

- Announcer: [00:03](#) Welcome to the reThink ELA podcast, hosted by English language arts teacher Michelle Waters. Prepare to receive strategies, products, and expert advice tailored to help teachers build social awareness, student agency and voice in their ELA classrooms.
- Michelle: [00:22](#) Welcome to the reThink ELA podcast. I'm your host Michelle Waters and my guest this week is Hugh Hunter, who is an author, activist and motivational speaker from Atlanta, Georgia.
- Michelle: [00:33](#) His latest book, Torment: A Novella, is about a young man struggling with lifelong mental health issues and it follows this main character through the weekend of his brother's funeral. He interacts with several grieving family members and grapples with the tragedies in his past that have led to his family's current situation.
- Michelle: [00:51](#) Questions at the top of his mind are, "What is worth living for?" and, "What lessons could I have learned so that I didn't have such a hard time growing up?"
- Michelle: [01:00](#) Hugh's book deals with serious topics including mental health, race, class, and society and coming of age. And it's suitable for both middle and high school students.
- Michelle: [01:09](#) Torment is the winner for multicultural fiction in the 2019 Next Generation Indie Book Award contest. It won the third place grand prize for fiction in that same contest and it was a finalist in the novella category.
- Michelle: [01:23](#) Hugh is a former university level career coach who worked primarily with business students, but his real passion was writing, so he created Torment as a way to process his own life and reach out to other young people. He now offers virtual or in-person workshops and classroom visits to inspire and encourage students.
- Michelle: [01:42](#) In just a few moments, you'll learn more about Hugh and what he and his book can do for your classroom. We'll be right back.
- Announcer: [01:49](#) When it comes to reaching students through literature, finding reliable resources is challenging. Your search is over. reThink ELA podcast is here to provide student-tested research-based strategies, products, and advice. Here's your host, Michelle Waters.

- Michelle: [02:09](#) Welcome back to the reThink ELA podcast. I'm here with Hugh Hunter, author of *Torment: A Novella*. Thank you for joining us.
- Hugh: [02:16](#) Thank you for having me. I'm really excited to be here.
- Michelle: [02:19](#) I'm excited to have you here and I just want to jump in with both feet and ask you to briefly introduce your journey, your story about how you started writing books for young adults.
- Hugh: [02:32](#) For sure. I was always really passionate about writing, but kind of got away from it after school and started again after I got into my first job. I wrote a book of short stories, but the stories were sort of all over the place, in terms of content and audience. So, after getting the feedback from that book and having people read it and let me know what they thought, when I sat down to write again and work on another project, I thought about a couple of things.
- Hugh: [03:00](#) One, how can I make sure that the book is actually getting into hands? And writing for young adults is definitely a way that we can almost ensure that. They're taking classes, they're learning a lot through reading at that age. So, I definitely wanted to be visible in that space.
- Hugh: [03:17](#) And then another thing was, thinking about my experience as a middle grade and high school student growing up and how much I enjoyed that time, and knowing that not everybody did enjoy that time. So I think when people think back on that age, other artists and other writers, they sometimes shy away from creating content for that age group because it's a difficult emotional time to try to navigate and then even to connect with once you're an adult.
- Hugh: [03:41](#) But I've always sort of had a knack for it. So I wanted to just play into that natural connection that I have with that age group of people and create something that allows me to connect with them even more.
- Michelle: [03:54](#) Absolutely. It sounds like, maybe even as you're connecting with that age group and thinking about yourself at that age group, would you say that maybe you're kind of writing some content that you or people you knew might've needed back then?
- Hugh: [04:06](#) Now, that's a really good question. I think so, in so many different ways. I guess a particular part of my story is having a home life where I wasn't always able to broach sensitive topics with the people that I lived with.

Hugh: [04:21](#) So, thinking about writing that sort of dives into more difficult things or more sensitive parts of the life of a young person or any person and what it really means to grow up, and being able to put that in a classroom space where you have a teacher who is protecting you and classmates that you trust every day, I definitely see parts of my work that would've been really helpful for me, and I hope that they're helpful for other people too.

Michelle: [04:49](#) Absolutely. So talking about that classroom context, and I've also mentioned your book, Torment, before the segue, what can you tell us about Torment and how it's a good choice for that classroom context?

