

***The Night Watchman* Learning & Teaching Guide**

Brief Description

A pedagogical resource to spark interest, promote community conversation, and build capacity for teaching with a common reading for instructors who are engaging with *The Night Watchman* by Louise Erdrich.

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Introduction

By Jennifer Keys, PhD | Senior Director of The Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching | Professor of Practice in Sociology

[One Book One Northwestern](#) is a community-wide common reading program that is distinguished by its thought-provoking book selections and rich array of accompanying academic and co-curricular learning experiences. Students are invited to join a vibrant intellectual exchange of ideas, to grapple with wicked problems, and to build stronger connections to the university and broader community.

Common reading programs offer many valuable learning opportunities for students. A research study by Soria ([2022](#)) identified positive benefits for first-year college students who participated in common reading programs that included higher levels of interaction with faculty, a stronger sense of institutional belonging, and deeper academic engagement exhibited by contributing to class discussions with insightful questions and integrating ideas across courses.

Common reading programs also offer opportunities for instructors to integrate content related to the common book into their courses in engaging and innovative ways. This guide has been created as a pedagogical resource to spark interest among instructors, to build institutional capacity for teaching with a common reading, and to extend the reach and impact of One Book One Northwestern. Our vision is that the guide will equip instructors so that they can confidently facilitate and assess this type of engaged learning in ways that amplify the educational benefits for our students.

Additional Resources

- Soria, Krista M. "[More Than a Novel Experience: Exploring the Effects of Common Reading Programs on First-Year College Students.](#)" *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition* 34, no. 2 (2022): 47–64.
- Explore more curated resources on the [One Book Further Reading website](#).

Content Note

By Eun Sandoval-Lee, EdS | Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching

The Night Watchman includes depictions of racial trauma, alcoholism, death of a parent, domestic and child abuse, sexual violence, and trafficking. As part of the University's commitment to the [Principles of Inclusive Teaching](#), we underscore the importance of creating a community of care that safeguards mental and emotional wellbeing as learners engage with thought-provoking content.

When approaching potentially sensitive content, readers are encouraged to exercise self-care. Jenny Nordman ([2018](#)), an Associate Professor of Reading and Literacy at Regis University, offers techniques of emotional regulation while reading, such as:

- Anchor yourself by thinking of the last time you read something challenging yet meaningful.
- Give yourself a relaxation break with deep breathing or stretching.
- Skip pages when needed and measure progress by number of words, paragraphs, or pages.
- Periodically check in by identifying specific feelings and noticing any changes over time.

In the spirit of cultivating a relationship rich environment, we have identified relevant, confidential campus resources:

- [Center for Awareness, Response, and Education](#) (CARE)
- [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) (CAPS)

Pedagogy

Indigenous Pedagogies

By Veronica Womack, PhD | Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching |
Department of Black Studies

Indigenous pedagogies critique, challenge, and reconstruct fields and educational approaches that are rooted in colonial systems of thought. When instructors design their courses in ways that actively challenge hierarchical ideologies, critically reflect upon the assumptions that underlie the ways that we are taught to think about and approach our work, and encourage their students to do the same, they are embodying decoloniality. Scholar and founder of [maskihkiy wellness](#), Professor Karlee Fellner, identified three *medicines* that instructors can draw upon to decolonize their curriculum and integrate Indigenous counternarratives. These medicines are *responsibility* (i.e., learning Indigenous histories and contexts), *relationality* (i.e., considering the person-in-relation as opposed to an individual independent of all their relations), and *land* (i.e., connecting with land and learning from place).

Instructor Reflection Questions

- What norms, values, and worldviews inform your selection of knowledge for your curriculum?
- How does your teaching recognize and affirm the agency of Indigenous people?
- How do you build a learning community in your classroom where students learn from each other and draw on their own knowledge sources?
- How can you create opportunities for your students to learn about the place where they are studying and to learn in connection to that place?

