



MEET THE STORYTELLER

Mira Jacob is a novelist, memoirist, illustrator, and cultural critic. Her graphic memoir *Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations* was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award. She is the co-founder of Pete's Reading Series in Brooklyn, where she spent 13 years bringing literary fiction, non-fiction, and poetry to Williamsburg.

Mira performed at a SpeakTogether student matinee at Edward R. Murrow High School in Midwood, Brooklyn, on January 30, 2017, speaking on the theme, “Turn the Page.”



[WATCH VIDEO](#)

GENERAL TOPICS

Use these themes and guiding questions from the author’s story to structure your lessons or group discussions. You may choose to share your responses to these questions aloud as a group or as a journal activity. If you decide to share as a group, be sure to set some speaking and listening norms, such as speaking from the “I” perspective, not questioning or doubting someone’s experience, and treating everyone’s story with care and respect.

- Discovering and honing your craft as an artist
- Learning to tell one’s story
- Skin, bodies, and identities
- Living between worlds or between identities
- The usefulness of pop culture when having difficult conversations
- Mixed identities, dual realities
- Reading as an empathy building exercise
- Radical Faith
- Windows, mirror, and sliding doors

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- In what ways do you exist in multiple worlds? Name your dual identities. For instance, Person X is afro-latina and raised in a homogeneously white environment.
- What makes a story worthy of being told or worthy of being heard?
- Do you ever wonder: “Why would anyone want to hear about me?”
- Why is it important to tell your story? Where does one even begin?
- What are the pitfalls of a Black/White polarity?
- What does it mean to be a racialized person?
- How can the act of reading build empathy?

ACTIVITIES

One on One Interview

Conduct an interview with someone who matters to you.

A Graphic Conversation

In the spirit of Mira Jacob’s book, *Good Talk*, create a conversation using words and images.

BONUS READING MATERIALS

“Mixed Feelings: Exploring Multiracial Identity in America”

<https://changewire.org/mixed-feelings-exploring-multiracial-identity-in-america/>

“Mixed Feelings: White Enough”

<https://changewire.org/mixed-feelings-white-enough/>

American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang

One on One Interview



In her story, Mira Jacob talks about the necessity and her ability to traverse multiple worlds. Through the example of simply going to brunch, she talks of witnessing her Black friends having a terrible time, while her white friends had a typical brunch experience. This can be attributed to the various stereotypes that exist about BIPOC (Black/Indigenous/People of Color) and white people respectively. These positive and negative stereotypes are related to the effect of **headwinds** and **tailwinds** in our lives.

However, one does not need to be an immigrant or a person of mixed race to exist between multiple worlds. We all have multiple identities and the way those identities function changes as we move from place to place. Even though we may hold power in one corner of our lives because of a given identity, that very same identity might disempower us in another corner of our lives.

The effects of headwinds and tailwinds in our lives create privileges and powers for some that are denied to others. But that power is not fixed. It is relative, it is contextual, and it is dependent on social circumstances. That means that while certain identities can be looked down upon in one circumstance, it can be a source of great power and pride in another setting. For instance, a person who is not a native speaker of the dominant language, in this case English, might be disenfranchised in a setting where native knowledge of English is valued, such as in a corporate workplace. But that very same person, as a non-native English speaker, is able to understand the nuances of the lives of non-native English speakers. Their community values their ability to traverse multiple worlds.

The power that identities hold is dependent on the value imbued in those identities by the external forces of society. By and large, our society has been constructed to give men more power and value than women. Our society has been constructed to give more power and value to white people than BIPOC. The same is true for cisgender people and trans people. A similar comparison can be done for all of our political identities. These power dynamics are constructed by society and are dependent on what is most sacred to every individual—our identities. That is why when events occur in the news, in politics, in society at large, we sometimes feel that the world is against us and targeting us individually. That’s the power of identity—it makes the internal external and it makes the personal public. But more importantly, our identities bind us in a shared experience with those who share our identities, and they connect us with all those who are disenfranchised.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What are some identities that may hold power in one circumstance but not in another? Explain.
2. Can you think of an example where one’s power may shift depending on where they are and who is with them? Try to think of as many examples as possible.
3. How can the knowledge of shared struggle be a catalyst for advocating for the rights and well-being of others? Another way to put it, how is fighting for someone else’s rights an act of fighting for yourself?
4. How might code-switching be a by-product of the way our power shifts depending on context?

