

St. Andrew's School

Stories Are Arguments

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Prev Next



Former St. Andrew's English teacher Bobby Rue visited campus on Friday, September 18 to talk with the V and VI Forms about narrative structure. Rue now teaches English at Calhoun High School in Manhattan, and he is also a writer of fiction and screenplays. He has visited St. Andrew's to lecture before, and students and teachers alike were excited at the opportunity to hear from him on a subject to which he has devoted so much time and thought.

Rue began the lecture by posing a set of questions that many students grapple with in their English classes: What is the point of literary interpretation? What are we searching for in books? When asked to write about a work of fiction, what are we supposed to write?

Rue responded to these questions by looking at literature through a new lens, one that focused on the basic design underpinning the works we read. A story, said Rue, is not simply a series of events meant to entertain an audience; "stories are arguments." He explains this view in an essay which he shared with students: "Simply put," he writes, "narratives – and I mean to include popular forms, like film – convince us of things. They make ideas and actions seem elegant, noble, essential, outrageous, appalling. . . . When we feel something in a story, we've probably bought into an argument."

How does a story communicate its argument? Is it reinforced through every choice – conscious or unconscious – made by the author? Is it conveyed through character? Through tone and style? According to Rue, a story makes its argument primarily through its narrative structure, a structure which, Rue argued, follows the same basic pattern in almost every story, from *Hamlet* to a coteremporary blockbuster: "The beginning introduces a problem. The middle complicates that problem. The end addresses it." The argument of a story, he explained, comes through in the final stage; in addressing the problem, the story invariably takes a stance on that problem.

Though we may not be aware of it, Rue continued, we all have the ability to recognize this basic narrative structure; we internalize it at an early age. To illustrate his point, Rue passed out a Peanuts comic strip – a scene between Snoopy and Lucy - with the final box removed. On the back of the page were three possibilities for the missing box. All these options were plausible endings to the comic strip, but almost everyone in the room chose the same image – the correct one - as the ending. Somehow, the audience had identified this ending as the most satisfying, and Rue explained that this was because it more fully addressed the problems and questions raised throughout the scene.

Throughout his lecture, Rue invited students to challenge his claims, and they did. Sam Broer '10 wanted to know how the principles of narrative applied to fiction that borrowed from real life. How could an actual event, translated into story form, be seen as part of an argument? Rue answered that even writers of non-fiction followed narrative principles by making choices about what to include and by using details in a certain way. Rebecca Ogus '10 pointed out that at a certain point in the writing process, a character takes on a life of its own and begins to write itself. She wanted to know how the concept of structure could be applied in this case. Rue explained that a great writer needn't consciously create structure in a story; the structure happened naturally, springing from a deep sense of what a good story does and how it moves.

As preparation for the lecture, students had read a short story by Raymond Carver called "Cathedral," and Rue demonstrated his theory by pointing to key moments in the story and discussing their function in the narrative.

After the talk, several seniors wanted to talk with Rue about how his ideas applied to the books they were reading in their classes as well as to their own writing. On Saturday morning, he met with seniors in their English classes to talk about what to do as readers when they encountered a narrative that broke or complicated the conventions he had outlined.

Rue's lecture provided students with a new set of tools to apply as readers and thinkers at St. Andrew's and beyond. These tools will be invaluable for seniors over the next few months as they write the exhibition papers that will culminate their English careers at the School.

« Back