

Soldiers

By Scott O'Connor

Illustration by Scott Gandell

Curriculum developed by Kate Kesner



OVERVIEW

Quick-Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade-Level Appropriateness	16+/11th+
Genre/s	Short Story
Length	5,512 words (20 minutes)
Content Advisories	*Mentions of child abuse *References to alcohol
One-Sentence Summary	An child abused by his father starts playing with some wealthier kids.

Lesson Planning	
Topics & Key Themes Overview	Topics: *Parental love *Child abuse *Class *Race *Misogyny *The movie business *Bullying Themes: *Seeing and being seen *Lack of opportunity *Punching “down” *Cycle of abuse *In-crowd and out-crowd
Historic Events/Time Periods for Study	* 1892-1895: Early Motion Picture machines * 1893: First theatrical union formed in the United States * 1992: Rodney King Riots * 1994: The Northridge Earthquake * 1997-2001: The Rampart Scandal
Complementary Texts	*Comic: “Something Terrible” by Dean Trippe *Short Story: “The Fountain House” by Ludmilla Petrushevskaya
Author & Artist Information	<p>Scott O’Connor is the author of A Perfect Universe: Ten Stories, the novels Zero Zone, Untouchable, and Half World and the novella Among Wolves. He teaches creative writing at Cal State Channel Islands and in workshops around Los Angeles.</p> <p>Scott Gandell is the Art Curator at Locavore Lit LA. He is also a Board Member of The Society of Illustrators of Los Angeles.</p>
Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum)	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7

Author Biography

Scott O'Connor is the author of *A Perfect Universe: Ten Stories*, the novels *Zero Zone*, *Untouchable*, and *Half World* and the novella *Among Wolves*. He has been awarded the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Award, and his stories have been shortlisted for the Sunday Times/EFG Story Prize and cited as Distinguished in Best American Short Stories. Additional work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Paris Review*, *Zyzzyyva*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. He teaches creative writing at Cal State Channel Islands and in workshops around Los Angeles. (<http://scottoconnor.com/>)

Artist Biography

Scott Gandell wears many hats. He descends from a long line of creatives and business professionals. His experience is as diverse as the subjects he illustrates. He is a proud alumnus of Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. (https://www.gallerynucleus.com/artists/scott_gandell)

SYNOPSIS

Frank, a kid whose family is struggling with money and whose father is abusive, plays “soldiers” with some wealthier children in his father’s friends’ neighborhood. He thinks about how his father insults and hits him and why he, in turn, bullies a child at his school. Frank returns home with the same issues weighing on him, but also a new perspective and self-awareness.

CURRICULUM

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

Topic

15-Minute Partner Discussion Activity (Discuss one or both questions).

Option One: Talk to your partner about a time you witnessed someone being ignored. Why were they being ignored? Do you think the reason was valid?

Option Two: How do you think the movie business affects the average Los Angeles resident? What do you think about the *process* of making movies, rather than the movies themselves?

Main Ideas

15-Minute Journaling Activity: How much do other peoples’ opinions of you affect your opinion of yourself? Which people’s opinions are most important to you? Do you feel like you take other people’s feedback too personally? Too impersonally?

Follow-Up Journaling Activity: When do you like attention? When do you fear it? How do the people around you (your friends, classmates and family) respond to attention?

Passage-Specific Themes

Writing Exercise and Small-Group Discussion: Read the following excerpts from “Soldiers” and write your responses for 20 minutes.

Optional: Afterwards, discuss within small groups.

Excerpt #1:

That Saturday morning, my mom didn't know what to do with me. I was supposed to be grounded, but I couldn't go to work with her and I knew she didn't want me hanging out with my dad at Denny and Rey's. She wouldn't let me stay home alone because the last time she'd done that, when my dad was away on a movie shoot, I'd set off an M-80 in the backyard and the garage roof caught fire. The neighbors saw the smoke and called 911. My mom was grocery shopping and when she got home the fire trucks were just leaving. As they pulled away, one of the firefighters leaned out the window of the cab and told her to keep a better eye on her kid. We stood together in the kitchen, and she looked at me, holding her car keys, already late for the farm stand. We could hear my dad calling from out in the driveway, ready to leave. Mom looked like she was going to scream or cry.

'Frank,' she said, 'what can I do?'

I didn't know what to say, if I was supposed to answer or not. But then she pushed her lips together and shook her head.

