In an era of increasing emphasis on standardized testing, it can be difficult to add the works of new authors to the high school English curriculum. But what if reading the poetry and fiction of Judith Ortiz Cofer, or the writing of other multicultural authors, “engaged your students in such deep reading and writing that their scores went through the roof?” In this practical guide, Carol Jago argues that the curriculum should embrace all kinds of literature because such a curriculum keeps students both engaged and challenged.

The writing of Puerto Rican American poet, essayist, and novelist Judith Ortiz Cofer appeals to students of all ethnicities because it speaks to a universal effort to balance the demands of self, home, and broader culture. This short, readable, and practical guide to teaching her work includes

- Several of Cofer’s poems
- Many examples of student writing, some modeled on Cofer’s poetry and some in response to her fiction
- Guidance on standards-based literary analysis
- A rubric for evaluating the reflective essay
- An interview with Cofer by Renée Shea

Writing like Cofer’s, which reflects students’ lives no matter what their primary culture, draws adolescents into literature and pushes them outside the “zone of minimal effort,” as they more willingly develop their reading, writing, and critical thinking skills.

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Chronology of Judith Ortiz Cofer's Life

Works Cited

Author
In June 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) issued a report that sent shivers down the spine of teachers across the nation. *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* reported that literary reading is declining rapidly, particularly among the young. Despite all the effort teachers had expended bringing young adult literature, multicultural literature, literature circles, book clubs, and “reading is fun” initiatives to students, young people still weren’t developing the reading habit. What were we doing wrong? What could we do better? In his introduction to the report, Dana Gioia, a distinguished poet and critic as well as chairman of the NEA, states:

> Although the news in the report is dire, I doubt that any careful observer of contemporary American society will be greatly surprised—except perhaps by the sheer magnitude of decline. *Reading at Risk* merely documents and quantifies a huge cultural transformation that most Americans have already noted—our society’s massive shift toward electronic media for entertainment and information.

> Reading a book requires a degree of active attention and engagement. Indeed, reading itself is a progressive skill that depends on years of education and practice. By contrast, most electronic media such as television, recordings, and radio make fewer demands on their audiences, and indeed often require no more than passive participation. Even interactive electronic
media, such as video games and the Internet, foster shorter attention spans and accelerated gratification.

While oral culture has a rich immediacy that is not to be dismissed, and electronic media offer the considerable advantages of diversity and access, print culture affords irreplaceable forms of focused attention and contemplation that make complex communications and insights possible. To lose such intellectual capability—and the many sorts of human continuity it allows—would constitute a vast cultural impoverishment. (vii)

I do not think teachers are to blame for this crisis. I do think teachers are this country's best hope for turning the tide. Advanced literacy is a specific intellectual skill and social habit. The earlier this skill is acquired and the habit established, the more likely children are to read as adults. Some researchers have suggested nine as the magic age.

Reading by Age Nine
When I was nine years old, Saturday mornings meant trips to the library. Living as my family did in an unincorporated area outside Chicago city limits, the public library was actually a storage room behind the local grammar school. The place was windowless, chairless, and bulging with books. A volunteer manned the dusty checkout desk three hours a week, fifty-two weeks a year. With no idea that libraries might look otherwise, I thought the place a paradise.

On my first visit, I went straight to the adult in charge. I hesitate to identify Mrs. Martin as a librarian, as it seems doubtful that she would have held any formal qualifications for the job other than a love for books and a fondness for children. I quickly informed her that I wanted to read all the books in the library. To the grand lady's eternal credit, Mrs. Martin didn't laugh. Pointing
to shelves marked with a Dewey Decimal system “92,” she suggested I start with biographies. For the next few months, I worked my way through a set of books whose titles began with The Life of ______________. I can still recall how the end sheets of each volume depicted a time line of the person’s life winding around the page. Pathologically methodical, I read the series in alphabetical order: The Life of Amelia Earhart, The Life of Mamie Eisenhower, The Life of Leif Eriksson. By the time I got to The Life of Marco Polo, it began to dawn on me that my plan to read from shelf to shelf might benefit from revision. Fortunately, Mrs. Martin had other ideas about how I could choose books.

It sounds dramatic, but this silly little library saved my life. Not that my childhood was particularly miserable or in any obvious way painful, but I simply didn’t like being a child. I thought all games were stupid and all kids in the neighborhood boring. The only people I had any time for were those I met in books. I mean, who can compete with the Scarlet Pimpernel or Tom Sawyer as boon companions? Had it not been for that makeshift public library, I don’t know how I would have learned how to be human. A few years later I discovered that I could apply for a Chicago Public Library card, and suddenly it seemed as though I would never be at a loss for a good book again. But though the collection in this “real” library was large and the building a clean, well-lighted place, I missed Mrs. Martin. How could I find the right book among so many?

