

Study Questions/ Suggestions for Essay Topics /Activities & Projects

Discussion Questions

For wonderful discussion questions, check out the link to the book club questions on Brian's web site. <http://www.briancopeland.com/clubs/>

General Literary Topics for Essay writing, Exams, & Discussion

- **Essay** – Write a **character analysis** of Brian Copeland. Be certain to include what kind of a child he was, his likes and dislikes as a child, the problems he faced, and how those problems were solved or not solved. Include a discussion of the incident that caused Brian to become “the man of the house.” Trace the journey Brian went through to make his way back through the despair of his childhood, through his suicide attempt, to his becoming a resilient, self-actualized human being today.
- **Essay** – There are several turning points in this autobiography, not just one climactic moment as one might find in a typical novel. From having his father almost strangle him, to his mother's death, to his acceptance that he is indeed a genuine black man, Brian experiences many turning points in his life. In an **expository essay**, examine the major turning points, first for young Brian, and then for the adult Brian. You should plan to discuss at least three turning points for each stage of his life.
- **Essay** - In a **literary analysis** essay, describe the effects of racism on Brian's mental health from the time he is a youngster to the present. Trace the growth of Brian's depression from the time early in his life (Pg. 25 – “What was it about my very existence that so offended people?”) that seems to be the beginning of Brian's depression to his finally giving in to the depression and attempting to take his own life. (Chapter 13) Be certain to use specific examples from the book to support your conclusions.
- **Essay** - Brian often uses humor throughout the book to illustrate and comment upon the situation and events he describes. In an **expository** type essay, select and examine at least 3 humorous sections, describing them thoroughly for your reader and explaining just what it is that makes these sections funny.
- **Essay** – Brian introduces many chapters with a quote from sources such as political statements, newspaper articles, civil rights hearings, and even jokes. Write a **literary analysis** type of essay in which you examine his use of these quotes and explain how the quotations comment upon, contribute to, or enhance our understanding of the content of the chapter. Use at least 3 quotes and chapters to examine in detail in the body of your essay.
- **Essay** - “**If I lose control, they win,**” is one of the most important concepts that Carolyn tries to instill in herself and in her family. In a **persuasive essay**, explain first what she means, then discuss whether or not you agree with her. Could there be two ways of looking at crying? Brian was crying when he was threatening Sylvester with the butcher knife. Was he weak then? On the other hand, most

people do find crying or yelling hysterically to be a sign of weakness, allowing the other person to win. Give some examples from your own experience, or from the book. Show how you feel about her quote, and try to convince your reader that your point of view is correct.

- **Essay** – “**Man can be destroyed, but not defeated!**” says the main character in Hemingway’s *The Old Man and The Sea*. In a **critical analysis essay**, examine how that quote is a major theme in *Not A Genuine Black Man*. First, explain the meaning of the quote. Describe specific instances from the book that show Brian and his family standing up to great odds, sometimes even life threatening circumstances that could destroy them. Consider if the book itself is an example of not allowing oneself to be defeated.
- **Essay** – In an **expository essay**, explain the attitude of most of the white residents of San Leandro toward blacks living in their town when Brian and his family first moved in. Compare the condition of blacks in San Leandro then (in the 70s) to the present times. This topic could also be discussed in a research essay.
- **Essay** – Critically **analyze** the effects Sylvester had upon Brian’s character. Be certain to include how Sylvester’s negative parenting influenced Brian in all stages of his life – his childhood, his adulthood, and in his own parenting skills. Definitely discuss the meeting Brian had with his father when Brian is sixteen years old.
- **Essay** – **Compare and contrast** the effects Brian’s Mother had on his character with his Grandmother’s influences on Brian. Be sure to show the importance of Carolyn’s decision to move to San Leandro and her precept about “not crying” to Brian’s development. Also show how Carolyn’s decision to sue the landlord and her choice of attorney influenced young Brian. With Seur, be certain to include a discussion of the “hot water incident” and her phone call near the end telling him to “get his black ass up.”
- **Essay** – In a **persuasive essay**, discuss the essential question of the book – what is a genuine black man? What is your definition of a genuine black man? Be certain to include what the author of the hate mail means when he says that Brian is not a genuine black man. You might examine why it seems that the criminal element is revered and the educated black people are often “put down” by their own race. Reread the last paragraph on page 92 and the first paragraph on page 93 where Brian discusses the effects of black criminals on himself. Why do you think that the whole black race must take responsibility for all crimes any individual black person commits, when white people aren’t blamed for crimes white criminals commit? Conclude by showing how Brian finally comes to terms with this question and how your original definition of a Genuine Black Man is the most appropriate.

