

This Year's Documentary

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Markers of the WA TEE English examination paper often comment that answers in the non-print section of the paper indicate a willingness on the part of teachers to tap into and use recently released texts which, because of their contemporary relevance, are more likely to be successful in engaging students than many of the tried and true standard texts.

This was especially evident in answers to the 2003 TEE English exam which presented a large number of responses referring to Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*, a film which had been released on video and DVD in Australia only part of the way through that year. Often when markers are confronted with many responses on the same text they grumble about the sameness of answers because this suggests disengaged rote learning rather than personally constructed understandings and responses. Such grumbings were far fewer in relation to the extensive use of *Bowling for Columbine*, reinforcing the belief that appropriately chosen current texts are more likely to produce the desired objectives of the course. It would be a shame, however, if *Bowling for Columbine* were to become the next in a long line of tried, true and eventually tired standards which gradually lose the potential to engage students as each year passes.

If last year's choice of documentary for engaging students was *Bowling for Columbine*, this year's has to be *Spellbound*. Released in Perth cinemas late last year, *Spellbound* was, like *Bowling for Columbine*, initially shown at the Luna cinema, and then, as it attracted significant audiences, picked up by a large cinema chain. *Spellbound* should be out on video and DVD in Australia in the first half of this year. Directed by Jeffery Blitz, *Spellbound* takes as its subject the Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee competition in the United States in which each year nine million contestants aged 12 to 14 participate. *Spellbound* traces the careers of eight participants in the 1999 Bee through local and regional competitions to the national final in Washington DC in which 249 participants compete for the title of National Champion.

Spellbound was made on a shoestring: except for the Washington final where two extra camera operators were used, first-time feature director Blitz used a crew of two to create the film, himself and producer/sound man Sean Welch. Blitz and Welch self-financed the film by borrowing to the limit on their credit cards.

Despite the low budget and unlikely sounding nature of its subject matter *Spellbound* makes for a gripping and totally involving viewing experience. When I saw the film there was more vocal audience engagement than with any film I have seen. There were gasps at the difficulty of the words contestants were asked to spell, sighs of relief when they spelt words correctly and groans of disappointment as favoured contestants failed and were eliminated. Within a year of its release *Spellbound* had become the sixth highest grossing documentary of all time, won over fifteen Best Documentary Feature awards at film festivals and been nominated for Best Documentary Feature at the 2003 Academy Awards. The Oscar was won by *Bowling for Columbine* but like the other nominees, Blitz was onstage with Michael Moore when the latter made his controversial acceptance speech.

There is a myriad of ways the study of *Spellbound* can be used to help students achieve the objectives of the Year 12 English and Senior English courses in relation to documentary specifically and textual construction, reading and viewing generally.

A useful starting point for study is the manner in which the film succeeds in turning a potentially esoteric and uninteresting subject into an engaging and entertaining narrative. Of particular importance in achieving this goal is the film's choice and construction of characters. The film focuses on eight characters. Angela Arenivar comes from a rather depressed looking community in Texas which reminded me of *The Last Picture Show*. Her father, a 'wetback' who entered the USA from Mexico illegally some years before, works as a ranch hand and speaks no English. Emily Stagg, in contrast, is a member of the privileged and prosperous community of New Haven, Connecticut. Her days are filled with horse riding and choir practice. Ted Brigham is from a school in rural Missouri which places little emphasis on academic achievement and his family home is a doublewide trailer. Neil Kadakia of California is the child of immigrants from India who have made good. His father employs an army of tutors to help Neil prepare for the competition and on the week of the national final Neil's grandfather pays a thousand people in India to chant and pray for Neil's success. April Degideo, from a rustbelt Pennsylvania town, has to persevere with a battered dictionary to prepare for the competition. In contrast to Neil's father's determination to help his son succeed, April's working class parents, whom she nicknames Archie and Edith because they remind her of the Bunkers, seem somewhat bewildered by their daughter's enthusiasm for the spelling

competition: ‘April, go to the mall. Lighten up!’ Nupur Lala, another child of Indian immigrants, is from Florida where her father is a university professor. Ashley White, an African American lives with her single mother in the high rise projects of Washington DC. The final member of the cast is Harry Altman, a Jewish boy from New Jersey whose motormouth behaviour will be instantly recognisable to many teachers.

