our classrooms. Their ability to make the world better depends on how well we teach them to value each other’s culture, history, and language. To understand the world around them requires a real understanding of themselves, as well as of others.

Students should inquire into their own lives, as well as into the lives of others. Literature classrooms and curricula can provide students with such opportunities. At some time in their K–12 education, children should read something that affirms their existence. All around us are the stories of people, yet we have heard only a few of them, usually concerning the same group of people. It is time to look for more voices if we are to give our children a sense of what it means to be human.

The work of curriculum reform in literature classes can begin small. While many of us are charged with transforming whole departments and/or schools, I think the most effective place for us to begin is in our own classrooms. As you make changes, consider who is represented and who is left out. Begin with a manageable task, like changing one unit or one unit per class. For example, teaching the literature of the Harlem Renaissance along with other literature of the Jazz Age gives a more balanced view of that era. Or in a class about growing up, teachers could include a book by a writer of color who has addressed this topic.

Even “traditional” material can be looked at in different ways. This is important for those teachers who cannot change the actual content of their curriculum. For example, what does *The Scarlet Letter* reveal about early attitudes toward Native Americans? Think of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Lord of the Flies* as texts about class and gender roles and expectations. One overall guiding principle is always to have more than one type of voice addressing any theme or issue. “Matching texts” is a way to do this. Pairing John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* with Tomás Rivera’s *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* gives students a fuller picture of the lives of migrant workers by presenting both Anglo and Chicano experiences.

One set of voices usually missing from the curriculum is the voices of students. Including those voices is crucial to making the

curriculum more representative; the students can help to shape the curriculum. For example, ask students to think about their own ethnicity. Music and art are a central part of our students' lives, and they too can be used as ways to let students testify to their own experiences. One assignment could ask students to select or create music and artwork to accompany particular passages in novels or poems.

A multicultural curriculum cannot work in isolation: It has to be supported by other elements in the school. For some schools, that means starting a multicultural awareness group; for others, it means hiring more teachers of color. Whatever form it takes, the work of making schools psychologically enriching places for students is not just about changing titles and texts.

And yet, I still believe that the work done by classroom teachers is the first step in the process of transforming schools. Teachers have the ability to influence students' thinking about themselves and others. If one purpose of education is to provide students with models for life, then the models we present must be as varied as life itself. Literature provides the kind of raw material that helps students understand what it means to be whole and human, and to allow everyone the luxury of living that way.

*Dena L. Randolph*

Dena L. Randolph, an educator who focused on the implementation of multicultural education in K-12 classrooms, especially literature classes, completed her comments for these guides shortly before her untimely death.

## BACKGROUND

### Overview of AQUABOOGIE

This book is a collection of short stories that are interconnected. The same characters appear in the different stories, and all but the last two, which take place in reform schools in Los Angeles, are united by place—they all occur in the Riverside section of California. Much dialogue in the book is conducted in the black dialect of Southern California.

One feels, when reading the book from beginning to end, that one is walking down the street of an African American neighborhood and stopping into the houses along the way, learning the histories of those inside, the brothers, sisters, aunts, babies, etc. The stories often explore the importance of where the characters live, or of what happens when the central character moves away from Riverside. Other stories focus on the realistic conflicts between men and women, or between young and old.

Throughout these stories, readers experience what it is like to be black in America, what it means to be subject to police searches, to false arrest, to harassment on the job simply because of one's race. Yet the book is not limited to such concerns. Any student, white, black, Asian, or Hispanic, can relate to the insights, the relationships, the interactions between the generations, the universally human experiences of *Aquaboogie*.

### About Susan Straight

Susan Straight was born in Riverside, California, went to college in northern California, and received her M.A. from Amherst College in Massachusetts in 1984. While there, she studied with James Baldwin, Julius Lester, and the novelist Jay Neugeboren. Several of the stories in *Aquaboogie* were included in her master's thesis. In 1984, she returned to Riverside, and has not left since.

She says of her neighborhood:

"Everyone tells stories, almost legends, about people and cars and events, and I've heard them for so many years that I wanted my stories to be on paper instead of only in the air. We live in a talking place, not a reading place, so nobody really understands what I do. A lot of our friends have gone the same ways James Baldwin used to talk about—the prison, the service, or the needle—but now the needle is the pipe; the people smoke cocaine. Sometimes it's hard to still live here, but this is where our families are."

Straight met her husband in junior high. She is white; her husband is black. Susan says of this: "People who read my stories are always surprised to find out that I have blue eyes and blond hair. Sometimes it surprises me, too, because I forget—I've been in the

community so long, no one remembers anymore that I'm not black." Susan Straight has also worked within the community, teaching gang members, refugees, and college students.

Straight's two daughters were born in the same hospital where she and her husband were born. When the girls are asleep, she writes. She worked on the stories in this collection for seven years.

*Aquaboogie* won the Milkweed National Fiction Prize in 1990. *The New York Times Book Review* said Straight is ". . . a writer whose love for her characters infuses her work with the dignity and urgency they so clearly deserve." Straight has also written two novels: *I Been In Sorrow's Kitchen and Licked Out All the Pots* (Hyperion, 1992) and *Blacker Than a Thousand Midnights* (Hyperion, 1994).

## Setting the Historical Context

In 1579, four black Africans—three men, one woman—were taken by Sir Francis Drake to what is now California and was then the northernmost part of Mexico. Captured in the Caribbean and in South America during Drake's voyages, they were probably the first members of their race to land there.

During the next 150 years, many Africans were transported on Spanish ships to the region, and mingled with its Native American and Spanish populations. The first African American to achieve freedom and citizenship there was Juan Cristobal in 1819.