Hugh: [05:04](#) Oh, for sure. I know that social emotional learning is huge, and a lot of educators are finding creative ways to make Torment work for them in the context of social emotional learning. So, I think that it's a really good book to use, to that end, because of the content, because we're broaching conversations about mental health in a way that's still sensitive to various people's traumas and various people's identities. It's not heavy-handed, but it is real and it does make the space to have genuine discussions.

Hugh: [05:44](#) That's probably my favorite thing about it for the classroom, but it's also pretty short. Most adults that I know have read it in a sitting of two, no more than three hours, if they've tried to read it in a sitting. So, something that an educator can get through and then make a plan for students to get through, that isn't overbearing or putting too much extra pressure on a curriculum, I think is another good reason why it's a solid option for different teachers.

Michelle: [06:11](#) Absolutely. As I sat down and read the book, I felt like I was really able to get into the head of the character easily. Just kind of slide in there and just live with him as he was going through his experiences.

Hugh: [06:23](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: [06:24](#) So you mentioned that it's for young adults. Specifically what age of young adult? Are we talking middle school, high school, both or what are you [crosstalk 00:06:33] from that?

Hugh: [06:33](#) Yes. At this point, there's been so many people that have read the book, and I always appreciate feedback from educators and school librarians because I know that they're formally trained in this kind of thing. A few librarians have called it a pure

crossover, that the content and the depth is appropriate for high school aged students, but the writing is simple enough and the content is safe enough for students that are in middle school.

Hugh: [07:02](#) So I mean, I really like to pitch it across the grades and hope that I can encourage educators to think about whether or not it fits for them and their students. Because every school district, state, if people are doing different things, and the groups of students are different, so I don't like to sort of put a blanket over it. But I think the most classes that have used it have been seventh grade classes, in the first year that it was published.

Hugh: [07:31](#) And then in the second year that it was published, it sort of made its foray into high school and we saw a lot of 10th grade classes. The first senior year English class in Atlanta will be using it come this this next semester, Spring 2020. So, I'm really excited about that.

Hugh: [07:48](#) Another thing that I think has been important, is that schools that are located in rural areas, and the book takes place mostly in a small rural community. So, I felt a real affinity from teachers who live and work in areas like that, to say, "This would be great for our students, to see a world that's like theirs reflected in writing."

Michelle: [08:10](#) Absolutely. Being a rural high school and middle school teacher myself, I can see how, in some ways, the book can be a mirror for students that live also in rural areas. Also, students that maybe are from particular demographics might also see the book as a window into a different life, that they may not have experienced before and may not be able to experience.

Hugh: [08:34](#) For sure. For sure. Yeah. We're dealing with a lower income black family in a neighborhood that's pretty segregated, and so I definitely think the students that come from that sort of cultural background will find things to identify with. But there's a lot of systemic level sort of themes that I think anybody from a marginalized or underrepresented group could tie into.

Hugh: [09:00](#) And then even folks who are in majority groups, whether it be based on ability or race or culture, will also be able to see into the work and look at things that they may have not looked at in the same way before, see a different perspective.

Hugh: [09:17](#) I like to think that there are multiple sort of entry and access points for a lot of different type of people.

- Michelle: [09:26](#) Absolutely. I understand that now that you've got this book, that you also now do workshops, and you travel and you visit classrooms. What's the focus of your message in those contexts?
- Hugh: [09:38](#) Yeah. This is my favorite part of the job, by and large, and I have a lot of fun with it. It really depends. I'm at the level right now, where I'm still an indie author, still unrepresented, so I have autonomy over what these experiences look like.
- Hugh: [09:58](#) Sometimes, schools have read the book and they say, "Our students want to know all about the book and all about your writing life. That is what they want to talk about." So, I can make sure that we block out the time to do that.
- Hugh: [10:10](#) Sometimes, students haven't read the book, and it's more about having an experience to meet somebody who is a writer and does writing for a living, or how I got to that particular place.
- Hugh: [10:25](#) I think representation plays into it a lot. I visit a good amount of Title I schools, schools with high minority populations, low income schools. So, even just kind of changing the narrative of who authors are and what they look like in that space, has been a big thing as well.
- Hugh: [10:43](#) One of my favorite things to do is actually writing workshops, and I'm sort of building out a bigger niche in this area. But I've done some pretty intensive writing work with high school students, just working on craft, both for students that want to pursue writing and students that don't. Being somewhat of a supplemental instructor or somebody who can kind of come in and not undermine the work that teachers are doing every day, but disrupt it in a way that maybe can give students a new viewpoint about writing.
- Michelle: [11:14](#) So when you've done that, when you've gone into a classroom for an author visit or a workshop, and maybe you talk to the teachers later, you hear back some sort of feedback, what kind of impacts are you seeing?
- Hugh: [11:28](#) I think students have fun. I mean, it's always great. I think a lot of us can remember days during our school careers where they were just fun days, and every day can't always be like that. There are things that we have to teach and the students have to learn, and some days are harder than others.

