

Developing students' critical literacy: Exploring identity construction in young adult fiction

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The authors use a critical literacy stance to engage students in a discussion of young adult literature from Australia and America. They offer a framework teachers can use to initiate discussions based on critical literacy in their own classrooms.

Early in the young adult novel *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* (Zusak, 2000), Cameron Wolfe, the first-person narrator, says,

When I walk past the tiny houses on our street, I wonder about the stories inside them. I wonder hard, because houses must have walls and rooftops for a reason. My only query is the windows. Why do they have windows? Is it to let a glimpse of the world in? Or for us to see out? Our own place is small perhaps, but when your old man is eaten by his own shadow, you realise that maybe in every house, something so savage and sad and brilliant is standing up, without the world even seeing it. Maybe that's what these pages of words are about: bringing the world to the window. (p. 24)

Contemporary young adult literature, intended for readers between the ages of 12 and 20, offers a unique window on societal conflicts and dilemmas. Much of its appeal rests on the immediacy of first-person narration and the unique point of view offered by an adolescent main char-

acter (Herz & Gallo, 1996). Moreover, teen characters are usually "perceptive, sensitive, intelligent, mature, and independent" (p. 8). In a review of young adult Australian fiction, Comber and Nixon (2000) noted "At the beginning of the 21st century there is cause for optimism about the range and quality of youth literature and the power of Australian authors to reach a mass audience, within and beyond Australia" (p. 190). Because they deal with issues that are relevant to teens, including racism, pregnancy, divorce, substance abuse, family conflicts, and political injustice, young adult novels provide a roadmap of

sorts for adolescents coping with these issues in real life. *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* has parallels with American young adult fiction in general and implications for using various novels in content area classrooms in English or social studies.

Adolescent readers view characters in young adult novels as living and wrestling with real problems close to their own life experiences as teens (Bean & Rigoni, 2001). At the center of all of these themes are questions of character identity and values. These themes lend themselves to exploration through a critical literacy framework. "Critical literacy teaching begins by problematising the culture and knowledges in the text—putting them up for grabs, critical debate, for weighing, judging, critiquing" (Morgan, 1998, p. 157). We argue that a critical stance in the classroom empowers

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students to consider “what choices have been made in the creation of the text” (Janks & Ivanic, 1992, p. 316) and thus to construct a reading that may actively resist and challenge the preferred reading of a text. Through discussion of such choices, students may also better understand how they are being constructed as adolescents in the texts and how such constructions compare with their own attempts to form their identities.

Older definitions of identity evoked “an image of a bounded, rational, and unitary self—a self capable of agency and autonomy” (Alvermann, 2001, p. 678). However, more recent postmodern conceptions of identity recognize its complex and multifaceted character (Bean, 2001). Dramatic world changes, particularly globalization of markets, challenge long-established ideologies and values related to work and family (Langhorne, 2001). In a world of constant movement and flow, media images of advertising and commerce seep into our lives and strongly influence identity development.

Global markets, global manufacturers and purveyors of knowledge, and global consumers, already either horizontal in shape or lacking any physical shape at all, have arrived as new participants, stirring like a rising mist on a summer's morning round the soaring trunks of the trees in an old wood. They move inexorably across global space and time without respect to physical geography, political frontiers, or night and day. (Langhorne, 2001, p. 39)

In this article, we briefly review recent studies related to teaching literature and adolescent identity construction. We demonstrate how these theories can be used in the discussion of an Australian young adult novel. Additional young adult novels with parallel themes are included as a resource for teachers planning to adopt a critical literacy discussion framework in their classrooms.

