

## WHS Book Rationale

**Title:** *Crossing the River*

**Author:** Caryl Phillips

- **Intended Audience**

College Preparatory English 12

- **Brief summary and educational significance**

*Crossing the River* begins in the 1700's as an African man is forced to sell his three children - Nash, Martha and Travis - into slavery. The novel then assumes a three part structure - a snapshot in time during the 1820s, the latter part of the 19th century, and finally the late 1930s-early 1940s. The three children from the beginning are symbolically represented throughout the novel with each of their voices distinct and individual as the reader follows the history of blacks from Africa, to the American West, and to Europe.

A slave named Nash Williams is freed from bondage and sent to Liberia to convert native Africans to Christianity in the late-1820s. Narrated partly through Nash's letters back to his white master, the reader gains an appreciation of not only the brutality and desolation of slavery, but the power of freedom even when it means living in poverty.

Martha, an elderly black woman, is abandoned in Colorado while trying to travel with a group of black Pioneers to California. She grieves her lost child, and remembers the love of a man.

Finally, Travis - a black American GI - falls in love with a white English woman named Joyce during WWII. This section is narrated in a non-linear fashion from Joyce's point of view and exposes the bigotry and obstacles to mixed marriage and relationships during that time in history.

The novel's plot is complex because it is non-linear, and is told through multiple genres (letters, journals and a diary, the log of a slave ship). The story also takes place across 250 years of history, so it is not literally about the three children. Instead Nash, Martha and Travis are representative of a people as a whole. Phillips reveals the tortured search for home by a people whose lives were torn from their homeland through the Africa Diaspora. He doesn't spare the reader the horror of slavery or the grief of those whose families were destroyed by it.

Due to this novel's themes and style, it lends itself to a variety of educational possibilities: cross cultural connections with social studies classes, issues of race across time and cultures, making personal connections with the lives of the students.

*Crossing the River* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1993.

- **Purpose of teaching the work and how it will be used**

English 12 focuses on British Literature, and *Crossing the River* offers a postcolonial reading experience for the students. Phillips was born in St. Kitts, raised in England, and currently lives and teaches in the United States.

This novel provides a context for discussing the results of the African Diaspora. It offers interesting thematic connections with books read in previous years: *Things Fall Apart* (English 10), *Kindred* or *Beloved* (English 11 and AP English Language), and offers interesting text pairings (e.g.: the writings of Olaudah Equiano).

Before reading the novel, students will research and present about historical events to provide context for the reading (African Diaspora, Liberia and the American Colonization Society, African American Cowboys, African American soldiers in England during World War II, etc.)

The multigenre nature of the text offers various writing possibilities: writing our own multigenre stories based on personal experience, “giving voice” to characters in the novel who are not heard from, connecting the issues of the novel to contemporary experiences.

- **Potential problems**

*Crossing the River* was selected as an On the Same Page Cincinnati book in 2004, so it has been part of a public reading experience. Phillips offers the perspective of a slave ship captain, which uncovers some of the brutalities of slavery, and there is a veiled reference to the possible pedophilia of a slave owner toward one of the characters. These are all important to creating the context of the lives of the characters after they are deserted (sold into slavery) by their father.

Despite the painful situation of some of the characters, the book ultimately has a triumphant tone in considering the breadth of influence and experience of those affected by slavery and the African Diaspora.

The book will also offer a challenging reading experience to the students due to the style mentioned above.

- **Addressing potential problems**

The difficult themes and structure of the novel are some of the reasons for teaching it. As seniors, the students will be asked to address the issues of race, betrayal, and call for responsibility presented in the novel. Through class discussions, writing, presentations, and group reading, students will explore the tensions and challenges offered by the novel.

Students who request with legitimate concerns about reading the novel, might be given the alternate choice of reading *The Wide Sargasso Sea*, by Jean Rhys.