

# Introduction

*Ishmael*, by Daniel Quinn, is the story of a desperate young man in search of a teacher. The teacher he finds is a lowland gorilla, who, being a member of a species entirely different from ours, has an entirely different vision of our history and our role in the universe.

The book won the Turner Tomorrow Fellowship in 1991 for a work of fiction offering positive solutions to global problems. It was selected from more than 2500 entries from around the world by a panel of judges that included Nadine Gordimer and Ray Bradbury. Since its initial publication in English in 1992, it has been published in German, Italian, Hungarian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, and Spanish and will soon appear in Dutch.

The author was startled when he began getting letters from teachers telling him they were assigning *Ishmael* to their classes. Even more surprising was the fact that they were not just teachers of literature, who might be expected to use a novel in class, but teachers of biology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, and more. He heard from teachers in universities, in graduate schools, in high schools, and even middle schools. They told him how they were using *Ishmael* in their classes, but they also asked if he knew of other teachers with whom they might compare ideas and notes.

That's why we put together *The Ishmael Companion*. The teachers who share their thoughts and classroom activities with you in the following pages are representative of the several hundred who have written the author over the past few years to share their classroom experience of using *Ishmael*. What we found, in collecting information for this guide is that *Ishmael* lends itself to diversity. The ways teachers use the book are as different and creative as the teachers themselves and the schools they teach in. We hope you'll find their experience stimulating and useful in your own teaching.

Sally Helms Maher & Rennie Quinn

## **The *Ishmael* Companion: Classroom Notes from Teachers**

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Published by The Hard Rain Press, Austin, TX

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## Grades 6-12 Courses

### Philosophy/History (Grade 6)

Rob Williams, Albuquerque

Academy

Albuquerque, NM

**The course and students** This is an interdisciplinary, teacher-driven and -planned sixth grade program with 140 students. The seven teachers have regular meetings (every other day for 45 minutes) to plan curriculum together and work out schedules. Students come to the Academy from elementary schools all over the greater Albuquerque area and are generally a bright, creative, and articulate bunch, looking for new intellectual challenges. Instead of the usual class section divisions, students form villages, clans, and lodges and operate within these groups all year. The configuration changes according to what suits the needs of a particular course or day's work. (Two clans from different villages may meet for a special math session. Then they may join others in their village, but from different clans, for a large-group session in history.) This structure provides an enormous amount of flexibility for both teachers and students.

**Why *Ishmael*?** We initially decided to use the book because the history teachers in the program were looking for a foundational text that connected the various components of the course—philosophy, geography, and a historical look at cultures, specifically the hunter/gatherer and agricultural modes of living. *Ishmael* proved a natural selection and served the needs of our program in a number of ways. It was the driving force for the philosophy program for the year, but overlapped other disciplines as well—ecology, science, writing, geography, even computer class (when students had papers to write).

**Class activity** Over the course of the year, from October to March (1994-95), we read the book, interspersing it with other projects and activities. We began the year with some dialogue about philosophy, defined in our program as “the love of and search for wisdom.” We then defined ourselves as a “community of philosophic inquiry,” and, together with the students, developed guidelines for engaging in philosophical dialogue with one another, talking first about the importance of effective question-asking and then about how to share ideas with one another in a constructive and respectful fashion. (See example A at the end of this

*narrative.*) We always sat in a circle to facilitate direct eye contact and equality with one another and gradually turned over control of the class to the students, who began to moderate discussions by asking questions and drawing out important ideas, images, stories, and metaphors from the book, using a set of moderator ideas we'd developed as a guide. (See example B) By January the students were moderating all the discussions, and I only spoke up when points needed clarification or they had reached an impasse that needed outside intervention.

We read the book slowly (some students complained “too slowly”!) and trained them to read critically each portion of the text, marking their books as they did so. They looked for new and unfamiliar words, questions the author posed, major ideas of the story, powerful images or moments, marking them in appropriate ways (See example C), and included any other questions, comments, or drawings in the margin or at the end of the section. Students who showed up for class without any markings in their books were asked to leave the discussion to read critically and rejoin the discussion when finished. They soon learned the value placed on preparing their thoughts and their text ahead of time, and few were unprepared after the initial period of adjustment to our system.

**Skills** Questioning; developing a community of inquiry; learning to use moderating techniques; critical reading and thinking; writing.

**Assessment** Classroom observation of students on a daily basis proved critical, and with the students acting as moderators, I was free to observe the class in action, noting which students asked intelligent questions, which built on the ideas of others, and which seemed “out of it.” Keeping track of students who had not read critically proved useful, though with one or two exceptions, all remained faithful to the process. We had students complete two writing assignments with the book, although having them keep a log of thoughts would have proved useful and may be tried in the future. They also engaged in a final two-day philosophical exercise in which they wrote thoughtful responses to questions on the book given to them in advance (See example D) and identified almost one hundred new vocabulary words from the book (See example E). On a more creative note, we had each student choose his or her favorite metaphor or story from the book and illustrate it by creating a two- or three-dimensional project that represented the story or metaphor and describing it in a

written attachment as well. A final written reflective piece at the very end of the year summarized each student's thoughts on the book and what he or she learned from reading it in terms of both skills and content (See *example F*).

We also used the ideas in the book with two group simulations (the Adapt program of the Interact Company). In this project students, in groups of four or five, imagine them-selves first as leaders of a small band of hunter/gatherers and then as a small village of agriculturalists who must select a place to live on an imaginary continent, keeping in mind geographic variables and potential hazards of the continent.

**Student response** The students generally enjoyed the book. Initially, many felt it to be too difficult, but the slow pace, combined with valuable classroom questioning and reflective discussion time, allowed them to air their concerns in a safe and supportive environment. Many found the critical reading process to be beneficial, while others found it too tedious. Most thought the book should be used again in sixth grade. A typical response was that of the student who thought the book contained too little plot to captivate eleven-year-olds, but also felt his thinking had been changed by the book: "Before I read *Ishmael* I had an empty spot in my mind, and now I can never imagine living without it." Some students found the ideas in the book to be scary, but dealing with the notion of a society that might self-destruct if its excesses aren't checked is very much on young people's minds. Every once in a while I let students just talk about how they felt about the book itself, rather than having them always fleshing out the ideas. This seemed to work well.

**Summing up** I was pleased with how deeply the students got into the book, and I would certainly use it again in a sixth grade class. I'd have the students do more writing (probably in a journal-type format) about their reactions to *Ishmael*. I'd also hold them more accountable for vocabulary: rather than giving them a final vocabulary exercise, I'd incorporate the new words into our discussions on a more regular basis. I'd recommend balancing the critical reading component for the philosophical sections of the book with regular reading for the sections of plot—a technique I'll try in the future.

The daily moderating process was remarkable. Sixth graders are a creative bunch, and my students really took the opportunity to create some engaging classroom dialogues as moderators, using either the techniques I suggested or the ones they created themselves. Any opportunity to provide them with a creative outlet for the ideas in the book proved useful. We even got the students together with a class of twelfth graders who had read the book, and they put together a full-length film

version of their interpretation of the book. Very cool!

There are all kinds of ways to spin off the ideas in the text (ecology, media studies and literacy, ancient history, current events, etc). I'd advise going slowly at first, and laying the philosophical groundwork. I found that students this young needed to be reminded continually of their responsibilities to the text and to each other. But they soon found that learning from one another is both challenging and fun, and I was rewarded by realizing that I'd empowered these students to be independent learners—certainly a worthwhile goal. *Ishmael* is of great significance in raising challenging and provocative questions about our own culture, where we've been, and where we're headed. Thus, it's an important book.

*(In their original form, each of the following examples was a sheet of one or more pages. We've condensed — and in some cases abridged— them because of space limitations. But because these students are the youngest we know of using *Ishmael*, we wanted to give you most of the actual material used with the class. ED.)*

#### **A: Student-generated Discussion Guidelines**

(The class wrote these guidelines on poster board, which we kept on display in the center of our circle as a reminder of our responsibilities to one another.)

**AN ENGAGED MEMBER OF "THE SACRED HOOP":** 1. **RESPECTS** the ideas of others; 2. **ASKS effective questions;** 3. **REFERS** to the text, early and often; 4. **LISTENS** actively to the discussion; 5. **BUILDS ON** the ideas of others, even when disagreeing; 6. **LEAVES** if unwilling or unable to participate.

#### **B: Moderator Ideas Sheet**

*Here are some ideas you can use as moderator for any discussion (including class discussions on *Ishmael*). Feel free to create your own ideas and add them to the list. Remember, an effective moderator steers a discussion and helps the class get the gist of the reading but talks as little as possible. Always (!) sit in a circle: doing so fosters eye contact, equality, and respect for each other.*

*1. In advance, develop one or two open-ended questions based on the reading. Write them on the board and spend the class discussing them.*

*2. At the beginning of class, assign each person a page or two, and ask them to select the word, phrase, sentence, concept, or idea that is most important on that page, and write it on the board. Then discuss as a class.*

*3. At the beginning of class, divide the class up into smaller groups and continue with #1 or #2 above. If you have time, bring the smaller*

groups together for a large group debriefing during the second half of the class.

4. Have individuals or small groups develop their own questions, based on the reading. Write them on the board and then discuss them as a class.

5. Give the class a few minutes to collect thoughts, then randomly ask individuals to share their own perspective on the reading. You can determine which questions you want to follow up on, and which you want to “let sit” for awhile.

6. Go around the circle, and, with no one interrupting, have each person share a thought on the reading. Then, after everyone has spoken, open it up for discussion.

7. In advance, select one or more significant quotations from the reading. Write them on the board and discuss them.

8. In advance, select key concepts or ideas from the reading. Write them on the board and give members of the class a few minutes to illustrate them. Then discuss.

9. Create your own moderating scenario.

#### C: Thoughts on Reading Critically

Reading critically demands that we pay attention to our level of engagement in a text. Rather than pleasure reading (which has its own importance), critical reading requires more energy. Below you will find several useful steps that will enable you to become a more effective critical reader. Internalize this process so that it becomes part of your learning.

##### A Suggested Five-Step Process

1. Find a comfortable place to read. It must be relatively quiet and allow you to write easily in the text. (Beds may be great, but they induce sleep.)

2. Find a writing implement—a pen or a pencil. (Highlighters do not allow for writing in the text.)

3. Read the text slowly and carefully, allowing yourself time to stop and reflect on what’s being said and how it’s being said.

4. Read the text again, with pen or pencil in hand: a. Draw a box around any words that are new to you and define the word in the margin, using a dictionary if needed. b. Underline any major ideas or points you feel the author is trying to make. c. Place a “Q” in the margin next to questions the author raises. c. Place a star next to descriptive images or intriguing phrases that grab you. d. Finally, write your own questions and comments in the margin.

5. Gather your thoughts together for class discussion.

D: Ishmael Final: Written Philosophical Exercise  
Greetings, fellow philosopher. You will be participating in an Ishmael final that will consist of two parts: 1. Correctly identifying philosophical vocabulary from the book (one class). 2. Discussing essential questions from the book (one class). In an effort to help you, I am providing you with both the “essential questions” and the vocabulary below. I will choose one of the questions, and you will choose two of them. You will write on all three during one class period. Please be as specific as possible, using examples from the book when necessary.

1. Discuss, specifically, the various roles of Ishmael and the narrator in the book. What philosophical and metaphorical purposes do each of them serve?