Teaching literature

Recent studies of secondary English teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching literature in the

United States show substantial variation in guiding students' literary discussions (Agee, 2000; Langer, 2001). For example, in a five-year multiple case study spanning 25 schools, Langer found that English instruction in high-performing schools was characterized by skills instruction in multiple types of lessons where texts were deconstructed and discussed, and collaboration and connections across various texts and media were important components. Successful English teachers operated from a variety of underlying principles. In more typical schools, teachers were at the center of instruction, guiding students into predetermined intertextual and personal connections with literature. “In the higher performing schools, students were constantly encouraged to go beyond the basic learning experiences in challenging and enriching ways” (Langer, p. 872). For example, in one middle school class students read the Holocaust-based novel *Night* by Elie Wiesel (1982). In addition to poetry writing and a visit to a museum, they wrote letters from three points of view to craft a critique of the work in terms of its historical, ethical, and political issues. In other instances, this class read novels and then wrote songs about the deeper meanings in books like Rudolfo Anaya's (1972) *Bless Me, Ultima*. These more advanced reader-response options engaged students and increased the depth of their learning.

In another classroom-based investigation, Agee (2000) conducted case studies of five experienced English teachers' beliefs and practices. Some teachers felt strongly that the literary canon was a useful tool for preparing college-bound students, which let the teacher remain at the center of instruction and interpretation. Agee noted that “Narrow conceptions of literature and reading, especially those that are marked by monologic rather than dialogic practices, establish literature as a cultural icon with little room for students to develop critical interpretive skills” (p. 307). In contrast, other English teachers were more interested in helping students make personal and intertextual connections. These varying models of teaching emanated from teachers' personal biographies and experiences, as well as their college

classes in English and education. Given the current critical literacy movement in Queensland, Australia, where future English teachers have a substantial amount of exposure to this model in their major and in subsequent teacher preparation courses, we might surmise that they will adopt critical literacy in their literature discussions. American teachers are more likely to be familiar with reader-response theories (e.g., Rosenblatt, 1978) than critical literacy, although this is changing with the inclusion of critical literacy books in the International Reading Association collection (Fehring & Green, 2001) and a growing number of articles in journals based in the United States.

This expanded view of literary response is important because, as Agee (2000) argued, "How high school teachers approach literature sends messages to their students not only about what kinds of literature are valued but also who is valued" (p. 306). Issues of reader voice, positioning, inclusion of diverse literature, and an expanded literary canon are all important elements in the messages about reading and responding to literature that students take from their school experiences. For example, struggling readers are sometimes introduced to less inspiring readings and response tasks that minimize their voices (Agee, 2000; Langer, 2001). We would argue that both accomplished and struggling readers need opportunities to make personal and intertextual connections with young adult literature that challenges their thinking. The model presented in this article gives voice to students' views and a much needed consideration of how readers are positioned, as well as a consideration of gaps and silences and transformative elements. In addition, recent work in postmodern adolescent identity theory profiled in this article suggests a need to update our literature selections and the ways we encourage readers to read and respond to these selections.

Theories of identity development

Enlightenment views of identity development were based on somewhat fixed social structures

and actions according to class differences (Mansfield, 2000). The Enlightenment myth of the rugged individualist struggling to get ahead in society was challenged by Foucault and others. Foucault (1980) disputed the Enlightenment view of the rugged individual and argued that power was the driving force in shaping identity. Within a modern Marxist industrial labor culture this theoretical position was useful, particularly in guiding people toward resistance to institutionalized power. However, these linear class and power structures have been altered by the postmodern landscape, rendering older theories of identity development less useful in describing the world contemporary teens navigate. For example, cultural theorists like Mansfield argued that "We now live in a world dominated by consumer, multinational or global capitalism, and the older theoretical models that we relied on to critique established systems no longer apply" (p. 163). Urban teens navigate through shopping malls, train stations, airports, freeways, and the Internet. These fluid spaces are disorienting, disrupting a fixed sense of place, and this spills over into teens' interior worlds. Instead of clear anchors in family, community, and institutions like schools to forge a coherent identity, these fluid spaces engender feelings of disconnection and alienation (Mansfield, 2000). Identity in a mall culture is constructed through consumption of goods, with selfhood vested in things. Because this is ephemeral, feelings of panic and anxiety flow into teens' lives. Given these postmodern, fluid conditions, how do contemporary teens construct their identities?

