

Riot Baby

by **Daniel Voll**

Illustration by **J. Michael Walker**

Curriculum developed by **Rosalind Helfand**

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OVERVIEW

Quick Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

| Student Population | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Age/Grade Level Appropriateness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ages 15+ * Grades 10+ |
| Genre/s | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Narrative nonfiction (originally published in 2012 in <i>Esquire</i> magazine) * Journalism |
| Length | 10,134 words |
| Content Advisories | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Reference to drugs * Reference to violence * Reference to gangs * Reference looting * Reference to an abusive relationship * The trauma of giving birth * Some cursing |
| One Sentence Summary | Jelani Stewart is born during the chaos of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots and, although, he doesn't know it, that event continues to shape his life and the lives of his family members until his mother makes an important decision. |

| Lesson Planning | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Topics & Key Themes Overview | <p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * 1992 Los Angeles Riots * Abusive relationships * Growing up in South Central Los Angeles * Childbirth * Poverty cycles * Segregation in Los Angeles |

| Lesson Planning | |
|--|---|
| Topics & Key Themes Overview | <p>Themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Becoming stuck in one's life * How children are shaped by adult role models * Choosing hope over despair * Women and self-esteem struggles * Making difficult life choices |
| Historic Events / Time Periods for Study | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * 1992 Los Angeles Riots * History of housing segregation in Los Angeles * The Crack Epidemic * American War on Drugs * History of gun violence in the United States * Inequality in the United States criminal justice system (and related issues) * History of the lawn * Pollution and the environmental justice movement in Los Angeles * Police / community relations in the United States * The Dr. Demento radio show * Riot / Rebellion: The Legacy of 1992 by Steph Cha (article) https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/riotrebellion-legacy-1992/# (https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/riotrebellion-legacy-1992/#)! |
| Complementary Classic and Historic Texts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * "Los Angeles Riots: 25 Years Later" series of articles from <i>LA Times</i> http://www.latimes.com/projects/la-me-riots-25-years/ (http://www.latimes.com/projects/la-me-riots-25-years/) |
| Author and Artists Information | <p>Daniel Voll is an award-winning journalist and screenplay writer living in Santa Monica.</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.RL.9-10.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4 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.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.D |

Author Biography

Daniel Voll, a Chicago native, is an award-winning journalist who has written for *Esquire*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The New York Times*. He has reported from Bosnia, South Africa, and covered the U.S. pullout from Iraq for *Esquire Magazine*. He has also written extensively on hate crimes in America and produced the HBO documentary, *Army of God*, about the violent wing of the anti-abortion movement. In television he has served as executive producer and writer on the prime time dramas, *Lie To Me*, *The Unit*, and *Threat Matrix*. For Oliver Stone, he adapted the screenplay, *Patriots*, based on his reporting of a racially-motivated murder in the 82nd Airborne; and for MGM, he wrote *Fire Dogs*, about a season he spent fighting forest fires with a convict crew. An *Esquire* contributing editor, Daniel lives in Santa Monica, California, with his wife, Cecilia Peck, and their two children, Harper and Ondine.

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

In this narrative nonfiction story, Jelani Stewart is born in South Central during the chaos of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots. Although he doesn't know about the circumstances of his birth, the events of that night have a profound influence on his childhood. His mother, LaTonya, struggles to make her way in their community, which never truly recovers from the riots and the underlying issues which led to the riots. She is deeply entrenched in an abusive relationship with a drug dealer who is himself trapped in a seemingly unending cycle. But Jelani represents new hope and LaTonya finally embraces change and carves a new path for them both.

CURRICULUM

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

Topic and Main Ideas

What does the term “external force” mean in a societal context? In small groups, come up with lists of 5-10 external forces on your lives or the lives of your family members – these can be positive, negative, or neutral.

After sharing your lists with the class, individually write in your journals for 10-minutes about external forces on your family that may have shaped your childhood. These forces can be specific events that happened or more general social and life circumstances. Discuss how they may have shaped your childhood, then discuss how and whether you still feel the effects of these forces — or have you moved on? If so, how?

Passage-Specific Themes

Read the following passage from “Riot Baby” then discuss the question below:

Bo settled back into LaTonya’s little three-room house, and the romance rekindled for a while, and she even had fleeting thoughts that maybe they’d get married. When he was in jail, LaTonya had had fantasies of taking Bo away from his homeboys and the three of them just living a simple life, but where? She even searched the Internet to find an apartment in Lorain, Ohio, where they all could live. But she knew better. And Bo began to stay away at night, and soon he was back in the thug life. The restraining order from years before had done some good, though; if Bo was still a thug, at least he was a mellower thug.

What do you think leads people to make the same poor decisions in life, especially when it comes to relationships, repeatedly? Is it possible to break out of such cycles? How?

