

(Editor's Note: Since this article was written, Jerry Noland's classes have been cancelled for the foreseeable future after she experienced some health issues. We wish her well in her recovery.)

Themes From The Life Of Jerry Noland



This semester, Sylvia "Jerry" Noland, a teacher of literature for OLLI for the past 10 years, will focus on two novels: *The Covenant of Water* and *Cutting for Stone*, both by Ethiopian-born writer Abraham Verghese.

The books provide sweeping narratives, with characters experiencing upheavals and triumphs that bring them in and out of each other's lives. They span decades, providing an inside look at history.

Why these books?: In a sense, the same themes found in them are the backdrop for Jerry Noland's life.

Now approaching 91 years of age, Jerry has led a complex life, filled with strife and sorrow, but also joy and fun. For Jerry, tying together the elements of fiction and real life is an important part of understanding literature.

"I'm all about connections – how do you connect what you're reading to life," she says. "Literature is so full of life's challenges: loss, betrayal, redemption. It's all about humanity – who we are as human beings."

Over the past 10 years, Jerry has taught a variety of literature-related subjects for OLLI, delving into poetry, short stories, plays, themes of absurdism and existentialism, creative writing, and novels.

Her classes are lively, filled with discussions about the readings and how they relate to class members' lives. Frequently, Jerry will go off on what she calls

“riffing,” talking about events in her life that relate to events in a character’s life.

And she has plenty to riff about.

Chapter One: A Traumatic Childhood

Jerry describes a “rough” childhood growing up in Tampa in the 1930s and ‘40s. “My mother married five times,” she says. “We lived in some awful places. It was very traumatic, a lot of violence.”

One incident in her life prompted her to write a short story she called “The Lady in the Long Black Dress”: One rainy night, 8-year-old Jerry and her mother took a cab to a mysterious-looking red brick building. Inside the building, the little girl saw a woman dressed in a flowing black nun’s habit coming down the stairs.

“The woman took my arm and said, ‘Come with me, Sylvia.’ She led me to a long room with cots and sleeping girls. A crucifix was hanging on the wall at the end of the room. She put me in a bed and walked out. I didn’t know where I was. My mother gave me no hugs or goodbyes before she left. I was lonely, frightened, in a world I didn’t know anything about,” Jerry says.

It was a Catholic boarding school, where Jerry lived for nearly two years before returning to live with her mother.

Despite her difficult childhood, Jerry found joy in two things: religion and reading.

Her religious faith began as a teenager when she would go to church with her friends. Her love of reading began at home, seeing her mother always with a book. When she was old enough, Jerry spent hours at the local library down the street from where she lived.

Jerry had no educational or career expectations as she approached high school graduation. Her mother had no education; why would Jerry aim that high? But one day, she was called into a school counselor’s office and learned she would receive a scholarship to the University of Tampa.

Chapter Two: A Winding Path

Armed with a teaching degree from UT, Jerry began teaching English and geography at Oak Grove Junior High School after graduation. A year later, she married her high school sweetheart. That began a winding path that led her to Georgia, then Gainesville, then Richmond, Virginia, then Bushnell, and finally, Brandon, as her husband pursued dental training and a dental practice, and the couple raised three children.

In 1990, after 33 years of marriage, the couple divorced, and Jerry continued her travels, moving back to Gainesville for several years and then back to Hillsborough County, along the way earning a master's degree in English and doing postgraduate studies at USF and the University of Florida.

But that's just part of her story.

Jerry has been a teacher for most of her professional life. She has brought her love of literature to high schoolers, junior high schoolers, and college students. But between those jobs, she's had a variety of other occupations.

In Virginia, she worked in a physician's office at the State Tuberculosis Hospital for Colored People, an eye-opening experience for a young Southern White woman. "For the first time in my life, I was a minority," Jerry says. "I would go to the cafeteria and there were no other White people in the room." she says.

There, Jerry became friends with an African-American woman with whom she worked. "We told each other our life stories, and we shared our concepts of how different our lives were," she says.

In Gainesville, Jerry served as events coordinator for Burdines department store, helping to organize its grand opening and setting up fashion shows, back-to-school events, visits from Santa and the Easter Bunny and more. It was a chance for Jerry to unleash her very active imagination, she says.

She's also worked for Hillsborough County Commissioners Kevin Beckner, Pat Frank and Brian Blair and for the county's Charter Review Board, experiencing government operations from the inside.

Chapter Three: Being The Light

Jerry's 91st birthday is coming up in March. But despite her age and heart valve replacement surgery last October, Jerry is not slowing down. This semester, she's teaching two classes a week for OLLI, one at the Regent and the other at her church, the First Presbyterian Church of Brandon. Both classes focus on Verghese's novels.

Her classes, she says, give her inspiration. "I love teaching more than anything. I never feel so alive as when I'm standing in front of a group of students and sharing my knowledge, wisdom and experiences. Teaching is more than just relaying information; it's relating what we're reading into life and the lessons we can learn," she says.

That she's still around to deliver those lessons brings her a sense of wonder and awe. It's her curiosity about everything and her ability to inspire it in others that keeps her going, she says.

"I believe we're given gifts that are God-given," she says. "I want to make sure I'm using mine with an attitude of gratefulness – being the light. That's how I want to live my life – to be the light."

--Sandy Buckley