

Study Guide *for*
First Generation American Humor:
Firoozeh Dumas and Sandra Tsing Loh

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Page 1 / 18



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an Accent, opened to sold out audiences. Her memoir, *Laughing Without an Accent*, was published in 2008.

GETTING TO THE CORE

An excerpt from Firoozeh Dumas's *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America*, Random House, 2003.

Chapter One

Leffingwell Elementary School

When I was seven, my parents, my fourteen-year-old brother, Farshid, and I moved from Abadan, Iran, to Whittier, California. Farid, the older of my two brothers, had been sent to Philadelphia the year before to attend high school. Like most Iranian youths, he had always dreamed of attending college abroad and, despite my mother's tears, had left us to live with my uncle and his American wife. I, too, had been sad at Farid's departure, but my sorrow soon faded—not coincidentally, with the receipt of a package from him. Suddenly, having my brother on a different continent seemed like a small price to pay for owning a Barbie complete with a carrying case and four outfits, including the rain gear and mini umbrella.

Our move to Whittier was temporary. My father, Kazem, an engineer with the National Iranian Oil Company, had been assigned to consult for an American firm for about two years. Having spent several years in Texas and California as a graduate student, my father often spoke about America with the eloquence and wonder normally reserved for a first love. To him, America was a place where anyone, no matter how humble his background, could become an important person. It was a kind and orderly nation full of clean bathrooms, a land where traffic laws were obeyed and where whales jumped through hoops. It was the Promised Land. For me, it was where I could buy more outfits for Barbie.

We arrived in Whittier shortly after the start of second grade; my father enrolled me in Leffingwell Elementary School. To facilitate my adjustment, the principal arranged for us to meet my new teacher, Mrs. Sandberg, a few days before I started school. Since my mother and I did not speak English, the meeting consisted of a dialogue between my father and Mrs. Sandberg. My father carefully explained that I had attended a prestigious kindergarten where all the children were taught English. Eager to impress Mrs. Sandberg, he asked me to



demonstrate my knowledge of the English language. I stood up straight and proudly recited all that I knew: “White, yellow, orange, red, purple, blue, green.”

The following Monday, my father drove my mother and me to school. He had decided that it would be a good idea for my mother to attend school with me for a few weeks. I could not understand why two people not speaking English would be better than one, but I was seven, and my opinion didn’t matter much.

Until my first day at Leffingwell Elementary School, I had never thought of my mother as an embarrassment, but the sight of all the kids in the school staring at us before the bell rang was enough to make me pretend I didn’t know her. The bell finally rang and Mrs. Sandberg came and escorted us to class. Fortunately, she had figured out that we were precisely the kind of people who would need help finding the right classroom.

My mother and I sat in the back while all the children took their assigned seats. Everyone continued to stare at us. Mrs. Sandberg wrote my name on the board: F-I-R-O-O-Z-E-H. Under my name, she wrote “I-R-A-N.” She then pulled down a map of the world and said something to my mom. My mom looked at me and asked me what she had said. I told her that the teacher probably wanted her to find Iran on the map.

The problem was that my mother, like most women of her generation, had been only briefly educated. In her era, a girl’s sole purpose in life was to find a husband. Having an education ranked far below more desirable attributes such as the ability to serve tea or prepare baklava. Before her marriage, my mother, Nazireh, had dreamed of becoming a midwife. Her father, a fairly progressive man, had even refused the two earlier suitors who had come for her so that his daughter could pursue her dream. My mother planned to obtain her diploma, then go to Tabriz to learn midwifery from a teacher whom my grandfather knew. Sadly, the teacher died unexpectedly, and my mother’s dreams had to be buried as well.

Bachelor No. 3 was my father. Like the other suitors, he had never spoken to my mother, but one of his cousins knew someone who knew my mother’s sister, so that was enough. More important, my mother fit my father’s physical requirements for a wife. Like most Iranians, my father preferred a fair-skinned woman with straight, light-colored hair. Having spent a year in America as a Fulbright scholar, he had returned with a photo of a woman he found attractive and asked his older sister, Sedigeh, to find someone who resembled her. Sedigeh had asked around, and that is how at age seventeen my mother officially gave up her dreams, married my father, and had a child by the end of the year.

As the students continued staring at us, Mrs. Sandberg gestured to my mother to come up to the board. My mother reluctantly obeyed. I cringed. Mrs. Sandberg, using a combination of hand gestures, started pointing to the map and saying, “Iran? Iran? Iran?” Clearly, Mrs.