Judith Ortiz Cofer had much the same experience as a young reader. Where I had Mrs. Martin, Cofer had Sister Rosetta:

The next week she handed me a paper sack containing Women in Love, Madame Bovary, and Wuthering Heights. They were public library copies; she had actually checked out two books that I
thought might be included in the church’s list of banned writings! All she said was, “Make sure you put them in the drop box by the due date.”

Of course I went home and lost myself in them. D. H. Lawrence appealed to me most, with his reckless immersion into language. Flaubert was too careful and precise for my taste. (I did not yet suspect that I had begun to read a page for the effect the words had on me rather than just for the juicy parts.) But it was the storm surging within Heathcliff that transported my imagination to places I wasn’t yet quite able to identify.

Sister Rosetta continued to feed me books, neither asking me what I wanted nor quizzing me on their considerable effects. Under her tutelage, I read Hawthorne, Poe, The Odyssey, the stories of Katherine Anne Porter, Dante, the Romantic poets, even James Joyce (whose Ulysses was totally impenetrable, so I gave up on it). And always there was D. H. Lawrence, my dark, mysterious man, and the Brontës, who, like me, lived on the small planet of circumstance and who spoke to me about boundaries and how a smart woman might take flight through art. All the words I did not yet possess were my source of secret torment and joy. Sister Rosetta’s was a reading list without apparent order, but it all came together inside me. My vocabulary expanded, my English improved, my restlessness doubled. (Woman in Front of the Sun, 8–9).

Cofer insists, “Books kept me from going mad. They allowed me to imagine my circumstances as romantic: some days I was an Indian Princess living in a zenana, a house of women, keeping myself pure, being trained for a brilliant future. Other days I was a prisoner: Papillon, preparing myself for my great flight to freedom” (Woman in Front of the Sun, 67). Reading offered both Judith Ortiz Cofer and me “irreplaceable forms of focused attention and contemplation.” It made “complex communications and insights”—the kind we both so hungered for—possible.
Still Reading at Nineteen
My students hunger for complex communications and insights, too, though they often don’t know it. By the time they come to high school, many are reading far below grade level and will tell you for free that they hate to read. They need help feeling human. Kids worry that they are the only ones who have ever felt or thought as they are feeling or thinking. Newly discovered desires scare them. No one seems to understand. The characters in Judith Ortiz Cofer’s stories offer young readers hope. All are somewhat lost and in search of answers to questions that adults have mostly stopped asking. All are sensitive and suffering the pain of a fragile person in a rough world. The following titles work well as selections for a literature circle focusing on the theme of Books That Help Teenagers Feel More Human:

- *Call Me María*, Judith Ortiz Cofer
- *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Mark Haddon
- *Ender’s Shadow*, Orson Scott Card
- *Lost in Place*, Mark Salzman
- *The Meaning of Consuelo*, Judith Ortiz Cofer
- *The Member of the Wedding*, Carson McCullers
- *Monster*, Walter Dean Myers
- *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Betty Smith
- *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape?*, Peter Hedges

You will notice that the list includes something old, something new, something borrowed, and something for boys. We need to get our students reading—a book every three weeks is my rule of
because more than reading is at stake. The NEA report unambiguously demonstrates that readers play a more active and involved role in their communities. The decline in reading parallels a larger retreat from participation in civic and cultural life. The long-term implications of this study not only affect literature but all the arts—as well as social activities such as volunteerism, philanthropy, and even political engagement. . . . Reading is not a timeless, universal capability. Advanced literacy is a specific intellectual skill and social habit that depends on a great many educational, cultural, and economic factors. As more Americans lose this capability, our nation becomes less informed, active, and independent-minded. These are not qualities that a free, innovative, or productive society can afford to lose. (vii)

Writing Reflective Essays
Inspired by Dana Gioia’s warning and the terrifying extrapolation that if trends for the dramatic increase in books published and the dramatic decrease in readership continues, in fifty years there will be exactly one reader for every book, I asked my students to reflect on Judith Ortiz Cofer’s experience with reading and to compare it with their own. California’s English Language Arts Standards require students to write reflective compositions that

a. Explore the significance of personal experiences, events, conditions, or concerns by using rhetorical strategies (e.g., narration, description, exposition, persuasion).

b. Draw comparisons between specific incidents and broader themes that illustrate the writer’s important beliefs or generalizations about life.

c. Maintain a balance in describing individual incidents and relate those incidents to more general and abstract ideas. (70)
I assigned students the following writing prompt:

Writing Situation
Judith Ortiz Cofer wrote, “Books kept me from going mad. They allowed me to imagine my circumstances as romantic: some days I was an Indian Princess living in a zenana, a house of women, keeping myself pure, being trained for a brilliant future. Other days I was a prisoner: Papillon, preparing myself for my great flight to freedom.”

