S

ometimes things get out of hand. How it all started, this sleaze business, was one day a month or so ago during our opening minutes of class. That’s when I ask, “Who has anything to say?” and they report whatever it is. Like, after Thanksgiving, Aaron said, “Why is the food at Thanksgiving always cold?” and somebody followed with, “Yeah, and why is there never enough gravy?” Justin growled from his corner, “I don’t like to eat in groups; I always feel like guarding my food.” Often, these little talks lead to fruitful writing/discussion sessions; in this case, we wrote about what we prefer to do alone, once the snickers subsided. This one day, though, somebody regaled us with an account of a flasher she had encountered over the weekend, and somebody else said, “That’s sleazy.” A few days later, Keith said, “Will you read us selected passages from this?” He held up Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*. “Sure. Which passages?” I said. “I’ll mark them,” said Keith, “and bring it back in.”

Sleaze became a leitmotif. One day Corinna turned her back to me and became absorbed in something behind her. Since Eli sits behind her, and since past experience has taught me that, whenever Corinna’s back is turned she is laughing, I wandered over. Eli was smoothing out the wrinkles in a photograph he removed from a magazine; the photograph was of Paulina, a model Eli has confessed to lusting after. As he smoothed and smoothed, he said, “And then her tongue goes all over every part of my body.”

“Some fantasies are total sleaze,” somebody said.

“No, they aren’t; fantasies are good, even rape fantasies, because the person creates them in their mind and they have control over them.”

“Wait a minute, I found a book in my mom’s closet, *Women on Top*, I think it was; some of those fantasies, I don’t know.”

Jennifer said, “I read that; women’s fantasies have changed; we have more power now.”

“I saw that author on Joan Rivers,” said Kristin.

“How could you? She’s on at ten in the morning.”

“I was sick.”

“Sure you were.”

And so it goes.

Then, about a week later, we were talking about what we were reading, other than school stuff, and Kim said, “I’m embarrassed to say this, but,” and she held up a big thick book, “I’m reading this.” It was Julia Phillips’ *You’ll Never Eat Lunch In This Town Again*. We wanted to know why she was embarrassed and, after some encouragement, she agreed to read. It was a passage in which two people were having sex and doing coke.
"That’s sleazy," I said. "No, it’s not," said Chris. "It doesn’t show any sex, it just tells they were doing it."
"So what’s sleazy?" I asked. Right then I bid a silent goodbye to my lesson plan book, which had something in it about semicolons, and we were off.

I should say right here that I have a horror of being one of those teachers the kids describe thusly: "Oh, you can get her off the track so easy, you hardly ever have to do any work in there." What’s different in our class is that no one is ever quite sure what the track is. So we don’t really go off, we just get going, we make our own track which, admittedly, can get pretty curvy but which, I like to think, eventually lands us somewhere and provides some great scenery along the way. In this case, our engine is stoked which I can tell because Steve has taken his cap all the way off. Last week I asked Steve why he always turned his cap around backwards when he came to this class. "Are you a gang member?" I asked. "Are you signaling for violence?" "Naw," said Steve. "I turn it around so I can sleep; I can’t put my head on my desk with my cap frontways." Oh. But today, Steve is barehead. Full steam ahead, I say, and don’t spare the horses.

"Give me some examples of sleaze," I say and turn to the board, chalk in hand, ready to take dictation.

"Guys with hairy chests and gold chains."
"Phone sex."
"Child abuse."
"No, that’s beyond sleaze."
"Cheating on your spouse."
"What if your spouse is cheating on you?"
"Then it’s not sleaze. No wait, they’re both sleaze."
"Huh uh...if you deserve it, it’s not."
"You can’t hurt anybody, else it’s beyond sleaze."
"What if they like to get hurt?"
"Yeah, like guys who turn into girls. That’s sleazy."
"Not necessarily. Who are they bothering?"
"Whips and chains."
"Yeah!"

The bell rings.

Pedagogically speaking, I can certify that student interest was high; well over ninety percent of the class participated in the discussion, and we were all on task for a solid fifty minutes. Experts, take note.