Activities and Projects: For 7th grade and above - all ideas can be adapted to work for assignments within any discipline.

(I've put each activity in a different color to keep them separated for my purposes. That should, of course, be changed on the web site. AND I HAVE BEGUN EACH ACTIVITY ON IT'S OWN PAGE. SO BE SURE TO SCROLL DOWN – THERE'S A LOT LEFT TO SEE.)

Illustration Activity!

- **Overview:** Students of all ages love to draw, once their initial fears about not being great artists are assuaged. Explain that they will not be graded on their drawing ability, only on whether they complete the assignment or not. This assignment could be used any time and more than once during the reading of the book but avoid too much repetition.
- **Materials:** blank paper of any kind or size – printer paper is ideal-- and a variety of crayons, markers, & colored pencils are essential.
- **Description:**

Have the students illustrate a scene from the book or draw their idea of a specific character. For example, you might read aloud the description of Mr. Wilkins, and ask the students to draw what he looks like. Or you might read the stoning incident, and ask them to draw their version of that event.

The students could also choose a sentence from the book that is meaningful to them and attempt to illustrate the meaning of the sentence. They should write the quote on the bottom front side of their drawing as a title. This makes a good variation to the assignment for a second use.

This drawing assignment is especially interesting with older students.

Allow about 10 minutes for the drawing and about ten to 15 minutes for the sharing, depending upon the number who share.

- **Sharing:** The students usually enjoy sharing their drawings, as well as having them posted on the classroom walls if possible. Ask for volunteers who might want to share their drawing. Have them stand up and hold up their picture so everyone can see.
- **Assessment:** These drawings should not receive a numerical or other type of grade, though the whole class and the instructor may evaluate and critique them orally as the students present their drawings. An art class might be an exception, and the teacher may wish to grade the assignment.

“Radio Talk Show” Activity! An Improvisation

- **Overview:** This group activity is perfect for students in an acting class or perhaps a psychology or English class, though it may be appropriate for other classes too. It involves knowledge of the various characters and incidents in the book, so it is most useful after the students complete the reading of the book. This assignment reinforces an understanding of the characters and events they face in the book. Since Brian has spent many years being a talk show host, it is a natural activity for the study of the book.
- **Materials:** Prepare for the activity by going to Brian’s web site and listening with the class to his shows: <http://www.briancopeland.com/radio/> You’ll need some kind of performance space, chairs or stools for the ‘characters’ and a chair or stool for the talk show host. You might consider hanging a drape, or curtain to separate the “radio” actors from the audience, to give the effect that they can’t be seen by the “callers.”
- **Description:** Have the students choose two or three characters from the book to appear on a radio talk show, like Brian’s. One student will be the host, another could be the producer, and the others the guests. They then will answer questions from the interviewer and the class who are the callers. You decide if more than one group can use the same characters. Usually they are so different, that it doesn’t matter.

The interviewer will talk to the guests, and then “take calls” through the “producer” from the rest of the students in the class who are acting like the “callers.” The actors on the stage will then answer the questions in character, explaining as necessary the situations they faced.

Although a character like Sylvester would be especially appealing for a young actor to portray, students could also take on the guise of people who are not really main characters in the book, such as Brian’s son or daughter, the various barbers, real estate people, neighbors, or the mayor of San Leandro. Students will have many ideas.

While the students should definitely plan some questions ahead of time, the teacher should allow them the freedom of improvisation to create and use ideas on the spot.

These interviews can be serious or humorous, after all, Brian is a comedian and there are many humorous sequences in his book. But the humor should be appropriate and not degenerate into stupid parody or worse.

The teacher needs to always keep control of the content of improvisational work. Give plenty of guidelines ahead of time. For instance, the first rule of improvisation is: Don’t Deny. In other words, if your partner calls you by a name, never say: “That’s not my name.” And while you discuss improve rules, make sure they know the rules about abusive or foul language not being allowed in Improv or on the radio, and any other rules you might deem necessary.

Give them a maximum time limit to shoot for. They may end earlier, but they may not go over the time allotted for the Talk Show.

Divide the class into groups of about 4 students, and then give them 10 minutes or less to decide upon characters and the types of questions they will use. A brief rehearsal – no more than 10 minutes may be useful to the group, but then the class should come together and LISTEN to all the performances.

A block period is ideal for this assignment, or 2 regular class periods.