Later, during the 1830s and '40s, large numbers of black deserters fled to the land that would become California in 1850, some to join the Gold Rush, and others to escape from American warships then moving into Mexico's territorial waters. (White members of multiracial warship crews also deserted at that time.) Other African Americans arrived as the servants of white military men, while still others traveled on their own to escape slavery in the Northeast. Black migration from New England and the South increased dramatically when word spread overland of the American occupation of the future California in 1846. Passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 also led many blacks to migrate to Canada, since the law prohibited anyone from standing in the way of helping slave owners recapture their runaway slaves. California passed its own Fugitive Slave Law in 1852. So, though not unduly hospitable to blacks, the state was attractive to them. African Americans journeyed West seeking prosperity, just like everyone else.

After the Civil War, black Californians made progress in improving the quality of their lives. They lived and worked in a state that was experiencing constant growth, which meant expanding opportunities for everyone.

Although black men and women were among the first citizens of the city of Los Angeles, founded in 1781, southern California's black population did not increase significantly until the late 1880s.

Following the Great Depression of the 1930s, and before World War II, black Americans migrated in large numbers to Los Angeles. They lived in neighborhoods such as Riverside that had become small cities of their own within the cities and suburbs of Los Angeles; the races rarely mixed. Los Angeles grew into one of the most segregated cities in the country. As a result, tension between many different cultural groups often erupted into violence. Los Angeles experienced major riots in African American neighborhoods during the summer of 1965, during the civil rights movement, and again in 1992, after the Rodney King trial.

In *Aquaboogie*, in the fictional community of Rio Seco, California, Susan Straight has created characters with roots all over the nation, from the deep South to the East Coast. She explores the complicated way racism has perpetuated segregation to this day.

### Warm-Ups

**This book is a collection of short stories. Each one can be read on its own, and yet as a group, they form a novel, because the same characters and places reappear throughout the stories.**

1. Some contemporary movies might be interesting for students to watch as they read *Aquaboogie*. These are all rated R; care should be taken when using them in the classroom. *Boyz N the Hood*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, and *Laurel Avenue* all offer realistic and graphic portrayals of the lives of urban black families.
2. Tell students they will be reading neighborhood stories when they read this novel. Have them think of their own neighborhood. What have they heard or observed about people who live near them, work at the supermarket, wait at the bus stop? Have students invent a story using one of these people as a main character, imagining his or her life, how he or she spends time, how his or her apartment or house looks.
3. Much of this novel is written in dialect (see glossary on page 38). At first, it may be hard to understand, yet gradually the meaning of the words will become clear. Ask students if they can think of words in their vocabulary that are particular to their neighborhood, group of friends, family, or city? Have some terms just come into fashion? When they listen to rap music, do they understand all the words? Have them make a dictionary of slang or dialect words in their life.



4. Ask students how important it is to have a common language in getting along with people? Have they ever been in another country and had to make do with sign language? Did it work? Have students write a scene in a play or story involving two characters who speak quite differently from one another but come to understand each other, even though they don't speak in exactly the same way.
5. Some people communicate through graffiti. Ask students if it is art, public expression, vandalism, or all of the above. Put up a "Graffiti Wall" in your classroom. Tape shelf paper over the chalkboard or walls in your room. Have students write and draw on the wall, perhaps on a theme such as racial prejudice or respect. Before you remove the sheets, assign a student to write down any poems, sayings, etc., that you might want to use later.
6. Since some of the characters in the stories must deal with anger, examine this emotion by exploring personification: What clothes could anger wear? What kind of car might anger drive? Have students draw anger or write about it.
7. Have students make a collage of hairstyles throughout the years, starting at the beginning of the twentieth century. They could look in magazines and books or watch TV shows and movies to see how hairstyles have changed and what is popular now. Or have the class explore fashion in general: What do women wear? What do men wear? Why do we insist on ties for men? What purpose do they serve? Why do women wear makeup? Nail polish? How important is it to keep up with fashion? Ask students to describe their ideal woman or man, or both, focusing on style.
8. The clothes the characters wear reveal things about them. For example, in the detention home in "Buddah," members of different gangs wear bandannas of different colors. Almost everyone wears a "uniform" of some sort. Men wear ties and suits if they work for corporations. Women dress in short skirts if they are waitresses in certain kinds of restaurants. Ask students how clothes define us. Have them list some "uniforms" they have observed: e.g., the "preppie" uniform, the "punk" look. Then instruct students to write a character sketch about someone wearing one of the uniforms on their list. They should add one unexpected element to the character that contradicts his or her appearance: e.g., a violinist who is studying to be an architect. This exercise shows that we are all more complicated and individual than our appearances suggest.

## LESSONS

The Open-Ended Questions and Writing Exercises for each lesson are written for students. These sections can be read to students for class discussions or can be used as worksheets.

### “Aquaboogie”

Nacho, a black art student from Rio Seco, works as a janitor at a Massachusetts college so that he can take a free art class. He cleverly crafts symbolic acts of sabotage when he can no longer tolerate the racial badgering of the other janitors.

#### Open-Ended Questions

##### *Prereading*

1. What do you do when you feel you are being treated unfairly, are being discriminated against? What should people who are treated cruelly at their jobs do? Quit? Fight to change things?
2. When you are away from home, in a strange place and/or a strange climate, what do you do to make yourself comfortable? Can your friends, relatives, and family tell over the phone how you are feeling? How do you, and how do they, hide their feelings?
3. What is one unusual and creative way you have dealt with anger? Think of some original or artistic ways to express your emotions, e.g., in a painting, a play, etc.