Next day, before school, Erin comes in with Jean Auel’s Plains of Passage. "Would you read this?" she opens to a marked passage. "I was wondering if it’s sleaze. I read it to my mother last night, and she said..." Hey, now, how much of what goes on in class gets home to the parents? But here we have parent involvement, for sure. I read the passage. "Bring this to class on Thursday," I say. In an effort to maintain some sort of professional control, I have set aside Thursdays in my lesson plan book for this topic. "Let’s see what the rest of the class thinks." "Okay," says Erin, "my mother says it isn’t sleaze but she can’t think what it is."
"Explosive?" I ask. "Yeah," says Erin, "That’s what it is." The following day, Erin will tell me that Danielle Steele’s writing is explosive, don’t I think. Yes, I do.

But there they still are, all those examples on the board and all those arguments rebounding off the classroom walls. What is sleaze anyway? Maybe we could do a little analysis, a little synthesis, some inference and, oh could it be, arrive at transfer and application? Why not? Dr. Bloom, watch our dust.

But I shut up because I know that the surest way to kill student interest is for the teacher to push something too hard, too often, no matter if it’s sleaze or Shakespeare. It’ll come, it always does. And then the teaching: what do I do with "It?" More often than not, when I ask myself whether I should shut up or speak out, I answer shut up. The more I’ve been able to do that in my later years of teaching, the better my classes have gone. Not easy at first, but very rewarding later on.

Okay, so week three or four, Thursday, rolls around, Erin has forgotten Jean Auel at home, and here it comes again, sleaze. Somebody says something like, "I was thinking about what we talked about, that sleaze stuff?" And we are heading down the track again. This time, though, I am a step ahead. This time, I speak out, briefly but firmly, you can hear me. "Do you think we could get a definition out of all these examples? Do you think we could find a common denominator for all these examples and perhaps come up with an absolute?"

Keith strokes his copy of Henry Miller’s Tropic of Cancer, now marked with dozens of little strips of paper sticking out at me. "There is no single definition of sleaze," he says. "What’s sleazy to one person is not sleazy to another." People nod their heads.

"So," I answer, "what’s right or wrong or sleazy or not depends on the circumstances?"

"Right." Keith, having settled the ethics question once and for all, sets aside Mr. Miller and pulls out Siddhartha, curled up there in his backpack.

"I agree," says Rossana. "As long as you don’t hurt anyone else, whatever you do is okay."
Oh, yippee, we are off into one of my favorites. I race to the board — I am intervening, I know, but it won’t take long — and write “situational ethics” and “relativism” and “absolutes.” “What you’re talking about the thinkers call this,” and I point to my hasty scrawl on the board.

I can hear them: how’d we get into this stuff? Whatever happened to sleaze? Steve has turned around his hat, a sure signal that it’s time for me to shut up. Keith, though, writes something in his journal which rests next to Siddhartha which snuggles next to Henry Miller there in his backpack. Could it be? Could he possibly have written down that which I, the teacher, have placed on the board? Don’t get your hopes up, I remind myself. Better hand writers than you have stood in this very place without a nod from the class beyond.

The bell rings. But just before it does, very softly Amy, who looks like her namesake in Little Women but thinks like Jo, says, “I believe there are some absolutes.”

Week four, or is it five, and I am determined to bring this to a close. I want a definition of sleaze; rather, I want the kind of thinking that goes into getting a definition. So here it is, today, Friday, (whatever happened to Thursday?) and it shows. What shows is that today is my turn and I’m going to take it. It’s the last day of the week. I try to be cool, nonchalant, but they’re on to me, it’s December after all. I don’t care; I’m going for it. But wait, let’s turn to a higher power. I grab Barry Yourgrau’s Wearing Dad’s Head and turn to his page and a half in which the speaker tells how he took a job as a plumber and had sex with a willing customer there on the kitchen floor. I’ve got their attention, or Barry has it, so quick as a bunny I jump in with, “Is this sleaze?”

“No,” says Eli, “that’s funny.”

Jason says, “When a good writer writes about sleaze, he turns it into art.”

