

# **Umbrella Men**

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Alonso Caua, a Brooklyn librarian, inherited an ancient, magic umbrella that spreads peace in its shadow, but its presence now seems to be changing his 10-year-old son in unpredictable ways, forcing the family to make a fateful decision.

Appropriate for grades 9-12. Curricular materials developed by Karen McDaid, M.S. Ed., Reading and Literacy.

## **Synopsis**

A magical umbrella stolen from British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in 1938 has ended up in the hands of a Brooklyn librarian. Now, three generations of Alonso Caua's family struggle with how the Umbrella affects them and all those it touches. Alonso's father once used it to prevent riots in New York; Alonso brought peace to a troubled region; now, years later, ten-year-old João is changing as the Umbrella seemingly prepares him to take over as its bearer. Alonso and his wife Mimi come to grips with the legacy of the Umbrella in a tangled plot involving spies, heads of state, a conspiracy theorist, a science fiction writer, and a mysterious young girl genius, all connected by an Umbrella that sits by the door of their simple East Flatbush home.

## **The “Umbrella Men” Meet the Common Core**

The assignments listed below were developed to align to the Common Core standards for grades 9-12. Because all essays require that students read a challenging text and provide evidence from the text in their answers, they all reinforce CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-12.1 and CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-12.10. Consider these to be options and choose or revise the one to three directions that make the most sense for your classroom and your students.

### **Theme**

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2

What would you consider to be the primary theme of the story? Please describe how that theme develops through the text, using specific details from the text to support your analysis.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2

“Umbrella Men” can be seen as having two competing themes – one encouraging generous action with global implications, and one encouraging the importance of family and home. How do these themes interact and build on each other throughout the story?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2 and/or CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5

The first spoken sentence of the story is, “There are some shadows that are only developed in darkness.” What is meant by this statement? What later events in the story might this statement foreshadow?

### **Elements of the Story**

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.3

Throughout the story, Alonso is torn by an inner conflict. What is this inner conflict, and how does it drive the action of the story? Which interactions with other characters pull him in one direction or the other?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3

How does the setting of the story, in a middle-class neighborhood in Brooklyn, NY, influence the story? Please provide specific examples in which this backdrop effectively helped to develop the story.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3

The umbrella is an important symbol throughout the story. Why do you think the author chose an umbrella? What does it represent? How does the umbrella develop as a symbol throughout the story? Provide evidence from the story to support your opinion.

### **Story Sequence**

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.5

The author uses flashback to enrich the background and control the pace of the story. Using specific examples from the text, explain how this technique contributes to the story.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5

Why did the author choose to begin with this image: “the old man wandered the streets of New York with the Umbrella for two days straight.” What is the significance of this passage, in the introduction and later in the story?

### **Contrasting Points of View**

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6 and CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7

What is the significance of Lucas McLeod’s visit? How does his viewpoint, as presented in the story and at thedarkumbrella.com, contrast with Alonso’s?

### **Writing Assignments**

These writing assignments provide an opportunity to address Common Core Writing Standards 3, 4, and/or 5, and can be adjusted to reflect the expectations of a particular grade level or standard.

### **Everyday People**

“Umbrella Men” emphasizes the importance of everyday actions by ordinary people. Think of a time when a small action resulted in a big change. It could be something you or someone else did, the result could be good or bad, and the event could be real or made up. Write the story of that experience.

### Situation Challenge

This short story came about as the result of a writing assignment, in which students were asked to imagine a scenario where handing someone an umbrella at the door of the New School could bring about world peace. Choose a thing, a place, and a result at random. Try to create a short story showing how the place and thing could interact to create the result. Here are some ideas to get you started, but feel free to add your own:

<i>Things</i>	<i>Places</i>	<i>Results</i>
A used car	at the circus	falling in love
A broken violin	at the mall	the best meal of your life
A huge bouquet of tulips	on a bus	discovering your career
A wearable computer	on the Newport Bridge	death and dismemberment
A stray cat	at a mountain's summit	a crisis averted
Fresh air	underground	great wealth

### Resources for additional Information

Context for Condolezza Rice quote  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4019395.stm>

Context for Rodney King verdict and Los Angeles riots  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1992\\_Los\\_Angeles\\_riots](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1992_Los_Angeles_riots)

Pronunciation for Joao  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_fOndVOI5SE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fOndVOI5SE)

Context on Rep. Elizabeth Holtzman  
[http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/H/HOLTZMAN,-Elizabeth-\(H000752\)/](http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/H/HOLTZMAN,-Elizabeth-(H000752)/)

Context for Michael Flannery  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1994/10/02/obituaries/michael-flannery-an-advocate-of-a-united-ireland-dies-at-92.html>

Neville Chamberlain and his signature umbrella  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neville\\_Chamberlain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neville_Chamberlain)

Alger Hiss and the United Nations  
<http://www.unmultimedia.org/oralhistory/2011/10/hiss-alger/>