

I'M HERE (Red Deer Press, 2025)

Educators' Guide for Grades 8 - 12

prepared by the book's editor, Beverley Brenna B.Ed., M.Ed., PhD

INTRODUCTION

I'M HERE is an anthology of 19 young adult short stories, written by authors from across Canada. Submissions were requested on the theme of identity, and this topic features broadly throughout the collection.

The webbing provided in this guide includes various response activities, intended as a series of choice-based activities. Many of them are intended to be completed in a Reading Journal or kept in a Creative Writing Folder.

This anthology can be read sequentially, as a class, or students may be asked to self-select particular stories that match their topic and genre preferences. Interest groups can be drawn to facilitate discussions on particular readings, and students can also be encouraged to design their own response questions and activities, based on their connections to the stories and independent research on their authors.

History of the Work: The collection was put together over a period of two years. Invitations for submissions were issued via the Red Deer Press website, provincial and territorial media, and connections with previous Red Deer authors. Stories were received in the spring of 2024, and assessed over spring/summer of that year. A shortlist was devised by the editor, and then final decisions were made in conjunction with the Red Deer publisher.

Contents: Serendipitously, these stories demonstrate diversity within the group: they range from authors at various stages in their careers and from various parts of Canada; and the collection presents realistic fiction, including humorous as well as serious content, new takes on Greek mythology, as well as horror, adventure, historical fiction, and speculative fiction—magic realism, fantasy, and science fiction. This varied design was very welcome, though unplanned—our goal was to select the very best stories from the submission pool—and the resulting anthology will cater to a wide spectrum of reading interests.

Webbing of Response Activities	
<p>Art Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select representative visual elements from a single story or a combination of stories (a hearse... a musical score...a tree...a dress...a plow...). Create this visual display in whatever media you choose. 	<p>Considering Alternatives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select one of the stories in this collection and think about a change the author could have made (the addition of another character, for example, or the appearance of a new problem). How would the story have unfolded differently had that change been included? Rewrite it in that direction.
<p>Creative Writing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select one of the stories and insert additional dialogue to extend a scene or series of scenes—involving conversations between characters that hasn't been included in the original. • Use George Ella Lyon's "Where I'm From" poetry pattern (found online) and write a "Where I'm From" poem from the perspective of one of the characters in the collection. • Write your own story; consider voices/perspectives missing from the group and what you might contribute from your experiences. 	<p>Drama</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvise a conversation between two of the characters in any of the stories included in the anthology. Feel free to add or subtract particular details in favour of a dramatic whole. Concentrate on organizing the scene with clear beginning, middle, and ending lines. • Work with a small group to present tableaux of at least two different stories, and enlist the help of a photographer to capture your scene; which representation do you think was most effective, and why?

<p>Interdisciplinary Research Ideas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select a topic that interests you from one of the stories. Jot a few preliminary questions and then record your answers (from reputable sources) using jot notes; explore additional questions if you wish. Does knowing these things enhance your understanding of the story or simply add to your knowledge going forward? • Select one of the authors in the collection and create a series of interview questions to learn more about them. After the teacher's approval, locate a contact for the author and send the questions if you wish. Be ready to report back. 	<p>Literary Awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List the different genres of writing included in this anthology, and use examples from the story to define one or two of them. In addition, discuss points in favour of a particular genre (perhaps your favourite genre of all, or a genre you feel is popular with others, and why this is). • Create a chart comparing and contrasting the theme of identity between two or more stories. • Write a short essay or poem defining the word "identity" and using examples from various stories in the group.
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<p>Personal Response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read at least five stories in the collection and discuss why you selected the ones you did, and which were your favourite (and your reasons). Which did you like least, and why? • Put yourself in the position of one of the characters whose story you've read. Present a soliloquy that clearly identifies story beats 	<p>Related Literature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In her introduction to <i>I'm Here</i>, the editor mentions another short story (also known as a novella) called "The Metamorphosis," by Franz Kafka. Read and write a 250 word review of that classic work. • Research other YA short story collections by Canadian
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<p>for that character and related emotions. Or... explain what you might have done differently if you had been in that position.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you had been asked to write the Introduction to this story collection, what would you have included? 	<p>authors, and add to the master reference list posted in the classroom. Read one, and compare to this one.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locate at least one other work by an author from this anthology, and discuss similarities and/or differences in style between the two.
<p>Values Clarification</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many of the stories involve characters making value judgements. As you read, keep track of the ways characters assess something as good or bad and identify the standards or priorities on which you think these judgements could be based. For example, the principal in “Design” called the black dress inappropriate for school. The standard underlying that could be his preference for a more traditional school uniform. • Prepare a debate outline, identifying two sides of an issue from one of the stories, and the points debaters might raise for each perspective. 	<p>Other</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some of the stories are more complex than others. Which stories do you think are the most difficult to read? Are there pre-reading activities or summaries that would make them easier for others, or background knowledge that would support new readers? A traditional approach to reading involved having students define a set of vocabulary words before reading (using dictionary skills)—do you think this actually transfers into better understanding of what you read? What exactly is reading comprehension?

Webbing Framework (adapted from Charlotte Huck)

More About Identity:

Notes for Teachers Based on the Identity Theme In This Collection

The online Oxford English Dictionary defines identity as “the fact of being or what a person or thing is.” In addition, it’s “the characteristics determining what a person or thing is.” This is interesting—the word reflects both the commodity as well as its internal parts. That’s like saying a car is a car, but it’s also an engine, wheels, transmission, suspension system, tires, and brakes.

But are people just people? And are we always only the sum of our parts?

Going back to the Oxford dictionary, there’s a third definition for identity that may be even more intriguing. In mathematics, identity is “a transformation that leaves an object unchanged.”

This bears further thinking.