“No,” says Patty, “the writing is art, but it’s still sleaze.”

“It’s graphic, though,” says Erin, “but,” and I can see her wrestling with her new vocabulary word, “it’s not exploitative, I don’t think.” She will want to borrow Barry to read to her mother.

“All right!” I almost yell, “Sleaze lacks humor and is graphic. Give me some other stuff. We’re getting somewhere.” I stand at the board, lesson plan book in one hand, why I cannot recall, it’s empty, my journal in the other where for sure something will get entered, and a piece of chalk between my teeth. I am ready to teach.

Where have they gone? Steve’s head is down, Chris is drawing beasts for album covers, Erin is reading Jean Auel, Amy is doing her physics, and no one is looking at me or at the board. Only Jennifer and Maria look shyly at me, embarrassed for me up there all alone, forging ahead into the maw of the existential void. I stand there and write in my journal, “Enthusiasm for sleaze is down.” And then I remember it’s Friday, one more week till Christmas break, and oh gee whiz, do I really want to push this? Yes. I want closure. That’s why I say to them: “I want closure, it won’t take long, and I have a reward, this article in The New Yorker about Guns N’ Roses.” Aaron’s head comes up. I read them what I have written in my journal, and Amy sighs and closes her chemistry book. “Give me some definitions or descriptions of sleaze,” I say, “and I’m not kidding.”

We get quite a list: graphic, humorless, poorly written, offensive to someone, sexist, reductive (my word, vocabulary enrichment) to stereotype, often deals with sexual matters.

Then Charles, Charles of the Three-Day Stubble, Charles the Often Absent, Charles who early in the year described himself as without ambition, rivaled in that respect only by his mother, speaks from behind his dark glasses: “I’ve been listening to what you’re saying, and I wonder if a definition mightn’t go like this: People or behavior most of us would be uncomfortable with. Those who are comfortable with these people and behavior we would consider sleazy.”

Well, now we know the truth. Charles isn’t lazy, never has been. He has been storing up energy for just such a moment as this. He has galloped out of the Land of Truancy right here into our classroom to fight off and defeat Chaos, the Enemy of Thought. Charles has taken us up to the Kingdom of Higher Level Thinking Skills. We owe him a lot, not the least of which is that we’re almost done with this business of sleaze and can get down to earth, from where the weekend beckons.

But not yet. We still have twenty minutes, and, while Charles has gotten us free from the Monster Confusion, we’re only at the door of the Magic Kingdom. It is Tiawna who has the key. Tiawna is a beautiful maiden. She is shy, mostly silent, and a steady reader — of sleaze. Tiawna may be the Queen of Sleaze. She has read every single Sidney Sheldon novel ever written though she defends Sidney as writing really about power, little about sex. Now she speaks. “I brought with me a book my friend says is total sleaze.” We look. It is thick, a hard cover, a library copy. (We all agreed sometime ago that, while it’s okay to read sleaze, like
American Psycho, it’s not okay to buy it.) “I haven’t read it all yet, but it’s closer to Jackie Collins than to Sydney Sheldon.” We trust Tiawna. “Read to us,” we say. But Queen Tiawna does not read to the common herd. She hands the book to Stephanie, her lady-in-waiting, who takes the book and reads. It is a passage from Dark Angel by Sally Bauman. It is a passage about a man who likes his women begging for it, a passage that shows her getting it.

We are all quiet. The Magic Kingdom isn’t looking so hot. Is this where our journey has taken us? I’m feeling pretty sleazy myself right now. After all, while the track may have belonged to the kids, I fueled the engine. And now look where it’s got us. At the very least, it’s made me mix my metaphors: I’ve got the Industrial Revolution tangled up with King Arthur which is maybe what’s going on in my classroom; maybe I’m just mixing people up. As Wendy will write later, “I’ve changed my mind about sleaze; I don’t even know if it exists.” What have I done?

“Well,” I say, pointing pointlessly to the board. “Charles’s definition seems to apply here; Ms. Bauman’s writing seems to have all the qualities you mentioned: it’s...” God, why doesn’t the bell ever ring when you want it to.