Drawing on the work of contemporary French sociologists Touraine (1995) and Dubet (1994), McDonald (1999) conducted case studies of urban Australian teens to map their identity development. On the surface, the social world of these adolescents seemed "chaotic, unpredictable, and unstructured" (McDonald, 1999, p. 2). In essence, youths no longer live life as a journey toward the future but as a condition. Unlike the industrial society model with its promise of lifetime employment and preparation for this work in

schools and homes, the postmodern secondary school is now “a place where a youth culture and a school culture confront each other, young people navigating between the two” (p. 5). With the demise of working-class experiences and the increase in unemployment and poverty in urban core areas, older socioeconomic models have been destabilized. Rather, teen social actors use action and experience to forge identities in this shifting, unstable landscape.

In McDonald's interviews with urban core teens, he found they were constantly worried. The stability of a job for life in a factory as experienced by their parents has been replaced by constant change. Life on the dole (welfare) and unemployment have replaced a stable future for this group of teens. The Melbourne, Australia, suburb of Westview is a microcosm of other urban neighborhoods struggling with instability. “We're just called the Westview louts. That's what we call ourselves. It's what we're stereotyped as, I suppose,” offered Tania, one of McDonald's participants. These teens register for vocational classes that lead nowhere and random, nonsensical gang violence plagues their lives, leading to constant anxiety about safety. “Now at the railway station they've got cameras. So at least there's someone watching you,” said Cindy (p. 29). In the fluid, postmodern urban world, external devices rather than people now monitor behavior and regulate social action.

Much of a contemporary teen's day is now spent in what McDonald (1999) referred to as “non-places.” In modern cities, these include supermarkets, railway stations, and malls. “These spaces are sanitized and kept free of the poor. This, coupled with the decline in work-based identities further disassociates teens with those features of life that, in the past, sustained identity and a possible future” (p. 45). Teens in Westview resorted to racism toward Asians and others as a way of making sense of their own displacement. Anger became linked to a positive identity by turning an experience of social domination into one of social conflict (McDonald, 1999). Touraine

(1995) argued that displaced or marginalized members of society exist in a “social world divided between people who are part of the global flow and people caught in an increasingly desperate world of tribal competition” (p. 86).

In this divided world one may cling to a nostalgia for the past, but Dubet (1994) argued that young people are social actors, struggling with social relationships to construct positive identities in fluid times. “It is social actors rather than social systems who must unify experience, holding together increasingly divergent terrains of action” (McDonald, 1999, p. 111). In this context, identity is not an essence but a problem to be undertaken by the actor. Postmodern forms of urban teen identity construction include cults of performance manifested in consumption of goods that form or alter identity (e.g., cars, clothes, CDs, cell phones), gang affiliations, graffiti writing, eating disorders, ethnic and cultural affiliation, sports, and street life. For example, McDonald's interviews with urban gang teens revealed how these structures supplied a routine formerly offered by steady employment and stable home life. Tina said, “So, what we had, was like routine. Even though half the time we don't know what day it was. It was like routine” (p. 131).

Other researchers have engaged students in the critique of media portrayals of gender and identity. For example, Brozo, Walter, and Placker (2002) used a young adult novel about urban gangs, *Scorpions* (Myers, 1990), to help seventh-grade Texas youths examine portrayals of males in novels and the media. The community where they conducted their study had a high incidence of gang-related violence. “The discourse of violent masculinity in popular and local culture dominates the lives of these young people from the 'hood” (p. 14). Ricardo said, “No one messes with me or my *carnal*...that's all I got to say” (p. 14). Identity in this setting was forged within gang affiliation. However, in the course of students' critique of popular television shows, they came to see how males were positioned and portrayed in negative ways by the media. The

students became more aware of cultural influences, but resistance to these powerful forces seemed unlikely.