Sandberg had planned on incorporating us into the day's lesson. I only wished she had told us that earlier so we could have stayed home.

After a few awkward attempts by my mother to find Iran on the map, Mrs. Sandberg finally understood that it wasn't my mother's lack of English that was causing a problem, but rather her lack of world geography. Smiling graciously, she pointed my mother back to her seat. Mrs. Sandberg then showed everyone, including my mother and me, where Iran was on the map. My mother nodded her head, acting as if she had known the location all along, but had preferred to keep it a secret. Now all the students stared at us, not just because I had come to school with my mother, not because we couldn't speak their language, but because we were stupid. I was especially mad at my mother, because she had negated the positive impression I had made previously by reciting the color wheel. I decided that starting the next day, she would have to stay home.

The bell finally rang and it was time for us to leave. Leffingwell Elementary was just a few blocks from our house and my father, grossly underestimating our ability to get lost, had assumed that my mother and I would be able to find our way home. She and I wandered aimlessly, perhaps hoping for a shooting star or a talking animal to help guide us back. None of the streets or houses looked familiar. As we stood pondering our predicament, an enthusiastic young girl came leaping out of her house and said something. Unable to understand her, we did what we had done all day: we smiled. The girl's mother joined us, then gestured for us to follow her inside. I assumed that the girl, who appeared to be the same age as I, was a student at Leffingwell Elementary; having us inside her house was probably akin to having the circus make a personal visit.

Her mother handed us a telephone, and my mother, who had, thankfully, memorized my father's work number, called him and explained our situation. My father then spoke to the American woman and gave her our address. This kind stranger agreed to take us back to our house.

Perhaps fearing that we might show up at their doorstep again, the woman and her daughter walked us all the way to our front porch and even helped my mother unlock the unfamiliar door. After making one last futile attempt at communication, they waved good-bye. Unable to thank them in words, we smiled even more broadly.

After spending an entire day in America, surrounded by Americans, I realized that my father's description of America had been correct. The bathrooms were clean and the people were very, very kind.

Hot Dogs and Wild Geese

Moving to America was both exciting and frightening, but we found great comfort in knowing that my father spoke English. Having spent years regaling us with stories about his



graduate years in America, he had left us with the distinct impression that America was his second home. My mother and I planned to stick close to him, letting him guide us through the exotic American landscape that he knew so well. We counted on him not only to translate the language but also to translate the culture, to be a link to this most foreign of lands. He was to be our own private Rosetta stone.

Once we reached America, we wondered whether perhaps my father had confused his life in America with someone else's. Judging from the bewildered looks of store cashiers, gas station attendants, and waiters, my father spoke a version of English not yet shared with the rest of America. His attempts to find a "vater closet" in a department store would usually lead us to the drinking fountain or the home furnishings section. Asking my father to ask the waitress the definition of "sloppy Joe" or "Tater Tots" was no problem. His translations, however, were highly suspect. Waitresses would spend several minutes responding to my father's questions, and these responses, in turn, would be translated as "She doesn't know." Thanks to my father's translations, we stayed away from hot dogs, catfish, and hush puppies, and no amount of caviar in the sea would have convinced us to try mud pie.

We wondered how my father had managed to spend several years attending school in America, yet remain so utterly befuddled by Americans. We soon discovered that his college years had been spent mainly in the library, where he had managed to avoid contact with all Americans except his engineering professors. As long as the conversation was limited to vectors, surface tension, and fluid mechanics, my father was Fred Astaire with words. But one step outside the scintillating world of petroleum engineering and he had two left tongues.

My father's only other regular contact in college had been his roommate, a Pakistani who spent his days preparing curry. Since neither spoke English, but both liked curries, they got along splendidly. The person who had assigned them together had probably hoped they would either learn English or invent a common language for the occasion. Neither happened



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GETTING TO THE CORE

Sandra Tsing Loh "Class Dismissed," from the March 2009 issue of *The Atlantic*.
<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200903/class-system>

Some 25 years have passed since the publication of Paul Fussell's naughty treat *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*, and I think this quarter-century mark merits the raising of either a yachting pennant, an American flag, or a wind sock with the Budweiser logo (corresponding to Fussell's demarcations of Upper Class, Middle Class, and Prole). For readers who somehow missed this snide, martini-dry American classic, do have your assistant Tessa run out and get it immediately (Upper), or at least be sure to worriedly skim this magazine summary over a low-fat bagel (Middle), because Fussell's bibelot-rich tropes still resonate.

