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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1995 Volume I: Gender, Race, and Milieu in Detective Fiction

Tough Guys for Tough Guys

Guide for Curriculum Unit 95.01.08
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The unit “Tough Guys for Tough Guys” can probably be taught in most classes, but it is designed with my own situation in mind: self-contained middle school class of unruly but bright kids. The principal mystery writers to be studied are Walter Mosley, Tony Hillerman and Rex Burns. Their detective creations are tough guys, but virtuous tough guys—guys we can count on to do the right thing. Their books are essentially mysteries, but the authors are so eclectic that the books lend themselves very well to an interdisciplinary presentation. Hillerman, for example, is used in Navajo schools on the reservation to teach cultural history. Mosley’s series can be read as a chronicle of the city of Los Angeles. The police procedurals of Rex Burns expose the underbelly of urban renewal and big city politics.

In addition to their plain, old virtuosity as novelists, what will link the writers in my unit is their treatment of “place.” Each one treats “place” lovingly, like a character. They envelope the action of their books with place. Place, or locale, becomes the most interesting hook of all in these books, when it comes to inducing readers into enjoying fiction. And inducing young readers to read, to develop a “fiction addiction,” is really what this unit is all about.

(Recommended for English and Language Arts, grade 8)

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