Teaching Seattle Through Laurie Frankel’s *This Is How It Always Is*

This project consists of a set of lesson plans for a weeklong Seattle literature unit for local high school students, structured around a typical fifty-minute class period. The focus is on Seattle author Laurie Frankel’s novel, *This Is How It Always Is.* I tried to focus on a variety of teaching methods and techniques to cover various aspects of this novel, keep students engaged, and challenge them to think more deeply about this novel’s content, style, and form. Each day includes an exit task, to allow opportunity for reflection at the end of the day’s lesson and discussion. Many days include a ‘pre-framing activity’ to set up the day’s learning as well. I also included a backup activity for each lesson, knowing quite well that there are days when high school students just aren’t willing to participate enough to make a discussion or activity quite fill its time.

**Day One: Where I’m From**

*Students will be able to…* reflect on the experience of reading local literature and their own perceptions of the place they come from.

**Introduction to Laurie Frankel (5-10 min)**

* Welcome, class! This week, we are starting our examination of the novel *This Is How It Always Is,* by local Seattle author Laurie Frankel. Hopefully you have all started reading, if not finished the novel; reminder that it’s due tomorrow!
* Since it’s always good to have some context before we read…
* Laurie Frankel is the author of three novels: *This Is How It Always Is, Goodbye For Now,* and *The Atlas of Love*.
* She is the winner of the Washington State Book Award, among other recognitions.
* Her books have been translated into more than 25 languages and have all been optioned for film or TV
* She is a former college professor who now writes full-time
* She lives in Seattle with her family, including her transgender daughter.
* If you haven’t already, please flip to the back of the novel and read the author’s note. This segment offers insight from Frankel’s own perspective on this novel. Any thoughts you want to share?

**Introductory Creative Writing (15 min)**

* Everyone in Seattle experiences the city differently. One of the incredible things about reading local authors is that we have the chance to reflect on where we come from, and how that impression differs from person to person.
* We all have our own versions of Seattle. Take the next fifteen minutes or so and write about yours. Think about what areas of the city you frequent – what neighborhoods? Are there any significant landmarks? What about landmarks that wouldn't stand out to anyone else, but are important to you? How would you characterize the city to someone who has never been here? How would senses come into play in your descriptions? Think about all five.

**Creative Writing Reflection / Discussion (15-20 min)**

* Let’s discuss and share. What are some of your versions of Seattle? You can read what you’ve written or summarize
* One of the traits of *This Is How It Always Is* is Frankel’s fictionalization of Seattle. The story is clearly set in Seattle, but not in a neighborhood you could find on a map.
* What makes an author fictionalize the place they’re in – is this version still ‘true’?
* When an author writes about the place they’re from (or any place, really), to what extent are they shaping the place they write about, and to what extent has it influenced or shaped them?

**Exit Ticket and What’s Next (5-10 min)**

* Tomorrow, we’re going to start talking about the novel itself.
* Since this is a novel set in Seattle and written by a local author, we’ll begin with an examination of place. We’ll then move on to look at storytelling techniques on a large and small scale, then discuss characters and identity, and finish off by looking at the novel’s repercussions in the wider world.
* For your exit ticket, please answer this question: What are the benefits of reading local literature (if you think there are any)?

**Backup Activity: Read aloud and discuss the novel’s opening page.**

* What literary techniques are we noticing already?

**Day Two: Place, Continued**

*Students will be able to…* explore the role of place in *This Is How It Always Is,* as well as how place plays a role in fiction as a whole.

**Pre-Framing Activity (5 min)**

* Think about a place that is important to you. It can be as big as a country, or as small as a room in your house. Try to picture it in your mind in as much detail as you can. What traits characterize this place? If someone else were to describe it, would their descriptions be different than yours?
* If desired, offer students the chance to share with partners or with the class

**Frankel’s Seattle (15 min)**

* Since we all should have had the chance to read the novel by now, we're all familiar with Frankel’s version of Seattle.
* Look back at your free-writes from yesterday about your version of Seattle. What is similar and different about Frankel’s Seattle? Do you think this gives us information about Frankel as an author? Or because the story is fictional, is it more distant from her?
* Talk in pairs, reflecting specifically on your free-write, then we’ll share out

**A Novel of Many Places (15 min)**

* Since Frankel is a local author, we’ve emphasized Seattle and its role in the story in our discussion of place so far, but what did the novel’s other locations contribute to the story - the Midwest, Thailand, etc? How did Seattle compare with and contrast to these?
* Additionally, the novel is loosely divided based on the locations of the characters. How does place help to shape the arc of the story? Do you notice anything distinct about each section – how does the author shape each place, and how does each place shape the story?
* Split into three groups, with each group concentrating on one of these locations. (Seattle team, your challenge is to find something to share that we have not already discussed
* Have each team share out their ideas, then allow opportunity for further class discussion.

