

Confession Is Good for the Reader: A Rhetorical Analysis of a Pedagogical Problem

By Elizabeth Wilber

“I would like to start this letter off by thanking you for helping me like reading more. Reading your book *The Confession* changed my entire attitude about reading.”
—REA0017 student in a letter to John Grisham

Imagine never having read a book from cover-to-cover. Then, on the first day of your first semester in college, you walk into a class titled “Developmental Reading II.” Already, you hate the course, you hate the teacher, and you hate reading. Then, the hapless professor tells you on this already overwhelming first day of a class you are bound and determined to despise that you will be reading a *book* – an entire book, in *five weeks*! A look of horror crosses your face as you listen to the professor extoll the virtues of this novel you know you will loathe.

I teach developmental reading at Palm Beach State College’s Eissey Campus. Most of my students fit the description above; they are in perfect juxtaposition to me – a bibliophile. A student, Erica, in the first semester that I taught *The Confession* summarizes this attitude best in a letter to the novel’s author, John Grisham, “When my Instructor Professor Wilber instructed the class that we had to go out and purchase your novel and read it I was not a happy camper. I’m not a reader and I don’t like reading anything doesn’t interest me so I was skeptical about this assignment¹.”

In my never-ending quest, I am constantly (and quite often fruitlessly) searching for a text that will mitigate my students’ intense dislike of reading. I have approached this lofty goal in many ways; I have offered a list of literary texts from which students could choose - an approach that failed because my idea of an engaging, readable text and theirs vary greatly. To better fulfill my students’ ideas of enjoyable literature, I have allowed students to choose their own book based on recommendations by people they know; I have utilized a group project that requires students to read a book, watch its movie, and create a comparison/contrast PowerPoint; and I have facilitated the guided reading of a text. I prefer the latter method because it affords me the opportunity to offer a close reading of a text to my students. Three guided-reading novels that have met with varied success in my classroom are *To Your Scattered Bodies Go*, *The Gunslinger*, and *The Confession*². Of the three, the most effective text in engaging students and lessening their antipathy has been *The Confession* because they embark on a journey with Grisham that appeals to their moral sensibilities in a setting that they can make sense of.

¹ All student excerpts were written in assignments or email correspondence for REA0017 between Fall 2011 and Spring 2013 semesters. Errors, if present, have been preserved.

² This article contains spoilers for all three novels.

To Your Scattered Bodies Go by Philip José Farmer is a science fiction novel, the first of Farmer's five-book *Riverworld* series. Its premise is that everyone who has ever lived on earth, approximately 36 billion people, is resurrected on a planet that is not Earth. The humans are naked, hairless, appear no older than 25, and have retained their memories of life on Earth. Some of the main characters are based on historical figures, including Richard Francis Burton, Alice Liddell Hargreaves, and Hermann Göring. Others include the fictional Peter Frigate, the alien Monat Grrautut, and the "subhuman" Kazz. The novel is rich in historical, linguistic, religious, environmental, and sociological detail, and much of the plot centers on Burton's quest to discover who has created the planet and why the masses were resurrected. I primarily chose this novel because of its pedagogical opportunities. As we discussed the novel, I had hoped to improve my students' meager background knowledge in the areas listed above. I had also hoped they would become invested in *Riverworld* and want to follow the main characters to the end of their five-book journey. I was wrong. In the years that I taught this book, to my knowledge only one student has read the second book in the series.

The Gunslinger by Stephen King is a fantasy/quest/pseudo-Western novel, the first of King's *Dark Tower* series. It is about Roland Deschain, a gunslinger, who is on a quest to catch the Man in Black. The setting is a parallel Earth called All-World, very much like the Wild West. During his journey, Roland encounters a boy, Jake Chambers, and later has to decide to continue to follow the Man in Black or to save Jake's life. The novel also includes flashbacks detailing how Roland became a gunslinger. I chose this novel because King is one of my favorite authors, and the *Dark Tower* compendium is one of my favorite "books" of all time. I also chose it because of King's name recognition; I thought for that reason alone my students would be excited to read the novel. Much like my thought process with Farmer, I believed my students would become so invested in Roland's journey, much the way my husband and I still *are*, that they would want to follow him across the years and thousands of pages to the Dark Tower. And again, I was wrong. I have had one student continue to read the series, though to my knowledge she has not finished it.