2. As fully as you can, explain what Ishmael means by “Mother Culture,” and “her” relationship to us as individuals.

3. Explain and discuss the meaning of THREE of the following stories: a. the jellyfish story; b. The Taker Thunderbolt; c. Cain and Abel; 4. The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; 5. The story of Ishmael (Old Testament)

4. According to Ishmael, what three specific ingredients make up a culture? Which of the three do you think is most important?

5. Discuss FOUR important differences between Leaver cultures and Taker cultures, according to the book. (You may want to provide specific examples of the two cultures in your answer.)

6 Explain the historic importance of our agricultural revolution, according to Ishmael. How, specifically, did it change society?

7. Toward the end of the book, the narrator says that people “need a vision of the world and of themselves that inspires them.” What are the specific ingredients of that vision, according to Ishmael and the narrator?

#### E: Ishmael Vocabulary Final Exercise

(Only five of the original fifty quotes from the book are given here, as a sample. ED.)

Directions: Identify the meaning of each of the underlined words in the sentences below, in a few words or less. Use your knowledge of the words and the context of the sentence to help you! Good luck, fellow philosopher.

1. “Takers believe in their revolution, even when they enjoy none of its benefits. There are no grumblers, no dissidents, no counter revolutionaries.”

2. “According to your maps, the world of

thought is coterminous with your culture.”

3. “As an omnivore, his dietary range is immense.”

4. “With agriculture, those limitations vanished, and his rise was meteoric.”

5. “It’s another case where diversity seems to work better than homogeneity.”

#### F: *Ishmael* Final Reflection

*What a year it has been with this text! I am proud of your hard work and effort in reading such a challenging and provocative work. You taught me many things! I need your constructive feedback on using this book in a sixth grade program. In reflecting on your relationship with the book, please consider the following: the critical reading process, class discussions in philosophy, the moderating process, writing (the letter to Daniel Quinn, the two-day in-class final), the filmmaking project, and any other activities or experiences associated with the book.*

1. In reading *Ishmael*, what did you learn: a. about yourself? b. about the world? c. about learning?

2. What do you feel are the most important themes in *Ishmael*?

3. Describe your most favorite and your least favorite *Ishmael* activity and why you chose each.

4. Would you recommend this book to other readers your age? Why or why not? Should it be taught in the sixth grade next year? Why or why not?

## World Civilizations (Grades 7-9)

## World Cultures (Grades 9-12)

Stephen Myers, Traveling School International

Santa Cruz, CA

### World Civilizations

**The course and students** The school is a comprehensive junior/senior high (grades 6-12), nonprofit, private school averaging 35 students. We educate students to be global citizens through travel and international exchange programs combined with a comprehensive academic course of studies. Most students are highly motivated and college-track. World Civilizations has about 10-12 students, and we study both past and present civilizations.

**Why *Ishmael*?** I use *Ishmael* in both World Civilizations and World Cultures because it provides my students with a context for their study. The book challenges the traditional point of view, which defines progress as human beings building, controlling, and conquering nature. *Ishmael* gives an alternative interpretation. This encourages students to rethink their definitions of civilization and of progress.

**Class activity** We read *Ishmael* at the start of the course, over a period of about five weeks, using a combination of methods. Sometimes I have them read aloud in class and sometimes on their own or in reading groups. I also have parents get together with a group and read with them. (Parents come in several times a week and work with the students. It works well, and they all like doing it.) I’ve also used the audio tape of *Ishmael*. Although it’s condensed (*cut nearly in half to fit 180-minute format, ED.*), it gives a good overview. Whether or not I use the tape depends on the class. If they find the text too daunting, listening to the tape helps them get started. Or I might use it at the end as a summary.

I have a group of students take a civilization and analyze it in terms of both the contemporary, common point of view and then from *Ishmael*’s point of view. Once they’ve read *Ishmael*, they reconsider what is the criterion of a civilized society. They discuss this in groups and then make a presentation to the class. (A lot of what comes out is new ways to design laws to protect the environment and prevent growth.)

Many of the things we do are related to what comes up in class, what their questions are, what they’re ready for. I structure the class to allow this and stay alert to their interest and readiness. Each class is different.

**Skills** Critical thinking; vocabulary (I have the students make lists of words that are foreign to them and then we discuss them.); knowledge of history (When an event or place is mentioned in the text I may ask students to do some research. For example, in one section *Ishmael* talks about the Tigris/Euphrates area. This opens up a conversation with the students: Do you know what this is, where this is, and what he’s talking about? Then they research that area.); writing (Especially dialogue. When *Ishmael* talks, he has a special tone. Sometimes it’s condescending, sometimes compassionate, sometimes exasperated. We discuss what is being used to create that kind of tone or feeling. I then ask students to try to write their own dialogue creating a specific tone they have in mind.)

**Assessment** I give quick little quizzes each day to see if they understand the content and have them write a couple of essays to see if they’re getting the concepts.

There might be a final test, usually a group test (we do nearly everything in groups), where they'll have to take a position and defend it using the book as a back-up. They can attack or support a thesis, but they must show that they have used material from the book. They may also use other sources.

**Student response** It's somewhere between fascination and confusion. They're fascinated with the ideas, and enthralled, but they're confused about coming to terms with a new idea and what it might mean for them. This group is young and some of the concepts in the book are difficult.

**Summing up** Some of the younger students get bogged down in the reading and get more out of listening, so I've considered using just the audio tape for them. I might supplement the tape with some reading from the book. For example, the history lessons are not on the tape, so I might read some of those to the class. Our school spends a lot of time traveling and studying different places. I find that *Ishmael* relates not just to social sciences but to the way we live and relate to one another, and it helps students understand their own behavioral dynamics more clearly.

## World Cultures

**The course and students** This is a full-year course with 10-12 senior high students. The major portion of the class is a two- or three- month visit to another country, usually in late winter/early spring. We stay with families and also spend some time touring. Students attend classes in the country we visit, but also have class with me at other times, and I teach classes in an exchange program. Where we go varies from year to year. South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Thailand, Australia, India, Ireland, Indonesia, England, and Malaysia are some of the countries we've visited. We study the culture of the country before we go, and read *Ishmael* to provide a context for that study.

**Class activity** In this class we focus more on debate and discussion than in World Civilizations, and students usually write four or five essays during the four weeks we spend on *Ishmael*. When we read the book depends on the class. Generally, I assign it before we travel, but the most recent group wasn't ready for it, so we went to Zimbabwe first and experienced the culture. When we returned, students were able to read *Ishmael* and relate its ideas to what they had personally seen and felt and learned in Africa. Because they had seen Great Zimbabwe (the ancient stone ruins from which the country takes its name) and learned about its history firsthand, they could write about it in relation to ideas in *Ishmael* with greater understanding.

### Sample: Essay Assignments:

1. Write a paper from the Takers' point of view telling the story of Great Zimbabwe; then write it from the Leavers' point of view.

2. Based on the projections described in the book, write a history of the world for the next five decades. Make up events that are consistent with the point of view you adopt (the cynics generally adopt a Taker point of view.)

3. You're a politician transformed by reading *Ishmael*. What laws would you enact in order to turn things around?

**Skills** Critical thinking; writing; vocabulary; debating; understanding and appreciating cultural diversity.

**Assessment** In addition to the essays and regular exams, I give them a questionnaire to help them assess their own work.

**Student response** The students like the book, though sometimes they think it's weird. (Older kids sometimes have trouble buying into a telepathic ape, but they get past that when we look at it as a lesson in metaphor.) It validates students' point of view about what's wrong with the world and more or less reinforces their own idealism. It also sustains their motivation. Sometimes they get annoyed because they think the student in the book is so willingly led. Then when they see the love that grows between the two characters, they shift and become sympathetic.

**Summing up** I've been using *Ishmael* since 1992, and I'll certainly continue to do so. (It's used in our science department as well. The ecology teacher discusses habitats and niches and what would happen if something on the food chain were eliminated. So *Ishmael* creates a macro view of ecology.) When we travel I'd like to present *Ishmael* when I teach in other classes to see how students react (in South Africa, for example). I think it might be very different for them.

## Foundations of Civilization (Grade 9)

### Sr. Seminar on Political Science (12)

Karen Quackenbush, Rowland Hall-  
St. Mark's School, Salt Lake City, UT

## Foundations of Civilization

**The course and students** The school is a progressive private school with highly motivated students, of whom about 85% take advanced college placement courses. There's a great deal of parent support, and the school is noted for hands-on learning (e.g. participating in an archaeological dig). Foundations of Civilization Extended Studies is an honors class of 15 students. The course begins with the Paleolithic period and ends with the Fall of Rome. It also examines modern corollaries to each of these periods. ( e.g. after studying the Fertile Crescent, students would consider origins of modern conflict in the Middle East.)

**Why *Ishmael*?** As soon as I read *Ishmael* I knew it was a book that would be important and useful for both these classes. It's a rich and unique book that teases rather than spoon-feeds and elicits consideration of the limits of our beliefs and life-styles. It's ideal to get students thinking. With my younger Foundation of Civilization students it provided an underlying thread for the study of past and present. In the Political Science seminar, with older students, it was an ideal springboard for more involved analysis of problems we face today.

**Class activity** *Pre-assignment:* Before I assign any reading in *Ishmael* I have students collect, review, and analyze images and messages offered in local magazines and newspapers (local rather than national or international because I want them to relate to their own community). They create a collage out of the clippings and consider the priorities and values suggested by the images. The exercise not only prepares students for later discussion of Mother Culture (and reconsideration of their initial interpretations) but also encourages application of the ideas presented in *Ishmael* to their own upbringing and sense of community.

*Reading assignments:* Students read the entire book before we begin discussion and analysis. I assign one of the 13 sections each night for a couple of weeks and give weekly quizzes. This encourages all to keep up and provides an opportunity for clarifying questions about things that come up in their reading, like terms and metaphors they come across in the text (e.g. Mother Culture, teacher, student, captivity, culture, Takers, Leavers, certain knowledge, peace-keeping laws, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the airman and the craft of civilization, and Bwana). Then, when they've finished reading the book, and are equipped with their notes and questions, we launch into a series of discussions, using the Socratic method.

#### **Sample: Discussion Questions**

I give some background information and examples of the Socratic method and have students point to its use by Ishmael in his dealing with his student.

**1. Why doesn't Ishmael simply lecture, tell the student all of his ideas up-front and be done with it? Does the process of learning by questioning encourage more learning or frustration? As a reader, do you take the student's place and consider Ishmael's questions for yourself? (This discussion of Socratic method can easily be directed to consideration of the concept of teacher or student and the roles of each.)**

**2. What is Mother Culture, according to Ishmael? Are the messages described by Ishmael and the student consistent with those identified in the pre-assignment collage? Are there any perceived messages in our collage that counter or challenge Ishmael's interpretation of Mother Culture?**

**3. (Students first read a biblical version of the Garden of Eden and Cain and Abel stories. In our school we deal with most questions of religion as philosophy, and students are accustomed to this approach. Thus they don't feel threatened by a discussion of these stories.) Describe Ishmael's version of the Garden of Eden. What was the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and why might it be a dangerous illusion (or placebo) for man? Why are there different versions of this story, according to Ishmael? What triggered the cultural amnesia we experience? What framework for decision-making (paradigm) would man have by eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? What is the usual explanation of Cain's attack on Abel? Ishmael relates the story to Taker expansion. Explain. Why must Takers expand?**

**4. Consider the airman and aircraft of civilization metaphors. What has blinded the airman? What evidence suggests that the civilization built by Takers is not working? What evidence do Takers point to that suggests it is working? From what laws does Ishmael suggest that Takers exempt themselves and why? Does Ishmael suggest the only way Takers can escape the "crash" is by abandoning "civilization" and returning to nomadic, hunting-gathering lifestyles? Explain.**

**5. Ishmael claims one expertise. What is it? Relate this expertise to lessons shared in the story (role-play) of Bwana. What is Bwana's basic fear of Leaver cultures? Why must he "modernize" these societies. What threat does he perceive and why? What is holding Bwana-Takers captive? Is cynicism a part of this captivity? What is Ishmael's challenge to the student (and to us)?**

### Sample: Other Activities

We did all these things, usually in a group, which triggers more responses.