Back in 1983, Fussell—author of the renowned book *The Great War and Modern Memory*—argued that although Americans loathe discussing social class, this relatively new, rugged country of ours did indeed have a British-style class system, if less defined by money than by that elusive quality called taste. To be sure, Fussell's universe is somewhat passé, in that its population is almost exclusively white (with the Mafia thrown in for color), and the three "classes" in his opening primer conform to clichés we might think of as Old-Money WASP, Midwestern Insurance Salesman, and Southern Trailer Trash. The top classes, according to Fussell (with a hint of Nancy Mitford), drink Scotch on the rocks in a tumbler decorated with sailboats and say "Grandfather died"; Middles say "Martooni" and "Grandma passed away"; Proles drink domestic beer in a can and say "Uncle was taken to Jesus."

The still-fresh guilty pleasure of the reading, however, comes from the insistent unspooling, with an almost Ptolemaic complexity, of Fussell's cocktail-party-ready argument. (I picture him in rumpled tie elbowing his laughing-head-into-her-hands hostess while he gestures breezily with a glass of chardonnay—white wine itself being much classier in 1983 than now.) By chapter two, Fussell is revealing that he believes there are actually nine classes (Top Out-of-Sight, Upper, Upper Middle, Middle, High Proletarian, Mid-Proletarian, Low Proletarian, Destitute, Bottom Out-of-Sight). His Heart of Darkness journey wends boldly past unicorns (High Prole), ladies' thimble collections (Middle), men's hobbies ("One must learn that fishing in fresh water is classier than in salt, and that if salmon and trout are the things to catch, a catfish is something by



all means to avoid catching”), the Sunbrella hat (for which he reserves a timeless—and I think appropriate—ire), “parody” hats favored by the upper-middle class such as Pat Moynihan’s tweedy bog cap, and the perils of the dark-blue visored “Greek fisherman’s cap” as advertised in *The New Yorker* (*New Yorker* ads themselves being, Fussell explains, crucibles of middle-class high anxiety). God forbid you get that cap in black leather (“Only six things can be made of black leather without causing class damage to the owner: belts, shoes, handbags, gloves, camera cases, and dog leashes”). He even threads through the subtle lexicon of tie patterns—from “amoeba-like foulard blobs” (Upper), signal flags (Upper Middle), musical notes (sliding downward), to OH HELL, IT’S MONDAY (quite low), with special horror reserved for the southwestern bola (“Says the bola, ‘The person wearing me is a child of nature, even though actually eighty years old’”). Literally no stone—or soapstone—goes unturned.

The high-prole bathroom reveals two contradictory impulses at war: one is the desire to exhibit a “hospital” standard of cleanliness, which means splashing a lot of Lysol or Pine Oil around; the other is to display as much fanciness and luxury as possible, which means a lurch in the opposite direction, toward fur toilet seat covers and towels which don’t work not merely because they are made largely of Dacron but also because a third of the remaining threads are “gold.”

The experience of reading (and re-reading) Class is akin to wiping goggles one didn’t know were fogged. Fussell’s methodology settles into the brain like a virus; one soon cannot stop nanocategorizing one’s world. A quarter century later, most of Fussell’s categories live on—if with some fiscal damage. Fussell’s topmost denizens were “out of sight” in hilltop manses at the end of long, curving driveways. The billionaires in Michael Tolkin’s hilariously mordant *The Return of the Player* are even farther out, prow-jousting at sea in their satellite-technology-equipped yachts. Indeed, this novel is such a teeth-gnashingly precise class almanac, that Tolkin should surely replace Tom Wolfe as our modern-day high-society-anxiety chronicler (at least of the West Coast variety). Tolkin is particularly hard on his people, wealthy Los Angeles Jews, a variation on the American upper class with their conspicuously consuming Hebraism. At a bar mitzvah at a Reform synagogue that shares a driveway with Milken High (named deftly not for Michael but for the brother):

Torahs dressed in embroidered covers and silver breastplates stood on the branches of a sculpted tree behind a sheer curtain, like expensive boots in a winter window display. In attendance is a “fiesta” of rich Jews:

“the trim skeptical men and their two categories of wives, all of them brilliantly educated, some of them successful professionals themselves, others still drifting on the messy alibi supplied by their genuinely screwed-up relationship with their genuinely screwed-up mothers, but all of them, pediatric endocrinologists, failed Tibetan wool importers, soccer moms and private school committee volunteers, recognizing each other’s clan by a signal from within an unfakable right for their chaotic anxieties and



complaints to take up space around them.