##### *Postreading*

1. What would you have done had you been Nacho? How do you feel about his solution? Is he running away from a problem? Confronting it?
2. Read over the conversation between Nacho and Snooter on pages 23–24. What do you think of Snooter’s solution to “take him out”? Write another ending to the story and have Nacho decide to follow Snooter’s advice.
3. “He felt a pull at his stomach, thinking that he should be with his father, working outside, pushing together piles of cut-smelling leaves and trimmings, steaming grass” (page 21). How important is place in our lives? Is it important to Nacho? To you? What would be your ideal job in an ideal place? What would be your nightmare job in a nightmare place? Describe.

## Writing Exercises

### *Sensuous Description*

**Step One:** Listen as your teacher reads from Phillip Levine's poems in his book *What Work Is*, specifically "Coming Home from the Post Office" and "Growth."

**Step Two:** List jobs you or others have held that you know about in depth.

**Step Three:** Write a poem or description of a day on one of the jobs. Include all the senses in your description: What does the office or job site smell like? Sound like? Taste like?

**Step Four:** After you have written for fifteen minutes, get together in small groups and read your writing aloud to each other. Give constructive reactions.

**Step Five:** Work on your piece over a week's time, researching it—perhaps visiting the work site or asking someone more about the job.

**Step Six:** Hand in a finished final copy at the end of two weeks.

## “Hollow”

Nacho has quit art school and his night job in Amherst, Massachusetts, because of harassment. He is returning home to face his family and friends and to find new work. His options seem few. His father suggests he work with him, but Nacho is reluctant because his father is employed by a rich, bigoted white developer, who is driving his aunt from her home.

### Open-Ended Questions

#### *Prereading*

1. How important are heredity and environment in influencing our future? Have a debate. Divide into two teams, one arguing that heredity, your genetic makeup, is the most important factor in what you will become. The other team should argue that where you were raised—your home, your neighborhood—is most important.
2. How have your neighborhood, house, block, and city changed over the years? Are these changes for the better? Why or why not? If not, what can you do to improve things?
3. There are people who believe that we have stopped respecting older citizens. Do you think this is true? Imagine that you are eighty-five years old. Speak to the class from this person’s point of view. What wars have you seen? How old are your children? How do you feel about the way things have changed over the years? Have they improved? How do you feel about today’s young people?

#### *Postreading*

1. Read the description on pages 46–47 of Nacho’s sensations when eating a jalapeño sandwich. Write about the taste of something. Describe it in an original way.
2. Read over the last scene between Nacho and his father, pages 49–52. How do they feel about each other? Do they understand each other? Do you think parents and children can get along?
3. “Back in Amherst he’d dreamed about the hollow . . .” (page 43). Have you ever thought about places or people and later found that you had been idealizing them? Write about one of these times.

## Writing Exercises

### *Projecting into the Future*

**Step One:** Pretend you are keeping a journal. Write three journal entries commenting on a day in your life at the present time.

**Step Two:** Write three more entries as though you were five years in the future.

**Step Three:** Now write a set of entries describing your life ten years and then twenty years in the future. Describe the buildings, cars, etc.

**Step Four:** For the last entries, write as though you were eighty years old. What do you eat? How do you do your housework? How do you get around? Imagine it is 2070. Do you read a lot? What is life like for you?

## “Safe Hooptie”

Brenda, who lives on the “whiter,” more prosperous side of town, is dating Darnell, who lives on Westside. Two policemen have been shot, and the police are scouring Westside for Ricky Ronrico, the suspected murderer. This brings back memories of an earlier, similar incident, when many of the men in Westside were brought in as suspects.

### Open-Ended Questions

#### *Prereading*

1. In this story, racial tensions are spelled out clearly by Brenda. In your opinion, how well are people of different races getting along? How do the media and the police influence race relations? Do you think people of different races can ever truly understand each other? What could be done to make relations more harmonious?
2. In one scene we learn what Brenda’s mother wants for her daughter. What do your parents, guardians, or other relatives want for you? What do you need from them? Write a letter of advice about how elders should treat teenagers. Make a list of rules or guidelines for them. Then, make a list of promises for elders: What can you do to satisfy your elders and, at the same time, follow your own dreams?
3. Brenda loves Darnell. Is it a good idea for her to risk pregnancy the way she does? What are the risks to the man, and to the woman? If you are a man, write a monologue from the point of view of a young woman in a situation similar to Brenda’s at the end of the story. If you are a woman, write from a young man’s point of view. How difficult was this for you to do?

#### *Postreading*

1. Listen to a Billie Holiday recording. Write about how it affects you.
2. Read over Brenda’s description of Westside on Saturday night, page 60. She says, “Nothing seem natural at all.” What does she mean by this? What does the fact that this is an African American neighborhood have to do with the situation? With Darnell’s anger? With her father’s frustration? Support your answers by using examples from the story. Now write about a time when you were somewhere that didn’t “feel right” to you.
3. What do you think is the future for Brenda? For Darnell?

## Writing Exercises

### *A Sense of Place*

In this story, Brenda describes the evenings at Darnell's place (page 53), including the music, smells, sights, and sounds. Friday nights are a kind of ritual in his neighborhood.

**Step One:** Think about places where and times when people gather in your area, and list them. You can include parties, church, family reunions, etc.

**Step Two:** Listen to the lists read aloud by your classmates.

**Step Three:** Describe one of these gatherings. You can imagine it, or write factually from memory. Include the smells, tastes, and sounds involved with the gathering. You can work in small groups, choosing a common scene for all members to write about, or you can work on your own. If you work in a group, designate one person to describe each sense entailed by the scene. Also, someone should describe the people involved and what they do.