Studying the selection of characters can help students understand the highly constructed nature of documentaries. The characters in *Spellbound* did not fall from the sky; the diversity of the cast was no accident. Blitz spent six months researching to find contestants who had the potential to both contribute to a cross-section portrayal of American society and go far enough in the spelling competition to provide sufficient dramatic and narrative interest. In interviews Blitz has stated that one of his aims was to represent the diversity of participants in the Bee but that he also needed to find young people who had the potential to make the final and possibly win¹. According to Welch one wall of Blitz’s apartment ‘was covered with three dozen spellers and their bios, computer photos, their parents’ bios, a map of the US with pins indicating where these spellers lived and post-its with his hand-written notes. Jeff was like a Vegas odds-maker. As best he could he handicapped the kids in terms of reaching the National Bee.’² As a tribute to the effectiveness of Blitz’s homework, one of his chosen cast did indeed win the competition. While filming Blitz had followed the paths of twelve contestants but narrowed the final cast to eight in the editing room: the stories of those omitted are provided as an extra feature on the DVD version.

In examining the cast of the film, students should be encouraged to distinguish between the process of selection of people used by Blitz and the process of construction of characters in the film. Blitz chose to focus on particular people but through the shaping of the film he has constructed characters who might in varying degrees be more or less like the real people on whom the characters are based. For example, there is a real Angela Arenivar, a real Emily Stagg and so on, none of whom we, the audience, can really know as people. Then there are the characters Angela Arenivar, Emily Stagg and so on whom we the audience construct from the film we see and feel we know well.

Of particular importance in the construction of the characters are the ‘back stories’ which make up the first half of the film where we see and listen to each of the contestants in their home environments and meet their teachers, parents and peers. Students should be asked to look closely at the construction of these back stories and interrogate how the stories encourage audiences to construct the characters of each of the contestants. Particular attention could be given to the establishment shots, those early scenes which portray the wider community environment in which the child lives. Students could also look at the choice and framing of the environments in which the contestants and their parents are interviewed, as well as what the contestants, their parents and their peers actually say.

When discussing the impressions they form of each of the contestants, students should be encouraged to think about not just the film itself but the experiences, values, beliefs and pre-existing discourses which they themselves bring to bear in making the interpretations they do. As an exercise in self-reflection for students, it would be worthwhile pausing the film after the completion of the back stories and asking students to rank the eight contestants in the order in which they, the students, would like to see the contestants succeed in the competition. The resulting discussion could reveal much about students’ own values and reading practices, as well as the stereotypes they draw on in interpreting and constructing the characters.

The array of characters in *Spellbound* has a number of effects. First it provides a wide choice of points of identification for audience members, thus broadening the appeal of the film. Second, it enhances the possibility for dramatic tension and implied conflict as audience members warm to some characters more than others and want some to succeed more than others. Third, the variety of backgrounds allows the competition to be read not just in personal terms, but in terms of race and class, adding a political edge to the audience’s involvement. Finally, as already noted, the array of characters works to offer a representative cross-section of American society, an aspect of the film which has important implications for the film’s ideology. The fact that this cross-section is slightly skewed in favour of the children of immigrants also has important ideological implications, discussed later in this article.

In addition to the characters, the narrative structure plays an important role in enhancing the entertainment potential of the film. The skeleton of the narrative structure of the film is given by the structure of the competition. First, each character is on a quest to achieve a prize. As one reviewer puts it, ‘Eight fighters from distant lands are all called and all eight seek the same trophy. Think *Fellowship of the Ring* for the non-Star Trek set.’³ The other archetypal narrative structure arising from the competition and driving the film is the fact that participants are gradually eliminated until only one, the winner, is left. Blitz has admitted that in making the film he was influenced

by the structure of Agatha Christie's novel *And Then There Were None*, in which a group of people from different backgrounds come together on an island and one by one are killed off. The film's use of both the quest and elimination genres provides ready-made suspense and tension.⁴ However suspense and tension do not exist unless audiences care about the characters. This is why Blitz spends the first half of the film helping us to get to know the characters through their back stories. A second way in which Blitz varies the archetypal generic structure of the film is by the introduction towards the end of a possible 'spoiler', or villain, in the form of another contestant, George Thampie, whom we have not yet met and who is presented as having the potential to win the National Bee and thus deny our eight protagonists the prize we hope will go to one of them. The introduction of Thampie, who either lacks or is presented as lacking, the warmth and charm of our eight protagonists, unexpectedly increases the suspense and tension at the eleventh hour.