1. **Brainstorm to create a list of characteristics of a “healthy” Taker culture.**

2. **Read short stories, poems, or political documents like the U.S. Constitution for evidence of the cultural myths suggested by *Ishmael*.**

3. **Interview people from backgrounds different from your own and begin to put together a greater cultural story of humanity. (Students look for commonalities and differences and explore the “why” of each. Especially enlightening are interviews and exchanges with people from traditional cultures. In Salt Lake, for example, we’re able to draw on both Native Americans and Tibetans and create rich counterexamples to Taker society.)**

4. **Design a project in political/cultural/social/economic activism that addresses the paralysis induced by cynicism, the attitude that “everything is so screwed up nothing I can do will make any difference.” (They research a particular topic and become immersed in it, keeping a scrapbook of media coverage, their contacts and interviews, pictures of themselves involved with the problem, whatever they want. I grill them to make sure they’ve selected an issue they’re truly interested in. Through the study of *Ishmael* they’ve learned not to just accept in-formation at face value. Consequently they’re able to evaluate arguments, look at propaganda from both sides, and become, ultimately, problem solvers.)**

**Skills** Critical thinking; problem solving; analysis; political participation; character development.

**Assessment** I used quizzes during the reading, and an essay question on *Ishmael* dealing with cynicism and paralysis that enabled students to relate what they’d learned in the book to their projects.

**Student response** They soaked it up! But even this group of advanced freshmen found the going hard at times because they didn’t understand all the references to metaphors and needed more guidance than the older students. They often needed permission to question and still looked to me for answers. (But my group of less-advanced freshmen was very put out that they weren’t in on the *Ishmael* project too, because they heard their friends talking about it all the time!)

**Summing up** In future uses, I’ll work to get students to look beyond me as teacher-authority figure, to get

them to see that “teacher” equals “leader” rather than someone who sets limits.

## Senior Seminar on Political Science

**The course and students** In this course, which is a history elective, we spend the first trimester on political philosophy and the second on political models (parliamentary in the U.K., presidential in Brazil, Communist in China, emerging in South Africa). In the third trimester we study the United States and foreign policy and read *Ishmael*. This was a senior seminar class of six very motivated students who operated at a very high level, college level.

**Class activity** I had students read *Ishmael* in its entirety, noting their questions, before we began discussing it. (Specific discussion questions were very much like those for Foundations of Civilization.) This discussion formed the basis of the seminar and for the development of the foreign policy project—the major project. Here’s a general synopsis of how it worked: After reading *Ishmael*, especially the Bwana role-play, students described a pessimistic frame-work that shapes the decisions and priorities of Takers—no trust, need for control, need to establish our own security, etc. They related this pessimistic attitude to the political philosophers we studied in the second segment of the course (Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Mill, Marx, etc.) who have shaped Western culture and tied it to a cultural celebration of cynicism. Specifically, they noted cynicism and pessimism embedded in pragmatic approaches to foreign policy, which, of course, are based on the strategic needs of the U.S. They considered the limits and costs of this approach and whether any other policy options could be viable in a decidedly non-utopian world, or in effect, are we captive to a myth? With this as their underlying structure, they undertook the study of a specific foreign policy situation (Tibetan relocation and occupation of Tibet by China) and wrote a paper offering their own policy suggestions.

Salt Lake City is part of a federally funded Tibetan relocation program through which Tibetans are granted visas in order to advocate Tibetan culture and point up the occupation of Tibet by China. Consequently, the students were able to interview monks, students, government workers, and tradespeople who had been relocated. They also gathered information from the Chinese embassy, Congress, the State Department, and the International Campaign for Free Tibet. Each student considered the lessons of *Ishmael* and wrestled with the task of reducing large, abstract ideas to concrete policy suggestions. The project was not only a hands-on approach to familiarization with the process and conflicts of policy-making but also was a vehicle for response to the challenge proposed by *Ishmael*—to build a new

paradigm.

**Assessment** Quizzes and essay tests on policy-making and *Ishmael*. The extended paper on formal policy proposal was the major tool.

**Student response** The seniors gobbled *Ishmael* up, took it as an intellectual challenge. (One called me as soon as he finished to thank me for assigning it, and they've introduced their friends to it as well.) They were willing to take on the hard issues and found it refreshing not to be preached to. This was the main difference between the two classes: the older students welcomed the challenge, the younger ones were a bit afraid of it.

**Summing up** Ishmael's exploration of cultural mythology, of paradigm building, of power relationships and drive for control, and his reinterpretation of human stories provide a rich resource for any class addressing political philosophy and organization. I was able to bring the Tibetan program into this seminar because I was using *Ishmael* as a springboard. Otherwise I would have just had to preach the idea of looking at alternatives. This way, students could see alternatives, that it might be possible to create a different foreign policy. They could recognize the need for creative thinking and problem-solving as a way *they* might make a difference in their world, and they discovered they were willing to roll up their shirtsleeves and dive into it.

## World History (Grades 9 and 10) Michael Read, Stephen F. Austin HS Austin, TX

**The course and students** This is an honors course of freshmen and sophomores. This year I'm teaching four sections, with about 35 students in each. Since the school is located centrally, it draws a pretty mixed group of students, from all parts of the city. Reading levels of this class range from the 60th to 90th percentile.

**Why *Ishmael*?** I knew as soon as I read *Ishmael* that it was an important book I had to share with my students. For World History, especially, it offers an overview of how we got where we are today that helps students see the whole picture. Because I was so excited by the book, I figured my students would be too. (I also use it with my Humanities elective for gifted and talented juniors and seniors. I use it as a jumping off point for comparison of Western and Eastern Civilization because the issues raised are philosophical, and it gives the students a different point of view.)

**Class activity** I've been using *Ishmael* for the past three years and have tried out different things. Some have worked, others I've tossed out. But I always assign the book at the beginning of the year, before I even hand out the textbook, so they start right out realizing that there is another point of view. They get a sense of the Leaver story as a basis for the rest of their study of world history. We spend about three weeks of class on *Ishmael*, then go on to the text. But throughout the year I refer the students back to the book. We talk about what Ishmael would say about the issues we're discussing. This year, for the first time, I assigned only about 20 pages of the book each night and asked them to write out five questions about the material. This worked much better than what I'd done previously (assigning whole sections, which sometimes ran to 60 pages). Teaching style is crucial to understanding with this book. Mine is Socratic, so I when I make an assignment I tell students to come in with their questions, for me and for each other. I also generate questions, and each day in class we set up a dialogue around a body of information.

**Skills** Critical thinking is my focus. The two things I feel they should learn in this course are to view a body of work critically and to see that there are different points of view.

**Assessment** I give some quizzes but mainly just include questions on *Ishmael* as part of ordinary testing for class. One essay question, for example, asked them to give three different interpretations of the koan that appears on Ishmael's poster.

**Student response** Some have trouble with the idea of a gorilla that communicates telepathically, and one class couldn't get past it. Most are very positive and come away with the sense that they can make a difference in the world. One student who was in my class as a freshman read *Ishmael* again on his own as a senior. He got something completely different out of it as a more mature reader and understood it better. Quite a few ask if they can take the book home to their parents to read, and it becomes family dinner table talk.

**Summing up** This is a book that can be used all through the study of World History, even after the few weeks of formal study of *Ishmael* are over. Bringing it back in throughout the course helps students step back from events in history and evaluate them. I'd advise other teachers to teach it as a work of philosophy rather than as a novel and to break it up into small assignments. I rushed through it to meet the curriculum, but now I'd use *Ishmael* and *The Republic* and throw everything else away. (A cautionary note: don't get hung up on the Genesis stories if they're troubling for some of

your students. Deal with them and move on; sometimes I don't even talk about them, depending on the class.)

## **Anthropology (Grades 11 and 12)** **Terence Collins, Chippewa Valley HS** **Clinton Township, MI**

**The course and students** I first used *Ishmael* in both sections of my Anthropology class in the spring of 1995. Most of the 55 students were juniors and seniors, but there were a few sophomores, and nearly all were bound for college.

**Why *Ishmael*?** The book was mentioned in two different sessions at the Annual Conference of the World History Association and the Rocky Mountain World History Association in 1994. I got a copy, read it as soon as I got home, and was very impressed. It promised to be a vehicle I could use to convey many of the issues I wanted my students to address. (I wanted to deal with the “big picture” of human evolution and its astounding implications; to get free of our anthropocentric view of evolution; and to examine the extraordinary relationship between the human species and the biophysical environment and consider whether this relationship is sustainable.) *Ishmael* enabled me to do all these things.

**Class activity** *Ishmael* was the primary text for this class, which might better be called Philosophical Anthropology. Our regular Anthropology text became a reference and background source in connection with issues raised by *Ishmael*. We used several videos (*Millennium*, *Mindwalk*) in connection with the book, and in the second half of the course I had students read Kurt Vonnegut's *Galápagos* to compare and contrast with *Ishmael*. Our class discussions were conducted using the Paideia Seminar model (*Social Education*, January 1995). (*This is similar to the pattern described by Rob Williams on p. 4 and Stacy Studebaker on p. 13. ED.*) Here are some of the topics covered, with a few of the questions raised for each.

### **Sample: Anthropology Topics and Questions**

**1. *The concept of captivity as a metaphor for culture in relation to thoughts and behavior of that culture. (Can we as a culture identify the bars of our prison, or are we too happy in our captivity to care? Is our society really a cultural prison?)***

**2. *Questions of culture brought out by Ishmael. (Can the cultural myth be exposed so that all people see it for a myth? Could the myth be changed to create a new culture with a***

***sustainable way of life? What might get in the way of such change? What are the origins of culture and cultural beliefs, especially ours?)***

**3. *The need to create a new cultural myth. (Is the cultural myth of our society leading to our demise? Can a complex cultural myth such as ours be sufficiently changed, and how?)***

**4. *Living in conformity with the natural law. (Can we make our own laws, or with the natural law ultimately catch up to us? Is it possible, with technology, for man to control nature itself and all its processes? Or would this attempt make things worse? Since it isn't feasible for current society to go back to hunting and gathering, what can we do?)***

**Assessment** In addition to usual course tests, students wrote a paper with the title How Should We Live? This was their chance to draw together all the strands of our class discussion revolving around *Ishmael* and supplementary articles, books, and videos and analyze and synthesize it.

**Student response** My students had mixed reactions. Those few given to a consideration of large issues and possessed of much tolerance for ambiguity found *Ishmael* to be stimulating and thought-provoking. Others found it perplexing and confusing. It's very difficult to stand back from one's own culture and question its deep underlying premise at any age—let alone at 15 or 16, when such questioning has never before been asked of you. A number of them had questions they felt were not addressed adequately in the book (*some of these are addressed in the section Student Puzzlers on p. 22, ED.*)

**Summing up** A current emphasis in education is on meta-cognition, or thinking about thinking. I found *Ishmael* to be a great tool in this type of teaching. Throughout the book *Ishmael* tries to get his student to step back from his own culture, to study its thought processes and see the underlying premises behind them. The Socratic dialogue and relationship between *Ishmael* (the Socratic teacher) and his student makes each individual reader into his student as well. Because the teacher is a gorilla, the reader is no longer tied to the idea that life processes are human centered and can indeed step back and see the whole picture more easily.

