

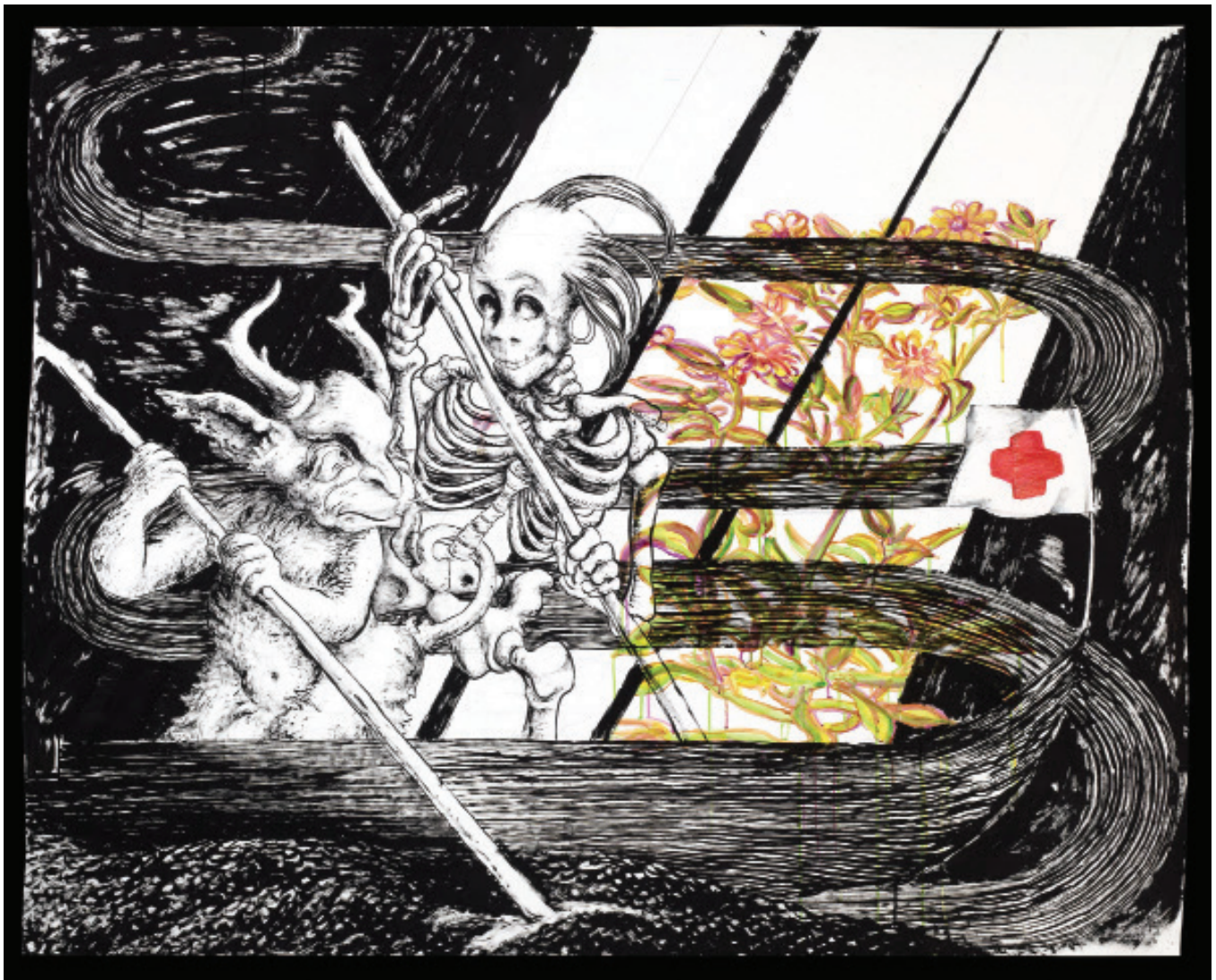
Crew

by **Aimee Bender**

Illustration by **J. Michael Walker**

Curriculum developed by **Lisa Beebe**

Supplementary curriculum and copy editing by **Athena Villard**



OVERVIEW

Quick Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

| Student Population | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Age/Grade Level Appropriateness | * Ages 15+ * Grades 10+ |
| Genre/s | * Fiction * Magical realism * Fantasy * Personal narrative |
| Length | 2,172 words |
| Content Advisories | Brief cursing. |
| One Sentence Summary | This often-ambiguous short fiction narrative, told from dual perspectives, follows a devil and a skeleton who form a bond as they work together rowing passengers across a river, and shows how friendships and relationships can develop in unexpected places. |