'Just go,' she said. She sounded resigned, like she'd had enough of him, of me. Like she was finally giving up.

Excerpt #2:

Driving home from the principal's office, my mom stared out the windshield, her fists tight around the steering wheel, knuckles round and white like little sand dunes. Neither of us spoke, until finally she said, 'What's wrong with you, Frank? Why would you do those things to him? Do you like when those things are done to you?'

'No,' I said, but maybe my voice was too low. It didn't seem like she heard me.

'I didn't want you to go this way,' she said. She still wouldn't look at me. Nobody would look at me—Curt, his parents, my mom. 'I didn't want you to be like him.' Like my dad, she meant. She'd said this before, but it wasn't until later that night, home in bed, that I realized what was different this time. Before she had always said, 'I don't want you to be like him,' and this time she'd said didn't. Like it was too late now—it was a done deal.

- 1) How do you think Frank feels after his mother says “Just go” in the first excerpt and “I didn't want you to be like him” in the second? Cite Franks' thoughts and actions within the text.

- 2) Throughout the text, the main character Frank does not explicitly state how he feels. Why do you think that is?
- 3) Frank says “Nobody would look at me – Curt, his parents, my mom.” Later, one of Frank’s father’s friends, Denny, stares at Frank and tells him to give him his helmet. As Frank walks towards Denny, he knows he’s about to get hit.
 - a. What are the adults around Frank doing when they look at him or refuse to look at him? Are they trying to understand him? Do they see his authentic self?
 - b. A motif is a distinctive feature or dominant idea in a piece of writing. Often, motifs are recurring physical details rather than abstract concepts. In “Soldiers,” seeing and being seen is a frequent motif. What do you think this motif represents?

If time, share with the class.

Universal Themes

In partners, discuss the following questions:

- 1) How important is it for people to have a sense of belonging or community? When someone is often alone, what can they do to try to connect? If they’re not connecting easily to others, how can they take care of themselves?
- 2) Think about a time in the distant past that you noticed someone being hurtful to another person. Why do you think they were hurtful? Do you think the reason the reason they were hurtful excuses their behavior? To what extent are we responsible for our own words and actions?

Key Vocabulary

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
deliberate	caulk	arroyo
resigned	embankment	insignia
cypress	gauzy	silhouette

Vocabulary Activity Options – Small Group Activities

Talk over the following questions with a partner:

1. Look at the word “insignia.” What words that you already know exist within this one?
 - a. Look at the definition on [Merriam-Webster Online](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/insignia). Is there anything about the definition or “Did You Know” section that surprised you?
 - b. Read [this](https://www.etymonline.com/word/insignia) page about the etymology, or origin, of the word “insignia.” (<https://www.etymonline.com/word/insignia>) What other words can you think of that include the word “sign” in them? How do they relate?

2. Read the text starting at the paragraph “we each took a gulp of air...” Based on context clues in this and the next four paragraphs, if you had never heard the word “arroyo,” what would you guess it means? What impact does it have on the story’s tone?
 - a. Look up the definition on [Merriam-Webster Online](#).
 - b. “Arroyo” is originally a Spanish word. Look at its definition on [SpanishDict.com](#). What are the similarities and differences in the Spanish and English meanings?
 - c. What is another English “loan word,” or word that comes from another language directly? Research how the term’s meaning has changed through cultures and time periods. Write 250 words on your findings.

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options – Full Class Discussion

Answer the following questions in a class discussion:

- 1) Summarize the text.
 - a. Next, identify two or more central themes of the story. How do these themes interact throughout the text?
- 2) What does the helmet signify in the story, for Frank and for Frank’s father? Use details from the story to support your argument.
- 3) Why do you think Frank’s father is so neglectful and mean? Why do you think his mother stays with him?
- 4) What is Brittany’s role in the story? Why do you think she and her brothers say nothing after they ask Frank “Are you going to keep doing it [hurting Curt]?”
 - a. Follow-Up Question: Why do *you* think Frank hurts Curt?
 - b. Optional Follow-Up Question: What do you think Curt feels after Frank pummels him? How do you think he expresses his negative feelings about it?

Text-Dependent Question Options

Discuss the following questions with the class.