**Step Four:** Read the descriptions aloud to the rest of the class. Let others add to the descriptions from their own experiences.

**Step Five:** Develop short stories from these scenes, writing about events that might happen.

## “Cellophane and Feathers”

Roscoe and his friend, Red Man, are picking up trash by the side of the road. Roscoe thinks back to when he left his father and family to go to Los Angeles to become a poet. His ambitions have led to less than nothing—picking up paper and cellophane. Then he thinks about his son, Louis the Birdman, with his artistic love of birds.

### Open-Ended Questions

#### *Prereading*

1. Roscoe describes himself as a bad man. What is your definition of a bad man? A bad woman? Should bad men or women be forgiven?
2. Roscoe observes rich people passing him in their fancy cars. He is angry and bitter. Do you think angry and bitter people who live in poverty and almost constantly encounter prejudice have a right to break the law? What are ways to deal with this kind of anger?
3. What are some ways elders can help or hurt children? Should parents, relatives, friends, and guardians encourage children’s day-dreaming if it indicates a kind of artistic creativity but at the same time is getting them in trouble?

#### *Postreading*

1. Why does the author end the story with the scene of Roscoe’s son, his eyes shining, listening to the mockingbirds? How has the author shown that both the father and son are artists? Why do you think Roscoe pushed Louis into basketball? What does he want for his son?
2. On pages 71–73, read again the description of how Roscoe ends up where he does, starting with “After the two white policemen had been shot on the Westside . . .” Write about this situation from the point of view of a white policeman, from the point of view of Louis, or from the point of view of Big Ma, who is taking care of Louis’s baby. Write a letter from Louis to Roscoe, or from Big Ma to Louis. Try to include the points of view of two generations and their feelings of hope or hopelessness.



## Writing Exercises

### *Metaphors*

**Step One:** Rio Seco means "Dry River." Invent descriptive names for your city, your neighborhood, your house, your family.

**Step Two:** "The ditch that cut between the railroad track and the highway was dry patchwork. Like a quilt, he thought, mud in little patches, the edges curled up, because no one had sewn them down" (page 69). "Frayed steel belts, black and flattened like dead snakes, lay along the asphalt" (page 71). This story is full of metaphors. It is written from the point of view of an artist who is in prison and works roadside cleanup detail. He sees and thinks in terms of metaphors. Walk around your neighborhood, your school. Try to see things in terms of images. Invent three metaphors about what you see.

**Step Three:** In the story, Roscoe's son divides the day into "Crow time" in the morning and "Cat time" in the evening, according to when these animals seem to emerge. Divide your day into different kinds of time, and characterize these.

**Step Four:** Write a poem about these times of day or night, integrating the metaphors you wrote, or writing others.

### “Esther’s”

This is a story about one morning in Esther’s house. While Esther styles hair, a woman who is interested in Esther’s attractive husband drives back and forth in a red car.

#### Open-Ended Questions

##### *Prereading*

1. Esther remembers how she was teased for being so dark (page 84). How important is a person’s shade of skin color in the black community? Is lighter considered better? What are some beauty standards in the white community? What is the ideal weight? Height? The perfect body for men? For women? How do you think teasing affects people as they get older? Are they affected by teasing for the rest of their lives?
2. Esther has managed to live with the knowledge of her husband’s infidelity. If your husband or wife was unfaithful, could you live with that knowledge?

##### *Postreading*

1. At the end of the story (page 91), a man comes to question Esther about her business. He is an official of some kind. Why is she suspicious of him? How would you feel if you saw a stranger writing down something that seemed to be about you? Why do you think someone like Esther would feel suspicious of this man? Describe a situation when you felt as though someone were watching you. How did you react?
2. Find examples that show how Esther felt about her children. Find those times in the story when she talked about her babies, and cite examples of the sensuous detail she uses to describe her children when they were tiny.
3. From what Esther says and thinks, what do you think of Killer Joe? Add another scene to this story from the point of view of Joe, returning home. What does he see, feel, smell, or touch when he comes in the door?

## Writing Exercises

### *The Power of Names*

**Step One:** Read over the description on page 85 about how Esther chose the names of her children. How was your name chosen?

**Step Two:** Research how some Native Americans and people of other cultures choose names for their children. (Consider reading from Margot Fortunato Galt's book, *The Story in History*, pages 40–41.) Also read from current mainstream books on naming a baby.

**Step Three:** Now list all the nicknames you have been given, past and present.

**Step Four:** Next, think of dreams you have had, and make up dream names for yourself based on those dreams.

**Step Five** List what your parents or friends might call you—sloppy, lazy, helpful, happy-go-lucky, cool, etc.

**Step Six:** Finally, make a list of names your enemy might call you.

**Step Seven:** Now write an essay about yourself, your names. Describe yourself. Let this piece become what it will—if you find you are writing a short story, let it be a short story. If it is a poem, let it be a poem. Simply surround yourself with your own names, your own images, and see what happens.

## “Sweet Thang”

Karen cooks and cleans in a nursing home, just as she does at home. She’s frustrated and angry with Eddie, her husband. She spies Victor, a friend of her husband, who used to be one of the great studs at school until he outlined his fly with rhinestones and was thrown out. Now he is a homeless drunk. Nucoa, a coworker, had once worn rhinestones, too. Now she is in danger of losing her job. Karen tries to reach out to both of them.