This isn't to say that Hollywood Jews' counterparts, Upper-Class Gentiles, are dead. Their ethos (or at least the ethos of those who aspire to Upper-Class Gentilehood) is lovingly enshrined, for instance, in *Vanity Fair*, with its wide-eyed revelations from the dusty alcoves of Kennedy history and obsessive detailing of the summerings, winterings, and fallings of obscure Eurotrash. (Though how I devour like stale-but-still-tasty Mon Cheri candies Dominick Dunne's dispatches about, oh, "Arch Viscount Fernando of Capri's 80th birthday party—he's a Scorpio!" featuring murky snaps out from which inevitably loom, like death and taxes, Barry Diller and the shiny gorgon head of Diane von Furstenberg.) Meanwhile, tacking starboard then port around Graydon Carter's fresh, startled horror over the latest outrages of the Bush administration (and I will miss those) are soft-focus ads pimping what appear to be blond, pink-argyle-sweater-clad, Ralph Lauren—fraternity Hitler Youth who look 30 seconds away from clubbing me (a light-mocha-hued person) over the head with an oar, or perhaps with a Nautica-logo polo mallet, sunglasses by Fendi.

Magazine reading for Middles, though (moving the goalposts in from both coasts), is best defined by the literary output of staid airlines such as Southwest, Delta, and Continental (as opposed to the more edgily cosmopolitan JetBlue and Virgin). Luxuriously Middle are those sumptuous photo ads for restaurants like Ruth's Chris Steak House (Why two names?) featuring mute, glistening hillocks of beef. (What is it about a close-up of a filet's dewy, reddened inside that so tempts the in-flight reader?) And how exquisitely State Farm Middle Manager are the matchmaking ads of Selective Search and It's Just Lunch!, with their come-hither phalanxes of kitten-nosed executive female "lunch directors"? Their unquestioned queen, I've ferreted out, is President Barbie Adler, with her strangely hypnotic execu-speak about eliminating "the pain points" in the dating process, as though the solution to contemporary romance is a Tucson-based chiropractic laser procedure performed on tibiae thrown out in racquetball.

Fussell believed in escape pod from this tyranny of classhood: residence in a special American psycho-emotional space called "category X." (Fussell borrowed his notion from Matthew Arnold's analysis of the three British classes—even a century earlier, Arnold was describing this fourth set of "aliens.") Fussell's Xs were essentially bohemians, the young people who flocked to cities in search of "art," "writing," and "creative work," ideally without a supervisor. Xs disregarded authority; they dressed down on every occasion; they drank no-name liquor ("Beefeater Gin and Cutty Sark Scotch betray the credulous victim of advertising, and hence the middle class"); they wore moccasins and down vests (in 1983, Fussell considered L.L.Bean and Lands' End natural X clothiers); they carelessly threw out, unread, their college alumni magazines.



Roger that. Even today, I think one's relation to one's alma mater is fraught with haute-bourgeois peril. In descending order of coolness are:

1. Dropped out of prestigious college;
2. Graduated from prestigious school, never bring it up unless asked—then as joke;
3. Graduated from prestigious school with honors, bring up quickly, no irony;
4. Graduated, have become garish, cheerful head of alumni booster committee.

I say “coolness” instead of “class” because that’s how desperately I cling to my tattered X membership card, even as I creep toward 50 (What? Haven’t you heard? Fifty is the new 36! Clock? What’s a clock? I obey no clock!). Fussell argued that Xs wear T-shirts without lettering or only with “interesting” lettering, and it’s true that, even today, I treasure my—yes, cliché—Ramones T-shirt. But wait! This is not the brand-new Ramones T-shirt sported so conspicuously by needy soul-patched 50-ish alternadads at the Silver Lake dog park. If you actually bought the black Ramones tee the year it came out, the lettering will be so faded (as mine is), you literally cannot read it. It looks like a linty rag. So there. Granted, this sense of X superiority is an absurd stance for a fanny-pack-wearing mother in Desitin-smear-drawstring Target pants who never particularly liked the Ramones and who, like any obedient dog, now dutifully listens to public radio while driving her kids about town in a McDonald’s-bag-strewn Toyota minivan. However, I believe it is the very je-ne-sais-quoi boldness with which I saucily steer my bird-shit-bedecked “ride” into scattering flocks of L.A. valet parkers that marks the true rebel. As Fussell puts it:

When an X person, male or female, meets a member of an identifiable class, the costume, no matter what it is, conveys the message “I am freer and less terrified than you are.”