The entire book is based on a meta-cognitive way of thinking and so gets the students thinking in this direction, bringing out ideas and discussion topics from them and getting them to think about their own thinking. *Ishmael* is almost a detailed guide to how to study the human process of thought and the deep-seated cultural basis of our thought and language. One task of anthropology is to stand outside cultural assumptions

and question them, and *Ishmael* is a tool especially suited for this.

## World Geography (Grade 9) Isobel Stevenson, Johnston HS Austin, TX

**The course and students** This is an honors course and the introductory social studies class for students at the Liberal Arts Academy, a magnet program at Johnston High School. There are five sections for approximately 125 students. I wrote the course and teach two sections.

**Why *Ishmael*?** One of the main things I want my students to learn is to challenge assumptions. Traditional textbooks present facts as they are understood, but they rarely, if ever, give students any idea of how we came to think a certain way. But *Ishmael* challenges those assumptions and provides a new way of looking at the familiar.

**Class activity** The course is issues-based rather than being region-based as most geography courses are. I put emphasis on having models to describe and predict geographical events. The students, therefore, must master some difficult concepts, such as the global circulation of the atmosphere, the demographic transition model, and the species-area curve. During the fall semester we study physical systems, resources and economic development, population, and food, farming, and famine. In the spring we cover endangered species, natural hazards, water, and energy.

We start reading *Ishmael* at the beginning of the spring semester, as a complement to the endangered species unit, though we are halfway through the semester by the time they've done all that I assign on the book. I don't require students to finish reading it, but most of them do. We have class discussions, and they make responses in the journal they keep for the whole course. We've watched a video on how zoos help endangered species and students then contrasted that assumption with what *Ishmael* says about zoos.

**Skills** The skill I'm really looking for in having the students read *Ishmael* is close reading of text. By that I mean that they will be able to extract a line of argument from text and cite evidence for their answers. For example, they take the jellyfish account of creation, show how the author builds his argument, and cite evidence from the text to support that argument.

**Assessment** I ask students to respond to questions

based on the reading assigned over a two-week period. These are open-ended questions, with no right answers, so I grade on the basis of the reasons students give for their responses. Here are some of the things I ask them to consider.

### Sample: Open-ended Questions

1. *What does Ishmael think of zoos? How does that compare with what your research on saving endangered species tells you?*
2. *How does Ishmael illustrate the difference between anthropocentrism and biocentrism?*
3. *Why did the author choose a gorilla and not a cockroach?*
4. *What does the jellyfish story tell you?*
5. *What do you think of the "tricks" Ishmael talks about?*

**Student response** The students really like *Ishmael*. Reading it was easily the most popular thing we did all year, in terms of projects that took longer than a day or two to complete.

**Summing up** I'm delighted with the way our use of *Ishmael* worked out. I've used it for two years now and don't anticipate making any changes in the third. I'd caution teachers to distance themselves from the views in the book, since some may be at odds with values students and their families hold. (This especially true of the jellyfish story of creation and the chapters on the Middle East.)

## Global Problems in Moral Perspective (Grades 11 and 12) Gary Partenheimer, Northfield Mount Hermon School, Northfield, MA

**The course and students** This is an independent coeducational boarding school with 1100 students in grades 9-12. More than 20% are from 65 countries outside the U.S. and nearly all go on to college. Two years of coursework in Religious Studies (including biblical studies, comparative religion, philosophy, and ethics) are required for graduation. The course is a one-term Religious Studies elective open to juniors and seniors (and a few highly motivated soph-omores). Many students take it concurrently with courses in environmental studies. It is well subscribed by international students, with China, Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Venezuela, and Zaire represented in recent

years. About 60 students take the course each year, and two instructors teach it in four sections of about 15 students each. (The other teacher uses *Ishmael* as well.)

**Why *Ishmael*?** I read *Ishmael* for the first time as part of an NEH Independent Study project called “Twenty-first Century Heroes in Twentieth Century Literature,” a survey of fiction about people, communities, and nations struggling with the global crises described in works like *Silent Spring*, *Limits to Growth*, and *Earth in the Balance*. After ten years of teaching this Global Problems course I had discovered that the facts students learned about population, species extinction, and the Greenhouse Effect, usually couched in scientific or mathematical terminology, were either too abstract or too overwhelming to be truly useful. Many left the course depressed about the world’s future, but most maintained the same aspirations for their individual lives: college, good job, happiness.

Certain that education should enable and ennoble rather than disable, I turned to literature for imaginative models of the world that these facts predicted and the consequent moral challenges for persons of good will. I also sought resources for teaching the wide perspectives of religious studies, with their emphasis on questions of meaning, purpose, and value, and their power to integrate insights from the sciences and social sciences. Daniel Quinn seems to have read my mind! *Ishmael*’s concept of Mother Culture whispering the Taker story explains like a laser the most persistent question students ask year after year: “If we know so much about what’s wrong with the world, why do we keep doing it?” Furthermore, the narrator’s “earnest desire to save the world” rings true for so many of my students who have bravely tried to get their classmates to recycle or change their consumption patterns. Finally, the book promises no foolproof program for survival, but in answer to Tolstoy’s lingering question, “What then shall we do?” *Ishmael* grounds the future in a simple moral imperative: “First, Cain must stop murdering Abel.” The implied assignment of working out the details makes this novel an ideal centerpiece for the Global Problems course.

**Class activity** We’ve used *Ishmael* with Donnell Meadows’ collection of editorials, *The Global Citizen*, as the two major texts for the past three years and plan the same for Winter 1996. Meadows’ opening essay on the concept of “paradigm” with her assertion that: “to solve the world’s gravest problems...the first step is *thinking differently*,” sets the stage beautifully for *Ishmael*. I divide reading assignments in accordance with the novel’s 13 sections and spend four class weeks on it in the middle of the course, which allows for ample student discussion, use of related short materials, and project time. (Most of my colleagues allow less time, even as

little as two weeks.) Discussions are consistently lively and substantive in every section, whether I lead classes deliberately through each major point or allow freewheeling excursions initiated by the most assertive students. Among the many activities and assignments generated in response to the novel, these have been consistently successful:

#### **Sample: Activities**

**Discussion topics:** *How the book would be different as an essay rather than a novel; Mother Culture and the influence of gender; the significance of Ishmael’s name and his name change; the relevance of the Holocaust to Ishmael’s teachings; the concept of myth and how it differs in popular usage; the concept of the sacred and the meaning of “in the hands of the gods”; the difference between Takers and Leavers; the peace-keeping law and whether it applies to humans.*

**Classroom activities:** *Individuals or groups volunteer to tell their own (or their culture’s) creation myth and analyze it; several volunteers find themselves aboard the “Taker Thunder-bolt” and must reach agreement on what to do; individuals or groups choose favorite (or troublesome) passages to present to the class, making connections with course concepts; go around the class asking each student if he or she would accept an invitation to join the “faraway land” described in Chapter Seven.*

**Writing assignments:** *Write to the author; summarize what you think are the novel’s five major points; review the twilight treadmill scenario in Chapter Eleven and respond to Ishmael’s question, “So, do you press the button?” ; write Ishmael’s commencement address (at NMH the commencement speaker is selected by the Senior Class Steering Committee); analyze our school from the perspectives of Takers and Leavers.*

**All-time favorites:** *Students tell someone outside the class about Ishmael and report to the class about the encounter. (They most frequently choose roommates, faculty they know well such as dorm advisors or coaches, and parents. They love to compare notes on what happened.); a group of students dressed up as gorillas and stood outside the dining hall displaying a two-sided poster like Ishmael’s, then reported to the class on their encounters.*

**Skills** Critical reading and thinking; imaginative problem solving and communication; moral reasoning.

**Assessment** *Ishmael* and Elie Wiesel's *Night* are two books that almost all students read for their own merits without the usual academic checks. Thus, having given short answer and essay tests in the past, this year I abandoned all quizzes and tests except for optional open-ended take-home mid-term and final exams to comply with current school policy. Instead, it was up to each student to design his or her own mode of response (poetry, sculpture, stories, etc.), subject to the guidance and approval of the instructor and the rest of the class.

**Student response** The hardest section for most students is the discussion of the stories of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel, but those who have taken our Old Testament course usually sustain the discussion of these chapters. Some foreign students with limited English proficiency have trouble reading, but usually say they like the novel more than most of the difficult materials assigned by our department. At the end of the course, students are required to submit a Personal Learning Summary discussing how they've changed as a result of participation in the course, with specific references to important books, assignments, ideas, and classes. Many wrote that reading and discussing *Ishmael* was a highlight of this course and their whole secondary education!

**Summing up** Based on my enthusiasm for the book, *Ishmael* is now a required text in Human Futures, an upperclass history course, and Environmental Problems, a science elective. Five freshmen read it on their own in my Humanities class last year (after reading class notes from Global Problems on my board), and we're considering it as the culminating text for our required introductory course for younger students. It is also a candidate for the school's Book-in-Common project, which includes all students, faculty, and staff, plus interested parents.

## **Environmental Studies** **(Grades 11 and 12)** **Stacy Studebaker, Kodiak HS** **Kodiak, AK**

**The class and students** Environmental Studies is a junior-senior elective course I initiated two years ago. It's an honors class, but credit is given only if two semesters are completed (mainly because of a year-long major project). The number of students varies each year from 24 to 33.

I called the class Environmental Studies rather than Environmental Science because I didn't want to be

limited by the accepted traditions or approaches in teaching a science class. I wanted the latitude to teach the course in an interdisciplinary manner, incorporating philosophy, psychology, art, music, writing, literature, and multicultural perspectives. My justification for this is that to understand

the environment and the human relationship to the earth, science seems too limiting. I also wanted to offer an alternative to students interested in taking more than the required two years of science—those who might be intimidated by the traditional chemistry-physics route or didn't want to follow it.

**Why *Ishmael*?** A friend gave me the book in 1993, and after reading it through in practically one sitting, I knew it was THE book I'd been looking for to use in my class. Wanting to introduce a keystone work of environmental literature to my students, I had tried using *Silent Spring*, but found they got bogged down in the technical aspects and missed much of the big message. *Ishmael*, on the other hand, is short and fairly easy to read at one level, and because of the Socratic format of the conversation between Ishmael and the narrator, it would lend itself perfectly to the Socratic Seminar format of discussing literature I wanted to use. I also intuitively felt the kids would like the book because it's so nontraditional. (What? The whole book is a conversation between a gorilla and a man?) It leads so methodically and smoothly into many important discoveries of our behavior and how we relate to the earth and raises many essential questions about the human role on earth—timely and important ideas among thinking adolescents.

Mainly, I wanted a book that would generate discussions in which everyone could have something to talk about. That's the magic of *Ishmael*. Everyone can relate to it. No matter the culture, gender, economic, or religious background.

**Class activity** Most of the third quarter of my class is dedicated to reading *Ishmael*, using the Socratic Seminar Format developed by Michael D. Strong.