### Open-Ended Questions

#### *Prereading*

1. In this story, Nucoa is described as “cheap stuff.” Other words also describe young women who are sexually active, words such as “slut,” “loose,” etc. Are there words like this to describe young men? Once a girl has a reputation for sleeping around, can she ever lose that reputation? Is it a negative or positive reputation? How about for a boy who sleeps around? Does he get a reputation? If so, is it positive or negative? Can he lose it?
2. Think about people from your past with whom you lost contact in sadness or in anger. Describe the person as he or she was and how you think he or she may be now. Think about what you would say to that person if you could see him or her again and how that person would react.
3. Karen describes one section of town as “Wackheads and crackheads and hypes, oh my.” Are there parts of the city or town where you live that are like this, too? Are there places near school where it is easy to buy or sell drugs? What, if anything, should be done about places like these? Should crack houses be torn down? Should the police clean up in certain parts of town? Write an “instruction sheet” for solving the drug situation in the United States, in your county, city, neighborhood, or school.

#### *Postreading*

1. On page 99, read over the dialogue between Karen and Eddie. What does it reveal about their relationship? At what other points in the story do you learn more about this?
2. After you have finished this story, what do you think of Karen’s preoccupation with Victor? Why does she think about him so much? What will happen between the two of them?
3. What is the significance of the title “Sweet Thang”?

## Writing Exercises

### *Character Description*

**Step One:** Write a surface description of a person. Include details of appearances, clothes, and home.

**Step Two:** Now exchange your description with a partner.

**Step Three:** Write a monologue from the point of view of the person your partner has described. Imagine what the character feels, thinks, dreams, desires, plans.

**Step Four:** Read these descriptions aloud to the class. Read the surface description first, then the monologue. Or, ask your teacher to make copies of the surface descriptions and then you and another student write a monologue for each surface description, sharing the different interpretations of the same description.

## “Toe Up and Smoke Dreaming”

Darnell, a seasonal firefighter for the Forestry Service, fears his job has come to an end and he will be trapped in Westside with his pregnant girlfriend, Brenda, who does not understand his love for fighting fires.

### Open-Ended Questions

#### *Prereading*

1. Brenda’s father refuses to speak with her after she tells him she is pregnant. Why do you think parents, guardians, friends, or relatives react this way? (Look back at the story “Safe Hooptie” to refresh your memory of Brenda and her family.) Is there ever a time when parents are justified in cutting off all communication with their children? Is there ever a time when children are justified in cutting off all contact with their parents? Describe some situations for each of these categories; then role-play, taking the side of the parent, of the child. From the role-playing, develop dialogue and a plot for a story about the parting of a parent and child.
2. Some men find war exciting and almost addictive, just as Darnell finds fire fighting exciting and addictive. Do you feel this way about anything? Sports? Art? Drugs? Smoking? Are there healthy addictions?
3. Make a list of ways you escape. Where do you go? If you can’t get out of a situation or a place physically, how do you escape mentally? As a class, compile a list of positive and negative ways to escape the pressures of life. What are some ways older people whom you know escape? Does anyone you know escape into his or her job to avoid what is going on at home? Or vice versa?

#### *Postreading*

1. On page 111, Darnell’s father gives him some advice: “You best stop hiding up there in the mountains and get you a real job.” Why do you think he said this to his son? Can you think of a time when you had to give painful advice to someone? Write about it.
2. What kind of a father do you think Darnell will be? What do you predict for him, based on what you know from this story and from “Safe Hooptie”? Back up your prediction with examples of Darnell’s state of mind from the stories.
3. What would you say to Brenda if she asked you how to keep her relationship with Darnell alive? What would you say to Darnell if he asked you the same thing about Brenda?

## Writing Exercises

### *Dialogue*

In this story, we learn much about Darnell and Brenda through the dialogue they have with others.

**Step One:** Take your notebook and sit in a restaurant or a park or on a bench in a mall. Write down any dialogue you overhear. Quickly write or draw a sketch of what the people look like.

**Step Two:** Bring these pieces of dialogue back to the class and read them aloud without reading or showing your descriptions.

**Step Three:** See if your classmates can describe the people who are talking.

**Step Four:** As a class, brainstorm stories about the characters revealed through the dialogue.

**Step Five:** Now write your own short story from one piece of dialogue you collected.

## “Back”

The story “Back” is told as the thoughts of Pashion, an elderly arthritic black woman. As she lies next to her husband one sleepless night, she remembers their hardworking lives in West Virginia, where he was a miner. Now he suffers from black lung disease, and she reflects on her deep love for him and on her willingness to leave this life when she is ready, by her own hand.

### Open-Ended Questions

#### *Prereading*

1. How do you picture yourself when you are eighty years old? What will you be doing and where will you be living? What will the world be like then?
2. Pashion says of her husband: “I seen how he got most all his scars because we was together so young” (page 122). Look at the scars you have on your own body. Write a short anecdote, poem, or phrase about how you got each one.
3. Describe someone by describing his or her hands. See how much you can reveal about the person just by focusing on the hands. Describe the rings, hand movements, fingernails. Are your character’s hands nervous or restful? Have the class guess what the person is like. Repeat this activity with other parts of the body.

#### *Postreading*

1. Read the story “Back” a second time. As you read, note how the author lets you know that this marriage between Pashion and her husband has been a good one. What do you learn about Pashion’s past, and how is it woven into her present situation and L.C.’s illness?
2. Write a monologue like Pashion’s monologue, but write it as though you were L.C.
3. At the end of the story, Pashion says: “Next week when I get more pills, when I know, then it my choosing, when it stop for good” (page 123). Do you feel that suicide is ever justified? Do you think it ought to be against the law to help someone commit suicide? Read some articles about Dr. Jack Kevorkian, famed supporter of mercy killing and the author of *Prescription-Medicine: The Goodness of Planned Death*. How do you feel about what he has done?