A third area students can study in examining *Spellbound*'s attempts to engage audiences is its filmic style. In addition to the frequent use of long shots to establish each participant's environment and therefore their character, *Spellbound* relies extensively on close-ups both to allow us to bond with the characters in the back stories and to experience the pressure, tension and confusion during the spelling bees themselves. In the national final the close-ups of competitors are accompanied by cutaways to their parents in the audience, allowing us to share their emotions as well, and to suggest that this is a film about families as much as individuals.

In terms of filmic style *Spellbound* provides an interesting contrast to *Bowling for Columbine*. The pairing of the films would provide a useful vehicle for enhancing students' understanding of the varieties of filmic and narrative style which can be found in documentaries. In *Bowling for Columbine* the presence of the filmmaker Michael Moore is overt and forceful and it is he who is the protagonist and hero of his documentary. The filmmakers of *Spellbound*, in contrast, are not seen on screen; they seem to be invisible and thus the story seems to tell itself. It is the eight contestants competing in the spelling bee who are the protagonists and heroes of *Spellbound*. What we have in the pairing is a contrast between Moore's guerrilla film making approach and Blitz's fly-on-the-wall technique. As a consequence, whereas the ideology of *Bowling for Columbine* is clear and direct, that of *Spellbound* is more subtle.

This leads to another way in which *Spellbound* can be used to help students achieve the objectives of the Year 12 English and Senior English courses. *Spellbound* provides an especially useful tool for examining the way in which a seemingly innocent, entertaining text can serve the purposes of particular ideologies. It is when a text is most entertaining that ideology does its most effective work. Audiences can become so caught up in a text that they do not notice that they are also caught up in its ideologies. Entertainment has the effect of naturalising, not neutralising, ideology.

In terms of ideology *Spellbound* can be read as a celebration of the American dream: the belief in America as the land of opportunity where dedication and hard work will bring success to anyone with the necessary desire, whatever the person's background. It is the film's endorsement of this optimistic and comforting belief, it can be argued, that makes *Spellbound* such a feel-good movie and accounts for much of its success.

This is why the selection and construction of characters in *Spellbound* are so important. They function not simply on an entertainment or narrative level but on an ideological level. The contestants in *Spellbound* are living embodiments of the American dream, the belief that success goes to those with the necessary dedication and desire. In warming to, sympathising with and cheering on the contestants in *Spellbound*, the audience is also implicitly warming to, sympathising with and cheering on the ideology they represent. This ideology is why the characters in *Spellbound* have been constructed to offer a cross-section of the American society. The array of characters implies that the American dream applies to, is embodied by and attainable by young people of all backgrounds: male, female, white, African American, Hispanic, rural, urban, northern, southern, western and eastern; all young people, in the words of the national song 'America the Beautiful', from 'sea to shining sea'.

Earlier this article noted that the array of characters is slightly skewed towards recent immigrants to the United States. This, it can be argued, is because the concept of America as a land of opportunity for migrants is a particularly important component of the American dream. Every occurrence of a recent immigrant or child of a recent immigrant making good in America provides further validation of the American dream. Further, the skew to children of migrants validates a belief in America as an open, tolerant and democratic society where all people whatever their background are accepted, given opportunities and have the chance to succeed. These ideologies are given their most famous expression on the inscription found at the base of the Statue of Liberty:

'Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to be free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.'

It is interesting to note that Blitz is himself the child of an immigrant to America, his mother having emigrated from Argentina partly in response to the growth of anti-semitism in that country following the second world war.

