

## **Invitation to Imagine:**

<https://www.teachingbooks.net/> invited me to create some writing prompts they call *Invitation to Imagine*. (For more about WALLS <https://www.teachingbooks.net/tb.cgi?tid=76800> ) They used the first one, but I add two more for your students below:

Please cheer, “HUZZAH!” when a teacher says you’ll be looking at some primary documents. Research/reporting is the FUN part of writing, the treasure hunt, where you play detective and find story. Primary documents—letters, photos, diaries, news clippings—are the gems, the clues. They will jumpstart your imagination and hand you characters, the thematic spine, the pivotal plot twists, the “show-rather-than-tell” anecdotes of your narratives.

For instance, for HAMILTON AND PEGGY! —my biographical novel on the youngest of the famed Schuyler Sisters—Alexander dropped all sorts of gossip about “the spritely,” “wicked wit” Peggy in his love letters to *Eliza*, telling me precisely who and where his soon-to-be little sister was during the American Revolution. For SUSPECT RED—my novel about McCarthyism—a political cartoon depicting a teenager being harassed by “anti-subversive” committee agents (with the caption “You Read Books, Eh?”) really brought home the Red Scare’s rampant censorship. Even *Robinhood* was banned as being communist-leaning—(because the Merry Men took from rich and gave to the poor). Any librarian who didn’t yank the classic adventure story off shelves was in danger of being fired.

For WALLS, chilling eyewitness accounts of the night the Berlin Wall went up handed me heartbreaking, specific details with which to paint that final chapter. I read memoirs of teens trapped behind the Iron Curtain, describing the bone-chilling dangers of just listening to music that Soviet Russia and East Germany had deemed provocative. If caught, for instance, with an Elvis Presley record (or just tuning their radio to a West European broadcast), youth could be charged with *Kulturbarbarei*, spreading “culture corruption.” That drove home just how high walls would be between my two cousins—Drew, the American Army kid, and Matthias, raised in communist propaganda. To “show-rather-than-tell” how suspicious and fearful Matthias might be of American pop culture—and to allow a wary empathy to begin between the two boys who had been taught by their nation’s political rhetoric to distrust one another—I have Drew take his East Berlin cousin to a Sadie Hawkins dance. What could be a more dyed-in-the-wool American event?

Thank you, primary documents.

**Now your turn:** In East Berlin, teens had been pitted against each other, tagged either as believers or dangerous subversives in need of “re-education.” Those who joined the FDJ (Free German Youth) might report their friends for “lack of enthusiasm” at state-mandated parades. The day the Wall went up young Vopos (“the People’s Police”) had to stop their friends and neighbors, maybe even their family, from escaping to the West.

Look at this photo, these faces, the body language. There is a pair of Vopos right at the barbed wire and another three talking to the growing crowd of anxious East Berliners. What do you see? What do you feel? What do you imagine? Stand in their shoes. Tell me their story. Pick one of the clusters of conversations in the photo and then one participant. Use his or her Point of View—are you a Vopo or a civilian surveying the barbed wire with dismay? Dialogue is often the quickest character reveal and certainly a powerful way to convey the emotion, the two sides, of a scene. Now switch people and groups and write a different perspective.



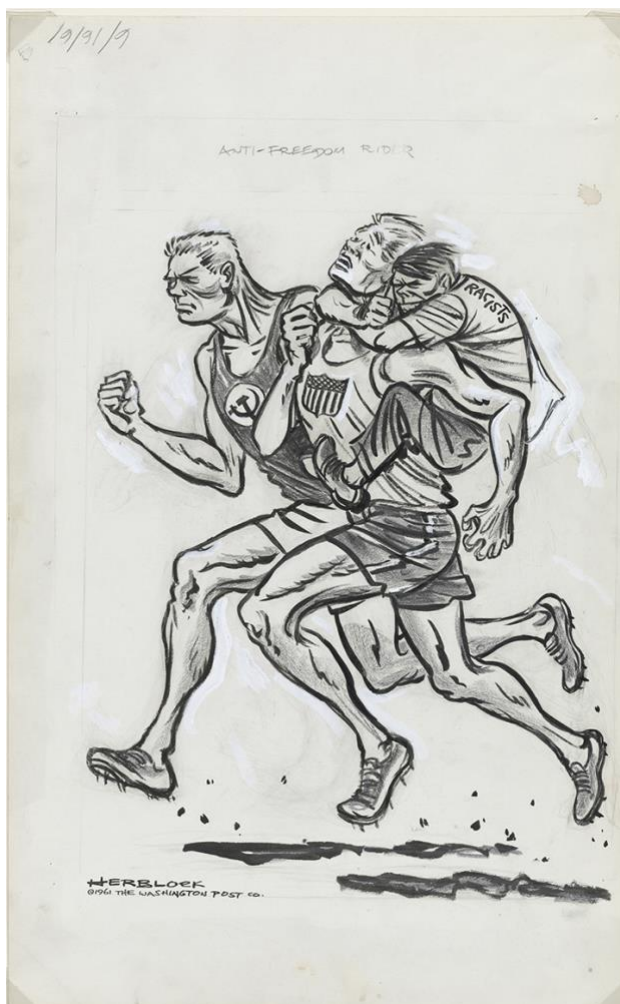
**Or try this one:** Imagine what these two children are saying to one another.



## Invitation to Imagine #2

There are often painfully relevant parallels between a past historical era and today. During the year WALLS takes place, 1960-61, the fight for civil rights and the harsh realities of racial inequity loomed large in America. Russia—and the Eastern European “satellite” nations it had taken over to create a communist Soviet Bloc against NATO democracies—use the hypocrisy of America’s systemic racism to turn its people against us. Look at this Herblock cartoon. It shows the “race” between Soviet Russia and America, and how violence and prejudice—like what “Freedom Riders” met as they peacefully protested segregation—was holding America back, in international regard and in its constitutional promise for a “perfect union” in which all men and women were equal.

What would you draw to symbolize today’s tensions within the United States?



## Invitation to Imagine #3:

In another echo of today: Right before the Berlin Wall went up, thousands of East Germans managed to cross into West Berlin seeking asylum. The Allies established a refugee camp called Marienfelde, in the American sector. To escape detection as they fled, they arrived carrying next



to no belongings, leaving everything behind for freedom. In the camp, this little girl was handed a banana. She had never seen one before. Imagine what she's thinking, tasting, saying to her little brother:



Cuba was another place refugees tried to flee after communist Fidel Castro became dictator. President Eisenhower authorized \$1 million to resettle those who made it to the U.S. border. He also sanctioned emergency visa waivers for *Operacion Pedro Pan*, a program run by the Catholic Welfare Bureau relocating thousands of children with Cuban dissident-parents to Florida. This little girl has just arrived. Imagine what she is thinking or seeing. Maybe write what she might be saying to her dolls.