Additional Resources

- Fellner, Karlee D. "[Embodying Decoloniality: Indigenizing Curriculum and Pedagogy.](#)" *American Journal of Community Psychology* 62, no. 3–4 (2018): 283–93.
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. [Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants.](#) First edition. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2013.
- "[The Importance of Place and Space: Land-Based Education.](#)" [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\) for Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility \(IDEA\).](#) Copyright © 2022 by Darla Benton Kearney.
- Wiggan, Albert. "The Case to Recognize Indigenous Knowledge as Science." TEDx Talks. July 15, 2019. Video, 10:26. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5QON5l6zy8>

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

By Laura Ferdinand, PhD | Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching

The Night Watchman depicts many kinds of traumatic events including violence against women and ongoing oppression and disenfranchisement of Native American and Indigenous peoples. Trauma-informed pedagogy is a framework that considers how to ethically engage difficult material and support the learning of students who have experienced trauma.

Initially an offshoot of research on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among military veterans in the 1970s and 80s, trauma-informed pedagogy has since drawn from research on intergenerational trauma, sexual violence and assault, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other related topics to explore trauma's effects on learning and teaching.

[The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association \(SAMHSA\)](#) defines trauma as an “event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.” When an individual who has experienced trauma is triggered, they may experience stimuli as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening, which may result in agitation, withdrawal, and/or impeded executive functions including the ability to focus, remember, and juggle activities. The role of an instructor is to offer empathy and informed teaching practices, not counseling.

Strategies

- Name trauma's effects on learning. It can be affirming to know that difficulty focusing, remembering, and juggling responsibilities and activities can be a result of trauma.
- Balance structure and flexibility, involving students in decision making to cultivate students' self-advocacy and ownership over their own learning.
- Refer students to campus and community resources and services such as [Center for Awareness, Response, and Education \(CARE\)](#), [Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#), and [TimelyCare](#).
- Provide content notes or trigger warnings, which have been empirically demonstrated to be a valuable harm reduction tool for learners when contextualized within a more holistic trauma-informed approach ([Bryce, Horwood, Cantrell, and Gildersleeve, 2023](#)). Providing notice ahead of time allows students to decide if they can participate, put in place the (self-)support needed to engage, and collaborate with instructors on alternative assignments to achieve learning outcomes, if necessary. Instructors are welcome to use our [Content Note](#) (included in this guide) with *The Night Watchman* in their courses, sharing it in class or including it in the syllabus.

Additional Resources

- Mays, Imad. "[Leveraging the Neuroscience of Now.](#)" *Inside Higher Ed*. June 3, 2020.
- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach.](#) SAMHSA Publication No. PEP23-06-05-005. Rockville, MD: National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory. 2023.

Making Northwestern's Common Reading a High-Impact Educational Practice

By Jennifer Keys, PhD | Senior Director of The Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching | Professor of Practice in Sociology

A robust community reading program like One Book One Northwestern offers—on a smaller scale than a core curriculum—a type of “common intellectual experience,” which has been identified as one of eleven [high-impact practices](#) (HIPs). Based on empirical research championed by the American Association of Colleges & Universities, HIPs have been shown to have a positive impact on student engagement, learning, and persistence, with especially significant gains shown for students whose demographic backgrounds have been historically underserved by higher education.

With the shared goal of transforming educational encounters involving *The Night Watchman* into learning experiences that are more engaging, meaningful, equitable, and impactful, instructors can consider the following pedagogical strategies inspired by Moore's (2023) *Key Practices for Fostering Learning*.