Blitz has been quite open about the ideology of *Spellbound*. The inspiration for the movie came, he claims, when he saw the national final of the 1997 Spelling Bee televised on EPSN, a cable sports channel, and immediately knew 'that there was an American dream story here'.⁵ Blitz has said of selecting his cast, 'There was a deliberate attempt to find far-reaching geographic stories and a mix of socioeconomic stories because I wanted to tell a big American story... I think the choice of stories tended to reflect my interest in the American dream angle.'⁶ Elsewhere he has said, 'There's an old-fashioned, populist message here, I think: that no matter where you begin, hard work can advance you. Is there truth to it, too? I think so. I think these kids prove it. They test themselves by tackling something massive—conquering, in a sense, the English language. There's something fundamentally American in that idea, that anything is possible with determination and dedication.'⁷

Not surprisingly, Angela Arenivar, the daughter of illegal immigrants from Mexico, was particularly important for Blitz's ideological project: 'When Angela finally won her (state) Bee, Sean and I burst into tears. In part this was because we cared so much about Angela's sense of the importance of her victory. But in part, this was because we knew we had the cornerstone of our documentary.'⁸ That cornerstone, it can be argued is the ideological belief in the concept of America as the land of opportunity for all. In the final film Angela emerges as the dominant carrier of the film's ideology, not so much because of what she says, but because of where she comes from, what she does and what her parents say, in other words, what she represents. Some of the most moving moments of the film are the scene of Angela's mother crying when Angela wins her regional Bee and the interviews with Angela's father Ubaldo where, translated by his son Jorge, he speaks of his pride in his children's achievements and his assurance that he will die happy with the knowledge of the opportunities he has created for his children in moving to the United States.

The ideological motif of the American dream running through the film is underlined by the comments of some of the other parents. 'You don't get second chances in India the way you do in America,' says Nupur's father. Neil's father loves America because, 'If you work hard, you'll make it.' In case we still haven't got the point the national final is frequently interspersed with cutaways to various shots of the American flag.

So is *Spellbound* simply American propaganda which glosses over the sorts of social problems Michael Moore exposes so persuasively in *Bowling for Columbine*? Should *Spellbound* be condemned for simply feeding back to audiences comforting but misleading ideologies and feeding into the unthinking flag-waving politics of the Bush regime? Well, that will be up to your students to decide. What they decide will of course be influenced partly by their contexts, beliefs and values. But it will also be influenced by the readings of the film made available to them by their teachers. It is thus worth encouraging them to explore a variety of readings of the film before asking them to come their own conclusions.

First, it can be argued that *Spellbound* does not gloss over the inequalities of American society nor pretend that all contestants start on a level playing field. The portrayals of Angela, Ashley, Ted and April make it quite clear that they do not have many of the advantages of the other competitors.

Second, it can be argued that *Spellbound* should be commended for the inclusive nature of its portrayal of American society. Its inclusion of Hispanics, African-Americans, Jewish people, rural and urban inhabitants and recently arrived migrants acts as a reminder of the complex, varied, multiracial and multicultural nature of American society at a time when most representations of American society are still dominated by WASPs. As this indicates, readings of *Spellbound* need, as with all texts, to take account of context and consider the role of the film in the circulation of ideas within this context. In American society there still exists considerable prejudice against and fear of Hispanics. In this context *Spellbound*'s sympathetic treatment and celebration of Angela Arenivar and her family can be read as especially commendable. Nor does the film try to hide the existence of the prejudice with which Hispanics have to contend. It is presented clearly in the ironically self-revealing comment made by the employer of Angela's father that Ubaldo 'ain't lazy like most wetbacks'.

Third, it is at least arguable that the film is not asking us to believe that America is a society where anyone can achieve their goals but a place where many still believe they can and should be able to. The film can in fact be read as a celebration of that belief and of those who hold it. In this respect the film can be read as a counterbalance to Moore's negative and sometimes despairing portrayal of American society, and presenting an optimistic, hopeful side of America which Moore chooses to ignore.