## Writing Exercises

### *Interviewing Elders*

**Step One:** Interview, on tape if possible, someone who is over sixty-five years old. Ask him or her about his or her dreams from the past and for the future. Find out how he or she feels old people are treated today. If you can, ask about the importance of love and friendship relative to jobs, money, etc.

**Step Two:** Transcribe this tape.

**Step Three:** Bring the transcription to class to read and discuss.

**Step Four:** Based on the interview, and using quotations, write an article about this person, focusing on a theme from the person's life.

## “Off-Season”

Rosa, a sportswriter, and her husband Donnie, a basketball player, have moved out East, from Westside to Hartford, because Donnie’s brother Three lives there and talked big about it. Now Rosa and Donnie are fighting constantly and brutally, and Donnie’s losing his job and losing at ball, too. Rosa wants to go home.

### Open-Ended Questions

#### *Prereading*

1. In this story we learn that Donnie has a serious learning disability. In what ways do you think being learning disabled can affect a person’s life? Make a list of situations, places, and jobs for which a disability could present a serious obstacle. Ask someone with a disability to come to your class to talk about his or her life.
2. We hear about Donnie from Rosa’s point of view. In the story, he beats her. Do you think it is ever justifiable for a man to beat a woman? Write from two points of view, the batterer and the woman being battered. How can people who are beaten take steps to stop being victims? How can those who abuse others physically or verbally learn to stop being violent?
3. Can you escape your neighborhood and upbringing? Your job? Your family? Your economic class? The effects of your cultural or racial heritage? Is it good to try to escape these things? If so, when and why?

#### *Postreading*

1. On page 130, we read of Rosa’s reaction to the landscape of the East Coast. Read over the paragraph starting with “The icicles . . .” She misses the physical warmth and color of California. What else does she miss? How do you know?
2. On pages 132–135, reread the descriptions of the fights Donnie and Rosa had over the year, including the last fight before she left. What makes this so realistic? Can you hear them fighting in this section? Can you see the fight? Feel it? Write a description of a fight you have had. Try to make it real and truthful, using dialogue and detail.
3. Do you think Donnie can justify his physical violence to Rosa as a reaction to his failure in school? Would you have done anything differently if you had been Rosa? Donnie?

## Writing Exercises

### *Angel to Monster—Monster to Angel*

**Step One:** Describe a person who seems wonderful at first. Gradually reveal an evil side to him or her so that by the end of the piece it is clear the person is quite different than first perceptions implied.

**Step Two:** Now, do the opposite. Write about a person who at first glance seems evil but by the end of your piece shows a positive side that surprises us. Or write only the angel and monster part of the descriptions, and let a partner describe the process of the character's transformation.

**Step Three:** Then pick another person you know, and write a description of that person from the point of view of someone who loves her or him. Include physical as well as emotional characteristics, and actions.

**Step Four:** Now write from the point of view of someone who hates this person.

**Step Five:** Finally, write an emotionally neutral description.

**Step Six:** Read these aloud to a small group or a partner, without telling that partner which of the three points of view you are reading. Ask your partner, or the group, to guess which portrait you have read.

## “Tracks”

Trent is a landscaper and home remodeler who has made it out of Westside by buying homes, fixing them up, and reselling them at a profit. He and his wife Brichée, an accountant, live in Grayglen, a predominantly white new development. When he goes out walking or cycling, his neighbors fear that he is a burglar stalking their homes. His family and friends feel out of place in his neighborhood.

### Open-Ended Questions

#### *Prereading*

1. Your teacher will show you five slides or pictures of different houses, apartments, or streets. While the slides are on the screen, imagine and write about a person who lives in each of the scenes. What does this person do for a living, what is his or her personality, how does he or she talk? Who are his or her parents? Read these sketches aloud to each other. Observe the differences and similarities in the descriptions you hear.
2. In this story, Trent, the protagonist, has made it out of Westside to live in a fancy area called Grayglen. He is one of the few African Americans to call this section of the suburbs home. He feels out of place, yet this is what he has aimed for, to do better than his parents. What exactly does it mean to do better than your parents? Do you want to achieve more than your parents? List the five most important things you will need to live a fulfilled life. Share these with the class. Is time more important than money, for instance? Is travel more important than a nice house? How important are marriage and children?
3. In one section of the book, Trent’s father says: “I didn’t raise you to pull you” (page 144). What do you feel are parents’ responsibilities toward their children? What are a child’s responsibilities toward his or her parents?

#### *Postreading*

1. Examples are given throughout this story of why it is so difficult for Trent to live in a white world. Write down three examples that reveal Trent’s bitterness or sadness. How does he deal with his anger? Give one example.
2. On page 142, we read of Trent’s mother’s reaction to his new house and of his wife’s reaction to his mother. Are such alterations in relationships inevitable? Does each generation have to move away, change the way it lives? Think of ways you want to be different from your parents. Does it mean you will lose touch with them?

## Writing Exercises

### *Character Description Revealed through Surroundings*

**Step One:** Make a list of people you know and want to write about.

**Step Two:** Choose one of these people to focus on.

**Step Three:** Describe the person's room, car, house, bathroom, or office. Do not tell the reader anything about the person except what is in his or her surroundings. This can include information about what food is in the refrigerator, what magazines and music are on the shelves, what clothes are in the closet. It can include a description of how the room is kept: Is it neat or messy? What is on the mirror? Any posters, pictures, signs on the walls? Imagine that this description is a stage set, arranged to reveal the character before he or she even walks out on stage.

**Step Four:** Read these descriptions aloud to the class.

**Step Five:** Have the class guess what the person is like. How well did you depict your character from the physical details? Could students guess his or her age? Personality? Occupation?