- 1) Pacing, word choice, and the use of imagery can affect how a story comes across. Find one effective use of one of these rhetorical strategies in the text. How would the story be weaker without it? Find one part of the text in which you feel the pacing, word choice, or imagery could have been better. How do you think O’Connor *should* have written that part?
- 2) At one point, Frank asks his father if his friend Rey is Mexican. His father responds that “Rey was American like everybody else.” What do you think Frank meant with the word “Mexican?” What do you think his father meant by saying he was American?
 - a. Optional Follow-Up Essay: In a two-page essay, answer the following question: In what ways do you think it’s beneficial for a group of people to be considered like everyone else, and in what ways do you think it’s detrimental for that group? Draw from “Soldiers” description contrast of wealthy white people versus poor white people, as well as a supplementary text of your own choice and your own personal experience, if desired.

- b. Optional: Give a summary of your essay to your small group. In what ways did your responses vary? After listening to your group members, has your opinion changed?
- 3) Do you think O'Connor's strategy of using asterisks (*) between scenes is effective? If so, what would a similar strategy be in film? If not, how would you structure the story?

Writing Exercises

Narrative

In "Soldiers," Frank refers to the kids he played with as "rebels...soldiers." In 500 words, respond to the following prompt:

When you were younger, was there a time when you felt like a rebel? Were you railing against the status quo, or merely existing as you were? Does rebellion have to be in response to an outside force, or can it be behaving in a unique way naturally? Did your moments of rebellion feel authentic to you?

Descriptive

In the story, the arroyo becomes the setting for Frank and the other children's fictional battle. The dirt, the fog, the bridge, and the cars passing by all add to an atmosphere of tension.

Write your own story set in a mysterious place. Describe what your characters hear, see and feel (and possibly smell), as well as what your main character(s) wants and what obstacles get in the way of them getting what they want. Write at least 250 words; then, if you get stuck and a member of your small group is done or stuck as well, quietly ask them about their story, and write more if that helps you.

Optional: Share your story out loud with the class. Two classmates should respond with three things they loved, and one thing they think you could do to make the story even better.

Analysis

Frank's father and mother's relationship is in the background of the story, described briefly. In 500 words or more, respond to the following prompt:

Why do you think Frank's mother stays with his father? What role does poverty have in keeping her with him? What resources (social, financial, etc.) do you think she should reach out to for help? Feel free to use dpss.lacounty.gov and lacity.gov for information on resources.

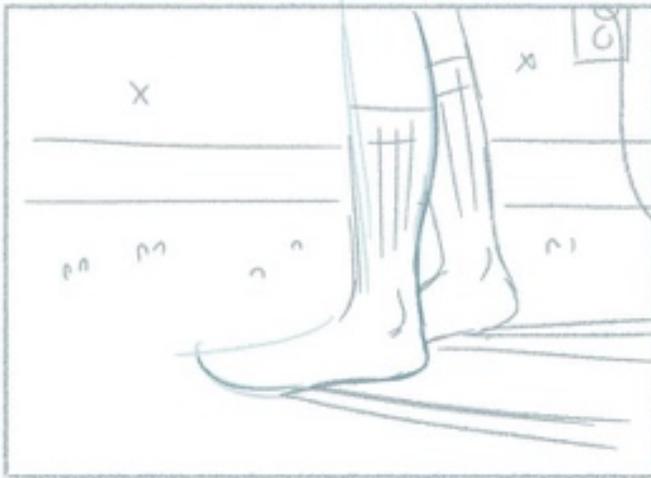
Complementary Text Options

Option One - Excerpt from “Something Terrible” – Trigger Warning: Mentions of Child Abuse, Mentions of Suicide

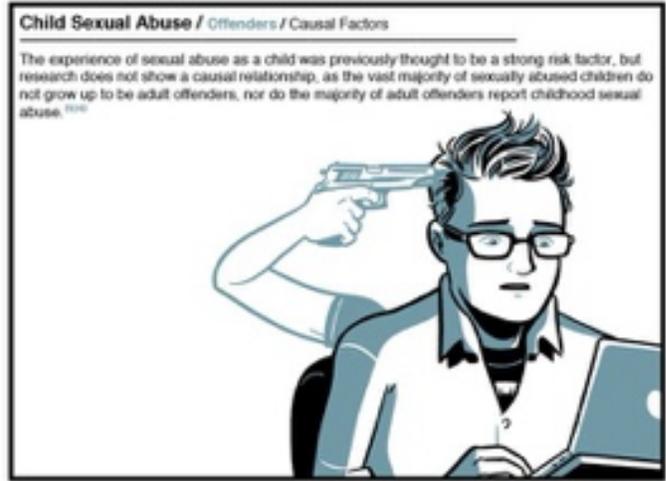












Thanks for reading this abridged version of my autobiographical comic, *Something Terrible*. For 99 cents, you can download the entire story, including my afterword and resources for other adult survivors of childhood sexual violence.