The Confession by John Grisham is a legal thriller and a stand-alone novel. It is about a young black man, Donté Drumm, who has been convicted of the rape and murder of a young white woman, Nicole Yarber. The primary setting is a small, fictional town in Texas, a town full of racial strife. Four days before Donté is to be executed, a man in Kansas, Travis Boyette, confesses to a pastor, Keith Schroeder, that he killed Nicole. The major tension in the first half of the novel is whether or not Donté will be executed, innocent or not. His lawyer, Robbie Flak, works every aspect of the judicial system in an effort to prevent Donté's execution, and Schroeder brings Boyette to Texas in an attempt to forestall it. All efforts fail, however, and the execution takes place two-thirds of the way through the novel. The remaining third of the novel focuses on the architects of Donté's unjust demise and what, if any,

retribution may occur. When choosing this novel, I believed that the surprising placement of the execution and Grisham's anti-capital punishment stance would engage my students, and, finally, I was correct! As students have written in letters to Grisham, this is the first book many of them have finished and also the book that has made them want to read more.

My reasoning for using both the King and Farmer novels is that I wanted students to read the first book in a series. I had many pedagogical discussions with colleagues about the efficacy of my reasoning. Others argued a better approach might be to have students read a popular author such as Jodi Picoult, an author who has numerous novels about controversial issues. In addition, as mentioned above, I thought King's name-recognition would be a selling-point. In a 2010 Harris Poll, Stephen King was identified as America's favorite author; John Grisham placed third on the list. Therefore, when I felt that neither King nor Farmer was producing the desired result, I tried Grisham.

I did not, however, choose Grisham on name recognition alone. As I was reading the novel, I realized Grisham's primary goal is to convince his readers of the injustices of capital punishment. I thought my students would be open to his message, and indeed, most students have met my expectations (as well as Grisham's). As I finished the novel, I firmly believed that most of my students would react viscerally to it, and I was correct. As a student wrote, "It made me think differently of the death penalty; it was a permanent life changing experience."

Why has using *The Confession* succeeded where using the other novels failed? Students' familiarity with the subject material and the emotional appeal of the novel are the primary factors in its success. Familiarity with the novel's subject material is important because my students are incredibly literal and lack aspects of basic background knowledge that authors take for granted. *The Gunslinger* failed because my students could not imagine the alternate world King describes. Perhaps if it had been more removed from their reality, they may have been more successful with it, but I think the similarities to Earth were too difficult for them to reconcile. For example, Roland's world has "moved on," and there are vestiges of our world – Amoco, "Hey Jude" – present. *To Your Scattered Bodies Go* failed for many of the same reasons; reading science fiction stretched my students' imaginations beyond their current capacities. Trying to imagine what the "grails" are in Farmer (the grails are containers each human has that provide food three times a day when placed on a "grailstone") confounded my students. In contrast, my students are approaching *The Confession* as Americans living in a death-penalty age, so they should have some of the background knowledge necessary to more effectively imagine it.

The Confession then, as the most contemporary of the three novels, requires the least amount of background knowledge. As Inge Crosman Wimmers points out in *Poetics of Reading*, a dynamic exchange between reader and text has been foreseen by the author; an author sets up a "culturally based system of reference" and the reader interprets these cultural codes (xvi). "What authors presuppose, then,

is a certain competence based on previous knowledge – knowledge from *outside* the novel. . . . Novelists create their readers’ competence *within* the text, through narrative and discursive strategies” (Wimmers xvi). My students have a basic understanding of the political and social forces at work in *The Confession* as opposed to the fantastical worlds of All-World and Riverworld. I help students create this background knowledge by assigning a capital punishment reaction paper before students begin the novel. This paper does not require research; instead, it allows students to situate themselves in the current capital punishment debate. By doing so, they then have an investment in the novel, regardless of their position.

Grisham understands that his readers approach his novel with what they believe is a firm position in the capital punishment debate. In doing so, he has to “read” them, and, in *The Confession*, Grisham reads his audience, especially my students, perfectly. He manipulates his readers’ emotions by creating an unwinnable situation for Donté: a villain who admits he killed Nicole but must be cajoled to tell the truth, a corrupt prosecutor and detective so full of hubris they will never be able to see the error of their ways, an unjust system that fights justice for Donté at every turn, and a protagonist who is so defeated he’s a shadow of his former self. Even the mother of the victim, Reeva Pike, is portrayed as an unlikeable martyr. Some, like book reviewer Laurie Muchnick, criticize Grisham’s approach, “You can almost feel Grisham grabbing your lapels and shaking you, saying: Can you believe these people? . . . The problem is that Grisham stacks the deck so entirely on Donte’s side. We never once doubt that he’s innocent or that Travis Boyette is guilty.” But my novice readers do not read the novel as so one-sided and predictable. In response to a journal question asking if the execution was expected, a student wrote, “I wasn’t expecting it, I was hoping Robbie Flak had something up his sleeve or they would believe Travis Boyette and stop the execution. . . . I always thought there was going to be a miracle for Donte.”