Activity One: One on One Interview

In order to find out more about how our power shifts depending on where we are, you will conduct an interview with someone in your life. You can do this exercise one of two ways. You may choose to record your interview digitally. Programs such as Garageband, Audacity, or a smartphone Voice Memo app work very well for these purposes. Alternatively, you may choose to record your interview with pen and paper. Regardless of which method you use, spend some time reflecting on the interview. But before you begin your interview, however, there are a few things you need to know.

Good to Know!

- Treat other people’s stories with respect. Stories are linked to our identities. If you respect the story, then you are respecting the individual.

- Always ask for permission to use or borrow a story. Don’t steal another person’s story. Otherwise, you risk appropriation.
- Respecting someone’s story means telling the truth as they tell it; giving the characters in the story their full humanity; checking your own personal tastes, desires, and biases; give credit to the owner of the story; stay away from problematic tropes about groups of people or identities; approach the story with an attitude of service to the owner rather than how it will benefit you, the writer.
- Be mindful of the types of questions you ask. We never know where a story will lead, and while some stories may bring up past trauma, mitigate this by choosing questions that edify and seek to lift the storyteller.
- If someone tells a story about a trauma, treat that information as a privilege and a gift. Do not try to gloss over what they’ve said. Instead, acknowledge it with kindness and care by saying something like “I’m so sorry that happened to you” or “That sounds really hard” or “You must be very resilient.” Do not feel compelled to share your own story, though you can if you wish and feel that it would be received by your interlocutor.
- Interview someone who has more and/or different life experiences than you.
- Interview someone you are truly curious about and want to learn more about.

Instructions:

1. Choose the person you will interview. We will refer to this person as the interlocutor in these instructions. Interlocutor simply means someone with whom you engage in conversation. It is preferable to choose an older friend, family member, teacher or mentor, neighbor, or even your friend’s grandmother. You should choose someone who can speak meaningfully about their experiences across time and space.
2. Craft your preliminary questions. These are the questions that will guide your interview. As you come up with your questions, think about the things you know about your interlocutor’s identity and life experiences. Try to come up with 10 rich and evocative questions that offer opportunities to riff and share anecdotes.

Sample questions:

- What are the values that were instilled in you as a young person and where did these ideas come from? Did you learn these values from family, friends, school, or personal experience?
 - What is an adventurous or daring thing you did in your life?
 - What was your most outlandish dream as a child?
 - What advice do you have for a young person like me?
3. During your interview, practice mindful listening. Use your questions only as a guide and allow the conversation to go where it wants to go. Ask follow up questions and prioritize the flow of the conversation over your initial questions.
 4. If recording, after the interview, during the audio editing process, be sure to record an intro in which you introduce yourself and your interlocutor. Think of the format of your favorite podcasts for inspiration.
 5. If you recorded your interview manually, review and organize your notes.
 6. Conduct your reflection. In your reflection, think about what you learned during the interview. Were there any surprising parts? Did you enter with any preconceived notions about your interlocutor that were upended? What will you take with you going forward? Write your reflection down in a few short paragraphs.
 7. Share your recording or reflection with the group.

A Graphic Conversation



Some conversations, especially those concerning identity, are difficult. And those conversations look different at home with family, with your friends, in the classroom, and on social media. Sometimes, it is so difficult to even know where to begin that we shy away from having those conversations. Conversations about our identities are difficult for many reasons. One reason is that we are encouraged to define ourselves by our non-political identities. We are very good at talking about ourselves as gamers, athletes, artists, as brothers, sisters, and cousins. We engage in these identities because they offer little friction in conversations with others. When we talk about our political identities, suddenly there's a tension present: what if the other person doesn't understand what it means to be a black girl, or an immigrant, or queer? We risk being misunderstood, dismissed, offending or being offended when we talk about our political identities.

Why else do you think it is so difficult to talk about our political identities?