Few communities remain untouched by these changes. "In most nations and regions, disparate economies and lifeworlds sit in various stages of emergence and decay, like radioactive isotopes with persistent half-lives" (Luke & Carrington, 2001, p. 4). Areas of poverty and immobility exist outside the flow centers of cities. The job market for noncollege-bound youths is rapidly dwindling. In this turbulent context, there is an acute need for curricular changes that engage students in reading the world (Luke & Carrington, 2001). Literacy, especially through multicultural young adult novels, provides a forum upon which to build cosmopolitan worldviews and identities.

Ethnic identity and social action

Ethnicity is now viewed by insiders and others as cultural capital to mobilize in political struggles (McDonald, 1999). Ethnicity in this context is a mode of experience rather than a characteristic that individuals or groups possess. Ethnic identity, then, is forged in the interpretation of events and experiences that are part of postmodern social practices in changing communities. For example, ethnic identity searches in adolescence often arise from a critical life episode or encounter (Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993). A critical life episode may be one in which cross-cultural communication fails, or it may involve an act of racism (Bean, Readence, & Mallette, 1996). This critical life episode, or series of episodes, produces a feeling of disequilibrium (Wurzel, 1988). Previously held attitudes and beliefs about others and oneself are called into question. The Aboriginal teens in Melbourne, Australia, interviewed by McDonald, saw this move to reclaim identity amidst the past practices of assimilation as a matter of struggle. Older constructs where identity could be anchored to collective cultural

norms have been disrupted. For example, in the isolated Aboriginal community of Cape York in northern Queensland, Australia, teens sing along with Britney Spears and other pop-culture stars. Few places can avoid being influenced by the seductive semiotic images of corporate commodities. Thus, even in very isolated communities, being in the flow of pop culture matters to adolescents.

In summary, we found the following themes emerging from contemporary discussions of identity construction. First, identity is no longer anchored to stable employment, communities, or institutions. Rather, identity is constructed through the properties of individual action carried out—more often than not for urban teens—in nonplaces like malls, train stations, and airports. Identity is now a matter of self-construction amidst unstable times, mores, and global consumerism.

Similarly, ethnic identity is forged in the interpretation of events and experiences that are part of postmodern social practices in changing communities. Critical life episodes or encounters precipitate an examination of past beliefs and practices, often initiated by an act of racism and feelings of disequilibrium (Bean, 2001; Bean, et al., 1996; Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993; Wurzel, 1988).

In unstable postmodern times, macro- and microcultures flow into one another, connected through media images, the fluid yet fleeting spaces of electronic mail, and a concomitant feeling of temporary connection. In this gelatinous social context, the future is uncertain. Teens dial into this fluidity in a multitude of ways. Streetskaters navigate the concrete structures of urban spaces, rappers use in-your-face poses and lyrics to nail down a strong rhythmic vibe in this shifting arena, and everywhere people use technology to stay in the flow. In many ways the nostalgia for stable family life profiled in 1950s and 1960s television reveals how far removed we are from that world. Teens eat on the run, take care of themselves, and balance competing pressures of

school, community, family issues, and their own anxiety about who they are.

In the section that follows, we examine a recent Australian young adult novel through the lenses of identity theory and critical literacy related to applied critical discourse analysis. Each of these lenses offers instructional implications and pedagogical strategies for the critical examination of other novels and their relationship to the lives of contemporary adolescents.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989) offers a method for the critical examination of behind-the-scenes dimensions of text.

Theoretically, Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter CDA) assumes that social conditions, particularly conditions of unequal power relationships, determine the properties of discourse. For example, if a teenager is pulled over for a speeding ticket, actively arguing with the police officer issuing the ticket will accomplish little. The power in this dialogue rests with the authority figure of the police officer and uniform, although resistance is an option but one likely to have negative consequences. Thus, a second element of CDA is the fact that power is distributed unequally and alters language in social practice (e.g., tone, length of utterance).