**Place Continued: Quick Writes (10 min)**

* To tie in our discussions from today to the topic we have planned for tomorrow, we’re going to examine how place can look different in different genres and mediums.
* Think about that place that you came up with for our entry task. You're going to have two minutes each round to write a description of that place using the style I give you.
* Important note: I’m not looking for quality of writing here as much as evidence of creative thinking about both places and genres.
* Ready? Go!
* The cheesiest tourist brochure
* Sweeping, epic, Lord-of-the-Rings-style fantasy
* YA dystopian novel
* Introductory sequence of a rom-com
* Campfire-style scary/horror story
* How did your descriptions chance each time – what writing techniques were different? How did the place come across similarly or differently?

**Exit Ticket (5 min)**

* For your exit ticket today, please take a moment to add or change anything you want to your creative writing exercise from yesterday, then turn them in to me.

**Backup Activity: Mapping Seattle**

* Authors sometimes include elements within their books that are not part of the text of the novel, but still contribute to the story as a whole. These segments are known as paratext. One example of a kind of paratext related to place is maps.
* Imagine you’re making a map to be included in the front of *This Is How It Always Is*. What would the scope of your map be? What locations would you choose to include and why? Would you have one map, or multiple?
* *If time…* Now think about your own version of Seattle, or another significant place in your life. If you were to write your life story up until this point, what would the accompanying map look like? What locations would you include? Are there any you would choose to omit?

**Day Three: Storytelling Techniques**

*Students will be able to…* think about various techniques of genre and storytelling and how and why a writer might apply these.

**Pre-framing Activity (5 min)**

* What are some fairy tales you remember as significant to you in childhood? Common or obscure. Call them out!
* What are some aspects of these fairytales that made them memorable or significant?

**Penn’s Stories (20 min)**

* The father in the novel, Penn, is an aspiring author who uses fairytales about his own characters (Grumwald and Princess Stephanie) as a way to communicate lessons to his children that he finds too difficult to talk about otherwise. The author employs these tales as a narrative technique, perhaps drawing attention to the power of stories in teaching lessons to children.
* What effect did Penn’s stories have on your perceptions of the novel as a whole? On its themes specifically? As a narrative tactic?
* Divide into groups, and select one of the stories Penn tells. Examine it in terms of both content (what does it bring to the novel’s plot? Character development?) and form (what writing and narrative techniques does the author employ?)
* (*After about five to seven minutes for groups to talk)* - Let’s come back together and share our ideas. Will a representative from each group summarize what you talked about?
* Are there any other writing or storytelling techniques in this novel that you found particularly compelling?

**Techniques of the Novel and Beyond (20 min)**

* Sometimes when reading, we’re prone to forget that novels are a very specific form of literature, crafted according to stylistic techniques just like any other artistic form. Because of this obliviousness to the novel as a form, we don’t always examine the effect of these techniques.
* Divide into groups again. I’m going to assign each group a different artistic medium. Discuss amongst yourself how a change in genre would affect this work. What are traits of this new genre that would need to be incorporated? What would remain the same in this adaptation? What would be different? In your opinion, would this novel translate well to this new artistic form?
* Form ideas: movie/film, TV show, poetry/novel in verse, graphic novel, stage play or musical
* Would our groups be willing to share their ideas?

**Exit Ticket (5 min)**

* Think about the stories we’ve examined today. Now think about a lesson you learned (or wish you’d learned) in childhood. Write down an idea for / the opening of an original fairytale you could use to teach this lesson.

**Backup Activity: Close Reading of a Passage**

* Pick a favorite page to a paragraph from the novel so far. What stands out about it to you? What techniques of the novel has the author employed? Can you define why you like it or what draws you to it? Jot down your ideas.

**Day Four: Character and Identity**

*Students will be able to…* examine the role of character in *This Is How It Always Is*, and make connections to the novel’s broader theme of identity.

**Pre-framing Activity (5 min)**

* What are some of your favorite fictional characters – name and what they’re from? Shout them out!
* Why do you like these characters – what draws you to them?

**Creative Writing Exercise (20 min)**

* Characters are a large part of what draws us to stories. Characters help us to connect with stories, to see ourselves in pages and adventures, or to learn about perspectives and experiences that are different from our own. Stories teach us how to empathize – and this is the skill I want to practice now.
* Pick a character from the novel and try writing a paragraph in their voice. Think about the vocabulary they would use, the way they would phrase things. Are their sentences long or short? Are their ideas complex or simple? What do they care about and value most? What challenges have they faced? How does this show in their speech or narration?
* *(Allow 5-10 minutes for students to complete this task)*
* What did you notice when writing from the point of view of your character? What techniques did you employ?
* What did this exercise show you about how authors explore and distinguish characters? What examples of these techniques can you see Frankel utilizing in the novel?

