

Class: A Memoir of Motherhood, Hunger, and Higher Education

Author: Stephanie Land

Published by: Atria/One Signal Publishers, 2023, 288 pages.

Reviewed by: Benjamin Michael Dadzie, *Clemson University*

In “Class: A Memoir of Motherhood, Hunger, and Higher Education,” Stephanie Land unravels a profound narrative set against the backdrop of her own life, focusing on the resilient Emelia (Mia) as her daughter and Jamie as Emelia’s father. Through Land’s portrayal of Emelia, a poignant mother-daughter dynamic emerges, shedding light on the challenges and joys entwined with the pursuit of education amidst the complexities of poverty. Jamie’s inclusion adds a layer of familial complexity, showcasing the intricacies of co-parenting within the context of economic hardship. The narrative seamlessly weaves together individual journeys, making Emelia and Jamie integral components of a memoir that extends beyond personal anecdotes to explore societal issues, resilience, and the transformative power of education.

In her latest work, Land continues the exploration of the intersectionality of motherhood, poverty, and the pursuit of education, building on the success of her debut, “Maid.” With a raw and unapologetic prose style, she offers readers an intimate look into the challenges faced by single mothers seeking a better life in a society marked by class inequality.

The memoir picks up where “Maid” left off, chronicling Land’s pursuit of a college education. The narrative unfolds urgently, capturing the demands of coursework, parenting, and the omnipresent specter of food insecurity. Land’s vivid descriptions and heartfelt reflections expose the sacrifices and resilience required to overcome systemic barriers perpetuating poverty.

“Class” goes beyond a mere chronicle of hardship; it delves into the emotional toll of poverty, exploring its impact on self-esteem, relationships, and mental health. Land weaves personal reflections with astute observations on social and political factors, prompting readers to contemplate the broader implications of class inequality and question the fairness of a system perpetuating such disparities.

Despite its weighty subject matter, “Class” offers moments of joy and hope. Land shares heartwarming anecdotes about her daughter and the supportive community found within and outside the university. These glimpses of humanity amidst adversity serve as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, providing a necessary counterbalance to the harsh realities depicted in the memoir.

Land’s writing style, characterized by accessibility and engagement, makes the narrative relatable to a diverse audience. Whether describing the challenges of navigating food banks or celebrating academic achievements, her prose maintains a captivating honesty that resonates with readers. Released amid ongoing discussions about income inequality and educational accessibility, “Class” stands as a relevant and essential contribution to the current socio-political discourse.

Educational Opportunities in “Class”: Nurturing Critical Thinking and Empathy

The memoir’s thematic richness opens doors to thoughtful discussions and activities that stimulate critical thinking, foster empathy, and prompt students to reflect on their roles within a broader societal context. One compelling educational opportunity lies in structuring classroom discussions around the socioeconomic challenges depicted in the memoir. Faculty can guide students in exploring access to education, systemic inequalities, and the intersectionality of gender and poverty. Engaging in these discussions cultivates critical thinking skills, encouraging students to analyze and articulate their perspectives on complex societal issues.

Moreover, the memoir provides a rich foundation for writing assignments, encouraging students to articulate their thoughts and reflections. Through essays, reflective journals, or creative writing exercises, students can explore the themes of

privilege, resilience, and the societal impact of economic disparities. This enhances their writing skills and fosters a deeper connection to the material.

The memoir lends itself to interdisciplinary exploration. Collaborating with other departments, educators can design projects incorporating themes from “Class” into various disciplines. For instance, a collaboration between the literature and social work departments might involve students creating community outreach programs informed by the memoir’s narratives. This interdisciplinary approach broadens students’ perspectives and highlights the real-world applications of academic knowledge.

