

USING *KENT STATE* TO REACH TOWARD PEACE

Jared S. Crossley



“THOSE WHO CANNOT REMEMBER the past are condemned to repeat it” (Santayana, 1905). Despite this phrase being quoted so often that it has likely become cliché, it is one that we have certainly had cause to reflect upon as we have seen history repeat itself time and time again. In April 2020, a new young adult (YA) novel, *Kent State* by Deborah Wiles, was published, documenting the events surrounding what has been referred to as the “Kent State Massacre” (Hatzenbuehler, 1996), when four students of Kent State University were shot and killed by the Ohio Army National Guard during protests of the Vietnam War on May 4, 1970. *Kent State* was published in 2020, marking the 50th anniversary of these devastating events. However, the timing makes the book appear prescient due to the parallels it shares with nationwide protests that occurred a month after the book’s publication. This article examines these parallels, includes an interview with *Kent State* author Deborah Wiles, and explores how educators can use *Kent State* to engage in critical literacy to promote greater peace.

Protests in the United States

In the late spring and early summer of 2020, there were protests in almost every major city across the United States, decrying the wrongful death of Black Americans. This round of protests was specifically brought on due to the murder of an unarmed Black man, George Floyd, by a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 25, 2020. This egre-

gious death was filmed by bystanders and the footage spread on social media, capturing the nation’s attention. However, these protests were about more than the horrifying death of one man. They represent the pain and anger that many people are feeling about the unjust treatment that continues to plague Black Americans despite centuries of fighting for equal rights and justice.

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While these recent protests were mainly peaceful (Kishi & Jones, 2020), there were also widespread cases of violence, looting, and vandalism, including the burning of multiple buildings and police vehicles. In response to this, President Donald Trump and many governors across the United States deployed the National Guard. Nearly 62,000 members of the National Guard were activated in Washington, DC, and 24 states in an effort to squelch these protests (Browne et al., 2020; Kim, 2020).

In contrast, on January 6, 2021, an angry mob composed of thousands of supporters of President Trump attacked the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, DC, after listening to Trump urge them to “fight like Hell and if you don’t fight like Hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore” (Dave et al., 2021, p. 1). This Capitol siege was part of a protest of the congressional certification of the election results declaring that Joseph Biden had defeated Trump in the recent November 2020 election. The Capitol riots turned deadly, in part due to a delayed deployment of the National Guard (Farley, 2021).

Protests in the United States are not a new or recent occurrence. As a way of expression that is theoretically protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, protests have often led to important changes in U.S. history (Nuñez & Dobrzyn, 2020). The United States' history of protests even predates the foundation of this country; on December 16, 1773, American colonists dumped tea into the harbor as an expression of anger against Britain's imposition of taxation without representation, in what has become known as the Boston Tea Party (Carp, 2010). On March 3, 1913, thousands of women gathered for what would be called the Women's Suffrage Parade to call for a constitutional amendment granting women the right to vote (Borda, 2002). On August 28, 1963, more than 250,000 people marched peacefully through Washington, DC, to the Lincoln Memorial, where they heard Dr. Martin Luther King deliver his "I Have a Dream" speech (Lei & Miller, 1999). And in 2014, the Black Lives Matter movement became nationally recognized when citizens in Ferguson, Missouri, protested the killing of an unarmed Black teenager, Michael Brown, by a white police officer (Ray et al., 2017). There is also a long history of anti-war protests in the United States (Heany & Rojas, 2008; Swank, 1997), including nationwide protests in the 1960s and '70s calling for an end to America's involvement in the Vietnam War (DeBenedetti, 1990).

Kent State by Deborah Wiles

One month before the death of George Floyd and the beginning of the subsequent protests, *Kent State* (Wiles, 2020) was published, centered on the anti-war protests that occurred on the campus of Kent State University in 1970. Deborah Wiles is no stranger to writing about how political issues and topics have shaped U.S. history. Her picturebook *Freedom Summer* (2001) portrays an account of segregation and racism as experienced by two young boys, one Black and the other white, in the American South following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Her *Sixties Trilogy*, which contains the books *Countdown* (2010), *Revolution* (2014), and *Anthem* (2019), uses a new format of the documentary novel to explore topics such as the Cuban missile crisis, racism, and the Vietnam War. In *Kent State*, Wiles explores Americans' ability to exercise their rights as protected by the First Amendment, granting "the freedom of speech" and "the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances" (U.S. Const. amend. I).