- **Sharing:** The groups then perform their interview shows, using the characters from the book as the guests being interviewed. Since these are improvisations, encourage the students to plan an ending. But at any rate, you should give the groups a time limit, and stand up when their time is almost up. They would then have 30 seconds to end their skit. Ten minutes might be a good maximum length for these improvisations. Taping the students' performances is a good strategy, especially if each student is able to take a CD copy of his performance home to watch on his own computer.
- **Assessment:** Observe the group's interaction, and evaluate the depth of participation. Giving a letter or numerical grade for the Talk Show itself would probably depend upon the type of class. If it is an acting class, the grading rubric would be different than one used for a psychology class. The instructor and the whole class may also evaluate and critique each Talk Show verbally after each performance, or evaluate themselves after everyone has completed the performances.

Map Activity!

- **Overview:** This culminating activity is best after everyone has completed reading the book. It is a group activity, using about 4 students per group. Students in groups will create a “map” of San Leandro and Brian’s activities there using ‘found’ items to make the map.
- **Materials:** One large sheet (about 3’ square is good) of white poster board, heavy enough to have things glued or stapled to it. Various miscellaneous colors of construction paper, scissors, popcycle sticks, markers, tape, glue, etc. etc. Yarn is good too. In other words, anything you can think of that they might need. You can also ask the students ahead of time to bring items for their map.

- **Description:**

Each group needs to decide what kind of map they want to make. Some suggestions might be a map of San Leandro and all of Brian’s activities, or a map of Brian’s emotional struggles and subsequent recovery, or a combination of their ideas. Some students create the maps that resemble a board game; others are more fanciful, and three dimensional. Creativity is encouraged.

The groups should brainstorm and write down ideas of events, places, or other things that they believe need to be included on their map.

Students will then cut and color and talk about the book as they create the map. Sometimes groups move the chairs and sit on the floor while others put desks together to accommodate the poster board.

Allow a whole class period for this project, reserving time for the groups to share their maps with the rest of the class toward the end of the period.

- **Sharing:** The classes who shared their drawings in the Illustration Assignment, thoroughly enjoy sharing this map assignment. Again, ask for volunteer groups first. Display the maps for several days in the classroom, if possible.
- **Assessment:** This assignment can be terrifically successful for the students. It gets them to talk about the book, including the action and themes as they cut and paste. They are learning as they share in the process of creating their map. This is a great assignment for this type of book, helping the student delve deeper into the book itself. Observe the group interaction, and evaluate the depth of participation, but do not give a letter or numerical grade for the map itself.

Movie Activity

- **Overview:** This activity is probably best used as a culminating activity after the students have completed the reading. In small groups of three or four, students will write a shooting script based on one (or more) of the incidents Brian describes in the book, and then film it. The instructor should determine the tone required for the film script, making certain that there are not any instances of racism or other inappropriate material. The scripts could include the comic scenes too, not only the serious ones. If there is only one camera for the whole class, the teacher and students might choose one or two scripts to film and have the whole class participate in the filming. Sometimes it's beneficial to have the whole class experience the making of a movie together before the groups to film their individual scripts. It helps to show them how to proceed with the assignment, especially if they have never made a movie before.
- **Materials:** pencils, pens, lined writing paper or shooting script forms, one digital video or digital dvd camera per group. Props as required for the recreation of the scenes. The instructor should make certain that proper substitution of props is made. For example, the students should not use rocks if they film the "stoning" sequence, they could use foam, painted grey to simulate rocks. (If the teacher knows editing programs that might be available at the school and has access to computers, they will also need cables to download the student's video to the computers, and time needs to be set aside for the students to edit their movie, if the teacher desires the movies to be edited.) Costumes are also helpful. Computers may of course be used for the writing section of the assignment.
- **Description:** Each group needs to decide what section or incident they want to recreate in video. Some suggestions would be for the teacher to assign each group an incident the teacher believes will translate into a good movie. One idea might be when the three boys throw stones at Brian and his subsequent rescue. Another might be to recreate his first day in school, or the incident with the nun who hits him. Or simply allow the groups to choose incidents that appeal to them. I would discourage them from recreating the suicide attempt, but that's up to the individual instructor's judgment, of course. Recreating the "hot water" incident, using cold water or confetti would be a good choice.

Teachers can, of course, choose to make the assignment last longer than indicated below, allowing more preparation, filming, and editing time, especially for a video production class project.