## “Chitlins”

Lanier owns a hog farm in Westside, where he and his wife, Lee Myrtle, still make old-fashioned Southern dishes, like chitlins, out of pork. The city officers want to change the zoning to drive them out. Lanier watches as his neighbor Rencie from L.A., and other young folks around him, waste their lives (and that of their children) on drugs and wild ways, and forget how to do things for themselves.

### Open-Ended Questions

#### *Prereading*

1. Change is inevitable. But some change seems for the worst. In this story, there are two themes involving change; both are negative. Can you think of some things that are changing for the better in your neighborhood or country? In what ways have things gotten worse?
2. In this story, Lanier rebels privately. Think of ways you, or others, quietly rebel against authority. Make a list of these and then choose one to explore in more depth. Write about it as a short story or poem, or act it out as an improvisational skit with a small group.
3. Lanier and Lee Myrtle try to reach out to a young woman, Rencie, who becomes a “crackhead.” They help in small, generous ways by giving her children food and attention. Think of the small ways you have tried to help someone. Did you succeed? Do you think it is possible, with small efforts, to improve the lives of drug addicts? Should they be arrested, their children put in foster care? What are some solutions?

#### *Postreading*

1. On pages 154–155, Naketa is described receiving plums from Lee Myrtle. List the senses in this description. How does the author use taste, touch, and sight to make the scene seem real? Reread the story and find another scene that uses sensuous details.
2. Respond to the ending. In what way does it tie the story together? Do you sense any hope in the relationship between Lanier and Rencie?

3. On page 160, Rencie says: “Huh! I might as well be in Oklahoma with my daddy’s uncles.” California has been described as a state of immigrants from other U.S. states. In what ways is this a strength and in what ways a weakness for California? What other section of the story describes the immigrants in Westside? Do you know people who come from other states, other countries? What problems do they face? What are the positive results of this migration?

## Writing Exercises

### *Examining Stereotyping*

**Step One:** Your teacher will call out the location words north, south, east, west, city, country, California. Write down, as fast as you can, the first things that come to your mind as you hear each word. You can write in sentences, phrases, lists, or paragraphs. You will be given about two minutes for each word. This exercise is a quick way to explore how you think and feel about different places. It explores the idea of stereotyping, too, and the belief we have that we know about places where we have never been.

**Step Two:** After the class has written about each word, your teacher will ask students to read aloud what they have written, word by word. Listen for different reactions to each stimulus word.

**Step Three:** Discuss your reactions. Collaborate as a class to organize the various written reactions to the words into a communal poem.

## “Buddah”

Buddah has been sent to St. Jude’s reform school for robbing someone’s house. He had been forced into it, as he had been forced into the gang. Now he remains silent, refusing to be forced into gang allegiance or anything else. On a trip to the beach with other boys who have no home pass, he thinks about his family, clan, and red beans.

### Open-Ended Questions

#### *Prereading*

1. In what ways is a gang like a family? How is it different? List reasons for joining a gang. Do you think gangs can ever be a force for peace?
2. Buddah has never been to the beach. He feels uncomfortable in this strange place, yet likes parts of it. Think about a time when you have been in a new or strange situation or setting. How did you react? What did you do to help yourself become comfortable?
3. Some readers will not agree with what Buddah does at the end of the story. Have you ever looked on as someone whom you care about falls into self-destructive habits? What did you do? Organize small groups, or join with a partner, and discuss these situations, describing two different resolutions of the same situation: In one, describe exactly what you did in real life, and in the other, describe a different possibility. Meet as a class to discuss these resolutions.

#### *Postreading*

1. Did you think Buddah would try to escape at the end? Why or why not? What made his choice appropriate to his character?
2. What makes Buddah appealing, as well as dislikable? How does the author create a realistic, complicated character?
3. Read over (page 171) the description of the mountains and the way they make Buddah think about his grandmother. Try writing a scene similar to this that starts with a landscape and leads to a personal memory.



## Writing Exercises

### *Point of View*

**Step One:** Bring in pictures of the Los Angeles riots and community reaction to the riots. Show these to the class. Or bring in newspaper articles about police and community relations in your own city, and as a class, imagine how your community might respond to an outbreak of violence.

**Step Two:** Write on this incident from the point of view of a policeman, from the point of view of the person or persons involved in the incident, from the point of view of the mayor, or from the point of view of a journalist or TV reporter.

**Step Three:** Act out the situation from these points of view.

**Step Four:** Discuss how we are influenced by what we read or have been told. How do we discern the truth?

## FOLLOW THROUGH

### Open-Book Test Questions

1. Take some time to look through the entire book. Pick out two of your favorite stories. Why did you like these more than the others? Find some of your favorite lines and scenes, and write them down. Take one of these lines and write whatever comes to your mind for ten minutes without stopping. When you have finished, read your work and find a part that you can save for a poem or as the beginning to a story.
2. What are the strengths of the people of the fictional Rio Seco section of California as described by Susan Straight in this book? What are the weaknesses or problems of this part of the country? Think of ways Rio Seco differs from where you live. How does “place” influence the way you are? How does belonging to a certain race or culture influence you? Write about these influences.
3. Did this book come together for you as a novel? Or does it seem more like a group of short stories? Give reasons why it worked or didn’t work as a novel.
4. Find one story that presents a situation similar to one you have experienced. Summarize the story and then write your own. Show how the two situations are similar and how they are different. Fictionalize your situation by changing some things, adding others, and creating a “character” out of your own self. Write this as a short story.
5. You will notice that crows appear often in the stories. What do the crows symbolize? How do they reflect the events in the stories? Give examples.
6. How do the characters’ different shades of skin color affect the stories and the characters? Why is skin color so important in Straight’s stories?