In *Kent State*, Wiles uses lineated prose to portray six different voices that were involved to various degrees in May of 1970. The book starts with the protests that started on the Kent State University campus on May 1, 1970, following the announcement by President Richard Nixon that U.S. troops would invade Cambodia. It then explores how the protests turned less peaceful, including the burning of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) building on campus and the activation of the National Guard by Ohio governor Jim Rhodes, leading to the deaths of four Kent State students.

Wiles eulogizes each of the four Kent State students who were killed when the National Guard opened fire on the protesting students: Allison Krause, 19; Jeffrey (Jeff) Miller, 20; Sandra (Sandy) Scheuer, 20; and William (Bill) Schroeder, 19. She writes about nine other students who were shot and wounded that day, and informs readers that not every student who was shot and killed was participating in the protests; some were just walking to class.

Kent State explores both historical and contemporary racism, intergenerational discord, war, gun violence, and the power of a single voice. It also highlights the need for members of society to listen to one another and not silence others, especially paying attention to the voices that have historically been silenced. The book breaks the fourth wall and acknowledges the reader. It does this to actively invite readers to get involved in making changes and using their voice in an effort to stop history from repeating itself.

The parallels found in this book between the Kent State protests and the 2020 protests are stark. In both protests, there were many demonstrators who were protesting peacefully, as protected by the First Amendment. In the Kent State protests, some students were passing out daisies while others sang "Give Peace a Chance" (Wiles, 2020); in the 2020 protests related to the Black Lives Matter movement, a recent study found that "in more than 93% of all demonstrations connected to the movement, demonstrators have not engaged in violence or destructive activity" (Kishi & Jones, 2020). In both protests, some people started to destroy property and act out violently, which in both cases elicited a response from the government to take military action and deploy the National Guard. In both situations, the government response failed to differentiate between those who were protesting peacefully and those who were acting out violently. For example, in a tweet concerning potential protests that might happen outside one of his political rallies, Trump

(2020) said, “Any protesters, anarchists, agitators, looters or lowlifes who are going to Oklahoma please understand, you will not be treated like you have been in New York, Seattle, or Minneapolis. It will be a much different scene!”

Kent State highlights the sad reality of what happened in 1970—and what might happen again—when the rights of citizens to peacefully protest were infringed upon by the government response to the violence happening around the protest.

An Interview With Deborah Wiles

I recently had a conversation with Deborah Wiles about her book *Kent State*; we talked about its relevance to our world today, and what it means for educators and young readers.

Jared S. Crossley (JSC): Your book *Kent State* is about the events and actions that led up to and included what happened at Kent State University on May 4, 1970, when the National Guard shot and killed four students at the university. Can you tell me more about the core message of this book?

Deborah Wiles (DW): The shootings at Kent State occurred three days before my 17th birthday. I lived in Charleston, South Carolina, at the time, where the Air Force had stationed my dad, a MAC C-141 Starlifter pilot, who was flying missions into Vietnam with supplies, and flying American bodies home. The war was unpopular, and Walter Cronkite had recently told Americans, in his CBS News broadcast, that the war was unwinnable.

When President Richard Nixon announced the invasion of Cambodia on April 30, 1970, college students across the country took to the streets to protest this widening of the war, and at Kent State, where the governor of Ohio, Jim Rhodes, called in the National Guard, the Guard occupied the campus. Tensions escalated for four days, until on Monday, May 4, the Guard opened fire into a crowd of unarmed, protesting teenagers and shot them in their school yard, killing four and wounding nine more.

The nation was shocked, stunned, in disbelief. It’s all we could talk about among my friends at school, and the feeling that our government could turn on its citizens and kill them for exercising their First Amendment rights has never left me. I wanted to write about it for young adults today so they can see the parallels in the unrest we are living in today. *Kent State* serves as a call to action for them. I want them to see themselves in those students, and decide to do what we did

then: act. We went to work. We lowered the voting age to 18; we ended the Vietnam War; we marched and we were angry; and we said “Enough is enough.”