Day 1 - The group should work on their shooting script, writing out as specific or general a script as the teacher feels is needed. If it is a film class or theatre class, the script might be more professionally designed than one for a psychology or English class. Planning each shot ahead of time saves much time editing the movie. Also, if there is not access to editing facilities and programs, planning the shots

carefully and editing as the filming is progressing can make a pretty good movie without any editing needed. Shooting scripts are due at the end of the period so that the teacher may review them before the filming.

This part of the assignment may be completed on a computer, of course, and either printed out for the instructor or sent to the teacher's computer.

Day 2 & 3 or One Blocked period – If there is one camera per group, the students should be allowed the time to film their movie. (I always needed to get permission for my high school students to be out on campus filming.) Tell the students they need to finish the movie by the end of the second day or block period. It's helpful if your school has block periods to schedule the filming for a block day.

For editing, allow at least 2 regular class periods or one block day. Editing is a slow process, but you can encourage students to roughly edit the whole movie and not worry too much about details.

- **Sharing:** It's great reinforcement of the events in the book to show the students' movies in the order the scenes appear in the book. Have the groups introduce their specific movie. The time needed for this part of the activity, depends on the length of each of the students' movies and the discussion they might prompt. I like to make a CD/DVD of the movie for each member of the group to take home, if possible.
- **Assessment:** Observe the group's interaction, and evaluate the depth of participation. Giving a letter or numerical grade for the movie itself would probably depend upon the class. If it is a video production class, the grading rubric would be different than one used for a Black History or English class. The instructor might consider evaluating each part of the assignment, with the shooting script, the filming, and the editing each receiving a separate grade. Or, the teacher might choose to not give a numerical or letter grade for the movie itself, but evaluate the script, the students' participation, and their contribution to the activity.

Poem Activity!

- **Overview:** Students generally enjoy creating a poem, especially if the first line is given to them. Unless you are teaching a poetry class, explain that they will not be graded on their poetry writing ability, only on whether they complete the assignment or not. This assignment could be done any time during the reading of the book, but avoid using the assignment more than once or twice.

- **Materials:** lined paper & pencils or pens, or computers and a printer

- **Description:**

Have the students choose a line, a sentence or phrase, from the book that they really like, a line that ‘speaks’ to them, a line they truly understand. Then, have them use that favorite line for the first line of a poem containing about 16 lines total. Remind them that poems do not have to rhyme. A suggestion for students who have trouble beginning their poem might be for them to begin by explaining the meaning of the line they chose, and then relate the quote to their own lives.

The students could also choose a character from the book for the subject of a poem. They could begin their poem with a description, illustrating the events in the person’s life, and end with an interpretation of what kind of person the character is. This could make an effective second poetry writing assignment

Allow about 20 minutes for the writing and about 15 to 20 minutes for the sharing, depending upon the number who share and the length of their poems. One class period should be enough time.

- **Sharing:** The students usually enjoy sharing their poems as well as having them posted on the classroom walls if possible. Ask for volunteers who might want to go first. Have them stand up and read their poem, speaking loudly so that everyone can hear.

If the assignment was done on a computer, the poem could be projected for the whole class to follow along as the author reads it. Be sure to have the students print a copy for the instructor or send the instructor a copy via computer.

Copies of the poems could be posted in the classroom, or printed and published as a book for the class, or put on a CD for the students to take away with them.

- **Assessment:** If this is a poetry class, the poems may of course be given a grade following the standards or rubric used for other poetry assignments in the class. With most classes, however, these poems should not receive a numerical or other type of grade. The whole class and the instructor will be encouraged to evaluate and critique orally after the students read their poems to the group, and the teacher should, of course, evaluate the effort, care, and thought put into each poem. It’s always a great idea to video tape the readings, download the tape into a computer, and make each student a CD of their reading to take home.

Chart Activity!

- **Overview:** Students will gain a better understanding of the chronology of the book with this assignment. This assignment is for individual students, not groups, and could be used any time and more than once during the reading of the book, but it would make an ideal culminating activity.
- **Materials:** Lined paper, and pen or ink, markers & colored pencils are great. Computers with Excel would also be ideal for this chart making activity. Then the various cells and lines could be color coded and otherwise decorated.
- **Description:**
Have the students make a chart showing the actual chronology of events from the book. Have them color code the events, one color for young Brian, another for adult Brian, a third for his Mother, a fourth for Grandma, etc. I'd allow about 15 – 20 minutes to prepare the chart, or give it as homework, and then for sharing allow about 20 minutes, depending upon the number of students who share.
- **Sharing:** The students usually enjoy sharing their charts, as well as having them posted on the classroom walls if possible. Ask for volunteers who might want to share their chart. Have them stand up and hold up the chart so everyone can see. If they produced their chart with Excel, they could either print a copy or project their chart, or both. The class will definitely discuss events students included or left out. The sharing of this assignment is an excellent discussion starter. If it becomes boring with many charts that are similar, discontinue the sharing.
- **Assessment:** The instructor might ask for a minimum number of incidents to be charted, so that completeness could become one part of the scoring rubric. This is an assignment that the instructor might not give a numerical or other type of grade, because the whole class and the instructor will be evaluating and critiquing them orally as the students present their charts.