Unique Perspectives Unveiled in “Class”: A Lens into the Complex Realities of Struggle

One distinctive perspective illuminated in the memoir is poverty’s emotional and psychological toll. Land goes beyond the surface-level depiction of financial struggles, delving into the profound impact on self-esteem, relationships, and mental well-being. By sharing her internal battles and vulnerabilities, Land humanizes the experience of poverty, breaking down stereotypes and fostering empathy among readers. The memoir delves into Land’s inner dialogue as she grapples with shame and inadequacy while relying on public assistance. This introspective lens gives readers a unique glimpse into the emotional complexities associated with poverty and challenging stereotypes. It prompts reflection on the broader societal attitudes toward those facing financial hardship.

Another distinctive perspective is Land’s exploration of the intersectionality of poverty and motherhood. The memoir highlights single mothers’ challenges in pursuing higher education, shedding light on the systemic barriers that disproportionately affect women in similar circumstances. Land’s narrative challenges readers to confront biases and assumptions about single mothers, fostering a deeper understanding of their unique hurdles. For example, Land recounts the logistical challenges of childcare while attending classes and the societal judgment she faces as a single mother seeking to improve her circumstances. These anecdotes provide a unique lens into the complexities of motherhood within the context of poverty, inviting readers to consider the systemic factors that contribute to the challenges faced by women in similar situations.

Furthermore, Land offers a perspective on the transformative power of education within the context of financial hardship. Her journey unfolds as a testament to the resilience and determination of individuals striving to break free from the cycles of

poverty through education. This perspective challenges the prevailing narrative that individual effort solely determines success, emphasizing the systemic obstacles often hindering access to education. Land's pursuit of higher education becomes a beacon of hope during adversity. Her academic achievements serve as a powerful counter-narrative, demonstrating that education has the potential to be a catalyst for positive change. This unique perspective prompts readers to question the societal structures that limit educational opportunities and to consider the transformative potential of accessible education.

Provocative Discussion Points in “Class”: Exploring Nuanced Realities

Land's depiction of the emotional toll of poverty opens avenues for discussions on mental health and self-esteem. Readers can explore how societal perceptions and stereotypes surrounding poverty contribute to the internal struggles faced by individuals like Land. Questions include how societal attitudes impact one's self-worth and what measures can be taken to challenge and change these perceptions. For instance, Land candidly discusses the stigma of relying on public assistance, revealing the emotional weight of judgment and shame. Discussion questions might center on the broader implications of societal judgment on individuals seeking support, fostering conversations about empathy, and the importance of dismantling societal biases.

Secondly, the intersectionality of poverty and motherhood is a poignant discussion point. Land's narrative invites readers to consider single mothers' specific challenges in pursuing higher education. Discussion questions may revolve around the societal expectations placed on mothers, the systemic barriers that disproportionately affect them, and strategies for creating more inclusive environments for single mothers in academic settings. For example, Land recounts the difficulties of navigating childcare responsibilities while attending classes. This could spark discussions about the support systems needed for student-parents and the role of institutions in facilitating an inclusive learning environment.

Furthermore, the theme of systemic barriers to education offers an opportunity for conversations about social justice and inequality. Readers can explore how economic disparity, lack of access to resources, and institutional biases limit educational opportunities. Discussion questions might delve into potential solutions to address these systemic issues, fostering a deeper understanding of the structural challenges faced by marginalized individuals. As an illustration, Land's encounters with financial

barriers to education provide a starting point for discussions on the broader implications of limited access to educational resources and the role of institutions in promoting equity.

Forging Special Connections: Tailoring “Class” Across Institutions

At smaller liberal arts colleges, Land’s story’s intimate and personal nature can foster a sense of community among students. Discussion groups can be formed, allowing students to reflect on shared experiences and build connections. Faculty at such institutions can use “Class” as a catalyst for interdisciplinary discussions, exploring the intersections of literature, sociology, and psychology to deepen students’ understanding of societal structures and human experiences.

In contrast, more prominent research universities might utilize “Class” to spark conversations on a grander scale. The book can become a focal point for campuswide initiatives, engaging diverse departments and fostering collaboration. Panels and lectures featuring Land or experts on the book’s themes could draw a broad audience, encouraging students to consider the wider societal implications of poverty, education, and social justice.