| Lesson Planning | |
|------------------------------|--|
| Topics & Key Themes Overview | Topics * Working * Routine * Companionship * Self-awareness * Self-acceptance * Fear * Desire * Being different * Death * Afterlife |

| Lesson Planning | |
|--|--|
| Topics & Key Themes Overview | <p>Themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Finding meaning in a relationship * Finding friendship in an unexpected place * How friendships change us * Real vs. unreal * Liminality * Finding one's path in life * The passage of time |
| Historic Events / Time Periods for Study | History of the American Red Cross and its mission to help people without taking sides. |
| Complementary Classic and Historic Texts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Poem: "Red Brocade" by Naomi Shihab Nye: http://bit.ly/2zVTH-Hv * Song: "Umbrella" by Rihanna: http://bit.ly/1cAbiOw * Song: "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" verse: http://bit.ly/2iEb71P |
| Author and Artists Information | <p>Aimee Bender is the author of five books and lives in Los Angeles, CA, where she teaches creative writing at USC.</p> <p>J. Michael Walker is the founding Locavore Lit LA artist. He has been an exhibiting artist since 1984 and has participated in more than 100 exhibitions.</p> |
| Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum) | CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.E CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.6 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1 |

Author Biography

Aimee Bender is the author of five books: *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* (1998), which was a *New York Times* Notable Book, *An Invisible Sign of My Own* (2000), which was an *L.A. Times* pick of the year, *Willful Creatures* (2005), which was nominated by *The Believer Magazine* as one of the best books of the year, *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* (2010), which won the SCIBA Book Award for best fiction, and an Alex

Award, and *The Color Master*, a *New York Times* Notable Book for 2013. Her books have been translated into sixteen languages. Her short fiction has been published in *Granta*, *GQ*, *Harper's*, *Tin House*, *McSweeney's*, *The Paris Review*, and more, as well as heard on PRI's *This American Life* and *Selected Shorts*. She lives in Los Angeles with her family and teaches creative writing at USC.

Artist Biography

Michael Walker is the founding Locavore Lit LA artist. He has been an exhibiting artist since 1984 and has participated in more than 100 exhibitions, received a dozen grants, fellowships, and residencies, and enjoyed solo shows at the following institutions: the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard; el Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares, Mexico City; the National Museum of Catholic Art and History, East Harlem, New York City; and the Arkansas Arts Center, among others. As a writer, J. Michael is the author and illustrator of *All the Saints of the City of the Angels: Seeking the Soul of L.A. on Its Streets* (Heyday 2008), which was awarded the Eric Hoffer Award for Art Book of the Year and the Independent Publishers Association Award for Best Regional Non-Fiction on the Pacific-West, and is co-editor of *Waiting for Foreign: L.A. Writers on (and in) Guadalajara* (Peregrino Press 2010).

SYNOPSIS

This often-ambiguous short fiction narrative is told from two perspectives: A devil and a skeleton describe their experiences working together rowing passengers across a river and reveal how their differences have brought them closer together and created a bond between them. The story implies that the two characters have been working together for a long time and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. "Crew" shows how friendships and relationships can develop in unexpected places and how those we spend time with have effects upon us.

CURRICULUM

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

Topic and Main Ideas

Activity One: Write a 10-minute journal entry about a scary book you've read or a scary movie you've seen, and describe how you felt as you experienced it. Do you like when books and movies make you feel fear, or do you avoid scary stories? Why do you feel this way?

Activity Two: In small groups, discuss what it would be like to have a job in which you did the same thing over and over again every day. What would you like about it? What would you dislike? Would it help if you only worked specific hours or you knew when your last day would be?

