



Teacher/Viewing Guide

Arab American Stories – Episode 104

Alicia Erian

Novelist/Professor

Grade Level 9-12

Episode Overview:

Alicia Erian was born in 1967 in Syracuse, New York to an Egyptian father and an American mother of Polish descent. She received a B.A. in English from SUNY Binghamton and a M.F.A. in writing from Vermont College. Her first published work was a collection of short stories, “The Brutal Language of Love.” Her novel, “Towelhead” was then published to critical acclaim and made into a film directed by Alan Ball. She has taught creative writing at Wellesley College and continues to write novels and screenplays. She is currently completing a memoir.

In the episode Alicia shares her experiences of coming to understand both her father and his culture, and the difference between the two. She explains that her semi-autobiographical novel “Towelhead” was an attempt to deal with the difficulties she had with him and how she identified these difficulties as cultural. She speaks about the pain she experienced during her childhood, and then the acceptance and love she found from her father’s family as she grew older, realizing that her father’s controlling nature was not simply a cultural or ethnic trait. She also talks about the acceptance she found from other women by sharing her story through her novel. As people responded to her novel, she began to see that her experience was not unique, and many girls from many different cultures grew up with difficult and overbearing parents.

Previewing Questions:

1. How do authors draw on their own experiences when writing?
2. How can we find strength in the struggles we face?
3. How can writing help someone not only tell a story, but also find a universal truth and understanding in their story?

Vocabulary:

1. Memoir: An account of the personal experiences of an author.
2. Narrative: A spoken or written account of connected events; a story.
3. Creative Writing: Any writing, fiction, poetry, or non-fiction, that goes outside the bounds of normal professional, journalistic, academic, and technical forms of literature. Works which fall into this category include novels, epics, short stories, and poems.

Lesson Overview/Review: After viewing the segment on Alicia Erian, students should be prepared to discuss how our past can shape our future, as well as how obstacles and struggles can lead to opportunities and strength.

Post-viewing Class discussion: After viewing the segment, consider the following questions:

1. Alicia speaks about finding material for her novel and short stories from her own experiences. Art is often a way that people deal with their own struggles. Can you think of a movie, story, painting or song where the artist is reflecting on their own struggle?

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2. Alicia talks about struggling in school and ultimately finding her own path through creative writing. Have you thought about how the classes you are taking or are interested in may one day lead to a fulfilling career?
3. The segment mentions Alicia's most well-known work "Towelhead." Are there negative connotations to that title? Why would she choose that as the title of her book?

Journal option: Have students take a moment to reflect on the struggles that Alicia describes. Remind students that she speaks of difficulties in school, pain from her childhood, and struggles in finding a path for her future and college. Ask students to write about a struggle they may have experienced and how they either overcame it or are working to overcome it.

Activity: Write a memoir. In the *Art of Teaching Writing*, Lucy Calkins states, "In order to write a memoir, we need to see that literature is made out of the everyday stuff of our lives." In this activity, students will be challenged to take a memory and use the techniques that Alicia speaks about to create a memoir. Alicia mentions that memoirs are created using both narrative and analysis. Give students the following two writing prompts to begin their memoir:

Prompt 1: Think about a day when everything went wrong. It could have been at home, school or anywhere. Analyze the events of the day. What made it a bad day? Tell the narrative story of the day through a one page memoir.

Or

Prompt 2: Think about a day when everything went right! What made it a "perfect" day? Analyze those events and then tell the narrative story of that day through a one page memoir.

In a group or whole-class discussion have students discuss how the writing process (both analyzing and writing about the events) may have led them to rethink, accept or further explore what may have been a bad or perfect memory.

Explore online: Use the following resources to allow your students to further explore the topic.

1. <http://teacher.scholastic.com/writeit/memoir>
2. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5340618>
3. <http://booth.butler.edu/2011/09/23/interview-with-alicia-erian/>

Interdisciplinary Options Art, Career Education, Writing and College Planning

Common Core Alignment

- RI 7 Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.
- W3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
- SL1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.