Acting Scenes Activity

- **Overview:** This activity is also best used as a culminating activity after the students have completed the reading. In small groups students will write a script based on one (or more) of the incidents Brian describes in the book, and then rehearse it and perform it. The instructor should determine the tone required for the scenes, making certain that there are not any instances of racism or other inappropriate material. Recreating comic scenes should be encouraged, as well as recreating the serious scenes. However, I would discourage the students from creating a parody of the situations.
- **Materials:** pencils, pens, lined writing paper, props as required for the recreation of the scenes, and a performance space. The instructor should make certain that proper substitution of props is made. For example, the students should not use rocks if they choose to recreate the “stoning” sequence, they could use foam or wadded up paper, painted grey to simulate rocks. If available, computers could be used for the writing part of this assignment.
- **Description:** Each group needs to decide what section or incident they want to recreate in their scene, or the teacher might assign each group an incident the teacher believes will translate into a good live performance. One idea might be when the three boys throw stones at Brian and his subsequent rescue. Another might be to recreate his first day in school, or the incident with the nun who hits him. Both serious and humorous incidents would be appropriate. I would discourage them from recreating the suicide attempt, but recreating the “hot water” incident, using confetti instead of the water, would be a good choice. Teachers can, of course, choose to make the assignment last longer than indicated below, allowing more preparation and rehearsal time, especially for a drama class project.

Day 1 - The group should work on their script, writing out as specific or general a script as the teacher feels is needed. Using lines directly from the book will be a big help to the students as they write their scripts. The scripts should be due at the end of the period so that the teacher may review them before the next day’s rehearsal.

Day 2 or ½ of One Blocked period – Allow the students time to rehearse their scenes, planning out their blocking and working on developing their character and getting an understanding of their lines.

Day 3 or second ½ of blocked period -- If the teacher allows the students to use their scripts, they could perform their scenes on this day. Or they may perform the scenes as “work in progress,” use their scripts and get suggestions from the teacher and class for further development of their scenes. If the teacher wants the students to perform without scripts, then more rehearsal time would be needed, whether in class or outside of class or both.

- **Sharing:** It's great reinforcement of the events in the book to perform the students' scenes in the order the scenes appear in the book. Have the groups introduce their specific scene. The time needed for this part of the activity, depends on the length of each of the students' scenes and the discussion their performances might prompt. Taping the students' performances is a good strategy, especially if each student is able to take a CD copy of his performance home to his own computer.
- **Assessment:** Observe the group's interaction, and evaluate the depth of participation. Giving a letter or numerical grade for the scene itself would probably depend upon the class. If it is an acting class, the grading rubric would be different than one used for a Black History or English class. With actors, the instructor might consider evaluating each part of the assignment, with the script, the rehearsal, and the performance each receiving a separate grade. Or, for a non-Acting class, the teacher might choose not to give a numerical or letter grade for the scene itself, but rather evaluate the script, the students' participation, and their contribution to the activity.

“Interview Show” Activity! An Improvisation

- **Overview:** Students in an acting class or perhaps a psychology or English class will enjoy this assignment. Though it may be appropriate for other classes too. It involves knowledge of the various characters and incidents in the book, so it is most useful after the students complete the reading of the book. This assignment reinforces an understanding of the characters and events they face in the book.
- **Materials:** Some kind of performance space, chairs or stools for the ‘characters’ and a chair or stool for the interviewer.

- **Description:**

Have the students choose several characters from the book to appear on an interview show, like Oprah or Larry King. They then will answer questions from the interviewer and the class. The interviewer will call upon people from the class before they ask questions, enabling the class and the performance to stay in control. The actors on the stage will then answer the questions in character, explaining as necessary the situations they faced. Don’t allow the students to shout out questions or become too much like a Larry Springer show. (Though, with really good kids who could keep themselves under control, I could see having Sylvester interviewed on a Larry Springer type show. That might be lots of fun for the class. I can just about hear the caustic questions the students would ask Sylvester.) The teacher should control the choices so that the scenes are appropriate for the class. The students need to be aware that different talk show hosts and different journalists ask different types of questions, and plan their questions accordingly. While they should definitely plan some questions ahead of time, the teacher should allow them the freedom of improvisation to create and use ideas on the spot.