Passage-Specific Themes

Read the following passage from “Crew”:

At first, they hired us for the kids’ birthday party. But the truth is, the kids didn’t like it, we were too realistic for the kids. The kids wanted a devil and skull that were almost real but on some level obviously not real, so that they could be spooked to a point and then unspook themselves; for example, they would’ve liked to glimpse the cap that the devil’s horns plugged into, just so

they could see how it worked with the hair. Then they would pretend not to have seen the cap, and they would have been in charge of their own fear levels. But they could not see any cap with old Devilly, because of course the horns grew out of his actual head.

Discussion Activity: In “Crew,” Devilly and Skelly are each described to be what seem to be very realistic devils and skeletons that the average person would be afraid of upon seeing or meeting them. Discuss this passage in small groups or as a class. Why isn’t Devilly a good choice for entertainment at a kid’s birthday party? Why might people be disappointed when Devilly and Skelly arrive? Why is it important for people to be in charge of their own fear levels? What happens when people are no longer in control of their fear levels? What does this show about humanity as a whole?

Universal Themes

How do your friendships affect you?

Journaling: An entrepreneur named Jim Rohn once said, “You’re the average of the five people you spend the most time with.” In your journal, make a list of the five people you interact with most often. For each one, write a sentence about how spending time with the person has changed you. Has the person changed your opinion of something or inspired you to look at the world in a different way?

Key Vocabulary

Definitions are very context-dependent. Make sure that any definitions you look up or work from are the ones that most correctly fit in the context of the story.

| Level One | Level Two | Level Three |
|------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| touring | missguided | International Red Cross |
| coordination | callbox | American Red Cross |
| uncluttered | crew (the sport) | feng shui |
| cabin | helm | wherewithal |
| eye sockets | pillaging | laws of physics |
| contract | inability | evolutionary |
| liquidy | crisis | Zen Buddhism |
| glimpse | summon up | |
| invaded | shepherd | |
| intending | interact | |
| engage in conversation | officiality | |
| routine | restraint | |
| principles | lackluster | |
| | scarcer | |
| | designated | |
| | liability | |
| | extrovert | |
| | introvert | |
| | understated | |
| | flourescent | |
| | validity | |
| | scrimped | |
| | underappreciative | |
| | muddle | |
| | exceedingly | |

Vocabulary Activity Options

1. Write a 10-minute journal entry about either Devilly or Skelly. Do you think the character you chose is an extrovert, an introvert, or both? Do you think you are an extrovert, an introvert, or both? Explain in your journal.
2. Working with a partner, look up what a shepherd is and its biblical significance. Why do you think Skelly calls Devilly a shepherd? Why does he take it as a compliment? Which character seems more like a shepherd to you? Why?
3. In small groups, research the sport of crew. What qualities do you think would make a great crew player? Make a list of 10 qualities, and write a sentence explaining why each one would be important on a crew team.

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. Do you find parts of this story confusing? Which parts? How do you feel after reading a story leaving so many things unexplained?
2. How would you describe the relationship between Devilly and Skelly? Do you think they are more than just coworkers or friends? Why?
3. Why is Skelly trying to teach Devilly restraint? Do you think she'll be successful?

Text-Dependent Question Options

1. How long do you think Devilly and Skelly have been doing this job? What do you think is the purpose of their job? The text doesn't answer this directly, but does it give you any hints?
2. Why do you think author Aimee Bender specifies that Devilly and Skelly work for the International Red Cross? How do you think they are helping people? Are there any hints in the story?
3. If you were hired by the same company, would you prefer to have Devilly or Skelly as a partner? Why do you think you'd get along? Cite the text.
4. "Crew" is told from two perspectives. Why do you think Bender chooses to write the story this way? How are the two perspectives different? Give examples from the text of how Devilly and Skelly see things in different ways.
5. How have Devilly and Skelly changed during the many years they've been working together? How does spending so much together affect each of them?
6. In artist J. Michael Walker's illustration for "Crew," Devilly and Skelly are looking into each other's eyes as they row the boat. Why do you think he made that choice?

Writing Exercise Options

Narrative

Imagine the scene when Devilly and Skelly first met, and write two versions of how it went—one from Devilly’s point of view and one from Skelly’s. Each version should be about a page long.