JSC: The format of this book is unconventional, with the different voices telling the story in different fonts and locations on the page. Can you tell me more about this format that you used, and how you decided to tell the story in this way?

DW: There is a mountain of information about the Kent State killings, both online and at the May 4 Special Collections archive at Kent State University’s libraries. I used those sources and others; I interviewed survivors and witnesses, historians and townspeople; and I spent time at Kent walking the campus where Allison, Jeff, Sandy, and Bill fell, standing where they were shot, attending the all-night candlelight May 3 vigil that’s held annually, followed by the May 4 observance, listening and talking and absorbing all I could.

I thought a lot about the polarization of the country in the late sixties, as well as the way we are so polarized today, everyone taking sides and shouting to be heard, no one seemingly able to listen. It was clear that all sides held some truth as well.

I worked with my editor, David Levithan, to come up with a “way of telling” this story. We talked about *Lincoln in the Bardo*, which we had both just read and loved, and which uses the device of disembodied voices to argue, to tell their sides of the story, and to inform the reader of historical fact along the way.

David mentioned “collective memory” as another way of storytelling. Any event in history holds many differing perspectives. If you can capture them all, you have a complete story.

Those disembodied voices who had been there that weekend at Kent State were talking to me from the archives, from the oral histories, from the pages of the National Historic Landmark nomination, from the museum at the May 4 Visitors Center, from all the books, position papers, newspaper articles, and ephemera about the killings at Kent State.

I chose to let them tell the story. I gave them voice by purposely not naming them, by putting them on opposite sides of the page, by selecting a different typeface for each voice, and a different size font, so the reader could follow the conversation easily, and swiftly, and be immersed in that conversation between three students—two white, one Black—

two “townies,” and one National Guard soldier. Each stands for a particular “position” in that conflict. I was particularly interested in opposing viewpoints and included much that I’d found in the archives, such as National Guard soldiers who were barely teenagers themselves (some of them Kent State students trying to avoid the draft), who didn’t want to be there, some of them “townies” who had written letters to the editor of the local newspapers saying, “You should have killed more of them.” Chilling, angry letters, heartbreaking oral histories, dispassionate facts, mistaken identities, and fist-pumping activists—all are represented in an effort to tell a whole story.

JSC: One of the groups of people that you included in the telling of the story is the Black United Students, or BUS. Can you tell me about the decision process and why you decided to include this voice in the story in the way that you did?

DW: It was clear to me as I researched, that the Kent State massacre, as it is sometimes called, takes its place in history inside a long arc of government overreach, and it is not the end of that overreach. From the Boston Massacre to the massacre at Wounded Knee, to today’s Standing Rock, and what’s happening right now in our country with the protests after George Floyd’s death at the hands of the police, with the attendant police actions to quell protestors—there is a lot going on that disproportionately affects people of color in this country as well as the overall dismemberment of the First Amendment rights to free speech, assembly, petition, and protest.

These rights were violated at Kent State on May 4 when the Guard fired into a crowd of mostly white protestors. The African Americans I interviewed for this book said they were told to stay away from the Commons on May 4, and they listened. More than one said, “You see a white man in a uniform carrying a rifle and you don’t think it’s loaded? Get real!”

And it’s a fact that the white kids protesting did not believe the Guard had real bullets in their rifles. So many of them said, “I didn’t believe they had real bullets.” Even when the shooting started, many of them shouted, “They’re blanks!” Which of course they were not.

BUS—Black United Students—at Kent State were very active in the late sixties, pushing for a Black studies program, walking off campus until the administration disinvited the Oakland, California, police department and their recruiting

efforts, and working in local high schools with mostly Black populations to help students increase awareness of their rights and future possibilities for activism.

These students were profiled by the local police departments, and sometimes followed. These records exist in the May 4 Special Collections archives. As I read them, I realized we had a repeat story that needed to be brought into the present day.

You can draw a direct line from Kent State—and I do so—from the government killing its children to school shooters and mass shooters who have access to assault weapons today, to the killing of young Black men, and women, by those in power sworn to protect them, and I want young adults to see this connection. The BUS students at Kent State saw it, saw it in the long arm of injustice from slavery to mass incarceration, and I want them to tell the reader about it now.

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JSC: The year 2020 marked the 50th anniversary of this horrific event. How do these events matter with what is going on today? Why do they matter specifically to the teenagers of today’s society?