These interviews can be serious or humorous, after all, Brian is a comedian and there are many humorous sequences in his book.

Divide the class into groups of 4 or 5, and then give them 10 minutes or less to decide upon characters and the types of questions they will use. A brief rehearsal – no more than 10 minutes may be useful to the group, but then the class should come together and watch all the performances. A block period is ideal for this assignment, or 2 regular class periods.

- **Sharing:** The groups then perform their interview shows, using the characters from the book as the guests being interviewed. Since these are improvisations, encourage the students to plan an ending. But at any rate, you should give the groups a time limit, and stand up when their time is almost up. They would then have 30 seconds to end their skit. Ten minutes might be a good maximum length for these improvisations. Taping the students’ performances is a good strategy, especially if each student is able to take a CD copy of his performance home to watch on his own computer.

- **Assessment:** Observe the group's interaction, and evaluate the depth of participation. Giving a letter or numerical grade for the scene itself would probably depend upon the class. If it is an acting class, the grading rubric would be different than one used for a psychology class. The instructor and the whole class may also evaluate and critique each skit verbally after each performance, or evaluate themselves after everyone has completed the performances.

Crossword Puzzle Activity!

- **Overview:** Crossword puzzles are easy, fun, and educational to create – check out web sites like: <http://www.puzzle-maker.com/CW/> Often, there is a charge for being able to print polished versions of the puzzles using the crossword puzzle sites. However, your school probably has an account with a crossword maker already, and you can print the web page versions for free. If you need help, check with the IT or Computer Lab person at your school and have them show you how to use the site. This is an assignment that could be repeated once or twice during the reading.
- **Materials:** Computers with internet access, an account with a puzzle maker company's web site (to be able to print the puzzle,) & printing capabilities.
- **Description:**

Show the students how to access and use the puzzle making program. Have each student create a crossword puzzle based upon the book. They might even try to be more sophisticated and create a crossword that uses themes like characters, incidents, or places for a particular theme for their crossword.

For most classes, require them to use a minimum of 20 down and 20 across. I'd require fewer questions for younger students and more questions for older students. Have them try making the puzzle several different times until their puzzle "looks" like a good crossword puzzle, with many words crossing.
- **Sharing:** The students could either print or project their crosswords. They should be certain to print the solution page also. The students might exchange a copy of their crossword with a partner, and attempt to solve each other's crossword. One copy should be turned in to the instructor.

Another possibility for sharing is for the teacher to select several of the best crosswords (or all of them), and put them together like a book for the students to solve. In this manner the crosswords can be used as a review for an upcoming exam on the book. If the teacher prefers, the crosswords can be projected directly from the computer so that the whole class can see each other's puzzles, solving them as a group for a class review.
- **Assessment:** The methods of evaluation for the crossword assignment depend upon the class. The instructor could choose not to give a numerical or

letter grade for the assignment, or to grade upon the sophistication of the choices the student makes. The evaluation methods or rubric should be made clear to the students prior to their beginning work on the assignment.

Autobiography Project!

- **Overview:** Make certain that students save all their writings, drawings, and quizzes they do during the course of working on Brian's book. Having those documents will help them with this Autobiography Assignment.

The autobiography project is for each individual student to complete. It is NOT a group project. And as a culminating activity, it is best after everyone has completed reading the book. Generally the students work on this project on their own time, but the instructor could build in time for the students to work in the classroom, library, or computer lab. This allows time for the teacher to give every student some individual help as they work on their projects.

The instructor may choose from many possible lengths for this project, from a smaller scale simple essay assignment with photos, to a semester long Scrap Book size, gargantuan project.

Computer savvy teachers and students can use their computers and scanners to create power point shows of this assignment and share them with the rest of the class.

I believe strongly in sharing projects, papers, and activities with the whole group. Not only does sharing give the students all the benefits of speaking in public, but sharing also boosts self-esteem and camaraderie as we teach the students to support and encourage each others' efforts.

One last note: I've had kids 20 years later tell me this was their favorite project and that they still had it on a shelf.