I believe the true X philosophy is to try to destroy “hipness” wherever one sees it. (Some 40-something mom friends and I thought the way to drain the pagan power from Burning Man would be to set up our own Jenny Craig camp there. And, if we get child care, we will!)

Sadly, though, rebellion is not the outlier stance it once was. Xs are no longer America’s free. By 2009, Xs are neither what Fussell called the “classless class” nor an “un-moned aristocracy” with the freedom of the Out-of-Sights, if without the bucks. (Note: tickets to Burning Man start at more than \$200.) Today’s Xs do not “occupy the one social place in the U.S.A. where the ethic of buying and selling is not all-powerful.” Thanks to the economic rise, over the past three decades, of what Richard Florida (betraying a wee bit too much admiration) calls “the creative class,” Xs now rule the world. Or, as David Brooks wrote in *Bobos in Paradise* (Bobos is short for “bourgeois



bohemians”): “Dumb good-looking people with great parents have been displaced by smart, ambitious, educated, and antiestablishment people with scuffed shoes.” Today’s Xs define themselves largely by what they consume. This is particularly well articulated, I think, in an *L.A. Times* home-section piece I clipped in 2005 about Brian and Gigi Levangie Grazer—think film mogul and writer/trophy wife making do in a modest 11,000-plus-square-foot home complete with little pads and pencils for brainstorming poised, as I pictured it, on every renewable-bamboo table. (Children: Asia and Lennon? Upper-class pediatric frailties: sugar issues, lactose intolerance, wheat allergies, Asperger’s, difficulty with gestalt thinking?—as opposed to the Old World ruling-class pediatric scourge of hemophilia.)

Charity itself is complicated when one hates to admit that one rules. Although old-school WASPs might tinkle their G-and-Ts while hosting an annual spring benefit for The Poor, the creative class will throw a star-studded fete to combat a politically fashionable disease, with celebs relaying anecdotes about personal frailty (as detailed in their candid new addiction memoirs). They can be rich and feel vaguely anti-establishment at the same time. *The New World* is all Richard Branson interviewed by Charlie Rose onstage at the Clinton Conference on Global ... Whatever—with a faint chunky mix-in of Third World Poverty. (The creative class usually prefers faraway poor people to the local variety, and always prefers the “ethnic” poor to the white kind.)

At network-TV meetings, millionaire 20-something comedy writers see how low they can go with torn jeans, T-shirts, and grimy Red Sox caps, while the only guys in coat and tie on the lot are the Honduran valet parkers. That grimy baseball cap signifies Harvard Lampoon alum, which opens the door to Hollywood comedy riches, in a process that can seem, to the uninitiated, truly bewildering and mysterious. X people offer jobs to those they recognize, by certain nuanced clues, as members of their creative tribe, which makes people fear that they might mistransmit a code—bringing us back to Fussell’s rubric of class being announced in clothing, lifestyle, and speech. What will best fire the small talk, and the resulting intimate connection, that invigorates the start of a pitch meeting? Mets cap? Cubs cap? Yankees cap? What if you went to UC Davis instead of Harvard—are you not as funny? What is the right note of irony to apply to your hip-hop speech, given that you are, in actuality, suburban, 33, and white? Oh, yes, the newfangled Xs now have not only the money, but also the anxiety. It’s easy to be banished from the land of affluent hipdom—especially now that the scratch that pays for all that hipness has been depleted. When I see those TV commercials of silverback Baby Boomers sprinting with vintage surfboards toward ever-higher-yielding money-market funds, I feel both Boomer derision and a gnawing dread that my own funds are not similarly accruing (and in fact they are not—but maybe, to offset the losses, Brian Grazer will option my book?). Although in Fussell’s day, the denizens of the middle class were the more piquant sufferers of “status panic,” today the most metaphysically



fearful group is, in fact, the Xs.