DW: As we are seeing right now, as I write this and there are protests in cities large and small across this country—in the midst of a pandemic!—if we don’t talk about our past and reckon with it, we repeat it. We are once again in turmoil in our country, as we were in the late sixties. What have we learned? How can we change things? I address this in *Kent State*.

JSC: This book covers topics of racism, intergenerational discord, war, gun violence, and the power of a single voice.

How do you feel these issues have changed over the past 50 years, and how have they remained constant?

DW: There will always be intergenerational discord. That is the way of growth and change. However, we are still facing these same political issues in part because there has been little systemic and structural change in our institutions and our legislatures on national, state, and local levels. We still fight for equality for all, for sensible gun laws, for a country and lawmakers that are not controlled by special interests, and for the ability of a real “we the people” to rise up and be counted and heard, no matter their political and personal stance. All need to be heard.

Racism is an open wound, still, in this country, stemming from our original sins of genocide and slavery. I dearly love my country. I want it to live up to the ideals on which it was founded. The United States Constitution was written in such a way as to allow for amending and changing it as the nation grew up. It is a living, breathing document that we are fighting for right now.

Certainly the advent of digital technology, for all it can take from us, brings us closer when we use it appropriately. I think we are seeing the possibilities it holds for bringing us together, in more effective ways than it might pull us apart.

JSC: The last “voice” that you included in this book is that of the reader. You broke the fourth wall by having your characters acknowledge the reader. There are also multiple instances where you invite the reader into the story by stating, “Insert your name here.” Why did you decide to do this, and what do you hope it accomplishes with the readers of the book?

DW: I begin the book by addressing “our young friend here,” because I want the reader to be included in the story from the beginning. I want you to live this story viscerally, along with the storytellers. And when you are asked to “Insert your name here,” I want you to imagine you are Allison Krause, Jeff Miller, Sandy Scheuer, or Bill Schroeder—or Philip Lafayette Gibbs and James Earl Green, who were killed 11 days after Kent State, at Jackson State, a historically Black college in Jackson, Mississippi. They are also included in *Kent State*.

I pull no punches in the May 4 section of the book. I eulogize each Kent State student and I tell you exactly how each one of them died. In the “elegy” section of the book, I turn around “Insert your name here.” I now want the reader to

insert his/her/their name into the call to action that ends the book. Let us be the change we wish to see in the world. Now.

JSC: Is there anything else about the making of this book, the messages and themes of this book, or how they apply to today that you would like teenage readers or their teachers to know about?

DW: I would like to recommend the *Kent State* audiobook.¹ Paul Gagne at Scholastic Audio brought together a stupendous cast of talented actors to sit at a table together in a recording studio and perform this book in one day, shouting, imploring, explaining, protesting, keening, inviting, and pulling you right into this four days in Kent, Ohio, in 1970 and challenging you to take up the baton of change. The production is stunning, and it serves as a companion to the words on the page.

Kent State is a novel written in lined prose from six voices representing different points of view about a tragic moment in our country’s history. It can be read separately or in groups as Readers’ Theater or staged as a play... There are many ways to absorb the story and its themes, and my hope is that the book finds its way into as many young hands as possible at such a crucial time in our history, and in young people’s lives.

Using *Kent State* to Engage in Critical Literacy

How can a historical book that parallels our current reality help us to better understand our situation and improve? How can educators, parents, and emerging adults today use this book to reach toward peace? It starts by reading the book. It includes having conversations in educational spaces. Educators at the high school and university levels can use *Kent State* to engage in critical literacy.

Critical literacy has been defined as “learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one’s experience as historically constructed within specific power relations” (Anderson & Irvine, 1993, p. 82). When writing about how to use critical literacy as an educational tool, Shore (1999) explained that critical literacy “challenges

¹ The *Kent State* audiobook was the winner of the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) 2021 Odyssey Award for the best audiobook produced for children and/or young adults in English in the United States during 2020. The award was announced after this interview took place.

the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development” and “connects the political and the personal...for rethinking our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity” (p. 2).