“One last thing,” a not so quiet note of desperation enters my voice. “Please, please, do me this favor? Please write me something about sleaze?” I am reduced to begging and rightly so. “Okay,” — I am so mean — “nobody leaves here alive before he or she gives me a piece of writing. Okay, right after sixth period, then, but after that...”

So what do I think this will accomplish? I don’t know. I don’t know if writing about this dreadful topic will return good humor to us all. I don’t even know if it’s just me in the doldrums. Actually, everybody looks fairly amused. What I do know, though, is that I cannot provide closure for them or for myself. Writing will have to do it for us. “Do we have to sign our names?” somebody asks. “Just write,” somebody else answers back. This is what they wrote:

From Jennifer: Renee smoothed the red silk over her hips and lit another cigarette. She blinked several times, trying to clear her mind from thoughts of him, Rolf. Rolf was Swedish. He was rough and bold. He did things to her that no other man would dare. She didn’t love him. She just desired him! She lit another cigarette from the butt and blew the smoke through her nose.

From unsigned: My friend went to a Billy Idol concert and met a cute girl. They did it right there in front of a bunch of people and never got together afterwards.

From Kristin: Sleaze, Mrs. Juska...is a girl and a guy renting a smoky hotel room, rumpling up the sheets, and turning in the key at 12 the same night.

From Chris: Sleaze is leaning against the open passenger door of your car, on a freezing Thursday night in December, in the suburbs with occasional car traffic, unafraid of any consequences, while your girlfriend performs oral sex on you.

From Keith: Strangled, helpless third world nations, littered with starving, diseased children, at the mercy of...our nation’s ‘splendid’ capitalism.

Who says kids can’t write? Who says kids don’t read? Well, okay they don’t pick Melville off the library shelves, or buy him either, but then they never did. Reading and writing and the thinking that accompanies both have happened here in this classroom over an extended period of time. And there is some evidence that these activities will continue. Here is Aaron: “For my portfolio I’m writing a sleaze story about a sleazy guy out looking for the woman he can have sex with that night.”

Aaron’s note ends with:

Tied up, Tied down
Ass against the wall,
I have my rubbermaid, baby
And we can have it all.
My way,
Your way,
Any way goes tonight.

— G N’ R

I look forward to Aaron’s portfolio.
But it is Wendy's writing that sticks with me, goes home with me, wakes me up at four, and sends me back to it. Wendy is a wonderful combination of good looks, brains, and thoughtful concern. I have come to respect her over the past year and a half we have been in the same classroom together. So I pay close attention to what she says, not just in class, but especially on paper.

Here she is:

I've changed my mind about sleaze, I don't even know if it exists. Is it the psychiatrist who sleeps with his patients? Is sleaze the man (or woman) who beats up old people and steals their wedding rings? Is it the two criminals who kidnapped and killed two kids and ate their lunch? It could be all of these, yet it could also be none of these. Sleaze doesn't exist. Maybe it does under a euphemism or something but if it does, it is different for everyone. So talking about sleaze, I've found that I don't really know what sleaze is and I never knew. Sorry if I wasn't much help.

-- Wendy

She's right again; she wasn't much help if I had in mind getting a good night's sleep. She reminds me that teaching and learning have little to do with Madeline Hunter or Bloom and his taxonomy. She reminds me that, when all is said and done, teachers and kids inhabit a moral domain. And what is the teacher's responsibility there?

I believe in absolutes. One of them is that no teacher has the right to impose his or her absolutes on students. At the same time, I believe it is a teacher's obligation to help his or her students make sense out of a confusing universe. We have talked a bit about that, my students and I, about how hard it is to know what to do these days when, as Mike says, everybody is right. The animal rights people are right, sort of, the anti-abortionists are right, sort of; so are the right-to-life people, so is Greenpeace, so is the timber industry, sort of, sort of, sort of. No wonder Guns N' Roses speaks to kids: "My way, your way, any way goes tonight."

About all I know now is that my job in the classroom is not done. There is a new urgency in the air, and I'm not sure what to do. Shall I speak out or shut up?

I hope Charles shows up on Monday.

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