- Hugh: [11:46](#) But I think to be inspired about learning, having those experiences where you can pick one out from the rest and say, "You know what? That day was a really cool day, a really great day and it makes me excited to go back to English class next week," or whatever it may be, so that inspiration level in giving students a little bit of something different that they can hold in their memory has been something that teachers talk about a lot.
- Hugh: [12:13](#) The representation aspect, I visited a school that was over 90% black students. Over half of the students that I spoke with in their post-event survey said that they didn't realize that the author that was coming to speak to them was a black author. So, I thought that was a huge thing. Because growing up and being surrounded by black people in a city where a lot of successful entertainers or politicians, whatever it may be, are black people, sometimes there's still a disconnect about who does what and who is able to access what different careers. So, definitely the fun, definitely the representation.
- Hugh: [12:55](#) I've seen and heard students talk about just getting better with writing, improving their writing, having new ideas, having things that are going to help them be better writers in the future.
- Hugh: [13:07](#) I've also heard students and gotten letters from students that talk about maybe even giving writing a second chance, if they've stopped liking it, or wanting to try to do it more now that they have a different perspective on it.
- Hugh: [13:20](#) So, all of those things are things that I feel I keep really near and dear to my heart. I'm happy to make any impact, but especially for students who don't really expect much out of the visit and then end up saying like, "Writing is all right. I might get get more into that." It always warms my heart.
- Michelle: [13:38](#) Absolutely. It seems to me, that in English classes, we've kind of boiled writing down to just academic writing. So, there's a disconnect between students' actual lived lives and, "Oh, writing is something that I should do."
- Michelle: [13:52](#) So it sounds like you are helping them make that connection between writing and their own lives and being inspired and having a purpose for writing besides just, "I'm going to turn this in to the teacher and then throw it away as soon as I get it back."

- Hugh: [14:06](#) Oh, definitely, yeah. I sort of have a ... I don't know what I would call it, but there are various tenants of how I like to construct workshops and key points that I want to disrupt on.
- Hugh: [14:20](#) One of those points is the stakes of writing that you mentioned, like, "What happens when I turn this in?" That can cause a lot of anxiety and it's necessary. I mean, we have to have students turn in assignments, but this is why the teacher artist collaboration is so useful.
- Hugh: [14:34](#) Because now, still in a structured environment, I can come in and create something that doesn't have to hold to the same stakes as is every other assignment, and students can approach it with a different kind of energy.
- Hugh: [14:44](#) In addition to that, choice is another sort of tenant of how I like to disrupt. Students being able to choose what they write about, come up with their own ideas. Sometimes, I give them a framework, sometimes it's free writing, sometimes it's a mix. But either way, like you mentioned, not having it be just an academic essay or just something that they have to critically analyze, but to get to put their own experience and their own flavor on it, it gets a lot of students excited as well.
- Michelle: [15:13](#) Awesome. You were talking about, just there at the end, critically analyzing, which kind of brings us back to the book. What are some of the ways that you've seen the book used in classrooms? If you have maybe an idea or two that you can mention briefly.
- Hugh: [15:28](#) Yeah. Yeah. There's one particular teacher, Jefferson High School in Tampa, Florida, Miss Fitzpatrick. Hi, hope you're doing well. Teacher of the year, congratulations again. She, I think did an amazing job this year with the book.
- Hugh: [15:44](#) As we know, it deals with mental health, and sort of the onset of all of the conversations about mental health start with grief. And she actually had one of the local bereavement specialists from sort of a county services office come in and set the table for students about how they define grief and bereavement, and what resources in the community are available to students and families that may be going through a situation like that.
- Hugh: [16:18](#) Got a lot of feedback from students about their own experiences, did some writing around that. So, they created this context to go into the work, where I think it probably brought them a lot closer to the experiences of the character, of the

main character, but also gave them a real life application for what they would be reading and what they would be writing about.