Vist www.tençanticker.com/somethingterrible to purchase the complete story and help me continue to make superhero stories like the ones that saved my life.

D. Trippe



Writing Exercise

Option One: In “Soldiers,” the main character Frank suffers from physical and verbal abuse from his father and father’s friends. In “Something Terrible,” an autobiographical comic, artist Dean Trippe suffers from childhood sexual abuse. How does abuse affect Frank and Dean’s sense of self? How do you think they would have felt or acted differently if they had not experienced abuse?

Option 1a: In the fifth to last panel of “Something Terrible,” Dean learns that the majority of people who experienced sexual abuse as children do not go on to abuse someone else. When he learns that, the invisible gun by his temple disappears. What does the gun’s disappearance represent? How do you think Frank might act differently when his “gun” disappears (aka, his father’s voice is no longer in his head, putting him down)?

Option Two: What visual elements does the artist, Dean Trippe, use to deliver an emotional impact? How might the piece of art differ if it were told as a standard written story?

Option 2a: Some compare comics to theater due to how each box acts like a set, with the characters contained within. Others find them similar in that they usually require multiple people to make. What other similarities and differences can you find between comics and plays?

“The Fountain House”

By [Ludmilla Petrushevskaya](#)

August 24, 2009

There once lived a girl who was killed, then brought back to life. That is, her parents were told that she was dead, but they weren’t allowed to keep her body. (The family had been riding the bus together; the girl was standing up front at the time of the explosion, and her parents were sitting behind her.) The girl was just fifteen, and she was thrown backward by the blast.

While the parents waited for the ambulance, and while the dead were being separated from the wounded, the father held his daughter in his arms, though it was clear by then that she was dead; the doctor at the scene confirmed this. But the body still had to be taken away, so the parents climbed into the ambulance with their daughter and rode with her to the hospital morgue.

She seemed to be alive, as she lay on the stretcher, but she had no pulse, nor was she breathing. Her parents were told to go home, but they wouldn’t; they wanted to wait for the body, though procedures still had to be followed—the autopsy performed and the cause of death determined.

The father, who was desperate with grief, and who was also a deeply religious man, decided to steal his daughter’s body. He took his wife, who was barely conscious, home, endured a conversation with his mother-in-law, woke up a neighbor, who was a nurse, and borrowed a white hospital coat. Then he took all the money in the house and went to the nearest hospital, where he hired an empty ambulance (it was two in the morning), and, with a stretcher and a young paramedic, whom he’d bribed, drove to the hospital where his daughter was, walked past the guard and down the stairs to the basement corridor, and entered the morgue. There was no one there. Quickly he found his daughter and, with the paramedic’s help, put her on the stretcher, called down the service elevator, and took her to the intensive-

care unit on the third floor. The father had studied the layout of the hospital earlier, while he and his wife waited for the body.

He let the paramedic go. After a brief negotiation with the doctor on duty, he handed over his money, and the doctor admitted the girl to the intensive-care unit.

Although the girl was not accompanied by a medical history, the doctor could see perfectly well that she was dead. But he badly needed the money: his wife had just given birth (also to a daughter), and his nerves were on edge. His mother hated his wife, and they took turns crying, and the child cried, too, and now on top of all this he had been assigned exclusively night shifts. The sum that this (clearly insane) father had offered him to revive his dead princess was enough for half a year's rent on a separate apartment for his own little family.

This was why the doctor began to work on the girl as if she were still alive, but, since the father was determined not to leave her side, he did request that the man change into a hospital gown and occupy the cot next to his daughter.

The girl lay there, as white as marble; she was beautiful. The father, sitting on his cot, stared at her like a madman. One of his eyes seemed out of focus, and it was only with difficulty, in fact, that he was able to open his eyes at all.