- **Materials:** For the larger projects, student will need family photos, photos of their hometown, and any other places they've lived before now. Photos of where they live now will also be useful. Students should supply something like a scrapbook or binder to hold their finished project. Or they could make one out of heavy construction paper you supply. They will need lined and unlined paper, colored construction paper, pens, glue sticks, glue, yarn, and other decorations the students deem necessary. If at all possible, ask your librarian to save magazines with photos of places and people in them so the kids can have access to some magazines they can cut apart. Access to computers and the internet for research. For power point presentations, they also need access to a scanner, as photos or scanned copies of essays could be inserted into a power point presentation or slide & video presentation.
- **Description: The Larger Project**

The possible assignments in the autobiography project are to numerous to include them all here. Instead, I'll write a list of suggested sections for the Autobiography, including some assignments and other possible items that should be sufficient to get the

instructor's creative brain working. That way the instructor is free to develop ideas that fit into the curriculum for the specific class. For example, if this is a poetry class, the writing parts of the autobiography could be done as poems or songs. Or the students could find poetry on line to fit the concept they are looking for, print the poem and paste it in their Scrapbook. Encourage students to look back over any writing assignments they did about *Genuine*. Often they were asked to reflect about their own life and what they wrote might prove helpful to them with this assignment.

Students should be required to find photos or draw some illustrations for every section of this project. Each section can be several pages long. I am always amazed at how clever and creative they can be.

Part 1 – YOUR BIRTHPLACE. Where were you born? What kind of a town is it? Look it up on the internet and get some facts about it, and perhaps some photos of it today. Include any instances of bigotry or hatred the town has had to face in its history. Include copies of any old photos of your birth place. When did you move to this town? Did you experience any problems moving here? Maybe drawing a map would be helpful to show where you've lived.

Part 2 – YOUR FAMILY. Write about your family. Who are they? Where are they from? Pets? What kinds of things do they believe in? What concepts and values do your parents emphasize in your home? What is your relationship with each of the members of your family. Include photos of your family or any drawings they've made for you. Compare and contrast your family with Brian's family. Did Brian's family have pets, for example?

Part 3 – YOUR GRAMMAR SCHOOL. Where did you go to grammar school? Find photos (on line if necessary) of your old grammar school. What kinds of kids went to the school? Did you like being there? Write about an incident that happened to you when you were in grammar school. It could be a time of great happiness and humor, or a time filled with sadness and hurt. Compare and contrast your school experiences to Brian's when he was in grammar school in San Leandro.

Part 4 – INFLUENCES. What has shaped you into the person you are today? This assignment should not be an essay, but rather a collage/montage of photos, or other found items that help you symbolize the influences in your life. In other words, find photos from magazines, words cut from newspapers, photos from the internet, or your own collection that symbolize the major influences in your life from the past to the present. You might show how you've changed. What kinds of things did you used to enjoy that you don't do anymore? What new things have entered your life? Work? School? People? Hobbies? This section could be one or many pages long. Think back on all the influences in Brian's life. That will help you get ideas for this section.

Part 5 – HORRIBLE CHILDHOOD INCIDENT. Brian describes for us many horrible events in his young life. Your task is to select one horrible, difficult, or upsetting time from your past and write about it. Re-read one of Brian's descriptions to help you get started. Be certain to describe what led up to the event, what happened in vivid detail, using quotes when appropriate, and the conclusion to the incident. In other words, what happened and how do you feel about the incident now. Find words, photos, or other items to enhance your writing.

Part 6 – TURNING POINT. Brian describes for us life-changing events in his book. Think back and describe for us a turning point in your life that has happened since you got out of grammar school. Try to describe the event as well as how it has changed you or changed your life. Reflect upon whether change is good or bad. Some think change is just change – neither good nor bad. Again, think of how you can illustrate this writing assignment – drawing your own picture might be quite appropriate.

Part 7 – LIFE NOW. Describe your life now. Include photos of your home, room, family, friends, pets, hobbies, and places you love to go. This could be a short essay assignment, or mostly photos and drawings which are annotated. How does your life now compare and contrast to Brian's life now?

Part 8 - FUTURE DREAMS. What are your plans for the future? You may choose to write an essay, a poem, draw a picture, illustrate your essay with magazine photos, or drawings. Celebrate yourself! Predict where you will be in 5 years? In 10? Write a short paragraph telling yourself how to achieve your future dreams. Can you find some photo to illustrate yourself achieving your future dreams?

Other possible sections: Have the students accumulate all their writings on Brian's book and organize them by their date. Some students might want to do a whole section on the pets they've had over the years, or a whole section on the special person in their life, or tributes to grandparents or other loved ones, living or dead. The possibilities are endless. Of course the more ideas you can get from Brian's book for sections, the better!

