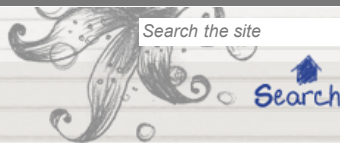


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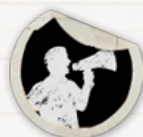
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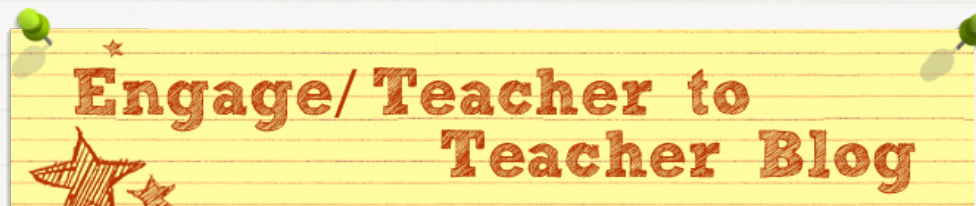
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Beyond the Notebook: Siobhan Vivian (THE LIST) on Writing for Awareness

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Writing Prompts Awareness By Siobhan Vivian

Here's the painful truth: we live in a society where value is placed on the way we look. Girls, guys—no one is immune.

From tabloid magazines eviscerating anyone with cellulite, to infomercials peddling promises of shiny hair and clear skin and a trim figure, to peer-created hot-or-not lists posted on Facebook, adolescents must navigate a minefield of daily reminders of how they measure up against an impossible ideal.

To combat against those external pressures, we need to find ways to teach our teens how to decipher what they are being fed by the media—and to challenge how they participate and perpetuate these issues on a smaller scale.

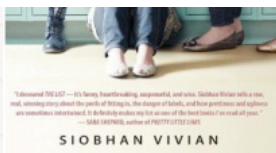
My newest young adult novel, *THE LIST*, opens with that very thing: a list that names the prettiest and the ugliest girl in each grade at Mount Washington High School.

Using that device, I wrote about those eight girls, "prettiest" and "ugliest", freshmen to senior, and followed each of them for one week in their lives. The individual narratives are all about beauty, identity, self-esteem, and the places and times where those three things intersect.



So far, I've had some wonderful experiences discussing the novel in book-club formats, and my teen readers have a lot of very insightful things to say on these themes. My book touches on a wide range of characters, experiences, and struggles. Readers have their favorite characters, the characters they love, the antagonistic characters who they *love to hate*. They sympathize with Bridget, a character struggling with an eating disorder. They relate to Sarah and Danielle, girls who are ostracized for their perceived lack of femininity. They pity Abby, a girl who thinks being pretty is all she has going for her.

But I have also discovered that a creative writing component takes what is on the page—an abstract discussion about my made-up characters—and helps those same readers to think about the ways *they* are objectified and evaluated in today's culture. It's a difficult, scary prospect, for girls especially, and not one that I think they always feel comfortable in having. When it comes to



understanding and accepting the ways society quantifies us based on the superficial, things tend to get really personal. And raw.

The way I've approached this dilemma is by creating a writing exercise specifically tailored to my book. It's essentially a questionnaire, a "list" that each reader can fill out about themselves. I remember loving these sorts of exercises when I'd find them in the back of a magazine or on the first page of a journal.

Some of the questions are light ("Name five things you love," "What was the biggest lesson you learned last summer?"), but others bring about a bit more

introspection.

Here are some examples:

- Name your best feature that isn't visible to the outside world.
- Do you agree with the old adage that beauty is in the eye of the beholder?
- Think of someone you've judged by their appearance. Was it a fair assessment?
- If someone judged you by your appearance, what would they miss?
- Do you think what people find beautiful today will be the same 50 years from now?
- Why do clothing designers typically use skinny models to sell their clothes?

Another exercise I use is to take a few current magazines and ask the students to rip out the pages that they feel are examples of media manipulation. I'm talking about the articles about beach bodies, ads where women and men are sexualized, etc.

Then, I give them this prompt:

Imagine you are the writer/advertising exec in charge of this story/advertisement. Explain what your objective is. Why have you chosen these images? What is it about this story will attract readers and why? What's the point? What feelings are you trying to elicit from readers/consumers?

Using these sorts of exercises, hopefully we can begin a dialog about the unfair pressures we are facing, the way media can prey on our insecurities for the sake of profit, and make today's young adults aware of how their own social behaviors can exacerbate the beauty myth.

Siobhan Vivian is the author of THE LIST, which has received starred reviews from both PUBLISHERS WEEKLY and KIRKUS. THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW praised the novel for its "Smart, snappy writing," and for "Expos[ing] the danger inherent in our culture's objectification of young women, a subject not often taken seriously in young adult literature." She currently teaches creative writing at The University of Pittsburgh.

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Anthony Varrato June 09, 2012 10:00 am

This is a really cool activity, Siobhan! It ties in perfectly with the National Health Education Standards (number 2 to be exact). I could also see this being used in psychology or sociology classes as well as English classes in order to integrate any of these other subjects. Thanks for the idea!

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