Writing Directions
Analyze the point Cofer makes about the power of reading. What role do books and reading play in your life? Use examples from the book you have just read as well as from other books you read for pleasure and for school.

I offer these excerpts partly as examples of how students responded to this prompt but also to counter claims that boys aren’t reading. My students are. Grant Overmire (grade 10) wrote:

Cofer makes a very important point in very few words when she describes reading. She speaks the truth in illustrating how important reading a story is and showing the power reading has on one’s imagination. The short description of various roles and characters that can be easily slipped into by just picking up a book gives a good summary of what reading is about. The power of reading yields the ability to turn to a different world and assume the role of anyone that you feel like being. From becoming the world’s greatest warrior in Beowulf, to being just an insect on the wall in The Metamorphosis, authors act as gatekeepers, each one leading us down a different journey inside our own head. The styles of different authors hit the soul like different flavors of gourmet food. . . . Reading has the power to educate, entertain, and bring an experience right into your own room. I feel that reading will always have a place in my life and I will make sure that it stays important to me.
Almost a year after Grant Overmire wrote this, his mother sent me the following e-mail message: “I would like to take a moment to thank you for all you have done for my son. When Grant was little, he loved reading. In his early elementary years he read just for the fun of it. Somewhere along the line his interest in reading and writing was quashed. Your class re-ignited his interest and he blossomed. I thank you for all you have done to hone his skills. He now enjoys reading and writing again. Sincerely, Wendy Overmire.” Teachers don’t always know how the seeds they sow come to fruition.

Chris Pratt (grade 10) wrote:

Why read a book rather than sitting and watching a multi-million dollar movie? Judith Ortiz Cofer stated that books kept her sane and allowed her to be whomever and whatever she wanted. Books are a personal escape, a portal to another dimension. Reading enables us to put ourselves in the situation of the main character where viewing a movie only gives the satisfaction of seeing the director’s interpretation of the story. I owe much to books because they have taught and raised me, each with their own separate style and reasoning. When you watch a movie made from a book you think the way the director thinks because that is how he/she understood the reading. Literature trains our minds, whereas movies are simply for entertainment.

Sebastian Pacheco (grade 10) wrote:

Reading allows you to take up personalities which you are not. A brave soldier, a beautiful princess, even an evil president if that is what you fancy. Cofer’s statement about detaching yourself from the world is 100% true. Those with little self-confidence find shelter in books and help people of all ages escape. I think if you don’t read, you’ll go mad.
Eliza Smith (who went on to win an NCTE award in writing) wrote:

We read because we are human—it is in our nature to be interested in dramatic story lines, odd characters, a different era, etc., because we see ourselves in the text. . . . We look to books not for mere comfort and pleasure, but for the reflections of ourselves that we find in them.

Assessing essays that are both personal and reflective can pose tremendous challenges. How do you assign a grade to writing that is clearly explorative and probing? I don’t for a minute want to suggest that the following rubric answers this question fully,
but it helped bring consistency to how teachers in our English department at Santa Monica High School evaluated our tenth-grade final exam prompt that asked students to write a reflective essay:

10th grade June common assessment
Reflective Writing Prompt

Writing Situation
While thought exists, words are alive and literature becomes an escape, not from, but into, living. To what extent does literature set people free and allow them to live?

Writing Directions
Plan and write an essay in which you explain your views on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observation.

Teachers evaluated student essays using the following reflective writing rubric.

Reflective Essay Rubric

5

IDEAS AND EXPLANATIONS—These essays explore and reflect upon the significance of personal experiences, events, or concerns and draw comparisons between specific incidents and broader themes that illustrate the writer's important beliefs or generalizations about life. They maintain a balance in describing individual incidents and relate those incidents to more general and abstract ideas.

ORGANIZATION uses appropriate transitions between and
within paragraphs for consistently clear, smooth, and logical relationships among ideas.

STYLE is a “pleasure to read”—graceful, uncluttered, rich, and vivid.

GRAMMAR and MECHANICS errors are rare or absent.

4

IDEAS AND EXPLANATIONS—These essays explore and reflect upon personal experiences, events, or concerns and draw comparisons between specific incidents and broader themes that illustrate the writer's important beliefs or generalizations about life.

ORGANIZATION is logical and appropriate for content, but may not use appropriate transitions.

STYLE is clear, shows sentence variety, and uses interesting and precise vocabulary.

GRAMMAR and MECHANICS errors are occasional.

3

IDEAS AND EXPLANATIONS—These essays explore and reflect upon the significance of personal experiences, events, or concerns.