It's not just that Romantic Selfhood—Walter Pater's notion of burning with a “hard, gemlike flame,” which is the true emotional underpinning of bohemia—has become commodified. Fairly harmless is the \$4 venti soy latte purchased amid Starbucks's track lighting, Nina Simone crooning, and a story about Costa Rican beans that have sailed around the world just to see YOU! It's that Selfhood has its own berth now in the psychiatrist Abraham Maslow's “hierarchy of needs,” a generational shift presaged by American sociologists who, as early as the 1970s, posited that, while hungry people are concerned about survival, those who grow up in abundance will hunger for self-expression. In the relatively affluent post-Cold War era, the search for self-expression has evolved into a desire to not have that self-expression challenged, which in turn necessitates living among people who think and feel just as you do. It's why so many bohemians flee gritty Los Angeles for verdant Portland, where left-leaning citizens pride themselves on their uniform, monotonously progressive culture—the Zipcars, the organic gardens, the funky graphic-novel stores, and the thriving alternative-music scene. (In the meantime, I've also noticed that Portland is much whiter than Los Angeles, disconcertingly white.)

Further, as Bill Bishop argues in his disturbing, illuminating *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*, the creative class's quest for lifestyle self-determination has had a giant and, in some ways, deleterious national effect. In the past, U.S. migration patterns were based on economics and available jobs. By contrast, writes Bishop, over the past 30 years, “there was a surge of people who wanted to live in cities for what could only be social—or even aesthetic—reasons.” In Austin alone, the percentage of people with a college education went from 17 percent in 1970 to 45 percent in 2004. In 60 years, the total population of San Francisco stayed roughly the same, but the average house price rose ninefold, from \$60,162 to nearly \$550,000 (compared with Cincinnati, where the average house price increased from \$65,000 to \$145,000). New “superstar cities” (a term coined by the economist Joseph Gyourko) were “metro areas where residence had become, in essence, a luxury good. People paid for the privilege of being in cities such as San Francisco, Seattle, San Jose, Portland, Los Angeles, New York, Austin, and Raleigh-Durham because they wanted to live there, not because they expected an economic return. “

In short: The function of cities had changed. Their reason for being—and their residents' reason for living within them—was no longer to produce salable goods and services. The city's new product was lifestyle.

These locales became “consumer cit-ies”—metro areas that catered to the well-paid, well-educated people who moved there.”



Counterintuitively, an over-clustering of educated people in one region is not always a social boon. Citing the research of the political scientist Diana Mutz, Bishop shows that, startlingly, education is presumed to nurture an appreciation of diversity: the more schooling, the greater the respect for works of literature and art, different cultures, and various types of music. Certainly, well-educated Americans see themselves as worldly, nuanced, and comfortable with difference. Education also should make us curious about—even eager to hear—different political points of view. But it doesn't. The more educated Americans become—and the richer—the less likely they are to discuss politics with those who have different points of view.

In 2000, the research of Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, showed that the correlation between the health of civic culture and the affluence of the local economy was actually negative; the highest-tech cities tended to have the lowest rate of civic connections. I think of the Silicon Valley runner guy we met in San Francisco who, when we showed him a set of lost car keys we'd found on the path in Golden Gate Park, said: "I wouldn't trust the police with those. Post a notice on Craigslist!" For all of Richard Florida's celebration of San Francisco, the city has been hemorrhaging families with children at an alarming rate, because of the creative class's flight from public schools there. (Florida proposes some remedies for these problems in "How the Crash Will Reshape America," page 44.)

It will be interesting to see, now that the apocalypse has arrived, how various modes of American status-striving will be rejiggered, particularly those predicated on amassing large amounts of debt.

Never mind Fussell's outdated notion that sartorial fearlessness belongs to the sloppy-T-shirt X class; the insouciant fun will probably now belong to the few defiant outlying WASPs still quaffing Bloodys before noon and tumbling off the dock in lime-green-and-blue whale pants. Or to those highest of High Proles called pimps. (For extraordinary archiving of such, see the classic HBO documentary *Pimps Up, Ho's Down*, featuring an annual pimp awards ball with gents in elaborately tailored suits, watch fobs, and bowlers, in "fuck you" colors of hot purple and tangelo, who explode out of ornate Freddie Munster Model T cars.)