Leland et al. (1999) claimed that critical texts enrich our lives and understanding of history by giving voice to those who have traditionally been marginalized or silenced. Critical texts explore dominant systems in our society that are used to position people and groups of people, and they examine complex social problems without necessarily providing a resolved or happy ending. They can help young adults navigate various social topics, including race (Glenn, 2012; Schieble, 2013), disability (Curwood, 2013), and gender (Rubinstein-Avila, 2007), as well as difficult issues such as school shootings, rape, drug use, and relationship violence (Alsup, 2003). Using literature to turn the classroom into a safe space for students to read, write about, and discuss these issues can help students gain social responsibility (Wolk, 2009).

Lewison et al. (2002) identified four distinct yet interdependent dimensions of critical literacy:

1. disrupting the commonplace, which they defined as inviting readers to view everyday occurrences through a new lens and to explore how texts attempt to position them;
2. interrogating multiple viewpoints, which engages readers in examining whose voices are heard and whose are missing, while specifically seeking out the voices of those who have historically been silenced or marginalized;
3. focusing on sociopolitical issues, where readers challenge power relationships and attempt to better understand the sociopolitical systems that make up our society; and
4. taking action and promoting social justice, which invites readers to challenge and redefine cultural borders.

Lewison et al. (2002) also noted that the fourth dimension, taking action and promoting social justice, is often thought of as the definition of critical literacy, but in order to create change, one must rely on the knowledge and perspectives gained through the other three dimensions of critical literacy.

As a critical text, *Kent State* lends itself to use in a critical literacy curriculum by inviting the reader to participate in

all four of these dimensions. By addressing the reader directly, *Kent State* invites readers to position themselves within the context of these larger sociopolitical issues, including examining how power has played a role in citizens' rights to peacefully protest and exercise freedom of speech, particularly in regard to specific social groups. When reading *Kent State*, educators can invite students to examine the role of power in relation to the government's response to the Vietnam protests at Kent State University in 1970 and compare it to the responses to other protests they have seen during their lifetime. The book explicitly contains multiple perspectives and invites readers to consider the viewpoints of each of the different groups of people that were involved (e.g., white students, the Black United Students, adults in the community, members of the National Guard). Table 1 lists suggested writing or discussion prompts for using *Kent State* to engage in critical literacy based on the four dimensions identified by Lewison et al. (2002).

Having these discussions and writing about these issues can help the rising generation to think about these topics—subjects that they otherwise might not have considered. It can also allow them to apply texts like *Kent State* to their own life and their personal experiences.

Conclusion

Using books like *Kent State* to facilitate critical conversation around sociopolitical issues such as government response to protests can help educators and students disrupt their thinking and broaden their perspectives. Exploring how power dynamics played a role in the tragic events at Kent State University in 1970 can help us better navigate our ability to use our voices today as we push toward greater social justice for all.

Listening to the opposing voices of 50 years ago might help us understand the need to listen to the differing voices of today. As we make an effort to understand one another and perspectives different from our own, we move closer to peace and unity. These conversations should be happening in our K–12 language arts and social studies classes. These conversations should be happening in our universities, with college students and preservice educators. These conversations should be happening in our homes, our streets, and our churches. These conversations should be happening in legislative offices and with policy makers. Critical texts like *Kent State* are a perfect way to invite such conversations to start taking place if they are not already. These conversations

Table 1

SUGGESTED PROMPTS FOR USING *KENT STATE* AS A CRITICAL TEXT IN THE CLASSROOM**Disrupting the Commonplace**

How did having the book address you directly as a reader impact your reading experience?

What do you think the author's purpose was for including the phrase "Insert your name here"?

How do you think inserting yourself into the text could change your reading experience?

How does the use of words like "massacre" impact and shape the narrative?

Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints

Who were the different groups that had perspectives portrayed in *Kent State*?

Whose perspective was missing?

How do each of these perspectives lead you to interpret the massacre differently? What does this teach you about the importance of perspective?

Which perspective was most impactful to you? Why?

Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues

What do you feel is the difference between a peaceful protest and a riot?

How do you feel the government should respond to protests?

How do you feel the government should respond to riots?

What does freedom of speech mean to you?

Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues

What inequities do you see in the world?

How can you share your voice to bring more equality and peace?

Do you have any personal experiences with protests? If so, what are those experiences?

need to be happening, because after all, if we can remember the past, we might be able to avoid repeating it. •

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