### **Sample: Socratic Seminar Format**

**1. We all sit around the edge of one big circle; everyone has a copy of *Ishmael* and a notebook to jot down ideas or questions.**

**2. All I tell my students about the book beforehand is that it's a book about how people relate to the environment. I also tell them that there are two groups of people in the book, the *Leavers* and the *Takers*. Their job is to learn as much as they can about these two kinds of people for their final assessment project.**

**3. One student volunteers to begin the reading out loud. Each student reads a page aloud while**

*the others follow along in their copy. We go around the circle reading aloud until we get to a place in the book that I have previously decided is a good place to ask some questions that will generate a discussion. I have my questions written down in front of me, but more always come up during the discussions.*

*4. We stop reading, and I begin with a question. The only rules for the discussion are: raise your hand before you speak, give the speaker your full attention, everyone's opinion is valid, no put-downs, everyone should share their thoughts.*

*5. My role is to ask questions that will spark discussion. I stay pretty neutral and don't provide answers to the questions. I clarify now and then, try to keep the discussion on track, and give necessary background information. I call on shy students to get them involved or sometimes guide the discussion a little by asking a series of questions. I keep a check list in front of me with the names of the students and keep a record of how many times each student speaks. This helps me know which students need more encouragement.*

*6. We always have a dictionary or two in the circle to look up unfamiliar words. Students keep a list of new vocabulary words and definitions.*

*7. At the end of each seminar (class period) we do a de-briefing. We go around the circle, and every student says something about the reading or discussions that day. I then assign a one-paragraph reaction that is due the next day. (I usually get more than one paragraph.) Each day, we begin where we left off the previous day.*

*8. When we finish the book, at the end of the quarter, the group has really bonded! They have shared much of themselves and explored new territory within. They have touched on and refined some of their primary values. They have developed more self-confidence through expressing and discussing their ideas and values. They have learned to respect the opinions of others and have experienced the power and stimulation of collective intellectual inquiry.*

**Skills** *Academic:* reading, speaking, listening, critical thinking; *Social:* teamwork, sensitivity, good manners; *Personal:* honesty, willingness to accept criticism, responsibility, initiative.

**Assessment** As a final assessment I ask students to demonstrate their understanding of the differences between Leavers and Takers. This demonstration is to be presented to the class and can be in the form of

poetry, music, a series of photographs, a video, paintings, sculpture, posters, or a report. I love to see what my students come up with. The work they produce for this assignment is generally of high quality because they're motivated to put so much of themselves into it.

**Student response** They're overwhelmingly positive. Many want to buy their copies of the book when they're through reading it in class. Many buy more copies for friends and relatives. This is a rather unusual phenomenon at the high school level. (One student bought the book for her mother and father and led them in Socratic Seminars on *Ishmael* at home. She was a potential drop-out the previous year, but she's been academically successful ever since.) I've had students tell me that *Ishmael* is the first book they wanted to read from cover to cover. English teachers have told me that students have magically become interested in literature all of a sudden! One English teacher wondered what in the world a science teacher was doing discussing and reading literature in a science class!

**Summing up** Juniors and seniors seem to really like the Socratic Seminar format. They also have enough maturity to handle some of the more controversial aspects of the book. If you plan to use the book in this format, I'd suggest reading it a couple of times first and deciding ahead of time where your discussion points will be each day. Having a list of already prepared questions each day helps things go more smoothly at first, but don't be afraid to be spontaneous. Be prepared for some emotional discussion! A lot of personal "stuff" comes out as students explore their own values.

When I discovered that my students were well versed in Taker culture but knew very little about Leaver culture, I assigned Marlo Morgan's book *Mutant Message Downunder*. It's a short, easy-to-read book about the Australian Aborigines (though there's some controversy about whether it's fiction or fact). It gives the reader a glimpse into a different mode of human operation that my students found very interesting and made a great follow-up to *Ishmael*.

**Multi-level,  
English/Science/History  
Avery Kerr, Santa Fe Secondary  
School  
Santa Fe, NM**

**The class and students** Santa Fe Secondary school is an independent high school with multi-graded classrooms, which offers basic subjects plus creative

and expressive arts, physical exercise, and noncompetitive sports. It's recognized by the NM State Department of Education, and we're working toward accreditation. My co-director, Dana Rodda, and I started the school in the fall of 1994, with 24 students—two multi-graded groups of 12 each, ranging in age from 14 to 18 and in reading skills from sixth grade to college freshman.

**Why *Ishmael*?** I chose *Ishmael* to begin our school year because it poses so many questions, both practical and philosophical. It deals with mankind's origins, the memories and myths about those origins, and the progress and process of our shared experience. It also seemed an ideal book to use with our varied group of students because the language is not difficult, and the ideas and philosophies can be explored in a number of ways, from 3-D art projects to research papers.

**Class activity** Everybody read *Ishmael*. We spent five to six weeks on it and incorporated the book into all subject areas: science (evolution), history (values and socio-political interaction), and English (vocabulary, character, the novel, etc.) (The science and history segments were taught by the school's teachers in those fields.) Drawing on *Ishmael*, we defined myth and talked about the myths of the Taker culture (media and family myths). We often read articles on current issues and events (e.g. Zero Population Growth) and discussed them in relation to *Ishmael*. For some writing assignments I asked students to respond creatively to different statements made by *Ishmael*. For example, "A family is like a hand," or "Everything you need to know can be found in the library." And, using the book, students also learned to write character sketches.

**Skills** Creative writing; vocabulary; critical reading and thinking; the development of themes; discussion.

**Assessment** We used simple vocabulary tests, creative writing assignments, and a semester final. This was a five-page paper (approximately 1000 words) completed over several weeks, from rough draft through final paper.

**Sample: Semester Final—English/Science/History**  
**Choose two or three of the following themes:**  
**Courage/integrity/**  
**honor; Invention/creativity; Power;**  
**Friendship/family; Justice; Individuality/privacy;**  
**Nature; Religion; Education/knowledge; Survival.**  
**Explain the relevance of these themes**  
**throughout one of the following texts: *Ishmael* by**  
**Daniel Quinn, *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, *Of***  
***Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, *Hamlet* by**

**William Shakespeare.**

**Trace the themes through one of the following aspects of BOTH science and history: Science (evolution, biotechnology, human genome project, scientific enquiry); History (Renaissance values, Greek-Roman values, the Church, socio-economic class).**

**Student response** Response was mixed. Most everyone "understood" the book, but some complained that "Nothing happened!" (*Ishmael* is definitely not an action-adventure saga!) Some were discouraged by the vast Taker culture we are part of. Others were hopeful for change.

**Summing up** I'll use the book again in a few years when we have a new student body. But next time I'll proceed more slowly and perhaps even divide the book into sections to explore in depth. For example, I'd explore Leaver societies that exist today and examine their systems. The book also lends itself to in-depth units that relate to our current situation on Planet Earth, and I'd suggest that students investigate some of *Ishmael's* biblical, philosophical, mythical, and political references.

**Oral Reading (Grades 10, 11,12 Math)**  
**Scott Sauter, Blue Mountain Union School**  
**Wells River, VT**

**The course and students** I teach everything from algebra through calculus in a small rural town in Vermont. Two years ago our daily schedule was changed to accommodate a science lab conflict. The net effect was to take our typical 43-minute block of time and make one block into a 60-minute period. We were told by the administration that we could do anything we wanted with the extra time added to this period. Most teachers chose to use it as a study hall or project period, but I decided to turn the extra time into a read-aloud period à la Jim Trelease in his *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. So 29 sophomores, juniors, and seniors became listeners for the last 17 minutes of our Algebra II class each day. I began by reading *The Education of Little Tree* by Forrest Carter.

**Why *Ishmael*?** When I learned that teachers in other schools were using *Ishmael* in the classroom, I decided to give it a try. I had been so impressed with the book when I read it, I felt that if even one student came away understanding the book's message, it would be worth it.

**Class activity** I read and the students listened. They were not held accountable for the books we read, and they didn't know quite what to make of that. (What? No tests. No papers. Why listen?) I believe, without exception, the entire class was quickly attending to the story at hand. At the end of each book we had a brief discussion. By December, when we had read several books, we all looked forward to the last segment of our math class with relish.

The reading of *Ishmael* went quite well overall, though it was hard to keep the continuity of its arguments clear in 17-minute snatches. I found myself explaining and re-explaining the argument at hand. I tried to engage the listeners at times by taking Ishmael's questions and posing them to the class. I also brought articles from the newspaper to help show examples of Mother Culture buzzing away. (e.g. statistics on world population, articles on bio-engineering and endangered species.) Things got a bit "hot" in the section of the book with references to the biblical creation story. One mother came in very concerned that I had chosen this book to read. But when I offered to loan her a copy to read herself, she wasn't interested.

**Student response** One of the direct spinoffs of reading *Ishmael* came just as we were finishing the book. Our school found itself in the midst of an environmental crisis. The air quality of the school was tested and found unfit. Five students from the *Ishmael* class came to me asking what action they could take. We decide to form a student action group, which we called Student Advocates For the Environment (S.A.F.E). Our motto was "Be Part of the Solution."

Since it began a year ago this group has established a recycling program at our school (more than 6000 pounds of trash in the first five months of school); built composting bins and composted school cafeteria food scraps, which are used on school flower beds and for the elementary school's indoor tomato-growing project; raised money to buy five acres of rainforest in the Children's Rainforest in Costa Rica; made a proposal for the three towns that attend our union school to start a recycling station (our modified proposal has recently been accepted by the three towns and should be in operation soon); sent teams of high school students into the elementary school to teach lessons on recycling; and raised money to send five students to Costa Rica during spring vacation to visit the Children's Rainforest.

**Summing up** I was amazed at the number of students who were thoroughly engaged during the reading of *Ishmael*. I would estimate that a third of them were right with me throughout the book. Another third were with me most of the time, and the rest were in and out.

(Attendance played a part in losing some of this last group.) Overall, I was amazed and pleased with the interest. I've been reading *Ishmael* again during the same period this year, and so far the response has been similar, very favorable. One student (who struggled academically throughout his school career) went out and bought his own copy of the book because we were reading too slowly for him in class. I gave the book to my brother-in-law, also a teacher. He gave it to a student he thought might like it. The student (a reluctant reader) came back to him and said, "Where did you get this book? I didn't know there were books like this!" That student is now turning his friends on to the book.

# College & University Courses

## Economy/Ecology/Ethics

**Sabine O'Hara, Siena College  
Loudenville, NY**

**The course and students** The course is an upper level elective in Religious Studies. (Siena is a Franciscan college and requires at least two courses in religious studies.) The 35 students were mainly juniors or seniors from all three divisions of the college: Business, Science, and Art and Humanities.

**Why *Ishmael*?** After a colleague recommended the book, I adopted it for my class. My intention in using *Ishmael* was to increase the students' awareness that though our religious concepts shape our understanding of nature, religion itself is not absolute but is shaped by its social and cultural context. *Ishmael*'s voice of Mother Culture and the distinction made between the Takers and the Leavers, which influences the interpretation of scripture (as in the story of Cain and Abel) makes this point powerfully. *Ishmael* thus forms a powerful basis for subsequent readings (e.g. a text taking a critical view toward the conceptual framework of The Enlightenment and its resulting attitudes toward nature and technology). The reading of a such a text can easily call forth defensive attitudes, particularly of students in science or business oriented fields. *Ishmael* makes it easier to question common perceptions and absolutes, and assists in bringing about openness toward differing world views.

**Class activity** *Ishmael* was one of two required texts for the course. The other was *After Nature's Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology*, a collection of essays dealing with various aspects of the Judeo-Christian understanding of stewardship and environmental ethics. (Students found *Ishmael* much more readable and engaging than the more theoretical essays contained in the reader.) The basic questions addressed in the course concerned the link between economics and ecology and the ethical ramifications of our behavior, around the globe and into the future: Who has a right to grow, a right to prosperity and resource use? Who pays the price for progress and growth? What criteria do we apply to evaluate these questions?