The primary tension in the novel is whether or not Donté will be executed. When I read the novel the first time, I felt pulled in two directions as the climax approached. As a copious reader of mysteries and thrillers, I felt Grisham as an author of this genre had no choice but to execute Donté to illuminate the injustice of the “judicial” system. On the other hand, as an empathetic reader, I did not want to see Donté die. Though Donté is a static character in the novel, the reader still feels overwhelming compassion for him because Grisham has created an unwinnable situation for this innocent man.

Hence I experienced split desires when reading the novel because I am a consummate reader of the genre; however, my students don’t have much experience with reading (as opposed to viewing) this genre, so many of them didn’t see the execution coming. The “culturally based system of reference” Wimmers discusses extends to knowledge of these genre conventions. Wimmers points out, “The most fundamental frame of reference in which we begin reading is based on prior knowledge of genre conventions— familiarity, for instance, with what a book is and what kind of book a novel is” (3). The familiarity with the genre of *The Confession* as opposed to the other genres is a key factor in the novel’s

success in my classes. Because fewer sci-fi and fantasy shows are available on mainstream television than legal thrillers and mysteries, students should have more awareness of the legal thriller/mystery genre. Because this genre is rooted in reality, this understanding of genre provides a level of comfort with the text that did not exist with the other two; though Grisham defies many of my students' genre expectations (especially with the placement of the execution), the novel does not hurl them into another world nor assail their senses.

The importance of developmental students' familiarity with a genre cannot be underscored because these students firmly believe they cannot successfully read that which does not interest them. In retrospect, I should have paid more attention to what my students enter the classroom *knowing* rather than focusing on what they could know. Wimmers agrees, "While the interpretive practices in force are important in shaping the reading of a particular text, the structural features and rhetorical strategies of the given text, as well as the reader's approach to it, need to be reckoned with. . . . In turn, the reader's awareness of genre conventions raises certain expectations that condition and thus circumscribe his reading" (xiv). I did not reckon with my students' knowledge of genre conventions when choosing the other two novels; instead, I placed my pedagogical desire to stuff them full of background knowledge³ above all else and lost sight of my primary goal – to lessen my students' intense dislike of reading.

One aspect of *The Confession* that lies outside its genre conventions and increases students' interest is Grisham's rhetorical purpose. Of the three novels, *The Confession* is by far the most rhetorical. In an interview with BookLounge, Grisham explains he became "morally opposed to state-sanctioned killing" while researching his 1993 novel *The Chamber*. In *The Confession*, Grisham is clearly anti-capital punishment, and every aspect of the novel is fashioned to persuade the reader to adopt Grisham's viewpoint. As Richard Burton expounds in *Forces in Fiction and Other Essays*, "Literature is one of the world's great mouthpieces for the expression of ideals" (102), and Grisham virtually shoves his ideals in his readers' faces. While his approach may alienate certain readers, especially those who are familiar with the genre or who prefer a subtle approach, Grisham's strong-armed tactics are effective with my students. For example, before reading the novel a student wrote in her capital punishment reaction paper that she was torn and unsure about how she felt, but she believed the death penalty could be used for those who are serial killers or mass murderers. After reading the novel, this same student's response differed, "He did effectively persuade me that the death penalty is a bad idea. Before I felt that only certain crimes

³ Ironically, perhaps, my students have learned more, especially about our current justice/incarceration system, while reading Grisham than they learned from the other two novels because both Grisham and I inform students of the facts behind Donté's wrongful conviction and sentencing.

should be punishable by death, but only after I ‘got to know the characters’ could I sympathize with how they could have possibly felt. When Donte died I was sobbing, for him and his family.”

As evidenced by the above student, Grisham evokes pathos in his reader in a way neither the Farmer nor King novels did. Students’ emotional responses to *The Confession*, as seen in letters they wrote Grisham, include “Even though I wasn’t happy about what happened to Donte, I always felt like a good read will have you feeling some type of way in the end. Whether it’s extremely happy, sad, scared or mad, and there were multiple times in this book when i ‘boo hoo’ cried,” and “I honestly had tears in my eyes and a knot in my throat at some parts and made my views on the death penalty change,” and “My favorite part was the most bitter sweet, tear jerking moment of the entire book, when Roberta was preparing Donte’s body for the funeral. I am a man, but that part had me tear up. The picture you painted was beautiful.” When reading the other two novels, my students’ did not have these visceral, emotional reactions.