As for the Upper Middle and their betters, what about Tolkin's formulation of "an unfakable right for their chaotic anxieties and complaints to take up space around them"? That really is financially viable only for the real upper class (to wit, not the millionaire but the ten-millionaire or more). The first tower to fall, for middle-class families, will be that fiduciary meritocratic yoke, the expensive education. Increasingly, college tuitions are outstripping the middle class's ability to pay them. Although 20-somethings going



for “hard” educations in things like medicine (aka “the Koreans,” quipped a professor friend) may still see a return, the high-water days of the \$50,000-a-year liberal-arts education are drawing to a close. (I think of the Boomer parents of the Wellesley student recently trolling all of us—their professional associates—for an “exciting summer job” for their daughter. All I had to offer was babysitting. Inquired the Wellesley girl: “Can you send me a job description?” I wrote back: “BABYSITTING! \$12 an hour!” She took it.) By contrast, the life of the High Prole may start to look reliable, and good—have you seen what plumbers make? Can your Ivy League-trained nephew do that?

But perhaps these times of hardship will see a return of the true bohemian, as in the days when the Left Bank was actually squalid. Stylistically, some artistic people are returning to thrift chic (either Goodwill retro wear, or something akin to the party a girlfriend threw recently called “Bitch Swap,” where you trade around the rags you’re tired of). Surely now the honestly eco-conscious will lead a bold return to—gasp!—tap water. (Because what’s worse for the environment than drinking water ... out of plastic bottles ... flown in from Fiji?) As Starbucks stores close around us, what’s more nostalgically amusing than Folders Crystals? To save gas money, I’d forecast a mass movement from cars to cruiser bikes, but for that you must live in a groovy, bike-friendly (expensive!) city. However, listen for poignant, witty Frank O’Hara stories about transformative experiences that occur on public transportation (in the rain), on *This American Life*. As Borders stores shutter, perhaps we’ll see a reflowering of public libraries. In any case, unable to secure those astronomical loans, more Xers will have to start rubbing shoulders with The Other, living in truly mixed neighborhoods, next door to such noncreative types as Kohl’s-shopping back-office workers and actual not-yet-ready-for-their-close-up-in-Yoga- Journal immigrants. More members of a once-creative class may now have to live like immigrants, if not 12 to a single-family home, at least with roommates, or other family members—and not necessarily one’s favorites. Speaking of which, even the self-actualized may not be able to afford the heady liberation of divorce. Get the Rick Warren tapes out! Enlightened women may have to stay not just married but in for the night—what with restaurants being so unaffordable, home life will be all about the hearth, the candlelight, the guitar (and not a vintage Les Paul).

This economic catastrophe is teaching the Xers that their prized self-expression and their embrace of personal choice leads to ... the collapse of capitalism. Time to inculcate not those self-satisfyingly hip and rebellious values—innovation! self-fulfillment!—cherished by the creative class (a class, after all, that includes in its ranks those buccaneering entrepreneurs who’ve led us down the primrose path), but those staid and stolid values of the bourgeoisie: industry, sobriety, moderation, self-discipline, and avoidance of debt. Out with the grungy baseball cap (cheap on its own, but not so thrifty when accompanied by those other accoutrements of formerly affluent hipdom—the iPhone, the rain-forest-safari vacation, the richly appointed LEED-certified house)



and in with the dowdy JCPenney suit. The age of narcissistic creative-class strivers has brought this country cool new neighborhoods and an infinitely better selection of coffees and greens, but it has also brought shameful social stratification and a consumer binge that our children's children may well be paying off. The Xer is dead. Long live the burgher!

REFLECTION:

“Don’t You (Forget About Me)” lyrics by Simple Minds and theme song from the film *The Breakfast Club*

<http://www.simple-minds.demon.co.uk/lyrics/gp/dyfam2.htm>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pybSRca-cA>

The Breakfast Club video clip

Ending scene: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sv1I4q6lOpo>

LESSON PLAN

By Alese Affatao, William P. Nixon Elementary School, Chicago, IL

Finding Your Way to Acceptance and Accepting Others: The Difficulties of Fitting in and Expressing Yourself in Your Own Voice

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How do we all find a way to fit in and how does humor play an integral part in getting along with others particularly when there are differences of race, culture, gender, etc. involved? Additionally, Dumas and Loh choose humor as an effective way to inform readers about their lives. What other ‘tones of voice’ do writers use to inform their readers about their lives and how does the tone of voice enhance the reader’s experience in the personal narrative?