When we think about our own identity, combined with the idea of transformation, we might think about the many ways that stories have transformed us, and continue to impact the way we see ourselves, or others—and yet leave us essentially the same. Stories from books, perhaps, have had transformative effects, but also stories from read life and the oral stories our elders have given us.

What is identity, and where does it come from?

A few stories in this collection imply that identity comes from one's occupation.

In Dennis Allen's "**The Undertakers**," one of the funniest stories in the book, we never learn the name of the narrator, but we have the growing sense that being an undertaker—and driving Chubby's new hearse—is right up their alley.

In Sylvia Gunnery's gut-wrenching story "**Design**," we see how dressmaking connects Taylor to her grandfather, and by proxy, her beloved grandmother, whom Taylor never knew.

Avocation, which is a fancy word for a hobby or minor occupation, underpins Zack's sense of self as a hockey player when he takes some gutsy steps in Jean Mills's poignant story about bravery, "**Right Defense**."

Colin Thornton's graffiti artist, in the elegantly spare "**Here Me Is**," derives something important from her creation on the concrete wall.

And Lynn McGonigle Clarke's chilling tale "**The Plowman**" conjures some important things about identity and career choice as Eric tries to stand up to his father.

Many stories here suggest the connection between self and other, with elements of identity shifting into focus as characters explore relationships. In

Beth Goobie's strikingly powerful sister story, **"How To Be No One,"** a tormented younger sibling finds a way—cruel and quick— to rise up from the shadows.

In another first-person narrative, Simone Garneau's beautifully evocative **"States of Being,"** Samantha contemplates the various forms of water as she experiences the loss of her father and explores her developing sexuality and gender identity.

In Madeleine Hart's zany yet completely relatable **"Sad Cat,"** Zan deals with his family's experiences of loss after their dog dies, not the least of which involves an inconsolable cat ... until Zan morphs into a dog himself, and deftly fills the gap.

"Mental" is how James thinks people are treating him, in Charise Jewell's incisive and revealing story by the same name. He's just returned from the psych ward after a manic episode caused by his bipolar disorder, and the words of a teacher, and then a particular song on a play list, help him move forward.

A retelling of the Greek myth, in Ziggy Shutz's carefully nuanced **"Iron Icarus Rising,"** is about relationships but also the expectations of others. From Icarus's father having grand expectations for her (... in this version, Icarus is not a boy) to Icarus walking out of the maze on her own ... how do these changes affect a story that, in its original version, was simply a cautionary tale?

Gender and gender roles also play a part in Maureen Ulrich's comic rendition of another Greek myth, this time about the rescue of Prometheus. In **"Saving Prometheus,"** it turns out that a shepherd girl named Elena is the hero (not

Heracles, as many of us have heard). But she chooses to go back to her old life, instead of partying with the gods, although she did retain the ability to listen, which has helped her in many ways ... and this brings us back to that third definition of identity

Self-awareness can also be seen as contributing to one's identity, and many of these stories offer a bright window in that direction. In **"A Spare Room,"** by Alice Kuipers, Mia is a delightfully fresh and mindful character whose stream of consciousness illuminates first love as well as grace when she begins to care for her grandmother—a woman with dementia and often a deep blue sadness that Mia suddenly sees quite clearly.

A different girl named Mia, just as self-discerning, appears in Patricia McCowan's brilliant character study **"Reading the Field,"** where Mia's close observations of Riley, the most visible girl in the school, leads to an important decision.

In **"The Bellstead Kittens,"** a story by Ann Margaret Oberst that's magically both creepy and humorous, its narrator offers many wise truths as well as a perspective on kittens that is truly unforgettable.

And in Carleigh Wu's hilarious **"Accidental Athlete,"** we are introduced to a young woman entering first year university—a context that hasn't been fully explored yet in the field of young adult literature—and the long-term passion she forges for Nordic skiing in spite of an innate clumsiness that verges on athletic torpor.

Athletics of a different kind are featured, along with a self-aware narrator, in Patricia Robertson's breathtaking work in "**Comfortable Morsels**," where Cennet describes growing up in a world where children can fly ... until like her, they reach an age where they can't. Cennet's perceptions of herself and her siblings are so detailed that we completely believe in this world, walking the wire between the real and the unreal so steadily that, by the end, we almost think we, too, can fly ... or maybe we could, when we were younger

Two other stories that conjure the possible from the impossible are Kelly Stewart's "**She Is**," and "**Ancestration**" by Mike Stewart (these authors are not related in spite of their last names). In "**She Is**," readers are skillfully introduced to a society where technology has produced AGPS—automatically generated projections—that are harder and harder to distinguish from people. Margot's journey as she struggles with what is Real (including her crush) is riveting.

In "**Ancestration**," Immi experiences a treatment that injects unknown ancestors into the brains of willing recipients, expanding his repertoire as he remembers and tries to process the experiences of long-ago relatives. Talk about self-aware—the idea that ancestors have already changed us, but now, with this incredible technology, we can learn *how*, is mind blowing, to say the least.

And then there's the enchanting story of Rico in Brian Slattery's "**The Lodestone**," a seamless blend of historical fiction and magic that builds to the kind of ending that leads us onward, well past the words with which, for now, we must be satisfied.

Through the entirety of this collection, readers will discover that the theme of identity crosses all genres—drawing from the deep well of realistic fiction while others drink from the pools of horror, comedy, mythology, science fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, and magic realism. The biographies of their writers, presented at the back of the book, also demonstrate great breadth—from emerging to experienced authors, and living in various locations across Canada.

We hope readers enjoy these stories, and we also hope that through this collection, audiences learn to see themselves a little differently, in myriad and wonderful ways.

Bev Brenna

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Beverley Brenna".

Editor of *I'm Here*