As I read *The Confession*, I fundamentally believed my students would be caught in Grisham’s emotional, rhetorical web. They would not predict that the execution would take place, the execution and subsequent fall-out would convince them of the horrors of capital punishment, and they would leave the novel dissatisfied and in search of change. Grisham is effective; students who approach the novel with an anti-capital punishment bias are more vehement once they finish the novel; “My personal views on the death penalty have not changed. The glitches and flaws that Grisham exposed and speaks about in the novel actually validate my feelings on the death penalty.” The minority remain staunchly in favor of capital punishment; “Grisham did not persuade me that the death penalty was a bad idea because some people should be executed for the crimes they have done, and mistakes can happen including wrongful conviction and even wrongful death.” I also have many whose viewpoints have changed as a result of reading the novel; “My view has totally changed since I read this book, I believe the death penalty is a crime, its disgusting, and its so wrong.”

By constantly reassessing their positions in the death penalty debate, my students are actively reading *The Confession*. Grisham positions his audience as active readers in another way – the reader as jury. Grisham positions his readers as not only “jury” of Donté and Boyette’s innocence or guilt but also asks them to pass judgment on capital punishment, and he clearly wants the jury to rule in his favor! Grisham puts the audience in the jury box, tapping into their knowledge, recasting the drama in terms they know, and focusing on issues that are important to them – issues of race, class, and justice. As jury, not of Donté but of the antagonists and of capital punishment, my students have a vested interest in the outcome of the novel.

To bolster his case, Grisham positions his protagonists on the extreme end of virtue and his antagonists on the extreme end of immorality. Protagonist Donté courageously faces his own death, and

protagonists Schroeder and Flack are fighting for justice both before his death and afterward. In contrast, *The Gunslinger* has a protagonist who lacks virtue and is unlikeable throughout most of the novel. Roland often makes decisions (such as killing his lover and not saving Jake) that my students find reprehensible. In *To Your Scattered Bodies Go*, Burton searches for an answer to why humanity has been resurrected. However, students are not empathetic of Burton; rather they find his brashness off-putting. In both of these novels, students were not engaged in the protagonists' struggles, yet in *The Confession*, students root for the protagonists' success because they want the truth of Donté's execution as well as his virtue revealed.

The truth of Donté's innocence is not the ultimate truth Grisham hopes to reveal to his reader, and even my neophyte students can identify from the beginning of the novel that the larger truth is that of the injustices of the capital punishment system. As Wimmers explains, "If we believe that society and culture have set us up to expect, desire, and look for truth, then we cannot ignore this dimension of reading and writing. Nor can we ignore it if the quest for truth has been built into the text we are reading" (15-16). Grisham positions his jury to accompany him on his quest for his truth regarding our current judicial system. In fact, Grisham ends the novel with another execution (albeit of a guilty man) to emphasize the point that change will not be coming to Texas (or the country), hopefully propelling his audience to take up his cause. And some will, such as the student who wrote, "After reading your work I think twice before looking at a picture of a man on death row and saying he deserves it or even condoning death as any means of punishment."

In the midst of this oppressive narrative, Grisham effectively manipulates the reader's emotions by placing Donté's execution two-thirds of the way through the novel. The unexpected placement of the climax often confounds students, who wonder how the rest of the novel will unfold. In addition, students are indignant that an innocent man has been executed. Their pity for Donté has been aroused through the injustices he faced, the descriptions of his life on death row in Polunsky, and the knowledge that the true killer has been identified before the execution. The pity intensifies when a videotaped confession by Boyette is sent to the governor three hours before the execution and his lackeys choose not to show it to him; therefore, the execution is not stayed. Grisham has masterfully placed the execution at this point in the narrative for maximum effect. John Dryden describes, "Grief and passion are like floods raised in little brooks by a sudden rain; they are quickly up; and if the concernment be poured unexpectedly in upon us, it overflows us" (269). Many of my students hold out hope that Donté will receive a stay of execution, so they are stunned by his death. Students' reactions include throwing the book away, crying, and raging against Grisham and the judicial system. Their rage is Grisham's goal. In her journal, Aaron wrote, "My reaction to Donté's execution was unbelievable. My jaw dropped! I was shocked! . . . All of this was so unfair. . . . I was not expecting it at all."