Strategies

- Build on prior knowledge and experiences by asking students to create a [concept map](#) that visually represents what they already know about selected themes, such as the fight against Native dispossession, gender roles and empowerment, or spirituality and dreams.
- Facilitate a relationship-rich culture by learning the [story of your student's names](#) and link this to an exploration of the power of naming for characters in the novel.
- Increase the number of substantive feedback cycles by incorporating low-stakes strategies from [Classroom Assessment Techniques](#) such as “invented dialogues” that asks students to synthesize their understanding of historical contexts into the form of an illustrative conversation between characters.
- Frame connections to broader contexts by challenging students to grapple with wicked problems and collaboratively formulate [action steps](#) to respond to difficulties for Native peoples on reservation lands and in urban areas.
- Scaffold reflection and [metacognition](#) by asking questions like: How did you approach this reading assignment? Where did you struggle? What passages triggered an emotional response? What is your identity, and how does it shape your understanding of the characters? What cultural skills or insights have you gained?
- Promote integration and transfer of knowledge by encouraging students to identify connections between class discussions and One Book One Northwestern [events](#). “By intentionally creating this relationship between the curricular and co-curricular components of the common reading program, the gap between students' in- and out-of-classroom learning is narrowed and learning is deepened” ([Laufgraben, 2006, p. 73](#)).

Being part of One Book One Northwestern is a powerful way to model our academic community's commitment to cultivating habits of mind, including intellectual curiosity, critical inquiry, perspective taking, boundary crossing, openness to new experiences, and continuous reflection. As Moore observes, "Engaged learning entails students actively and intentionally participating in their own learning, not only at discrete moments, but rather as an ongoing, lifelong activity" (p. 3).

Additional Resources

- Laufgraben, Jodi Levine. [*Common Reading Programs: Going beyond the Book*](#). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition, University of South Carolina, 2006.
- Moore, Jessie L. ["Key Practices for Fostering Engaged Learning."](#) *Change* 53, no. 6 (2021): 12–18.

Historical Context

Federal Policy toward Native Americans

By Anne Zald, MLIS | Northwestern University Libraries

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the United States used military and policy strategies to resolve its “Indian Problem.” Military strategies were carried out through the Indian Wars of the late 19th century, culminating in the Wounded Knee Massacre (1890). Policy strategies of assimilation and removal were exemplified by the General Allotment (Dawes) Act of 1887 which opened lands held collectively by tribes to individual ownership, ultimately transferring much of that land to non-Natives. Education, through removal of children to Bureau of Indian Affairs-operated boarding schools, was given Congressional funding. The “Indian New Deal” reforms under President Franklin Roosevelt were influenced by the 1928 Meriam Report which described failures of past policies. The Indian Reorganization Act (1934) gave Indians US citizenship, encouraging tribes to organize governments and adopt constitutions while also defining who was “Indian.”

During and after World War II, federal programs promoted relocation of Native people to economically growing cities. Creation of the Indian Claims Commission (1946) was a precursor to House Concurrent Resolution 108 (1953) which declared in idealistic language that “Indians” should be subject to the same laws and entitled to the same benefits as other Americans and called for the termination of the government’s trust responsibility to Indians (which was increasingly perceived as a financial liability by policymakers). Public Law 280 (1953) used this framework to make tribal members subject to state civil and criminal jurisdiction in five states with the largest Native populations. Other states were given authority to implement this control. Consent of the reservations or their Native populations was not required until 1968 with the passage of the Indian Civil Rights Act and the end of the federal policy of termination toward Native peoples.

Discussion Questions

- What evidence of the impact of federal policies toward Native Americans can you find in the characters, events, and depictions of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa in *The Night Watchman*?
 - Land Allotment
 - Tribal Government
 - Boarding Schools
 - Citizenship
 - Assimilation
 - Removal
 - Termination
- What evidence of resistance do you find?

Additional Resources

- Fixico, Donald Lee. [*Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945-1960*](#). 1st paperback printing. Albuquerque, N.M: University of New Mexico Press, 1990.
- Calloway, Colin G. [*First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*](#). Fifth edition. Boston, Massachusetts: Bedford/St. Martin's, a Macmillan Education imprint, 2016.
 - Most relevant to the period of *The Night Watchman* are Chapter 7, "Kill the Indian and Save the Man," pp.378-443, and Chapter 8, "From the Great Crash to Alcatraz 1929-1969," pp.444-501.
- "[Looking Back on the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act: Institute for Policy Research - Northwestern University](#)." Accessed July 24, 2024.
- Nesterak, Max. "[Uprooted: The 1950s Plan to Erase Indian Country](#)." *APM Reports*. 2019, November 1.