For community colleges, the memoir can resonate deeply with the diverse student body, often comprised of individuals facing economic challenges. “Class” can serve as a tool for student support services, sparking dialogues on available resources, financial aid, and mentorship programs. By emphasizing Land’s journey, community colleges can underscore their commitment to inclusivity and inspire students facing similar struggles.

In specialized institutions, such as art schools or vocational training centers, “Class” can be integrated into discussions about the value of different forms of education. Exploring how Land navigates pursuing a traditional higher education path may lead to conversations about alternative educational models and the varied ways individuals can acquire skills and knowledge to improve their lives.

In religiously affiliated institutions, the memoir’s themes can be linked to discussions on social responsibility and the duty to support marginalized communities. “Class” can be incorporated into conversations on ethical considerations, emphasizing the moral imperative to address issues of poverty and inequality. This connection can align with the institution’s values and inspire students to consider how their education can force positive change.

Moreover, “Class” could find a home in learning communities or special interest groups within any institution. Faculty might use the memoir as a foundational text for programs focused on social justice, where students explore the intersection of literature and activism. Learning communities could provide a space for students to engage in deep, ongoing discussions, fostering a supportive environment for personal and academic growth.

Navigating Raw Realities and Considerations of Explicit Language in “Class”

While “Class” offers a compelling narrative, there are areas of concern that professionals should consider if selecting it for a new student reading program. Though authentic, the book’s depiction of poverty may be intense and potentially triggering for some students. Professionals should be mindful of its emotional impact on students who have experienced similar hardships. Also, the book’s focus on a specific demographic – single mothers striving for higher education – might limit its relatability for a broader audience. Careful consideration should be given to the diversity of student experiences to ensure the book resonates with many readers.

It is essential to acknowledge the presence of explicit and vulgar language within its pages. This aspect of the narrative, particularly instances where such language appears without directly contributing to the plot, may pose a concern.

Readers may find moments where Land’s use of explicit language seems gratuitous, such as the mention of soaking and casual romantic encounters referred to as “fuck buddies.” Additionally, the frequency of clear terms like “fucks” and “dicks” might be perceived as excessive when not inherently warranted by the narrative’s context. For professionals considering the book’s appropriateness for educational settings, explicit language may be a factor to weigh carefully. While it undoubtedly reflects Land’s unvarnished expression of her emotions and experiences, the potential for discomfort or offense among readers, especially in more formal and educational environments, should be considered.

Conclusion

“Class: A Memoir of Motherhood, Hunger, and Higher Education” by Stephanie Land possesses qualities that could make it valuable for specific educational contexts. As a general student reader, the memoir offers a poignant exploration of issues like poverty, motherhood, and the pursuit of education. Its raw and honest portrayal of

these challenges could resonate with a broad audience, fostering student empathy and understanding. However, the explicit language may raise concerns in more formal and conservative educational settings.

The memoir could be particularly beneficial for a learning community or particular interest group focused on social justice and socioeconomic issues. In such a setting, participants could engage in a series of guided discussions and activities that delve into the multifaceted themes presented in the book.

For example, a learning community within a sociology department might use “Class” as a central text for a semester-long exploration of poverty, class structures, and the challenges single mothers face in pursuing education. Participants could delve into the societal implications depicted in the memoir, critically examining the intersections of gender, class, and access to education.

A community service and advocacy interest group could use the book to inspire initiatives addressing local socioeconomic challenges. Participants might collaborate on projects aligning with the “Class” themes, such as organizing food drives, supporting educational outreach programs, or partnering with organizations that aid single parents.

Furthermore, a learning community within a creative writing or literature department could explore the narrative techniques employed by Stephanie Land. Participants might analyze the impact of Land’s raw and unfiltered storytelling, inspiring them to create works that shed light on social issues within their community.

In each scenario, the learning community or particular interest group would provide a platform for participants to discuss and reflect on the memoir’s themes in a focused and supportive environment. The shared exploration of “Class” could catalyze deeper connections among participants and inspire collective action toward positive social change.