There is no moment like this in *To Your Scattered Bodies Go*. The novel contains a few small surprises in its narrative, but there is no event that would cause readers to experience such emotion that they would cry. *The Gunslinger*, however, does contain a similar event when Roland must choose whether to save Jake or follow the Man in Black. As he plummets to his death, Jake, who had humanized the aloof gunslinger, becomes the gunslinger's latest victim in his quest for the Man in Black and, ultimately, the Dark Tower. As a reader, I could not believe Roland would forsake Jake in pursuit of his quest. I wanted to know why Roland has such a singular focus; what had happened in his life to make him so hard? I had hoped my students would share my interest and curiosity – would Roland ever achieve his goal of climbing the steps of the Dark Tower? Unfortunately, none of my hopes were realized. By the time this scene occurs near the end of the novel, my students were so disengaged that they simply no longer cared.

In stark contrast, after the execution, my students are thoroughly invested in Donté's story. Students read the first two-thirds of *The Confession* because they hold out hope that Donté will be saved; they read the last third because they're angry⁴. Though many students have a strongly negative reaction to Donté's execution, their curiosity and sense of justice get the better of them. They are so invested in the novel by this point they *want* to know if the orchestrators of Donté's demise will get their comeuppance, if Nicole's body will be found, if Schroeder will be punished, or if Boyette will be on the receiving end of justice. And, as Grisham has so perfectly manipulated them, they want to know if Texas will impose a moratorium on capital punishment. Texas does not, however, and Grisham ends the novel with the execution of a clearly guilty man. The concise description of his death is juxtaposed by the rich detail of Donté's. While Donté's execution is attended by his "victim's" family, his family, his lawyer, and Schroeder, Adam Flores is not so fortunate. "He had no witnesses, and there were none for his victim. There was no one to claim his body, so Adam Flores was buried in the prison cemetery, alongside dozens of other unclaimed death row inmates" (Grisham 515). And so, the injustice system continues.

That sense of injustice garners the most reaction from my students. For even those students, and maybe especially so, who fervently hate this novel, Grisham has effectively made his argument. For most of my students, their vehement reaction, positive or negative, to *The Confession*, is the first time they have *reacted* to a text – the first time they have "loved" or "hated" a text, as the student evidence contained herein illustrates. In fact, one student's reaction to the novel is she "loved to hate it." Very few of my students finish the semester indifferent to this novel, which is not something I can say for most of what we read. Dan wrote to Grisham, "I honestly wish I had never spent the money on The Confession, it

⁴ Interestingly, when asked once they've finished the novel, most students agree it would have been worse without the execution.

was truly a waste.” Yet Brigitte wrote, “If it wasn’t for this book I wouldn’t of known that reading is fun and interesting. . . . I’m glad it was the first book I’ve fallen in love with.”

Brigitte has fallen in love with a book; I could have hoped for no better outcome when I first introduced *The Confession* to my students. One goal I have always had for my students with any of the novels I’ve chosen as guided-reading texts has been to open their minds to the world of reading, and I chose novels I hoped would encourage them to keep reading. With *The Confession*, I have been moderately successful. Some students have gone on to read other Grisham novels or books by other authors; in fact, one student that I had two years ago wrote to tell me he’s read seven books since being in my class.

In the rest of Erica’s letter to Grisham, she writes, “I was like oh my God I’m going to have to read this boring book and I’m not going to like it at all, but as it turns out I loved it and I couldn’t wait to finish it. . . . Thank you very much for this novel and I will be reading some more of them because this was grabbed my attention and didn’t let go.” As Bernard DeVoto states, “The act of reading brings the novel to completion: it is not a novel until someone, someone who has no vested interest in fiction, has read it” (xi-xii). And for most of my students, who had no vested interest in fiction before reading *The Confession*, they now understand the power a novel can have on their lives.

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Meet Elizabeth Wilber



Though she secretly yearns to be a used car saleswoman living in Oregon, Elizabeth Wilber has found herself affiliated on-and-off with PBSC for 13 years. She currently teaches any and all non-math developmental courses. She is also a member of the QEP Implementation Committee and is cluster chair.

If asked, she would say she has many hobbies including dollhouse miniatures, reading, cycling, collecting art, and playing Words with Friends, but in reality, she's so busy explaining to students that Lincoln's first name wasn't "April Ham" (true story!), taking care of her three dogs and four cats, and spending time with her husband Michael (whom she met at a poetry reading) that she has no time for hobbies.

But as proof she did once have time to read, her pets are named Queequeg, Melville, Roland, Susie, Tess, Walt, and Tux, all of whom but one are named after literature (though none after her current favorites – Erdrich and Atwood). Can you guess which ones?

Answers: Moby Dick, The Gunslinger, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Walt Whitman