The doctor, having observed this for a while, asked the nurse to administer a cardiogram, and then quickly gave his new patient a shot of a tranquillizer. The father fell asleep. The girl continued to lie there like Sleeping Beauty, hooked up to her various machines. The doctor fussed around her, doing all he could, even though there was no longer someone watching him with a crazy unfocussed eye. In truth, this young doctor was a fanatic of his profession—there was nothing more important to him than a challenging case, than a person, no matter who it was, on the brink of death.

The father slept, and in his dream he met his daughter—he went to visit her, as he used to visit her at summer camp. He prepared some food—a sandwich, that was all. He got on the bus—another bus—on a fine summer evening, somewhere near the Sokol metro station, and rode it to the paradisiacal spot where his daughter was staying. In the fields, amid soft green hills, he found an enormous gray house with arched gates reaching to the sky, and, when he walked through these giant gates into the garden, there, in an emerald clearing, he saw a fountain, as tall as the house, with one tight jet of water that cascaded at the top into a glistening crown. The sun was setting slowly in the distance, and the father walked happily across the lawn to the entrance, to the right of the gate, and took the stairs up to a high floor, to the apartment where his daughter was. She seemed a little embarrassed when she greeted him, as if he had interrupted her. She stood there, looking away from him—as if she had her own, private life here, which had nothing to do with him anymore, a life that was none of his business.

The place had high ceilings and wide windows, and it faced south, overlooking the fountain, which was illuminated by the setting sun.

“I brought you a sandwich, the kind you like,” the father said.

He went over to a table by the window, put his little package down, paused for a moment, and then unwrapped it. There lay his sandwich, with its two slices of cheap black bread. He wanted to show his daughter that there was a patty inside, so he separated the bread slices. But between them he saw—and right away he knew what it was—a raw human heart. The father was terrified that the heart had not been cooked, that the sandwich was inedible, and he quickly wrapped the sandwich up again. Turning to his daughter, he said awkwardly, “I mixed up the sandwiches. I’ll bring you another one.”

But his daughter now came over and began looking at the sandwich with a strange expression on her face. The father tried to hide the little bag in his pocket and cover it with his hands, so that his daughter couldn’t take it.

She stood next to him, with her head bowed, and reached out her hand. “Give me the sandwich, Papa. I’m really hungry.”

“You can’t eat this filth.”

“Give it to me,” she said ponderously.

She was reaching toward his pocket—all of a sudden her arm was amazingly long—and the father understood that if his daughter ate this sandwich she would die.

Turning away, he took out the sandwich and quickly ate the raw heart himself. Immediately, his mouth filled with blood. He ate the black bread with the blood.

And now I will die, he thought. I’m glad, at least, that I will go first.

“Can you hear me? Open your eyes!” someone said.

The father managed to open his eyes and saw, as if through a fog, the doctor’s blurry face.

“I can hear you,” he said.

“What’s your blood type?”

“The same as my daughter’s.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

They carted him away, tied up his left arm, and stuck a needle in it.

“How is she?” the father asked.

“In what sense,” the doctor said, concentrating on his work.

“Is she alive?”

“What d’you think,” the doctor grumbled.

“She’s alive?”

“Lie down, lie down,” the wonderful doctor insisted.

The father lay there—nearby he could hear someone breathing heavily—and began to cry.

Then they were working on him, and he was carted off again, and again he was surrounded by green fields, but this time he was woken by a noise: his daughter, on the cot next to him, was breathing in a terribly screechy way, as if she couldn’t get enough air. Her father watched her. Her face was white, her mouth open. A tube carried blood from his arm to hers. He felt relieved, and tried to hurry the flow of blood—he wanted all of it to pour into his child. He wanted to die so that she could live.

Once again he found himself inside the apartment in the enormous gray house. His daughter wasn’t there. Quietly he went to look for her, and searched in all the corners of the dazzling apartment with its many windows, but he could find no living being. He sat on the sofa, then lay down on it. He felt content, as if his daughter were already off living somewhere on her own, in comfort and joy, and he could afford to take a break. He began (in his dream) to fall asleep, and now his daughter suddenly appeared. She spun into the room like a whirlwind, a tornado, howling, shaking everything around her, and then sank her nails into the crook of his right arm, breaking the skin. He felt a sharp pain, yelled out in terror, and opened his eyes. The doctor had just given him a shot.

His daughter lay next to him, breathing heavily, but no longer making that awful screeching noise. The father raised himself up on an elbow, saw that his left arm was free of the tourniquet, and bandaged, and turned to the doctor.