### Interdisciplinary Activities

1. In this book, you have encountered characters of different races and cultures. How do you think we in America are getting along? What could we do better? How can you, as an individual, make a difference? Can you make a difference simply by voting? Through volunteer work? By living a certain kind of life? Respond to these questions in writing. Or, write an essay expressing your opinion on a political issue. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper in response to an issue you feel strongly about, or write an editorial that you would like to see published.

2. Write a script for a video, or work with students who know how to shoot and edit, and create video scripts about stories you have written or themes you want to explore on videotape. Choose appropriate music for background, such as jazz, rhythm and blues, spirituals, rap, chants, or gospel.
3. Write music and words to one or more of the African American forms of music noted above from the point of view of one of the novel's characters. You could combine your talents with those of student composers and musicians. Perhaps a whole musical could be produced based on one of the stories in this book.
4. Create photo books, with still photography and writing, to depict various scenes.
5. Write poster poems on newsprint as a class. Choose a piece of newsprint that your teacher has tacked onto the wall. Write the first line of a poem in magic marker on the newsprint. Then walk around the room, adding lines to poems already started by the other students. After all the poems are complete, return to your individual sheet and read aloud the "group" result.
6. Explore the history of your neighborhood by visiting your local historical society's archives and exhibits, and by talking to older citizens about what life was like years ago in the county, city, town, or neighborhood. You may also want to visit community organizations to ask about the future of your neighborhood—the problems and issues it faces, and plans for improvements. You and your classmates could talk to the mayor of your city, preparing questions ahead of time and role-playing the meeting before you go.
7. Organize an in-depth oral history project. Interview people in a senior citizen's home. Transcribe their stories and bind them into a book. The stories could be accompanied by illustrations, memorabilia, photographs, collages, etc.

### **Community Service**

You and your classmates could participate in a community-service project, such as a neighborhood cleanup or an anti-drug education program. Or you could tutor students with learning disabilities; paint murals on the backs of city buildings; volunteer at a nursing home, a battered women's shelter, or with Habitat for Humanity. Big Sisters and Big Brothers organizations might want to recruit high school seniors as members. The NAACP, the Urban League, and other groups might welcome young volunteers.

## ADDENDA FOR PHOTOCOPYING

### Further Resources

The following books deal with issues and situations similar to those depicted in *Aquaboogie*.

#### Fiction

Gross, Linda and Marian Barnes, eds. *Talk That Talk*. A collection of African American tales and folk tales.

Haynes, David. *Right by My Side*. This humorous novel is written from the point of view of a young African-American man growing up in St. Louis.

Kilgore, Davida. *Last Summer*. This collection of short stories by an African American woman is filled with humor and pain.

Marshall, Paule. *Mothers*. This novel explores the relationship between women in New York City and on a Caribbean island.

Naylor, Gloria. *The Women of Brewster Place*. This novel examines the lives of a group of women who live on one street in New York.

Price, Richard. *Clockers*. Protagonists are a crack dealer and a policeman. The book explores their relationship.

Rodriguez Jr., Abraham. *The Boy Without a Flag*. These short stories explore street life in the Bronx with realistic language.

#### Nonfiction

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Angelou's autobiography begins with Maya at a young age and follows her through adolescence and her struggles as a young African American woman dealing with racism.

Cary, Lorene. *Black Ice*. The protagonist is an African-American high-school student who is given a chance to attend a prep school. The book describes the process of her adjustment to a white world.

Kotlowitz, Alex. *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in Urban America*. A reporter's account of the day-to-day life of a family living in the projects of Chicago.

Wideman, John E. *Brothers and Keepers*. This is an account of the author's relationship with his brother. The brother is in jail and the author is a college professor. Both are African American.

#### Plays

Shange, Ntozake. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. Chronicles the lives of four young African-American women. A public television video was made of this work.

Wilson, August. *Fences*. Wilson's play concerns one Philadelphia family's struggles.

### Poetry

Suggested poets include Ntozake Shange, Mari Evans, Rita Dove, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Quincy Troupe, Phillip Levine, Lucille Clifton, Joy Harjo, Sharon Olds, and Roberta Hill Whiteman. These poets all concern themselves with themes found in *Aquaboogie*: family relationships, racism, city life, and violence.

## Glossary

Much of this book is written in black dialect. It is not necessary to “translate” each word from the text into its “white” equivalent. Part of the enjoyment of reading these stories lies in the way the meanings gradually become clear as the book progresses. Susan Straight says about her neighborhood: “We even have a language: when someone says, ‘He got new tennis shoes on that hooptie,’ we know exactly which kind of tires, a specific type, he bought for his car.”

By reading the stories, students unfamiliar with black dialect will learn the meanings of most of the slang words. But students may find the glossary below helpful.

*arroyo*: ditch or gulch with a flat bottom; fills up with water quickly during rains

*chitlins*: pig intestines, innards; usually served fried or in a sauce

*collards*: leafy vegetables similar to kale or cabbage

*crib*: house or apartment

*ducats*: money

*eucalyptus*: aromatic evergreen trees

*greens*: the leaves and stems of plants, such as spinach or cabbage, used for food

*grits*: coarsely ground grain

*hollow*: small valley surrounded by hills

*hooptie*: car

*natural*: African American hairstyle that involves no straighteners or artificial additives

*oleanders*: showy rose-colored or white flowers

*rock, rock cane candy*: crack cocaine

*the Santa Anas*: strong winds

*shooting hoop*: playing basketball

*slave*: job

*whore*: cook