We started by exploring ecological versus economic concepts and issues, then went on to explore concepts of ethics, both social and ecological, that have shaped our human/ecological interactions. A main focus was to

question how our religious traditions influence and shape our ethical concepts, both with respect to an ecological and a social ethic. Guest speakers shared with the class their own traditions' perspective on a socio-ecological ethic.

Finally, in order to keep an applied focus, we looked at the most pressing ecological questions of different continents and/or nations to distinguish between religious and cultural ethical values and their influence on human behavior.

In addition to reading assignments and class discussion, students had a written research assignment, which was a group project for presentation to the class and counted for 30% of the course grade.

### **Sample: Written Research Assignment**

*This paper is part a group project, and each group member will contribute an independent aspect to the overall project. Issues to be researched are the most pressing ecological problems in the U.S., Europe, China, India, Latin America, and Africa. Individual aspects include: historic problem assessment, ecological impact, social impact, institutional consequences, and global effects (ecological and/or political).*

**Skills** The ability to critically reflect on one's own standpoint and context was the major skill. Particularly in higher education, where the absolutes of an objectivist, distanced, and dissecting view of scientific inquiry are alive and well, a questioning of one's own context and shaping of context is very important. A saying attributed to Einstein makes the point well; "We can't solve a problem with the same attitude we had when we created it." Yet a critical reflection of one's own familiar ways of thinking and frames of reference is not a comfortable thing. The far out, yet loving and intimate story of *Ishmael* somehow makes this questioning of one's own frame of reference less painful. It is reminiscent of a coming home, a connecting with a closeness to nature's animal kingdom familiar from childhood, yet buried under 'adult' knowledge.

**Student response** Students were very positive about the course and most responded positively to *Ishmael* as well, engaging in some lively and insightful discussions, made even more interesting by the fact that students came from all three divisions of the college. Some had thought extensively about ethics and its relevance for economic and ecological issues, but others had been immersed in their field of science, business, or finance with little concern for ethical questions. I found that

business majors tended to take a more pragmatic approach to the ideas than did the liberal arts or social studies students.

**Summing up** My experience in using *Ishmael* was very positive. Currently, I'm not teaching an interdisciplinary course like the one described here, since I switched schools and am now teaching at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. However, I am planning on using *Ishmael* again in the future, possibly as a reading assignment in Ecological Economics or in a First Year Studies course on Nature and Society. I'd heartily encourage teachers to use *Ishmael*, particularly in interdisciplinary courses involving ecology and culture, philosophy, or values. However, I would also caution them to be prepared for resistance. While the majority of my students related and responded well to *Ishmael*, it was important to some that the points made in the book were reinforced by more "scientific" readings taken from our other textbook and/or academic journals in the areas of critical theory, philosophy of science, or religion and ethics. Otherwise it could become too easy for some to simply reject *Ishmael* as fiction with no or little connection to the real world of enlightened citizens.

## Freshman Composition

**Barbara Bass, Towson State University  
Towson, MD**

**The course and students** I've used *Ishmael* for the past few semesters in my Freshman Composition class to inspire students writing essays about their personal connections with environmental issues. This is a required course, and since Towson State has a very large business department, many of the students are career-track business majors. I had 18 students in each of my two sections.

**Why *Ishmael*?** When I read the book, I was very enthusiastic about it and was sure my students would be, too. I like to see Freshman Composition as an avenue for, at the least, consciousness raising and, at the most, social change, and I felt *Ishmael* would help do that.

**Class activity** We spend about two weeks with the book doing a variety of activities. **1.** As students read the book they write a series of letters to me giving their reactions, raising questions, exploring their thoughts. I read the letters and respond, so we have an ongoing dialogue about it. This gives them a chance to say what

they really think without exposing their ideas to anyone but me. (I initially had them use a journal format but found these responses very general. The letters brought out much more personal and individual response to the material. In future classes I may have them choose someone other than me to write to, even *Ishmael* himself if they want.) **2.** They spend several class periods working in groups to develop lists of questions they have about *Ishmael* and things they learned from reading the book. These lists are written out on newsprint and become the basis for our class discussion. **3.** For the final part of the assignment I ask them to write an essay, then work in peer groups to help each other with the organization and development of their ideas through several drafts. Their first drafts, peer group responses, and final papers are all turned in to me.

**Sample: At Home Essay (Choose either A or B)**

**A. Write a well-organized and developed essay explaining a personal perspective on an environmental issue. Incorporate into the essay your readings from *Ishmael*, using the following format:**

**1. Choose an environmental issue, preferably one with which you have a personal connection.**

**2. Describe the issue and write about the conflicts involved in it.**

**3. Use Quinn's ideas on the environment and our connection with nature to support your thesis and main ideas.**

**4. Once you have described the issue and the conflicts involved in it, suggest possible consequences and/or propose convincing solutions to the problem.**

**B. Compare or contrast the environmental philosophies of Forrest Carter as described in *The Education of Little Tree* and Daniel Quinn in *Ishmael*. Be sure to include your opinion in this paper. Be sure to support your ideas with examples from *Ishmael*. You can also refer to other environmental articles we have studied.**

**Skills** Basic writing; organizational skills; working together in groups; critical reading and thinking.

**Assessment** This final paper was my main assessment tool, but because of their letters to me I had an ongoing sense of the students' understanding of the material and their ability to communicate their ideas in writing.

**Student response** *Ishmael* gets my students thinking. Once they suspend their disbelief and accept a thinking gorilla, they become fascinated with the ideas. Even my fundamentalist students who are Creationists enjoy the

reading. They tell their friends and relatives about the book. After reading the book, one of my students said, "This is what college is supposed to be like. I'm really thinking now."

**Summing up** One student who had trouble with the book in the beginning (a narrator who did not have to report to a daily job bothered him almost as much as a telepathic gorilla) ultimately suspended his disbelief and in his last letter said, "I think this book is great for these times and should be mandatory for students to read." *Ishmael* definitely lived up to my expectations. It's perfect for college students; it inspires them to think. For freshmen it's a wonderful introduction to a liberal education. I plan on using it in my classes for the foreseeable future.

## Environmental Inquiry

Bob Henderson, McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

**The course and students** These are seniors in the Arts & Sciences Program, a small enclave within the university. Students in this program have a background of high academic achievement and are very motivated. Before they get to me, they've had courses in Western thought, statistics, calculus, creative arts, writing, logic, technology and society, literature, and physics. The 20 students in the class are a varied group, from different parts of Canada. Many are pursuing a second degree while in Arts & Sciences. All this means that a diverse group deal with issues of *Ishmael* that demand diversity.

Though Environmental Inquiry is a very broad title, I didn't want to be limited to any particular concept, like deep ecology or environmental management.

**Why *Ishmael*?** I didn't want to create a course that jumped in and *answered* students' questions. I wanted to slow them down, so *they* would ask the crucial questions. I knew *Ishmael* would help them do that.

**Class activity** In the first class of the first term, I tell students to read *Ishmael*, that we can't move forward in the course until they've read the book! This intrigues them because they're not used to getting assignments on the first day. (And I don't do any of what they *are* used to, handing out reading lists, test schedules, etc.) I allow them a week to read it, introducing it simply as an overview to environmental inquiry, a frame in which to consider the course. When they've read it, we spend several class sessions on it, doing different things.

### Sample: Class Activities

1. *We go around the room making open comments, then role-play. (I assign a different role to each student, who must then act what they think of a certain section of the book according to the that role. One might be told to think like a computer, another to be depressed, another a Pollyanna type, one to build consensus, another to create dissension, etc.) The roles ensure a variety of views and really help students understand what's being said in the book.*

2. *In groups students are asked to: a. Write an open letter to Ishmael; b. Rewind the story—go back to a certain point and explore a different direction from that point; c. Prepare a campaign slogan for the students' future efforts in politics.*

3. *They form a writing circle (a group of five with myself as part of one of the groups). After they read the section in Ishmael that describes the differences between the Taker and Leaver stories, they are to write their life as a Leaver (though still a McMaster student). Starting with getting out of bed, how would a routine day be different (e.g. ways of knowing, ways of valuing, ways of living)? At a signal, they begin writing and write stream of consciousness style, ignoring punctuation, capitalization, etc., until told to stop. At the end they can share some or all of what they've written with the class.*

In a future class I may ask students to write a journal entry or a short position paper on the topic "He's just a gorilla anyway, get serious, it's dumb fiction." Why this topic? Students, I hope, will see the absurdity of our contemporary view that all is okay, that a technological fix is coming, or we'll change when we have to (à la the lifeboat ethic).

**Student response** I found with this group a tendency to criticize everything. (Many thought the book's narrator was just too stupid and the text dragged.) To them it seemed superficial to "like" something. There was always a "but." The role-play helped because it took them out of the Arts & Sciences critique mode and made the material more personal. They've been trained to the idea that intellect = critique and fear celebration because they don't want to look unintelligent. I challenged them to tell me (in their journals) what they actually celebrate without a "but."

**Summing up** It's very unusual to ask a class to read one book *well* rather than read many books superficially. I think the students understood the book's contents but didn't take an "inside view," a deep view, a celebratory view. Many will later. Their view of themselves as critics hurt the effect, and I'll address this concern in future

classes. Students read the book in September, but in March a few read it again and got a lot more from it. I think I'll ask them to do a reread when I use it in 95/96. Or I might have the group listen to the audio tape in March instead of rereading the book, which will get a different response perhaps. (Though I read *Ishmael* again when my students read it, I also keep the tape in my car and listen to it as well. The tape provides a good overview of the book's content.)

## Sociology

Larry R. Ridener, Baylor University  
Waco, TX

**The course and students** I've used *Ishmael* in several classes in different types of colleges in different parts of the U.S. for several years. (Introductory Sociology for lower division undergraduates at the University of Texas-San Antonio; Environmental Sociology for seniors at Mississippi College, an independent church-related school, and at Seattle University, a Roman Catholic school, and Bellevue Community College in Washington. I'm now using the book at Baylor in a Sociological Theory course for upper level students. Class sizes in these courses ranged from over 100 to 25 or 30.

**Why *Ishmael*?** I read the book in 1992 when it first came out in hardback and immediately fell in love with it and began using it in class. It seemed a really good vehicle for encouraging students to think.

**Class activity** We'd spend about two weeks on the book, but I continued to refer to it throughout the course when it was appropriate. My primary interest was in getting students to think. Though just reading the book is provocative in itself, we had class discussions and students wrote a paper on their reactions to the book. In San Antonio we invited Daniel Quinn to visit and answer questions, which gave students additional insight into the book and an opportunity for both group and individual dialogue with the author. For example, one student asked if the gorilla was named *Ishmael* because he was the symbol for the whole community of life that humans put themselves above and think they can control (the student's own theory, developed after reading). This was not the author's original reason for the choice of the name, but he liked it and commended the student on his perception. The student was delighted to have surprised the author (who now has added this explanation to those he gives when asked "Why *Ishmael*? Or Why a gorilla?")

**Skills** Critical thinking; writing ability; creativity.

**Assessment** The paper I assigned toward the end of the semester was my main assessment tool. It not only brought out what students had learned from reading *Ishmael* but showed their ability to relate those concepts to the basic sociological concepts we had studied.