“Doctor, I need to make a phone call.”

“What phone call?” the doctor answered. “It’s too early for phone calls. You stay still, or else I’m going to start losing you, too. . . .”

But, before leaving, he lent the father his cell phone, and the father called home. No one answered. His wife and his mother-in-law must have woken up early and gone to the morgue and now would be running around, confused, not knowing where the girl’s body was.

The girl was already better, though she had not yet regained consciousness. The father tried to stay near her in intensive care, pretending that he himself was dying. The night doctor had gone, and the poor father had no money left, but they gave him a cardiogram anyway, and kept him there—apparently the night doctor had managed to speak with someone. Either that or there really was something wrong with his heart.

The father considered what to do. He couldn’t go downstairs. They wouldn’t let him call home. He was surrounded by strangers, and they were all busy. He thought about what his two women were going

through now, his “girls,” as he called them—his wife and his mother-in-law. His heart was in great pain. They had put him on a drip, just like his daughter.

He fell asleep, and when he awoke his daughter was no longer there.

“Nurse, where is the girl who was here before?” he said.

“What’s it to you?”

“I’m her father, that’s what. Where is she?”

“They took her into the operating room. Don’t worry, and don’t get up. You can’t yet.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“I don’t know.”

“Dear nurse, please call the doctor!”

“He’s busy.”

An old man was moaning nearby. Next to the father a resident was putting an old woman through some procedures, all the while addressing her loudly and jocularly, as if she were the village idiot: “Well, Grandma, how about some soup?” Pause. “What kind of soup do we like?”

“Mm,” the old woman groaned in a kind of nonhuman, metallic voice.

“How about some mushroom soup?” Pause. “With some mushrooms, eh? Have you tried the mushroom soup?”

Suddenly the old woman answered in her deep robotic bass. “Mushrooms—with macaroni.”

“There you go!” the resident cried out.

The father lay there, thinking about his daughter being operated on. Somewhere his wife was waiting, half mad with grief, his mother-in-law next to her fretting. . . . A young doctor checked on him and gave him another shot, and he fell asleep again.

In the evening he got up and, barefoot, just as he was, in his hospital gown, walked out. He reached the stairs unnoticed and began descending the cold stone steps, like a ghost. He went down to the basement corridor and followed the arrows to the morgue. A man in a white coat called out to him, “What are you doing here, patient?”

“I’m from the morgue,” the father said. “I got lost.”

“What do you mean, from the morgue?”

“I left, but my documents are still there. I want to go back, but I can’t find it.”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re saying,” the white coat said, taking him by the arm and escorting him down the corridor. And then finally he asked, “You what? You got up?”

“I came to life, and there was no one around, so I started walking, and then I decided I should come back, so they could note that I was leaving.”

“Wonderful!” his escort said.

They reached the morgue, and were greeted there by the curses of the attendant on duty. The father heard him out and said, “My daughter is here, too. She was supposed to come here after her operation.” He told the man his daughter’s name.

“I tell you she’s not here, she’s not here! They’re all driving me crazy! They were looking for her this morning! She’s not here! They’re driving everyone nuts! And this one’s a mental patient! Did you run off from a nuthouse, eh? Where’d he come from?”

“He was just wandering around,” the white coat answered.

“We should get the guard,” the attendant said and started cursing again.

“Let me call home,” the father said. “I just remembered—I was in intensive care on the third floor. My memory is all confused; I came here after the explosion on Tverskaya.”

Here the white coats went quiet. The explosion on the bus on Tverskaya had happened the day before. They took him, shivering and barefoot, to a desk with a telephone.

His wife picked up and immediately burst into tears.

“You! You! Where have you been! They took her body—we don’t know where! And you’re running around! There’s no money in the house! We don’t even have enough for a taxi! Did you take all the money?”

“I was—I was unconscious. I ended up in the hospital, in intensive care.”

“Which one? Where?”

“The same one where she was.”

“Where is she? Where?” His wife howled.

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I’m all undressed—bring me my things. I’m standing here in the morgue. I’m barefoot. Which hospital is this?” he asked the white coat.

“How’d you end up there?” his wife said, still weeping. “I don’t understand.”

He handed the phone to the white coat, who calmly spoke the address into it, as if nothing at all strange were happening, and then hung up.