Universal Themes

Some people believe that all you need is hope to succeed — that if you give up hope, that’s when all is lost in life.

What do you think? Is this too simple an outlook or does it have merit? Reflect on these questions for five minutes in your journal, then hold a classroom discussion about your answers.

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 |
|--------------|----------------|----------------------------|
| ruptured | contortionist | Rodney King |
| ringleader | contractions | benediction |
| scampers | ultrasound | Reginald Denny |
| hollers | verdict | gantlet |
| retribution | tactical alert | Eight Trey Gangster |
| tassels | euphoric | Pitocin |
| entrepreneur | exhilaration | forceps |
| coma | affluent | attention-deficit disorder |
| extroverted | elongates | exhorting |
| introverted | etiquette | |
| hyperactive | convulsing | |
| notoriously | slagging | |
| rekindled | cryptic | |
| volatile | evangelist | |
| transactions | desecrate | |
| attribute | safe house | |
| gleams | perplexed | |
| indulge | predicament | |

Vocabulary Activity Options

1. What words in “Riot Baby” refer to pregnancy and the process of giving birth? Identify, list, and research the meanings of these terms. After completing your investigation, hold a class discussion about how the process of childbirth takes place (and the exams leading up to it) and some of the methods including C-section. If the teacher is concerned about leading this discussion, invite a professional Planned Parenthood or other Sex Ed educator to lead a lesson and discussion.
2. In “Riot Baby,” Jelani has asthma. Research asthma and its causes. In particular, research the link between asthma and pollution. How are environmental justice organizations in South and East Los Angeles working to reduce pollution levels in their areas? Write a report investigating asthma and these questions.

3. What's an elephant? You may think you know, but do you really? Study the anatomical features that make an elephant an elephant and not another animal and list them. Make sure to include an answer to the question presented in "Riot Baby": Do elephants have teeth?
4. LaTonya is told Jelani has attention-deficit disorder (ADD) and that he should be on the drug Ritalin. There is some controversy in the United States about when it is appropriate to give an ADD diagnosis and how it should be treated. Research this debate. Make sure to seek out only the most reputable sources. Write a report discussing both sides of this debate and your opinion about the issue based on your findings.

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. Read about healthy versus unhealthy relationships here:

<http://teenshealth.org/en/teens/healthy-relationship.html?WT.ac=ctg#catrelationships> (<http://teen-shealth.org/en/teens/healthy-relationship.html?WT.ac=ctg#catrelationships>)

As a class, discuss LaTonya's relationship with Bo. Make a list of ways that it is unhealthy and abusive on the board. Then, discuss reasons why it is hard for not just LaTonya but people in general to sometimes leave bad relationships.

After discussing this, the teacher should provide additional reading about resources for leaving unhealthy relationships:

<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/teens/relationships/abusive-relationships> (<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/teens/relationships/abusive-relationships>)

2. A great deal of looting and violence took place during the 1992 LA Riots. In small groups, research and list the underlying issues that led up to the riots.

Then conduct a classroom debate on peaceful versus non-peaceful protest and whether looting and violence is ever (or never) acceptable. Students should be placed on sides of the debate in advance and each side should research their position and prepare points. This should be conducted as a formal debate.

3. In "Riot Baby," the author says that mothers in Jelani's neighborhood attribute gang violence and other issues to the devil. What other factors than the devil may such problems stem from? Why do you think Jelani's mother attributes gang violence to the devil?

Text-Dependent Question Options

1. Research the term “juxtaposition.” How are the trauma of Jelani’s birth and the external events that take place the night of his birth juxtaposed in “Riot Baby”? Cite examples from the text in your answer.
2. Does “Riot Baby” have a happy ending? Citing examples from the text, explain why or why not.
3. What facts does the author cite about the 1992 LA Riots in “Riot Baby”? After listing as many facts as you can find, discuss how the author succeeds through his chosen writing style in making it interesting to read these facts. What would have made reading “Riot Baby” and learning these facts less interesting?
4. Analyze who Jelani’s mother, LaTonya, is as a person. What aspects of her childhood, personality, and self-confidence or lack thereof do you think influence her choices in life, both good and bad? Is she a relatable character to you? Why or why not.
5. Research the meaning of the term “Achilles’ heel.” Several characters in “Riot Baby” can be said to have an Achilles’ heel. Identify and discuss who they are and what weaknesses undercut their strengths.
6. How is the circus in “Riot Baby” a metaphor for the story’s events and in what ways does the art for the story bring to life that metaphor? Cite examples from the text and the art when you explain your answer.
7. In “Riot Baby,” Jelani receives contradictory messages from his Sunday-school teacher and his karate class teacher. What are these messages and how are they contradictory? Have you ever experienced contradictory messages from different teachers? Answer these questions, then discuss what makes the role of teachers so important in our lives.