ORGANIZATION constructs body paragraphs that relate to the thesis but is simplistic OR relationships between ideas are unclear.

STYLE is functional but sentence variety and vocabulary are limited OR style is wordy.
GRAMMAR and MECHANICS errors are frequent.

IDEAS AND EXPLANATIONS—These essays retell personal experiences without reflection.

ORGANIZATION shows some minor skill but has major flaws—e.g., no controlling idea; poor paragraphing; redundancy.

STYLE has major flaws—e.g., simplistic, repetitious, monotonous, often unclear.

GRAMMAR and MECHANICS errors exist in almost every sentence and interfere with meaning.

IDEAS AND EXPLANATIONS—These essays present few or no ideas and explanations. They may be incomprehensible OR essay is too short to judge.

ORGANIZATION lacks paragraphing, is chaotic, illogical, and/or confusing.

STYLE has such severe flaws that essay is hard to understand.

GRAMMAR and MECHANICS errors are pervasive and interfere with meaning.

I am an unapologetic lover of rubrics, yet even I was perplexed by how to assess an essay like the one below. What do you do when a student is so clearly off the charts? I assign a 5 and
thank heavens for the gift of teaching students with such insight and wisdom. When I read the following essay, Molly's candor and insight left me breathless:

**Dealing with Death**

by Molly Strauss

Though ever present, the subject of death is often avoided by the living. However, even when ignored, it continues to take victims. My mother, Laurie, died of breast cancer when I was only 10 years old. Overwhelmed, I turned to literature as an escape. To my surprise, I discovered that instead of blocking out my pain, novels drew me into it. Exploring death in literature became therapeutic, helping me to process hidden emotions and thereby live more fully.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf documents the life of a functional, average family at their vacation home over two summers. Between visits, the mother unexpectedly passes away. The turmoil that follows paired with the family’s previous serenity is a perfect juxtaposition; it embodies the essence of death. Readers experience the total loss of control—the chaos—of a sudden end to life. Mrs. Ramsey held her family together, playing whatever role was required: wife, mother, and friend. In her absence, each member of the family must learn self-sufficiency, fulfilling their own needs instead of relying on Mother or Wife to do it for them. My mother’s death forced me to become my own person at an early age. Like the Ramseys, I no longer had the luxury of nurturance and attention. I resented her for leaving me to fend for myself. Instead of giving me relief from these emotions by blocking them out, *To the Lighthouse* helped me understand the beauty of my experience. As I watched the
Ramseys learn to take care of themselves, I saw my own “tragedy” as a gift. The loss of my mother forced me to become mature, and as a result I developed into a healthier, more self-reliant person. By thinking about the Ramseys’ growth as a result of death, I was able to see my life in a different light.

Emily Brontë’s portrayal of death in *Wuthering Heights* shows the effects of ignored grief. When Catherine passes away, her soul mate, Heathcliff, is devastated. Over the years, he fails to deal with his emotions, instead ignoring the pain. This failure to accept death, to accept that life continues after Catherine, turns Heathcliff into a bitter, unloving old man. His transformation served as a warning for me. I realized the importance of confronting emotions head on, and now reap the benefits. Instead of hiding my grief, I cry. And as a result, I can live without the hidden baggage Heathcliff experienced.

“Stone Boy,” a short story in *Points of View* by Gina Bericault, explores the repercussions of a freak accident. When a six-year-old child accidentally kills his older brother, his shock and guilt are enormous. These, in combination with his family’s uncompassionate reaction, destroy the boy for life. He becomes “stony,” unable to process his feelings. Guilt, though often irrational, is a lifelong disease. “Stone Boy” helped me understand that no one has complete control over life—that some events are no one’s fault. I experienced guilt when my mother passed away, though I had no control over the situation. Like Stone Boy, I took responsibility for something completely out of my hands. By recognizing that the “killer” in “Stone Boy” was not to blame for his brother’s death, I pronounced myself “not guilty.”
Literature has provided me with a way to understand myself. It is impersonal; I am able to analyze death without being wrapped up in my own experiences. Novels allowed me to process my mother’s passing. As a result, I can live without death ever present.

I think teachers are the luckiest people in the world to witness such wonder. I should send this essay to Dana Gioia at the NEA to give him hope. Reading may be at risk, but with the help of writers like Judith Ortiz Cofer, teachers possess the power to break the trend.
In an era of increasing emphasis on standardized testing, it can be difficult to add the works of new authors to the high school English curriculum. But what if reading the poetry and fiction of Judith Ortiz Cofer, or the writing of other multicultural authors, “engaged your students in such deep reading and writing that their scores went through the roof?” In this practical guide, Carol Jago argues that the curriculum should embrace all kinds of literature because such a curriculum keeps students both engaged and challenged.

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