If you think about it, the idea that society should be a place where anyone whatever their background can achieve the success they desire through hard work and dedication is in fact a pretty socialist idea and one which can be read as being at odds with many aspects of modern America. Following this line of thinking, a number of reviewers have read the film, not as propaganda or a whitewashing of the America of today, but as challenging the dominant values of modern America and calling for a return to the basic and noble ideals of the past which have been lost, or more accurately discarded, in recent times. These reviewers see the film as a counterbalance to the ideologies of an administration which aligns itself with the big end of town and is happy to see the entrenchment of structural inequalities which work against the very ideals embodied by the contestants in *Spellbound*.⁹ From this perspective, *Spellbound* can actually be read as performing a similar ideological function to *Bowling for Columbine*.

Fourth, and in relation to the previous point, it is also worth noting that while the winner of the National Bee receives a \$12,000 cash prize, this is given little mention in the film and seems of little consequence to the contestants, most of whom seem happy simply to go as far as they can in the contest. What they are seeking is something immaterial: the chance to prove themselves by performing as best they can in a challenging situation. Nor, can it be argued, as a number of reviewers point out, that the contestants are motivated by interpersonal competitiveness. It is the camaraderie of the contestants which stands out in *Spellbound*, rather than any rivalry between them: 'Those who earn the right to participate share a common goal and interest, battling against words rather than each other.'¹⁰ The indifference of the contestants to material reward and interpersonal rivalry can be read as a further challenge to currently dominant American values.

This leads to a fifth and final consideration when constructing readings of *Spellbound*. Given the importance of America's role in the world today, a role deeply influenced by America's conception of itself, it is entirely appropriate to read the ideology of *Spellbound* in terms of its participation in the circulation of ideas about the nature of American society. But we do not have to do this. We can read *Spellbound* as dealing with an ideology which transcends American society. After all Americans do not have a monopoly on the belief in dedication and hard work in pursuit of one's goals. We can ignore *Spellbound*'s role in the circulation of beliefs about America and read it simply as a celebration of young people who have a passion for something and are willing to take on a challenge and test themselves. The passion of the participants in *Spellbound* is for words, not just their spellings, but their uses, etymologies and origins. That is something to which I, as an English teacher, can certainly relate. More importantly, like any English teacher who has encouraged and cajoled students into participating in debating, drama, public speaking, writing, sporting or video production competitions, I can also relate to, appreciate and applaud the willingness of the *Spellbound* participants to rise to a challenge, or to put it in Australian terms, have a go.

To continue and conclude with the personal note established above, I choose to read *Spellbound* as offering a positive, affirmative message because, to draw on Bill Clinton's inaugural presidential address, I still believe in a place called Hope. After all, that's why I became a teacher.

Perhaps the most valuable reading of *Spellbound* English teachers can offer their students is one which emphasises the wonderful power of passion and aspiration in young people's lives. Like many English teachers, I have always believed that our primary goal is to tap into the passions and aspirations which motivate our students. In addition to helping us achieve the aims of particular English syllabi, *Spellbound* offers a way of helping us achieve this noble goal.

¹ Saxon Bullock, 'Jeff Blitz Interview', BBCi Films, 16 November 2003, www.bbc.co.uk/films/2003/10/10/jeff_blitz_spellbound_interview.shtml

² E.C. Thomas, 'Spellbound: Finding the American Dream in the Dictionary', *Glide Magazine*, 30 June 30, 2003, at www.glidemagazine.com/articles45.html

³ ruthlessreviews.com/movies/s/spellbound.html

⁴ Naomi Pfefferman, 'Bee-witched and Bee-wildered', *The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, 28 November 2003 at <http://www.jewishjournal.com/home/preview.php?id=11427>. See also Spellbound press notes at <http://www.thinkfilmcompany.com/SpellboundMovie//index.php>

⁵ Saxon Bullock, op cit.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Mari Sasano, 'Phenomenon, P-H-E-N...', *See Magazine*, 3 July 2003.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Film Snobs, 'The Yeoman's Work of the American Dream', at www.filmsnobs.com/www/shimes/spellbound.htm

See also Levy Shawn, 'Attack of the spelling bees', *The Guardian*, October 3, 2003
at www.guardian.co.uk/arts/fridayreview/story/0,12102,1054168,00.html

¹⁰ Mark Sells, 'Spelled Out, Spellbound is an H-I-T Hit', *Friction Magazine*, 23 June 2003,
<http://www.frictionmagazine.com/artful/film/spellbound.asp>