**Sample: A Guide to Writing Your Paper on *Ishmael***  
*This paper should be an interpretive sociological analysis of the book *Ishmael*. It should be more than a book report and should be written in a scholarly manner. You should include some of the things you have learned in sociology, particularly theoretical orientations and concepts. For example, you should be able to apply some sociological theory to the ideas Daniel Quinn uses in the book. Discuss the Takers and Leavers in terms of conflict theory, structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism, etc. Who are the Takers and Leavers? What is meant by the term Mother Culture? How does it operate? Who is *Ishmael*? What is he trying to teach and why?*

*Pick out a portion of the text in *Ishmael* and expand on it. There is symbolism in the book that can be tied to notions such as: stratification in terms of class, race, or gender; the sociology of religion; political sociology; economics; organizations; philosophy; social movements and collective behavior; or any topic of your choice. The possibilities are wide open and are limited only by your imagination (within reason, of course). Relate these ideas to various types of societies—hunter-gatherers, agrarian societies, industrial societies, or post-industrial societies. But don't rely on long, extensive quotes as the essence of the paper. Tell me what you've learned from reading the book.*

**Student response** The reaction of almost all my students has been extremely positive. Every semester I've had students thank me for introducing them to *Ishmael*. Some, on their own initiative, wrote to Daniel Quinn with questions. A couple of students thought I was some kind of far-out radical who was un-Christian and not suited to teach them, but this has been an exception to the general rule. Most students have been challenged by the book and have responded in a very positive manner.

**Summing up** I've used the book since 1992 and will continue to use it in a variety of courses because it teaches a form of critical thinking by experience, and not many teaching tools do that. *Ishmael* is a great challenge to all my students, and I'd highly encourage any teacher to use it. I've recommended it to other professors in

anthropology, sociology, and religion, who all told me how much they enjoyed the book, and now they're using it in their classes too. I'd encourage others to have students write papers giving their interpretations and analyses, because I find that many students will relate the book to some personal experience, which gives it an extra special meaning.

## **Environmental Policy-Making** **Christopher Tracy, James Madison** **College,** **Michigan State University, East** **Lansing, MI**

**The course and students** This is an elective course I taught the summer of 1994, but which was not taught this past summer because of insufficient enrollment. The course met for eight weeks, two hours twice a week, and was designed as an introduction to environmental policy-making. The ten students were mainly sophomores and juniors majoring in political theory or international relations. But one was a life studies major at the University of Pennsylvania and another was enrolled in the environmental program at MSU.

**Why *Ishmael*?** *Ishmael* brings out the alarming reality of humanity's future and the world's future better than any other source I've read. The issues and tentative solutions are presented in a much more accessible way than other sources. I wanted students to understand that economic influences shouldn't be the only criteria for policy-making, and *Ishmael* presents the best conglomeration of these other considerations—environmental ethics, philosophy, and religion. Quite often, too, certain ideas can be explored more easily through fiction than the more traditional textbook.

**Class activity** Because of the small size of the class I taught the course as if it were a seminar, with much interaction and student participation. Essentially, we explored ways in which environmental policy is made. Because this was an introductory course, we were obliged to focus on established modes of policy-making, which entails a significant amount of discussion of cost benefit analysis, economics, and science. However, we also brought in environmental ethics, religion and philosophy, and several other disciplines, and I attempted to have students discover that a variety of disciplines and thought processes shape environmental policy. I assigned *Ishmael* in particular to aid this far-ranging discussion in terms of considering whether we have preconceived notions of how we as humans relate to the environment. Since students read the book at the

beginning of the course, it cropped up again and again during discussions throughout the course. I encouraged students to explore policy decisions through the lens of what might be broadly called environmental ethics, and I believe that *Ishmael* helped shape the discussion of "alternative" modes of thought a great deal.

**Student response** Some students responded to the idea of learning from a gorilla with jesting comments, but a great deal of serious interchange also occurred, both in class discussions and on the final exam. The students genuinely enjoyed the book, and I sensed that it encouraged them to think about issues with a new perspective. For example, when they were writing on global warming for the final exam, all the students went through the cost benefit analysis and covered the other typical current thinking on policy-making. But some, after doing that, continued to write as if they were *Ishmael*, exploring alternatives and looking at the problem from an ethical, philosophical, and planetary perspective.

**Assessment** I included a long final exam question that drew on students' understanding of *Ishmael* and was meant to encourage them to consider how our current policy-making modes of thought (those often driven by economic and/or scientific concerns) might be shaped by our cultural moment. Students were asked to play the role of law clerks involved in a case before the World Court of Justice. (*We've condensed the question from two single-spaced pages in order to provide a glimpse of what the students were dealing with. ED.*)

### **Sample: Final Exam Question**

***The World Court of Justice Case #94-8675309***  
***Plaintiffs: The Leavers, members of an environmental interest group/non-governmental organization. Their attorney: the Right Honorable Ishmael. Defendants: The Takers, bureaucrats from a world political body. Their attorney: Dr. Excessive Growth. Justices: J. Blinded B.Y. Science, J. Economic Phil Enmore, and J. Enviro Greenfield.***

***The issue: The right of "the world" to a balanced and healthful ecology. Plaintiffs seek an order from the court preventing defendants from further logging in "Antreetica," alleging that deforestation is causing environmental damage and putting at risk the area's rainforest, rare and unique species of flora and fauna, and its indigenous peoples.***

***Defendants maintain that plaintiffs don't have science to support their claims and assert that plaintiffs have no standing to bring this matter before the world court because many of the specifics they cite (dislocation of cultural***

*communities, drought, flooding) are based on future-harm, speculation and/or harm to others.*

*Write opinions from each justice. Indicate the important facts the justices rely on to reach their conclusions. Set forth the policies and regulations they use as a basis for their opinions. Explain how their perspectives have guided their thinking in reaching their final conclusions. Finally, set forth the conclusion of each justice.*

The students, for the most part, readily accepted the challenge, and came up with a variety of interesting responses. One, for example, explained her feelings about how being raised a Roman Catholic may have shaped her notion of nature and the role of humanity in the world. The student sincerely attempted to avoid pigeon-holing organized faith as a negative or positive in the discussion, but rather attempted to objectively consider its influence.

**Summing up** I was truly excited about using the book in my course, though I admit that because of time and subject matter constraints, I may not have gotten as much out of the text as I desired. I'll definitely use it again when I teach this course. I would encourage other teachers to use the book, particularly if more time could be committed to exploring the variety of issues the text raises.

## Minority Voices in Literature

Richard L. Krupnow

Waupun Correctional Institution,  
University of Wisconsin Center-Fond  
du Lac, WI

**The course and students** Students in this maximum security prison college program must meet basic community college entrance requirements to qualify for the class, which is a writing emphasis course with an enrollment capped at 25. I taught in both the mens' and women's divisions of the prison, and chose to focus on myths as the basis for our discussion and writing.

**Why *Ishmael*?** It's a provocative novel, thoughtfully examining our culture and its underlying mythology, and I felt it would provide a central core for our study.

**Class activity** I use *Ishmael* with several other works that focus on how myths and the stories we grow up with impact how we perceive reality (Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Campbell's *The Power of Myth*, and Hamilton's examination of creation myths, *In the Beginning*). I bring

in current headlines and news stories to show how the actions of our society belie our rhetoric and invite students to share some of the stories they grew up with (about relatives, kids in the neighborhood, etc.) and recognize how those stories have shaped their perceptions.

Then I introduce *Ishmael*, and we analyze how we perceive the world based on Quinn's Takers and Leavers: Do we really perceive the world differently than native cultures? If so, why? What's the basis for that belief? Are we pretending we have stolen the knowledge of the gods (because, of course, we can't *really* steal it) and acting as if we can determine the fate of all around us? Is our society/civilization really crashing? What evidence is there for positive answers to any of the above questions? Finally, what can we do to change the course of our descent?

I then build on the students' newly gained perception to examine Native American, Tibetan Buddhist, and Pagan views of humanity's role in the world with Storm's *Seven Arrows*, Yongden's *Mipam*, and Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*. I don't suggest any single one of these philosophies is better than another. But, believing that teaching without values is an ineffective way of teaching, I emphasize that we're crashing and we better begin looking around to see how we can change our pattern of imagined flight (à la *Ishmael*). I initiate and encourage discussion of cultural patterns as they're evidenced in our treatment of native peoples and the environment and within our family and economic structures. During the course, students are assigned several essays, which reflect the focus described above.

**Student response** All were impressed with *Ishmael*. After reading it, some approached me with comments like "Wow!" and "Man, I never realized that before." (The men in particular had a kind of epiphany experience with the book. The women had a more gut level understanding of the concepts and weren't so surprised at the ideas.) Some were perturbed about the apparent answers to ending our headlong crash—we have to change our myth, and we have to stop pretending we're the most important things on this planet and in the universe.

**Summing up** I've taught college courses to inmates for four years and have discovered an almost universal common trait—a tendency to see the world in black and white. *Ishmael* thoughtfully examines what I have been teaching in my English classes since I began teaching in 1986: maybe humanity isn't God's gift to the universe, and all the others—plants, animals, and minerals—are patiently waiting for us to catch up to their own level of enlightenment. I will be using it again, though there is a question about funding for this program in the future.

# Systems of Survival Visionaries

Harvey T. Lyon, DePaul University  
School for New Learning, Chicago, IL

## Systems of Survival

**The course and students** The School for New Learning is an alternative college within the University and has about 2000 students. All work full-time and must be 24 years old to enroll. We have no academic departments at SNL, and the course offerings are not the standard ones found in the rest of the university. Students must take courses that fulfill certain competences within five areas (Arts of Living, Human Community, Physical World, World of Work, and Lifelong Learning) in order to graduate. (In more traditional terms, these might be listed as Arts-Humanities, Sociology-Psychology, Science, Business, and Basic Skills.) These are very challenging and exciting students to teach. (One of my colleagues described them as similar to the GIs who entered college after World War II, very focused and serious about learning.)

The course takes its name from Jane Jacobs' book *Systems of Survival: A Dialogue on the Moral Foundations of Commerce and Politics*. It meets one night a week for ten weeks and averages 25 students.

**Why *Ishmael*?** I teach *Ishmael* as a kind of spiritual detective story. It takes hold of the students just as it did me, which is why I've used it in more than one context. I use *Ishmael* in particular in Systems because it provides a point of view completely opposed to that presented in Jacobs' book, our main text, and does it through a unique novelistic prism.

**Class activity** In addition to Jane Jacobs' book, we read parts of Plato's *The Republic*, as well as Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and More's *Utopia*, and finish the class with *Ishmael*. Among the questions we explore are: Is work (and should it be) organized inherently differently in commerce and government? Can personal and organizational differences be separated and defined? Can it be argued that there can be only two systems to pursuing a livelihood? If so, what happens in society when the two systems get intermixed (e.g. bringing business efficiency into government and social responsibility into business)? Do past societies as well as contemporary ones give us clues to the answers to such questions? Students give class oral reports and write a term paper on the subject of their choice.

## Visionaries

**The course and students** This is a Capstone Seminar, a five-session course designed to permit students to explore a topic through cross-disciplinary methods of inquiry. I took the title from *The Utne Reader* (Jan./Feb. 1995), which describes a mixed bag of 100 "visionaries"—activists, academics, poets, physicists, and others. About 20 took the course last year.

**Why *Ishmael*?** In this class, the creative experience of *Ishmael* is more important than in my other class. Students can see more deeply into the subject matter, in a way that puts the ideas almost beyond argument. It addresses them at a level that's almost mythical and gives them a deep look at a vision of the world.