Other times, when we do have those difficult conversations, we can walk away from them kicking ourselves for not saying the right thing the right way, or not getting our point across. We walk away from such conversations with a feeling the French call *l'esprit de l'escalier*—the spirit of the staircase. Perhaps you know this feeling. It's where you leave a conversation with a feeling of regret at having thought of a perfect reply but only when it's too late. Fortunately, through the practice of making art, we can exorcise *l'esprit de l'escalier* and say what we mean to say, when and how we mean to say it.

Activity Two: Visualizing Conversations

You will be creating an imaginary conversation between yourself and another person who will be referred to in these instructions as your interlocutor. The instructions for this exercise are as follows:

1. You can complete this activity either digitally or with tactile materials (paper, glue, Sharpie). Once you have decided how you will proceed, gather your materials.
2. Choose your interlocutor. This can be the person from your One on One Interview OR you may choose another person.
3. Find a photograph of yourself. Find one of your interlocutor. You may also choose to use several different photographs of each person, or even ones in which both people are together. The choice is yours. If you don't have these pictures, you can choose images to act as a stand-in. Physical magazines, newspapers, and sites such as Unsplash and Creative Commons are great options for finding free images.
4. Choose the topic of your conversation. It can be a newsworthy topic, such as Black Lives Matter, political correctness, the efficacy of protesting, or why recycling matters. It can also be about identities, such as race, gender, religion, ethnicity, colorism, etc. You can also create your own topic, perhaps something that has been on your mind.
5. Decide whether you and your interlocutor are in agreement about the topic of conversation or if you are in disagreement.
6. Decide where this conversation will take place: is it in a public but formal setting such as the workplace, on a stage, or the classroom, or is it in a public but informal place like Instagram, Twitter, or the streets where passersby might overhear? OR does the conversation take place privately in the home, in a text thread, or via email? Your choice of setting, as you will see, will dictate what is said and more importantly how it's said.

7. Next, create the dialogue. To do this, simply start by having one person initiate the conversation. It can be as simple as one person saying, “Have you heard about this BLM thing?” You are only writing the dialogue here, so don't write down what the characters are thinking or doing or feeling, only what they say. Think of comic books!
8. Think about where you want your conversation to arrive. Do you want both people to end up agreeing at the end, agreeing to disagree, or somewhere in the middle? Do you want them to realize that each side makes good points, or perhaps they agree to form an alliance going forward. Or maybe they each double down on their initial thoughts. The choice is yours!
9. Once you have your photographs and dialogue entirely written out, if working digitally, create a new PowerPoint presentation or Google Slide. If using tactile materials, start with a blank page. Scan/paste the photos and arrange them in a way that makes sense to your conversation. Make it artful, like Mira Jacob does. You can even use background images to further illustrate the conversation or setting.
10. Then create text bubbles and add your dialogue to them.
11. You may end up needing several pages to accommodate the entire conversation.
12. Share your slides with the class.

Acknowledgements

House of SpeakEasy's SpeakTogether program features critically acclaimed authors performing on a range of themes relevant to teenagers' lives. Student Matinees take place in New York City public high schools and are recorded and used to develop these creative arts toolkits.

This creative arts toolkit is a collaboration between House of SpeakEasy Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and author and educator NK Iguh, made possible in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The Foundation holds the copyright in the audio-visual recordings of the talks, which is used with the writers' permission. NK Iguh holds the copyright in the accompanying curricula. All rights reserved.

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House of SpeakEasy would like to acknowledge the following people whose hard work and dedication made these toolkits possible:

- Peer reviewers Sean Denmark, Christina Olivares, Jon Savage, Aisha Sidibe, with contributions from Kathy Cheung
- Our partner schools on whose stages these stories were initially told
- The talented authors whose stories inspired the lessons in the toolkits
- The dedicated teachers who use these toolkits in their classrooms

We welcome your feedback on these toolkits and look forward to hearing how you have engaged with them via toolkits@houseofspeakeasy.org.

To find out more about House of SpeakEasy's other programming, visit www.houseofspeakeasy.org



Rachel Eliza Griffiths on "It's Now or Never"



Jason Reynolds on "Turn the Page"



Mahogany L. Browne on "The Road Not Taken"



Daniel Jose Older on "You Only Live Once"



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