Collective Action in the 1950s and 1960s

By Kevin Boyle, PhD | Department of History

Americans have a long tradition of organizing to demand justice and equality. The pace of their activism varied over time. In the 1950s and 1960s it accelerated.

The change was driven, in part, by Americans' experiences in World War II. The United States had fought the war to defeat fascism. Yet the American government supported the most egregious forms of racial injustice at home, a contradiction so glaring it led communities of color across the nation to intensify their organizing for equal rights. Communities were also inspired by the anti-colonial struggles that were sweeping across the postwar world. And movements took inspiration from each other. So, the Black, Latino, Asian American, and Native American freedom struggles, the women's movement, the labor movement, the anti-war movement, and the nascent LGBTQ movement were tied together, even as they drew on their own traditions and defined their own agendas.

Discussion Questions

- Ask students to discuss how activists' personal beliefs and experiences connect to the movement(s) they embrace. To what extent is the latter a reflection of the former? To what extent are they in tension?
- In *The Night Watchman*, characters from different backgrounds and communities come together to resist oppressive policies. How does the novel portray the importance of solidarity in social movements? Can you think of a moment in the novel where solidarity made a significant impact? How does this compare to the role of solidarity in other movements during the 1950s and 1960s?
- Many movements, including those depicted in *The Night Watchman*, involve activists of different generations working together. How does the novel explore the dynamics between older and younger activists? How do these intergenerational relationships strengthen or complicate the movement? What lessons can we learn from these dynamics?

Activity

Ask students to plan a protest to explore the strategic considerations faced by characters in *The Night Watchman* when confronting governmental policies. Begin by giving them an issue that they're to address—something campus-based can be particularly effective—and then have them discuss how they as a group would go about fashioning a protest action. They should pay attention to the relationship between their goals, their methods, and their strategic decisions. How do the goals, methods, and challenges they identified align with or differ from those depicted in the novel?

Additional Resources

There is a vast amount of material on the mass movements of the 1950s and 1960s. What follows are a few suggestions of places to begin.

- The classic documentary series, [Eyes on the Prize](#), still offers a compelling introduction to the Black civil rights movement, though its focus on South now seems too limited.
- The website for the University of Washington's [Mapping American Social Movements Project](#) covers a wide range of activism across the 20th century, with the glaring exception of Native American movements.
- The 2010 documentary [A Good Day to Die](#) provides a powerful entry point into the American Indian Movement through the life story of one of its key figures.

Social Movement Organizing in 1953

By Joan Marie Johnson, PhD | Office of the Provost

Eight years after World War II, some Americans pursued a return to so-called “normalcy,” and others sought opportunities and rights that had been long denied to them. The Cold War with the USSR greatly impacted these efforts, as accusations of communism effectively limited activists' organization and impact.

The manufacturing boom that began during the war continued as factories turned from airplanes and weapons to producing consumer goods. Labor union membership soared. While women war workers were pressured to quit work and return to the home, in fact, many women continued to work, and a diverse group of women labor activists fought for equal pay and workplace safety. Women's educational aspirations were also curtailed as the era of domesticity took hold, which would later spark the second wave of the feminist movement.

The [NAACP](#), the leading organization for Black Civil Rights in 1953, prioritized a legal strategy against segregation, demonstrating in court that *Plessy v. Ferguson's* “separate but equal” policy led to inequality. Having succeeded in cases dealing with graduate and professional schools by 1953, the NAACP tackled segregation itself through *Brown v. Board of Education*, already in front of the Supreme Court. Other Civil Rights organizations also focused on legal rights, including Mexican American activists who also won a ruling against segregation in education. Groups like the Mattachine Society (1950) and Daughters of Bilitis (1955) began to organize against rampant discrimination against gay and lesbian people. In the early 1950s, the pressure to conform to nuclear family ideals and investigations against communism led to increase in official repression, and thousands of queer government workers and teachers were fired.