Descriptive

Imagine you are one of the passengers in the boat. What are your first impressions of Devilly and Skelly? Write a detailed description of either character.

Analysis

Why do you think Bender chooses to leave so many questions unanswered in the text? How might the story differ if she described exactly who these characters are, where they are, and how they ended up in this situation? Write a one-page analysis of why she chooses to focus on the characters’ personalities and their relationship with each other.

Complementary Reading Text Option

Poet Naomi Shihab Nye’s piece “Red Brocade” mentions an Arab saying suggesting strangers can become good friends in three days. In “Crew,” Bender gives the impression that Devilly and Skelly have been working together for a long time.

Red Brocade **by Naomi Shihab Nye**

The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he’s come from,
where he’s headed.
That way, he’ll have strength
enough to answer.
Or, by then you’ll be

such good friends
you don't care.

Let's go back to that.
Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve water
to your horse.

No, I was not busy when you came!
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone put on
to pretend they had a purpose
in the world.

I refuse to be claimed.
Your plate is waiting.
We will snip fresh mint
into your tea.

Writing Exercise

How long do you think it takes to become friends with someone? Does three days sound right to you, or do you think it takes more or less time? Explain your answer in a 10-minute-long journal entry.

Activity Options

Classroom Activity One

The two sections of "Crew" end with the same repetition: "Rowin and rowin. Rowin and rowin and rowin." The folk song "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" starts in a similar way:

Row, row, row your boat
Gently down the stream,
Merrily merrily, merrily, merrily
Life is but a dream

In small groups, write a new version of this verse as a soundtrack for Devilly and Skelly. Try singing your new version as a round. (Sing with the same melody but with each voice beginning at a different time.)

Classroom Activity Two

In small groups, imagine the scene when Devilly and Skelly arrive at a child's birthday party. How do you think different kids interact with them? How do Devilly and Skelly respond? When do the parents get involved? Write a page of dialogue between the characters and perform it for your class.

Home Activity

Interview someone in your life about the least interesting job they've ever had. Your questions might include: What was so boring about the job? How did you cope with the boredom? How long did you stay at the job?

Write a one-page summary of what you learned and turn it into the teacher.

Guest Speaker

1. Invite the author and/or illustrator to visit your class and talk about their work on this project and other aspects of their jobs.
2. Invite someone from the Greater Los Angeles Region Red Cross to talk about the work the American Red Cross does locally, nationally, and internationally: <http://rdcrss.org/28MVtt5>
3. Invite a horror movie director to talk to the class about how to make things look scary on screen. Ask the director to discuss Skelly's idea that people want to see things are fake so they can be in charge of their own fear levels.

Field Trip

Option One: Visit a Hollywood prop shop specializing in horror movie props, such as Dapper Cadaver in Sun Valley, or a prop shop at one of the local studios, to learn more about how the scary props are made.

Follow-up Writing Activity: Did visiting the prop shop change how you feel about scary movies and TV shows? Write a fifteen-minute journal entry about the visit. If a specific prop stands out in your memory, write about its affect on you.

Option Two: Contact a local crew team, like UCLA's men's or women's team, and arrange to watch a practice and talk to the team about the sport.

Follow-up Writing Activity: Which part of being on a crew team sounds the most challenging to you? In a fifteen-minute journal entry, write about the challenge, and imagine how you would overcome it. How do you think you would feel?

TEST PREPARATION COMPONENT

Writing Exercise

In “Crew,” author Aimee Bender gives room for interpretation by the reader. She leaves many things about Devilly and Skelly’s relationship, as well as their jobs, unexplained. Continue Bender’s story as if you were Devilly and Skelly’s boss watching over them from afar as they work. Use this character’s more omniscient (all-knowing) point of view to explain elements of the story you feel are missing. Your response should range between half a page to two pages in length.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A: Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.E: Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Vocabulary Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2: Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

Text-Dependent Question Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A: Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Writing Exercise Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A: Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Complementary Reading Text Writing Exercise

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5: Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.6: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate. (See grades 9-10 Language standards 1 and 3 here for specific expectations.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.