

Summer 1999

# Review of A Novel Approach: A Guide to Using Literature and Film in the Classroom

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## Recommended Citation

Published in TESOL journal, summer 1999, 8(2), pp. 41 – 42 <https://www.tesol.org/read-and-publish/journals/tesol-journal>

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The reading series *A Novel Approach* supports a whole language approach using literature and film to teach adult and mature adolescent learners at intermediate to advanced English proficiency levels. The series is rooted in the principles of Fluency First, a whole language approach that uses extensive reading, writing, and small-group interaction to cultivate English fluency before focusing on clarity and correctness. This approach has been credited with doubling ESL passing rates at City College of New York (MacGowan-Gilhooly, 1995/1991). The first three titles in the series—*Being There*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, and *Fried Green Tomatoes*—are based on popular novels or novellas.

Using this series, students read about 10 pages per day of a novel(la) and choose short passages to copy and respond to in double-entry journals. In small groups, they share journal entries and help each other understand important aspects of the story. Each student writes, revises, and edits thousands of words, receiving feedback from a small group of peers. A special feature of the series is a video project in which students enact a scene from the book.

Each title in the series consists of a student workbook and a teacher's manual and is designed to accompany a novel (or novella) and feature film. The novels and movies are not included as part of this series, however, but can be obtained from their publishers or distributors, a book store, or a public library. The student workbook includes a brief introduction to the novel and its author; an orientation to extensive reading and journal writing; 9 or 10 reading assignments, each the focus of a 1- or 2-hr class session; numerous activities to help students relate the reading to their own experiences and to U.S. culture; detailed instructions for the video

## ***A Novel Approach: A Guide to Using Literature and Film in the Classroom***

**Reviewed by  
Martha A. Iancu**

### ***Being There***

Elisabeth Gareis, Martine S. Allard,  
Susan Gill, and Jacqueline J. Saindon  
Pp. vi + 110 (Student Workbook)  
Pp. vi + 62 (Teacher's Manual)  
Ann Arbor: University of  
Michigan Press, 1997.

### ***Fried Green Tomatoes***

Elisabeth Gareis, Martine S. Allard,  
Susan Gill, and Jacqueline J. Saindon  
Pp. viii + 83 (Student Workbook)  
Pp. vi + 85 (Teacher's Manual)  
Ann Arbor: University of Michigan  
Press, 1998.

### ***The Shawshank Redemption***

Elisabeth Gareis, Martine S. Allard,  
and Jacqueline J. Saindon  
Pp. vi + 98 (Student Workbook)  
Pp. vi + 106 (Teacher's Manual)

project; movie-related activities; and a bibliography. The teacher's manual provides a sample lesson plan, photocopiable quizzes, and answer keys for quizzes and discussion questions.

For extensive reading, a rule of thumb is that students can manage 3,000 to 4,000 words per day when reading at an appropriate level. The pacing of the nine daily reading assignments for "Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption" (King, 1983) is ideally balanced, with an average length of 9-10 pages each. By contrast, the 10 reading assignments for *Being There* (Kosinski, 1970) vary unevenly, from 4-20 pages each. Similarly, the 10 reading assignments for *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (Flagg, 1987) average 39 pages each, which would take 2-3 days per section to read.

Each volume in the series stipulates that students view the movie only after reading the book and filming a scene, so that students generate meaning from the text uninfluenced by the movie's interpretation. An alternative strategy is to show an excerpt of the movie first to provide a context in which students can guess the meaning of unknown words and thus increase their reading fluency.

There are two major shortcomings of the series' treatment of *Being There*. First, throughout the student workbook, each of the 44 different writing topics appears on an otherwise blank page, although students are expected to write responses to just 10 of them. Fortunately, however, this inefficient use of space has been remedied in the subsequent two titles by listing writing topics on one page within each section. Second, the teacher's manual misses a superb opportunity to suggest the topic of academic honesty by failing to mention interesting speculations surrounding Kosinski's writing, such as his suspected plagiarism and use of ghostwriters (Sloan, 1996), or to point out the contradictions that students will encounter in references and other publications as they undertake a library research assignment about the author's life (e.g., Student Workbook, p. 67).

The decision to adopt any title in this series hinges, in part, on the suitability of its

novel(la) and movie version for a particular group of students. This decision must take into consideration the teacher's personal preferences; the maturity, religious, and cultural backgrounds, interests, and abilities of the students; and any institutional or program restrictions. Each title in the series so far, as well as the upcoming titles *The Color Purple* (based on Alice Walker's 1982 novel) and *Stand By Me* (based on Stephen King's novella "The Body," 1982), contains references to sex or violence that may be inappropriate for some teaching situations. Therefore, teachers must carefully preview each book and movie before adoption. The publishers could significantly broaden the appeal of this promising series by also featuring titles of quality fiction written for older children and young adults that are appropriate for general readers.

Keeping this in mind, the Novel Approach series is a useful resource for teachers who are implementing a whole language approach for the first time as well as for experienced whole language educators. Each title provides a plan and supporting materials for a rich, literature-based unit. This series offers teachers a convenient and practical way to apply the principles and assess the power of Fluency First in whole language instruction.

## References

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