- **Sharing:** Students who have been sharing all along will probably enjoy sharing this project with others. Some may find parts of their project too personal to share. Don't force them. In the interest of time, I would sometimes have the students share their Autobiography Project in small groups, or place them out for display where students can look at each other's projects if the student permits you to. If you have to attend parent nights, this is a great project to have the students complete before the parents arrive.
- **Assessment:** The usual rubrics for assessing most writing assignments will work here. Definitely grade on the completeness, the depth of understanding, the creativity, timeliness of turning in the project, growth in writing capabilities. However you determine to grade the

assignment, the evaluation methods or rubric you plan to use should be made clear to the students prior to their beginning work on the project.

“Twilight: My City (this should be the name of the city where the students live.)”
A Research/interview/Creative Writing/Performance Project,
(with apologies to Anna Devere Smith!)

- **Overview:** This assignment involves using the links on Brian’s web site to research the historical videos about San Leandro and his comments upon them. Hopefully, the videos will give the students questions they would like answered about their town.

<http://www.briancopeland.com/corner/>

The students are to take a camera (a tape recorder will do, but it’s not as good as the video for the purposes of this project.) and much like Anna Devere Smith did in LA after the riots, the students will interview people in their town about the amount of hate, bullying, racial profiling, or other questions they want answered, create monologues based upon the interviews, memorize and perform the monologue as if the student were the person who was interviewed. A simple costume is all that is needed to suggest the character – perhaps a hat or jacket.

This assignment can lead to a wonderful performance opportunity, perhaps at night for the parents, or during the school day for another teacher’s class. I’ve used this type of assignment for a Final Project, to culminate the whole semester’s work. It’s perfect for an acting, English, or speech class, but I could see psychology, black studies, and history classes also enjoying this project.

- **Materials:** Digital Video Camera, (groups could share, if necessary), writing materials or word processing availability, playback capability for the video, simple costumes and set pieces as needed – a chair, a table, a desk, plus a performance space in the classroom or theatre, if available.
- **Description:**

This assignment could be completed with small groups of 2 or 3 people, but each person would need to perform the final part of the assignment.

The students should interview at least 5 or 6 people who have lived in the town for a long time. These interviews should be videotaped, but they should always ask permission first. The subject of one interview could be a family member, and another could be a teacher. A third could be a peer who has lived in the town all his life. Neighbors are good sources to be interviewed, as are the owners of small businesses or restaurants in the town. The students should seek a variety in the types and ages of people to interview.

It’s best if the whole class brainstorms about what questions to ask, so they all have interview answers on similar topics. Certainly ask about how the town has changed, and also about the person’s reaction to any recent, widely known event in the city or nearby. Questions about hate crimes, racism, and other subjects from the book should also be included.

Students watch all the interviews, and select the one they wish to perform. The student will write a monologue based upon what his person says on the tape. The monologues may be serious or comic, as appropriate, and should only be about 3 minutes long. Most importantly, the writing needs to capture the essence of what the person said and how it was worded. Some very successful monologues are also poems, so students who want to write poems should be encouraged.

Students will now need to memorize and prepare the monologue, trying to act like the person interviewed, WITHOUT making fun of that person in any way. The students should be wary about over acting. It might be helpful try to get the drama teacher to come in and give a mini lesson on preparing monologues and memorizing.

A couple of variations on this assignment might be to have the students do a scene with 2 -3 people, instead of a 1 person scene. This might be helpful if you have a student who is VERY shy or has other difficulties performing. Or like Brian, write a monologue about an incident from their own life involving living in the town.

- **Sharing:** The entire goal of this assignment is to put the monologues together into a logical and meaningful order, and then to share the monologues with an audience. The audience could be an invited class, or, better yet, a performance at night for parents.

Students should perform all the monologues for the class itself first. Then the class needs to decide on what order to put them in the show, or the teacher could decide, or perhaps the teacher will appoint a student director to make that kind of decision and help direct the performance.

Assessment: Definitely videotape the performances so that the class can watch them the next class meeting after the performance. If possible, each student should have a CD or DVD of the performance to take home. Unless this is an acting class, I wouldn't grade the students on their acting ability, but rather on all the other phases of the project from the interviews to the writing itself and working on the monologue.

THE NAME OF THE GAME IS THAT EVERYONE MUST PERFORM. I wouldn't tell them at the beginning of the assignment, but if they simply CAN'T remember their lines and it is performance time, let the student take the script with him on stage.