Writing Exercise Options

Narrative

In “Riot Baby,” the difficult nature of Jelani’s birth, the riots that took place during his birth, and the struggles of his childhood, are juxtaposed to underline an overall feeling of strife and fighting for peace and order. These events reinforce one another and make the story’s ending all the more powerful.

Write a short story that can be based on real life or is fictional where you juxtapose events that are similar in tone to lend power to your narrative. Choose a personal life event, an external event, and one more happening and weave these into your story.

Descriptive

Choose a scene in “Riot Baby” to rewrite and describe in the first person from Jelani’s point of view. Describe the scene in as much vivid detail as possible.

Analysis

Nothing much changes for Bo after he is released from prison. Conduct a research project regarding the problems facing America's prison systems, including, but not limited to California. Look at issues such as: racial and economic inequities in the criminal justice system, the prison industrial complex, the lack of support for inmates both in prison and once they leave, and more.

In a research paper of five to seven pages, one to three issues facing the prison system and propose possible solutions to these issues. Reference the situation portrayed in "Riot Baby" in your paper.

Complementary Reading Text Option

The Los Angeles Times newspaper created a "Los Angeles Riots: 25 Years Later" article series. Ask students to access this series of articles and assign them each two articles to read from the list.

<http://www.latimes.com/projects/la-me-riots-25-years> (<http://www.latimes.com/projects/la-me-riots-25-years>)

Writing Exercise

Write an essay comparing and contrasting what you learned about the riots when reading the articles and what you learned when reading "Riot Baby." What are the different perspectives represented in each piece?

Before turning your essay in, engage in a class discussion about the different perspectives about the riots and the importance of understanding and engaging different perspectives in general.

Activity Options

Classroom Activity One

In "Riot Baby," the author discusses how communities did not improve in the decade following the riots. Many saw the rebuilding period as an opportunity for change that was not successful. Conduct a class research project on the efforts to rebuild Los Angeles following the 1992 LA Riots and what went wrong. Break into five research teams and explore then give detailed reports back to the class on the following topics:

1. The extent of the damage from the riots and the damage locations.
2. The various communities who lost businesses, jobs, and lives during the riots.
3. The Rebuild LA organization formed after the riots and a critical analyses of its composition and efforts.
4. A comparison of how people envisioned the rebuilding the impacted areas of Los Angeles versus what they look like today.
5. Both the historic and current social and economic issues facing the areas affected by the riots (such as economic and racial segregation, the drug epidemics, higher incarceration rates, etc.).

After reporting back on these topics to the class, break into your teams once more and this time each team will research and create a report on the same topic:

If you could assist the communities in the areas impacted by the riots today, what would your goals be and how would you enact them? (Goals could be helping local businesses, housing improvement, or whatever else the students deem important.)

Classroom Activity Two

Circus as Metaphor Activity

How is the circus described in “Riot Baby” a metaphor for Jelani’s life? After reflecting on this question in class, conduct the following classroom activity:

Ask each member of the class to imagine a circus act that could be a metaphor for a life event, situation, or lesson they’ve experienced. Students should write a description of their circus act and what it represents in their journals. As students will be asked to create an artwork based on their experience, the experience should not be too personal for classroom display.

Then, ask each student to create a painting, drawing, or collage that depicts their circus act. Post these circus acts in the classroom. The teacher may ask students to present their work or not.

Home Activity

In what ways has your neighborhood changed (or not) over the last 20 years?

Create a set of five to ten interview questions to investigate this question and conduct interviews with family members, friends, neighbors, and/or business owners who you are comfortable speaking with in your neighborhood.

Take notes during each interview as well as photographs of your interviewees, then create a report about the ways in which your neighborhood and has and hasn't changed.

Present what you learned as a short talk presented in class in summary form.

Guest Speaker

Option One: Invite the author and / or the artist of “Riot Baby” to speak with your class.

Option Two: Invite a speaker from Planned Parenthood Los Angeles or Black Women for Wellness to come and speak with your class about healthy versus unhealthy relationships.

Option Three: Invite a member of the Los Angeles community who lived through the 1992 LA Riots to give a first hand account of their experience to the class.

Field Trip

Visit and tour the nonprofit organization Homeboy Industries. Learn about their various services and programs Writing Exercise:

In a journal entry, discuss how the lives of LaTonya and Bo might have turned out differently if they'd had access to the services of an organization like Homeboy Industries.

TEST PREPARATION COMPONENT

Writing Exercise

In “Riot Baby,” Daniel Voll touches on the opinion that people are either good or evil. Do you agree with this idea? Explain why or why not in an essay that is no longer than one page. Please be sure to cite real-life events.

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.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.