Discussion Question

- *The Night Watchman* takes place at a moment of US economic prosperity, when traditional gender roles, nuclear families, and the suburbs were idealized, while at the same time, discontent and protest simmered among people of color, women, workers, and others who were excluded from equal opportunities. What do the experiences of characters in the book reveal about societal ideals about family life, marriage and parenting, women factory workers, and early Civil Rights activism?

Additional Resources

- Boyle, Kevin. [The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968](#). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995.
- Cobble, Dorothy Sue. [The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America](#). Princeton University Press, 2011.

- Johnson, David K. [*The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government.*](#) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Klarman, Michael J. [*From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality.*](#) Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Kluger, Richard. [*Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality.*](#) 1st Vintage books ed., Rev. and Expanded ed., Vintage Books, 2004.
- May, Elaine Tyler. [*Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era.*](#) Rev. and Updated ed., Basic Books, 1999.

Select Themes in Book

Decolonization and Resistance

By Oslo Brewster, PhD | Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion

Decolonization broadly refers to the set of strategies developed in response to living in a colonial or post-colonial space. The aims of decolonization are multi-pronged and include repairing the social, economic, cultural, and structural damage done to both indigenous and non-indigenous folks by colonialism.

As colonization was and is a global project, this work is ongoing around the world and takes many forms, such as active political resistance to ongoing colonization; healing at individual, familial, tribal, and global levels; restoring pre-colonial practices as is practical and necessary; and imaginative world-building to create new ways of existing in the wake of colonialism. Many of the characters in *The Night Watchman* engage in acts of decolonization and resistance, both large and small.

Discussion Questions

- What are some of the ways that characters in *The Night Watchman* work to resist colonization? Are there characters who have complicated relationships to this work, and if so, how? How does Thomas understand the idea of emancipation and how it connects Indians to the US government?
- What are some of the connections that author Louise Erdrich draws between the poverty that some characters experience and their relationship to colonialism? Does Erdrich suggest that poverty is more influenced by economic and political systems, or by a lack of resources?

Additional Resources

- [Decolonization Toolkit](#) from the Community-Based Global Learning Collaborative
- Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne. [An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States](#). Boston: Beacon Press, 2014.
- National Museum of the American Indian. "[The 'First Thanksgiving': How Can We Tell a Better Story.](#)" Smithsonian Institute. 2024.

Language and Storytelling

By Jamiece Adams, MFA | Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion

Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* is an intimate portrayal of how language and storytelling are vital connections to the past, present, and future. Erdrich's depiction of the events surrounding the 1953 House Concurrent Resolution 108 through a fictionalized lens showcases Indigenous resistance and resilience to the intentional erasure of indigeneity. By highlighting culture through the oral tradition, with characters speaking Chippewa, and intergenerational ties, *The Night Watchman* roots the reader in the continued fight for the Land Back Movement and the self-determination of Indigenous people.

Passages Exploring These Themes

- Storytelling: Page 173
- Language: Pages 195 & 188

Discussion Questions

- How do characters use code-switching, the sociolinguistic practice of alternating between two or more languages or dialects, to relay information to one another throughout the novel?
- What does speaking Chippewa do culturally for the principal characters?
- The oral tradition is an intergenerational link to knowledge and understanding. How do stories provide a lens for the characters to learn from the past and apply it to their present experience?

Activity

Read sections of House Concurrent Resolution 108 depicted in the novel. Break down the words used to disguise the true intentions of the bill. Rewrite the document in your own words, depicting the true nature of the Resolution in plain speech. Share and discuss the new written "bills."

This activity's objective is to allow students to sit with the gravity of this legislation, including the potential damage it would have caused to the Chippewa people on Turtle Mountain.

Additional Resources

Find more resources on Sacred Stories on the [One Book Further Reading website](#).

How to Cite this Guide

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We are here for you. As you engage in ongoing reflection about ways to enhance teaching and deepen student learning, The Searle Center offers thought partnership and support. Check our [calendar of events](#) or [schedule a consultation](#). The [Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion](#) offers office hours and [consultations](#) with their educational team. [More Than a Novel Experience: Exploring the Effects of Common Reading Programs on First-Year College Students.](#)"