The morgue attendant brought him a robe and some old, ragged slippers—taking pity finally on this rare living person who had entered his department—and directed him to the guard post at the hospital door. His wife and his mother-in-law arrived there with identically puffy, aged faces. They dressed the father, put shoes on him, hugged him, and heard him out, crying happily, and then all together they sat in the waiting room, because they had been told that the girl had made it through her operation and was recovering, and that her condition was no longer critical.

Two weeks later, she was up again, walking. The father walked with her through the hospital corridors, the whole time repeating that she had been alive after the explosion—she had just been in shock, just in shock. No one else had noticed, but he'd known right away.

He kept quiet about the raw human heart he'd had to eat so that his daughter wouldn't. But then that had happened in a dream, and dreams don't count. ♦

(Translated, from the Russian, by Keith Gessen and Anna Summers.)

Partner Discussion

Option One: In “Soldiers,” Frank’s father makes the loving gesture of getting his son a helmet from on the set he worked on, but mostly treats him with anger and scorn. Frank’s mother loves him but has lost the ability to believe in him, thinking he has become like his father. In “The Fountain House” by Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, a father will not give his daughter up for dead after an explosion on the bus they were riding on, giving up his own blood for her and even eating a human heart (in a dream) for her. Do you think Frank is more or less lovable than the girl in “The Fountain House”? Do you think how someone’s parents treat them is reflective of how “good” they act? How about the world at large?

Trigger Warning: Child Abuse. Optional Follow-Up Question: Do you think Frank wouldn't have been abused had he acted more righteously? What about Dean, the child from “Something Terrible”?

Feel free to share your responses within small groups. If you would prefer not to, you may say “pass” and listen to the rest of the group or write down more of your thoughts on it.

Writing Exercise

Option One: The first sentence of “The Fountain House” reads like a fairy tale (“There once lived a girl who was killed, then brought back to life.”). What genre do you think this story is? What rhetorical strategies does the author use?

Option Two: What do the two dreams signify within the story? Use quotes from the text to support your claims.

Follow Up Question: The scene in which Frank plays “Soldiers” with the neighborhood kids is like a dream sequence in that he and the other children are imagining something. What does the dream represent in the wider story?

Second Follow Up Question: Why does Frank give his helmet away?

Activity Options

Classroom Activity

“Soldiers” ends on a hopeful note, but we don’t learn much about Frank’s future, whether it’s what happens with his family, if he continues to bully Curt, or if he continues to play with the neighborhood kids.

Write 500 words that continue the story. This can be in any form you wish: poetry, prose, a newspaper article, a song, etc., but it must include dialogue and snippets of action. If you get stuck, ask someone else who is stuck or the teacher what *they* think will happen to Frank. Then finish writing.

Home Activity

Ask a trusted adult what things were like for them growing up. What were they like? How were they treated by the adults in their lives? How did they feel about themselves, and how did that change once they got older?

Write a 250-word or longer summary of their response.

Guest Speaker

Option One: Invite the author, Scott O’Connor, to speak to the class about his story and his experience as a writer and professor. Ask him to lead a writing workshop.

Option Two: Invite the artist, Scott Gandell, to speak to the class about his artistic inspiration and process. Ask him to lead an art workshop.

Field Trip:

Visit the Center for the Arts Eagle Rock for an arts workshop and walk around the neighborhood, or attend one of their virtual workshops at <https://linktr.ee/CFAER>. If it has opened, visit the Eagle Rock Historical Society’s public archives from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. Saturdays, or visit their website at <https://www.eaglerockhistory.org/>.

Follow-Up 20-Minute Writing Activity: Has your experience in Eagle Rock helped you understand Frank’s father’s upbringing? How do you think the area has changed since he was a child?

COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE**Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options****[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1](#)**

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1](#)

Initiate and participate in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Vocabulary Activity Options**[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4](#)**

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1](#)

Initiate and participate in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7](#)

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options**[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2](#)**

Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1](#)

Initiate and participate in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Text-Dependent Question Options

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3](#)

Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5](#)

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1](#)

Initiate and participate in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.4](#)

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7](#)

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2](#)

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.RL.11-12.3](#)

Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.4](#)

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7](#)

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2](#)

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.11-12.3](#)

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1](#)

Initiate and participate in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Activity Options**[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.4](#)**

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7](#)

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3](#)

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.