GOALS

The goals for these lessons are to have students recognize cultural differences of others and explore how tools of communication, humor and knowledge can bring them closer to people who are different from them. These experiences will happen inside and outside the classroom environment. Lastly, students will explore different ways to describe their life in writing and what types of voice will strengthen their personal narrative.

MATERIALS & RESOURCES

Possible films or excerpts from films that explore fitting in and being you: *The Breakfast Club*, *Remembering the Titans*, *Juno*, *Napoleon Dynamite*, *Freedom Writer’s Diary*, *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World* (you can find clips on www.youtube.com)



<http://www.simple-minds.demon.co.uk/lyrics/gp/dyfam2.htm>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pybSRca-cA>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sv1I4q6lOpo>

Texts for comparing the personal narrative: *Persepolis*, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, *The Things They Carried*, *Maus*, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oladah Equiano*, and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas*

TIMEFRAME

The activity will take place over of a minimum of four course sessions. Teachers may choose to do some or all of the sessions.

PROCESS & PROCEDURE

SESSION 1 & 2:

1. Students will identify Iran and China on a map. They will research these countries' background information such as religion, cultural practices, language, and foods. Students will complete a "T Chart" with this information, finding the similarities in Iran and China. (30 minutes)
2. Students will be paired with another student. They will complete each other's charts with information they might have missed. (10 minutes)
3. Students will individually create a cartoon. They will draw a humorous cartoon showing themselves relating to someone from Iran and/or China; indicating how their similarities and their humor bring them together. Teacher might use the cartoon section of newspapers to spark students' creativity. (45 minutes)
4. Teacher will inform students of the performance by Dumas and Loh. Students will read biographical and performance information about Dumas and Loh. Class will conduct a quick discussion on how they predict Dumas' and Loh's backgrounds will influence their performances. If this is a post-performance lesson, have the class quickly discuss how Dumas' and Loh's backgrounds came across in the performance. (10 minutes)

SESSION 3:

1. Students will read the reflection, "Don't You (Forget About Me)" lyrics. Teacher will then play the song aloud to the class. While students listen, they will circle the phrases in the lyrics that apply to the acceptance/tolerance of others and 'X' out the phrases in the lyrics that indicate the fears and insecurities of not being accepted. The song can be found on youtube.com <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pybSRca-cA> (10 minutes)
2. Students will pair-share their circles and 'X's. (5 minutes)
3. Teacher will show the video clip to students and ask students to document the



characters' similarities and differences in a Venn Diagram. Students may work individually or in groups. Ending scene: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sv114q6lOpo> (15 minutes) If time allows, try to show more of the film to allow students time to evaluate the characters as well as how humor brought them together.

4. Students will write an individual response about one experience they've had where they did not feel like they fit in with a group. Students will identify these fears and insecurities around their experience and they should be encouraged to reference the song lyrics and/or the film as it applies to them. Also, how was humor used to ease their fears and insecurities? This could be accomplished in class or given as a take home assignment. (30 minutes)

SESSION 4:

1. Students will work in small groups to brainstorm to come up with a definition for 'personal narrative'. (10 minutes)

2. Teacher asks groups to share out and then teacher gives the 'personal narrative' definition. Teacher also shares with class various personal narratives in print such as *Persepolis*, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, *The Things They Carried*, *Maus*, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oladah Equiano*, and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas*. (15 minutes)

3. Students will work in same groups to discuss how Loh and Dumas write in the 'personal narrative' style humorously and how their humor makes their narratives interesting to read. Students will also discuss how they as students would choose to write their own 'personal narrative'. This discussion should include a quickwrite/brainstorming/webbing for each student to choose a mode of writing for their personal narrative. (15 minutes)

4. Students will write a short personal essay that includes an introduction, conclusion and at least 3 middle paragraphs. They need to focus on the tone of their voice, choose at least 3 past moments that are important in the student's life, and write about these moments in a way that will engage the reader. Teacher can remind students that this could be the beginning of their college essay writings. (45 minutes or assigned as homework)

ASSESSMENT

These lesson plans can be applied to courses on language arts, art, music, and geography. Session 1 & 2 focus on geography and art. Session 3 focuses on language arts and music. Session 4 focuses on the language arts. Students could be assessed on their "T charts," their cartoons, the Venn Diagram, their written response to the song/video clip, and their personal essay. Please use student-friendly rubrics to assess.



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Firoozeh Dumas & Sandra Tsing Loh
Page 18 / 18