**Class activity** Students choose several of the visionaries profiled by the magazine to focus on in relation to their chosen competence and personal interests. They prepare written presentations, based on the Utne models (e.g. developing one of the *Utne Reader*'s brief profiles into a longer profile of that person). The class reads and critiques all of these, thus fulfilling all the tasks of composition and editing, and learning the nature and limits of a journalistic approach to a subject of depth and mystery. The third class meeting focuses on *Ishmael*, which they read in its entirety. To deepen their understanding of the book, I also have several students report to the class on three related books: Quinn's autobiographical follow-up to *Ishmael*, *Providence: The Story of a Fifty-Year Vision Quest*, Barbara Ward's *Spaceship Earth*, and Paul Hawken's *The Ecology of Commerce*. (Ward and Hawken deal in different ways with some of the subject matter of *Ishmael*.) In using these books I want students to see the difference not only in doctrine but in the conception and power of the vision presented in the different approaches to the hard (and perhaps unanswerable) questions we're struggling with.

**Student response** The students in both these classes are older, all are involved with earning a living, and some have families, so they respond in a way that's different from younger students with less experience of the "real" world. They desperately want *Ishmael* to be wrong, but they don't feel they're being preached at or lectured. This book is a very unusual model, for either fiction or nonfiction, and students have little experience with this kind of thing. They find it very powerful, a "blockbuster" in fact.

**Summing up** I've taught *Ishmael* several times now, and continue to explore new facets of it. Since my background includes both business and literature, I also

deal with *Ishmael* as a novel, trying to show students how it works not just as a prism through which to view our culture but as a literary piece. It's a very unusual novel. One of its greatest attributes is that it gives students a sense that the author is a companion on their intellectual journey, not just a presenter of ideas in the academic way they're accustomed to. I look on my Visionaries course as an ongoing experiment in learning in which the teacher is merely the oldest of the students, and *Ishmael* provides a unique guide for exploration.

## Student Puzzlers

These questions aren't necessarily substantive, but they come close to being universal in classrooms. The following replies and suggestions were developed on the basis of replies offered by the author in many different class situations.

### **Why doesn't the narrator have a name?**

Discuss possible pros and cons involved in names like John, Derek, Aaron, Miguel, Moustafa, Marcello, David, Pete. (Names invariably evoke ethnic and social connotations that are inviting to some people and offputting to others.) What does NOT giving the narrator a name accomplish? (Reduces his importance as an individual.) What point(s) might the author be making by giving the teacher a name but not the pupil?

### **How did Ishmael get himself installed in an office building? How did he get himself out of the office and into the carnival?**

Have students suggest possible scenarios—clearly there are hundreds of possibilities. The more important question is, why didn't the author include a scenario of his own? Would it have enhanced the book? In what sort of novel (story/film) would you expect to see every such action explained? How does that sort of novel (story/film) differ from the sort of novel *Ishmael* is? (*Ishmael* is a novel of ideas, unlike action-thrillers, for example, which are plot-driven.)

### **Why did you make Ishmael a gorilla?**

This question is by far the most frequently asked of the author, who prefers to turn it back to the questioner. Why did they make Mickey a mouse? Why did they make Donald a duck? Why did they make Bugs a bunny? Why did they make the Keeper of the Crypt (in *Tales from the Crypt*) a corpse? The same reasoning that went into these decisions went into the decision to make Ishmael a gorilla. To carry the matter a step farther: Why any animal? What's the point of having the conversation be between a human and an animal? (The human "speaks

for" humans, while the animal "speaks for" rest of the living community.) Even so, it would be *possible* for a human to speak for the rest of the living community, so why not a human? Why not a cow, an elephant, a whale? Discuss the drawbacks and problems involved with each.

### **Why is the pupil a man rather than a woman?**

The pupil is on hand to answer for our culture's destructiveness on this planet (to answer the question posed by Ishmael's koan). If the pupil has to be one gender or the other, which gender in our culture do you think should be called upon to answer for our destructiveness? Which gender has the greater need to understand the consequences of our destructiveness?

### **Why is the pupil so dumb?**

Have one group of students edit a section of *Ishmael* to produce a dialogue with a pupil much smarter than the narrator. Have another group edit the same section to produce a dialogue with a pupil much dumber. Then have them assess how readers would be affected by these changes. (If the pupil is too smart, average readers will get lost; if the pupil is too dumb, average readers will get bored.)

### **Why is Ishmael seated behind a pane of glass at the beginning?**

In the context of this work of fiction, who do you presume designed Ishmael's office? (Presumably Ishmael designed it.) What purpose did he have in mind for it? (He expected pupils to come there.) Why would he separate himself from his pupils in this way? What was his probable theory? (He thought his pupils would feel less uneasy, less intimidated if he was in "another room.") If a potential new pupil walked into a room that had no such partition, what would probably happen?

### **What's the meaning of the koan on Ishmael's poster?**

A koan isn't a riddle, with a single correct answer ("What's black and white and red all over?") but rather a subject for mediation and reflection that has no definable endpoint ("What is the sound of one hand clapping?").

### **Why the name Ishmael?**

According to our cultural mythology, God lost interest in all other creatures on this planet when humans came along. According to Genesis, this is exactly what happened to Ishmael when Isaac came along: his father Abraham lost interest in him. In other words, what Genesis says happened to Ishmael is exactly what our mythology says happened to the nonhuman community on this planet. This makes "Ishmael" an appropriate name for someone who speaks for this community.

### Why “Mother” Culture?

Culture is a mother everywhere and at every time, because culture is inherently a nurturer—the nurturer of human societies and life-styles. Among Leaver peoples, Mother Culture explains and preserves a life-style that is healthy and self-sustaining. Among Taker peoples she explains and preserves a life-style that has proven to be unhealthy and self-destructive. If culture is a mother among the Alawa of Australia and the Bushmen of Africa and the Kayapo of Brazil, then why wouldn't she be a mother among the Takers? (To confirm the notion that “culture is a mother everywhere,” have students check foreign language dictionaries for the word *culture*. In languages that recognize “masculine” and “feminine” nouns—French, Italian, Latin, and so on—the noun *culture* is invariably feminine.)

### Is Ishmael saying we should give up agriculture?

As Ishmael says again and again, many Leaver peoples practiced agriculture. Its only our special style of agriculture, found only in our culture, that is problematic. It's problematic because it's based on the idea that all the food in the world belongs to humans, and we're free to destroy any other creature—to the point of extinction, if we wish—that tries to compete with us for that food.

### Isn't it true that Leaver peoples hunted some species to extinction, like the woolly mammoth?

Whenever a new species makes its appearance in a community, it registers an impact at all levels and in many different ways. For example, when the big cats arrived on the scene in Africa, some of the species they preyed on were unable to reproduce fast enough to maintain viable populations, and they eventually disappeared; in other words, the big cats “hunted some species to extinction.” This kind of change is precisely what evolution is all about. When humans arrived on the scene, they undoubtedly had the same effect as the big cats—they “hunted some species to extinction.” Hunting species to extinction, however, was certainly not something they set out to do or were even remotely aware of doing. The species they hunted to extinction were, after all, their food, and they would hardly want to eliminate their own food. As time went on, species that were hard to find in the previous generation were even harder to find in this generation, and in the next were even harder to find, until eventually they were no longer found at all. This is quite different from the activity of Taker farmers, who deliberately set out to make competitor species extinct. They don't want to eat the coyotes, they just want to make them dead.

### Why don't Ishmael and the narrator observe the rules of gender-neutral language that we're taught to

### use?

Have students check a wide assortment of published material with an eye to the question of gender-neutral language. A thorough study would be the work of a doctoral dissertation, but in general students will find that nonfiction authors are much more likely to observe “the rules” than fiction authors, dramatists, poets, and screen writers. In particular, fictional and dramatic *characters* rarely observe the rules. Discuss the reasons why the speech of fictional and dramatic characters often departs from rules followed in formal writing. (For example, should Eddie Murphy's character in *48 Hours* be expected to obey the same rules as a television news commentator? Should Bruce Willis's character in the *Die Hard* films be expected to obey the same rules as an essayist in *World Policy Journal*? If not, why not?) Does the narrator of *Ishmael* (who is of course a fictional character) have a greater obligation to “stick to the rules” than other fictional characters?

## Additional Reading

A number of books and videos have been suggested by the teachers in this book. Here are a few that Daniel Quinn recommends to readers who write and ask for further reading suggestions.

Farley Mowat, *People of the Deer*, Bantam Books, 1952. An intimate study of a Leaver people, the Ihalmiut, living in the Great Barrens of Canada. *The Desperate People*, Bantam/Seal, 1980. A follow-up, showing what happened to these people in the ensuing years.

Peter Farb, *Man's Rise to Civilization as Shown by the Indians of North America from Primeval Times to the Coming of the Industrial State*, E.P. Dutton, 1968. A different sort of history, exploring issues central to *Ishmael*.

Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, Doubleday/Currency, 1990. An introduction to systems thinking (of which *Ishmael* is an example). A fairly demanding book, but the only one of its kind.

Marvin Harris, *Cows, Pigs, War and Witches*, Vintage Books, 1974, and *Cannibals and Kings*, Vintage Books, 1977. A distinguished anthropologist examines aspects of culture in a highly readable and accessible form.

Paul Hawken, *The Ecology of Commerce*, HarperCollins, 1993. An important and influential study of sustainability issues.

Jean Liedloff, *The Continuum Concept*, Addison/Wesley, 1985. This book, almost a companion piece to *Ishmael*, shows why Leaver children grow up sane and healthy.

Jack Weatherford, *Native Roots: How the Indians Enriched America*, Fawcett, 1991. A treasure house of little known information.

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# What Students Say

—Chris Russell, Hurst,

TX

“Within the department I’m working in (Agronomy), the ideas put forth in *Ishmael* have had a significant impact on how we (students *and* professors) think about our research.”

“As a philosophy major, I have been exposed to a good portion of the ideology utilized in your novel, but never has it all been pulled together and presented in such a Zen-like simplicity.”

NE

—Mark Liebig, Lincoln,

—David Michael, Garnerville,

“Your book made complete sense and it really opened my eyes to a lot of new ideas.”

NY

— Abby Foulds, Pittsburgh,

PA

“My Native American Studies instructor assigned [*Ishmael*] as extra credit.... I was apprehensive and didn’t think it would be anything more than a stuffy textbook-style reading assignment.... What a revelation! I cannot tell you how much of a positive effect your book has had on me. It caused me to think, and to question on a plane of thought I never knew I possessed.”

—Jane Graham-Free, Missoula,

MT

“[*Ishmael*] is one of the most thought-provoking books I have ever read. It has made me rethink my role in our society and the role of our society in the world.”

—Lora A. Wieman,

Menomonie, WI

“[*Ishmael*] took my ideas of the world, which were crude and vague, and refined them. Your examples have inspired me and a few others in my classes to carry out the ideas of your book to a further extent.”

—Taylor Geer, Mendocino,

CA

“A project for one of my classes was to write about the Navajo/Hopi land dispute. My greatest struggle was to try to communicate to the white instructor that the government intervention was based on a completely different concept than the Navajo and Hopi have about land. Had I read your book before that time I could have asked the instructor to read it, then maybe he and I would have been able to communicate.”

—Lela K. Rhodes, Denver, CO

“Your novel both disturbed and inspired me because it presented a unique, yet logical, way of looking at the state of our world.”

# How to Order *Ishmael*

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by Daniel Quinn

A Bantam/Turner Book

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