**The Question of Identity** **(10 min)**

* Though normally I don’t like to impose my opinions on you all, I’d like to propose the claim that identity is an important theme in this novel. Reactions or responses?
* If you all will run with my claim for a moment… are there any specific places in the novel where this theme appears prevalent? (You can list pages/scenes, or even just general plot arcs). I have my own thoughts, but would love to hear what you think.
* The most obvious, of course, is Claude’s transition to becoming Poppy, and her ongoing journey surrounding her own gender identity
* How much should Rosie and Penn have a say in Poppy’s identity, and how much is it her choice? To what extent do you feel parents should have a role in determining their children’s (particularly young children’s) identities? What about siblings, classmates, etc? Are our identities really our own, or products of the people around us?
* Is there an element of identity in the family as a collective? How does this grow or change throughout the novel?

**The Question of Audience (10 min)**

* Most stories are designed to reach an audience of some sort – rarely do they exist in isolation.
* What do you think the role of audience is on this novel? Who do you think Frankel wrote this novel for? How does this audience affect your understanding of the novel?
* Does a novel’s intended audience matter, or are stories just for everyone?

**Exit Ticket (5 min)**

* What character do you connect with or relate to the most in this novel? The least? How does this affect your perception of the story as a whole?

**Backup Activity: Character Conversations (10 min)**

* Find someone in the class who chose a different character than yours for the creative writing exercise.
* Passing a piece of paper back and forth, make up a conversation between these characters. Try to maintain the same stylistic techniques and voice as you did in your individual paragraph throughout the conversation.
* Would anyone like to share?
* What was easy/challenging about this task?

**Day Five: Identity, Politics, and the Real World**

*Students will be able to…* make connections between themes of identity in *This Is How It Always Is* and current events, conversations, and politics surrounding identity; examine reactions to this novel in its social and historical context.

**Opening Remarks (5 min)**

* Yesterday we talked about the themes of identity that came up within this novel. We also began to touch on the idea of audience. Today, I want to expand this vein of thought and examine the real-world impacts of this novel.
* I’d like to preface this class with a reminder of the importance of respect when it comes to others’ worldviews. Different people are going to have different opinions, and that is okay. If conversation is not civil, it will have to cease. If there are any questions about this policy, I would be happy to discuss them with you personally.

**Scavenger Hunt (15-20 min)**

* Art almost always elicits a response, especially art like this novel, centered around such a prevalent topic in present-day American politics as gender identity.
* My task for you is to take the next five to ten minutes to go online and find some of the reactions to this novel. This could be New York Times book reviews, comments on Common Sense Media, or anything in between. Try to find a multitude of viewpoints and perspectives if possible (do try to keep anything you find PG).
* I particularly challenge you to examine local sources – independent bookstore websites (Third Place Books, University Bookstore, and Elliot Bay Books might be good spots to start), book reviews in the Seattle Times or The Stranger, etc. How do local sources differ from national ones in their opinions of this book?
* *(After they’ve had time to search)* - What were some reactions, reviews, or comments you found? Did any surprise you?
* This conversation should lead into the next discussion section, below.

**Discussion (15-20 min)**

* Let’s take some time now to discuss the politics surrounding this novel.
* First of all, are there any questions about the social and historical context of this novel? What aspects or views of the world we live in might make it controversial?
* I will try to answer questions and clarify as best I can, or someone more informed than me can chime in.
* Potential Discussion Questions to Expand:
* Should *This Is How It Always Is* be considered a political novel? Why or why not?
* What do you think the role of art is in interacting with politically fraught issues – is it a right? A responsibility? Something to be discouraged?

**Conclusions and Exit Task (5-10 min)**

* We’re coming to the end of our unit on this novel. I’ve tried to give you a chance to dive deep by close-reading segments of this novel, and think broadly by placing this novel in both its literary and societal context.
* Speaking of which, what is your perception of this novel’s context? How does it appear as a Seattle novel vs. an American novel? How does place affect our perceptions?
* Any final thoughts as we’re wrapping up?
* For your exit task today, please write a few sentences answering this question: Considering all we’ve studied and talked about, why do you think we took the time to read this novel? Why was it important? (or was it important?)

References:

<https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/block-scheduling/> - used for ideas for teaching tactics and structure of a daily schedule

<http://www.lauriefrankel.net> - used for background information about Laurie Frankel and her work