Hugh: [16:38](#) In addition to that, she partnered with their school counselor to do a presentation, just about the various things that that school counselor role can provide for students.

Hugh: [16:49](#) There's also a school counselor in the plot of the story, and so there were just so many connective points between classroom, text and community that she helped to create, that I thought it was super, super well-done. I was really happy to know that the art was taking students beyond the four walls of the classroom.

Michelle: [17:10](#) Yes. I see how having that context built ahead of time, and that prior knowledge and that connection to their life, would help them then connect to the book both as a mirror and a window. And then grief is so relevant for our kids. I mean, just in my own classroom, I hear so much, and that's something that's needed. And what you just said has got the wheels turning in my head for my kids.

Hugh: [17:38](#) Good.

Michelle: [17:39](#) I have ideas now.

Hugh: [17:40](#) Awesome. This is great.

Michelle: [17:41](#) So a teacher's listening to this podcast and they're thinking, "Wow, this is something that I really need to get in my classroom, both the book and Hugh." How do they do that? What do they need to do?

Hugh: [17:52](#) For sure. In true millennial fashion, I'm everywhere that you can hope that I would be on the internet. I'm very active on Instagram and Twitter. My Twitter is mainly for connecting with other writers and sort of keeping up with professional organizations, and cracking jokes every now and again. So, I have a group of followers there that I connect with.

Hugh: [18:19](#) My Instagram is good. It's able to provide more visuals about the places that I'm going and the things that I'm doing. And there's a really strong teacher community on Instagram, so I connect with a majority of teachers there. Feel free to send me a-

Michelle: [18:33](#) Me included.
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- Hugh: [18:34](#) Yeah, exactly, see. Well, my handle is @HD_TSD. People can feel free to find me there. Follow the page if you'd like, just to kind of keep up for a little while, see what you can see, but my inbox is always open. People can ask me questions and we can have a conversation.
- Hugh: [18:54](#) I also have a website, thesoutherndistrict.com. I'll be updating that as we head into the new year, with some new content, videos and pictures from some of the visits that I did in 2019. So, that's a great one-stop shop, just to get a overview of all the things that I do.
- Hugh: [19:08](#) But yeah, I just encourage people not to be shy. Send me a message. I'm on every day. I really like talking to teachers and just figuring out how we can collaborate, in a way that's mutually beneficial.
- Michelle: [19:20](#) Absolutely. All the links that you just mentioned and the resources you mentioned will be linked on the podcast page for this episode, at rethinkela.com.
- Hugh: [19:29](#) Beautiful.
- Michelle: [19:31](#) Is there anything else you'd like to add?
- Hugh: [19:35](#) I don't think so. I am really, really excited about being able to be on the podcast. Thank you again for inviting me.
- Michelle: [19:42](#) You're welcome.
- Hugh: [19:43](#) I'm going into the 2020, I guess the second half of the 19-20 school year, with some engagements already planned. I'm based in Atlanta, so I'll be here, but I'll also be in Texas, California and Virginia for sure. So, if there are teachers in those areas who are looking to collaborate, I'm already going to be in those places. I would love to hear from them.
- Hugh: [20:05](#) But I'm also always available to engage with students in a virtual way. I think we live in this time period now, where there's not a lot of reasons why we can't figure out something together, that would enrich the school day for a student or enrich a teacher's ability to get their point across with my help.
- Hugh: [20:23](#) I just see myself in service to teachers and students, and I want to help however I can. So, I'm thankful to you and I'm thankful to everybody who will listen to this. And hopefully, we can figure out how we can work together.

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Michelle: [20:36](#) Absolutely. I really appreciate all the help that I can get. Because you never know when you kind of throw something out there, or you have this idea and a kid just connects with it, and you're like, "Where in the world did that come from?" Thank you so much.

Hugh: [20:50](#) Absolutely.

Michelle: [20:52](#) Encourage your high school students to share their stories, discuss building a representative society and develop their writing skills. With this set of 15 highly engaging lesson plans, you can mix and match to meet your students' needs. Download this unit at rethinkela.com/sjwp.