

Best Practices for Using *Outcasts United* as a Common Read

Over the past two years, I've had the pleasure to speak at over 40 colleges, universities and community-organized common reading events about my book "Outcasts United." I'm always awed by the extraordinary amount of energy, effort and organizational skill each one of these events requires, and I frequently feel guilty about not having contributed much to those efforts myself; by the time an author arrives, most of the hard work is over. So in the spirit of trying to give back a little and hopefully of making the lives of those behind FYE and common reading programs a bit easier, I'm compiling a short list of things I've learned over the last couple of years. The first apply broadly, and the next few apply specifically to *Outcasts*. – Warren St. John

General Ideas for Freshman Reads

1. Clearly communicate to students why they are being asked to read the book in the first place.

It may sound obvious, but students I've spoken to are often unclear on the aims of their freshman common reading program. Many may understand that reading a particular book is a good idea in the abstract – they just don't know why they're being asked to read it in the busy weeks before going to college. The most successful freshman reading programs – the ones with the broadest participation and the deepest engagement from students – are those where the rationale for the program itself is widely and easily understood.

2. Make it social.

Most freshman reading programs were born out of a desire to ease the transition to college by making sure that all new students arrive on campus with something in common. Group discussions and author appearances are valuable, but consider more casual gatherings – film nights, meals, sporting events, group art projects, volunteer projects – based on the themes of your freshman read to promote more organic interaction among students. Make sure incoming students know these events will take place, and they'll be more motivated to engage with the book.

3. Get involved in the discussion.

Students will be discussing their freshman read on Facebook and Twitter over the summer, the only question is whether you'll be participating. (The most common question you'll see on Facebook, by the way, is "Are we getting graded on this?") A few cantankerous voices can quickly start a meme that a freshman read is not something worth participating in. Be willing to engage the conversation and to make the case for your program before those voices can shape the overall perception.

4. Involve older students.

I know you're cool, and you know I'm cool, but let's face it – most incoming freshmen don't think we're cool. The case for participating in freshmen reading is better made by new students' peers than by administrators, faculty or authors. It's no coincidence that many of the most successful FYE programs rely on sophomores and upperclassmen to lead activities and online discussions. New students by nature look up to older students, and because sophomores and upperclassmen have participated in their own FYE programs, they can make a case for engaging and participating.

5. Get in touch with the author early.

Many authors have good ideas about activities and strategies that have worked well to engage students with their books. Others may have short videos or other media that can be emailed students, to help establish a connection with the material. But authors can be hard to reach in the summer, particularly if they're traveling for their books or on deadline -- reach out early, so you have time to implement their suggestions. Be mindful that authors on deadline have the disposition of rabid badgers, so keep correspondence efficient.

6. Clearly define the goals of author events and communicate them to the author.

Take the time to clearly outline what you hope to get from your author events, and make sure the author is aware of those aims. This is especially important for secondary events; most authors have a standard speech about the themes and lessons of their books, but for classroom talks or other general discussions, direction and clarity are helpful. The more clearly defined the subject talk (e.g. a talk about the writing or reporting process; a talk about careers in journalism or fiction writing, etc.) the better both for the speaker and for the audiences. Audiences need to understand that the secondary event(s) will be distinct from the primary talk, or in my experience, they are less likely to attend.

Ideas and Activities for *Outcasts United* Common Reads

I've been very impressed by the creativity many colleges have shown in developing programming around their selection of *Outcasts*. Much of this programming is centered on the idea of demonstrating the local resonance of the themes and issues in the book. Others are simply ways to create an atmosphere where students can get to know each other better in settings that relate to the book's exploration of the idea of community. Here's a list of ideas I've seen successfully implemented over the last couple of years.

1. Volunteerism

A major theme of *Outcasts* has to do with the impact a single person can have on a community. A number of colleges and high schools have run with this idea by using the book as the impetus for their own volunteer efforts. Some have partnered with local refugee resettlement agencies like the International Rescue Committee (www.IRC.org), Lutheran Family Services and Catholic Charities on food and toiletries drives. Others have reached out to the Fugees Family (www.FugeesFamily.org) to conduct student-run fundraising efforts. Others have partnered with local charities to serve disadvantaged youth nearby. Any of these activities provide a sense of purpose to newcomers on campus, as well as an environment for building community both with fellow students and with local non-student residents.

2. Film Series

There are number of excellent films that explore the refugee experience as well as themes of assimilation and community. Some colleges have put together semester or year-long film programs to help animate and deepen the discussion of the issues raised in *Outcasts*. Suggested films include *Gran Torino*, *Bend it Like Beckham* (about soccer too), *And the Gods Grew Tired of Us*, *Rain in a Dry Land*, *The Lost Boys*, etc. A good list of films about the refugee experience is available here -- <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resources/SOARFactsheetRefugeeFilmsandBooks.pdf> -- care of the IRC.

3. Food

Food is cultural glue, and many scenes in *Outcasts* revolve around the role food as connecting force between strangers. A number of colleges have organized ethnic food buffets in conjunction with books discussions, some by drawing on local refugee communities, others by studying and cooking various ethnic foods themselves. Food from Afghanistan, Liberia, Burundi, Bosnia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Iraq, among other countries, figures into *Outcasts*. For the most part, the staple cuisines of these cultures are easy to prepare and delicious. And needless to say – the promise of free or affordable food is a fairly reliable draw to events for cash-strapped freshmen!

4. Soccer

A number of schools have held soccer tournaments, for fun, as fundraisers, or simply social mixers. At least one common reading program sponsored a soccer tournament between local refugee teams. Others have held games between students and refugee teams, and others, simply intramural games. Soccer coaches themselves can be a good resource – they frequently know local coaches of immigrant and refugee teams, as do local resettlement offices. Just as soccer was a source of bonding for the Fugees, the game provides an easy environment for connecting between new students, their peers and their community.

5. Panel Discussions with local refugees

Many communities have refugee populations, often out of sight, who are eager for their neighbors to understand their stories. Many colleges have arranged panel discussions between refugees, resettlement officials, and professors who study issues of assimilation in conjunction with common reads of *Outcasts*. As with volunteer efforts or soccer games, these discussions are a great way to help student understand that the issues discussed the book are not limited to Clarkston, GA, but pervasive in many communities in our country. The easiest way to reach these communities and to find willing speakers is through local resettlement organizations. To find out if there is an IRC office in your city, visit <http://www.rescue.org/where>. You can also send an email to warren@outcastsunited.com and I can try to help you connect with refugee speakers in your area.