Within an analysis of any printed or oral language text, CDA centers on discourse events and their power relations. CDA serves as a critical lens to interrogate a discourse and how it is shaped by looking at (a) *social determinants*—What power relations are operating and are they located primarily at situational (i.e., local), institutional, or societal levels? (b) *ideologies*—What ideologies are operating and how do these belief systems shape the discourse? and (c) *effects*—Does this discourse contribute to sustaining existing power relations? (Fairclough, 1989).

Critical literacy takes the reader beyond the bounds of reader response. As we are interested in

issues of contemporary teen identity construction in young adult novels, critical literacy offers a useful framework for our exploration of the novel *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* (Zusak, 2000). We offer a brief plot summary before sharing the critical literacy questions we use to help students in English and social studies explore identity construction in the novel.

Fighting Ruben Wolfe

Fighting Ruben Wolfe (Zusak, 2000) is a tight-knit, 156-page novel centered on an urban, working-class family and narrated from the point of view of Cameron Wolfe, the youngest brother in a family of four. Most of the novel revolves around his relationship with his slightly older brother, Ruben. Both boys attend the same high school. Their Dad, formerly a proud working plumber, has lost his job due to an industrial accident and must go on the dole (welfare). He is very depressed and their Mom attempts to keep things on an even keel by cleaning people's houses. Both brothers are accomplished backyard boxers, having fought together often for fun. As the novel unfolds, their sister Sarah is often drunk and carousing with various boys at school. Cameron and Ruben talk privately about their concern for Sarah in the room they share. The print in the novel changes to cursive writing for these private male conversations and marks the exclusion of this discourse of sensitivity and caring from their day-to-day encounters. Cameron, who narrates the novel, quotes Ruben: "If I hear someone sayin anything about her, I'm gonna nail em. I'm gonna kill em...and sure enough, he nearly does" (Zusak, 2000, p. 21). Indeed, that is the incident that sets the boys on a path to fighting illegal boxing matches on Sunday evenings in various warehouses and clandestine locations around the city. They elect to keep this a secret from their family and stash the money they earn in their room.

We are working people. Work. Laugh about it. We're survivors. We are wolves, which are wild dogs, and this is our place in the city. We are small and our

house is small on our small urban street. We can see the city and the train line and it's beautiful in its own dangerous way. Dangerous because it's shared and taken and fought for. (p. 23)

Dialogue and description in the novel are terse, mimicking the staccato punches of a fight. The book has a tough urban tone, balanced by a strong element of family love that contradicts easy stereotypes about tough youth. In one of their conversations before sleep, Ruben says, "See Cameron. The only things I care about in this life are me, you, Mum, Dad, Steve and Sarah...the rest of the world means nothing to me. The rest of the world can rot (p. 31)." Cameron responds, "Am I like that too?" And Ruben counters, saying, "'No way. And that's your problem. You care about everything.' He's right. I do" (p. 31). That scene establishes their contrasting identities—Ruben's tough exterior that drives him to win every fight he enters, under the name "Fighting Ruben Wolfe," and Cameron, constantly getting beaten, under the moniker "Underdog." They begin a tough training routine of running together early in the morning. In becoming fighters, they are social actors, forging identities of self-respect apart from school where they are treated as the underclass and their sister is called a slut.

Our throats suck in the winter breath of the city, and I imagine people still in bed, dreaming. To me, it feels good. Good city. Good world, with two wolves running through it, looking for the fresh meat of their lives. Chasing it. Chasing hard. (p. 49)

When they talk at night, they see themselves as having a purpose in life, in the urban flow, not just "out there doin nothin" (p. 50). Indeed, they have chosen boxing because one's identity is clearly on the line, all alone and as fleeting as the next fight. And as the novel and the fights progress, school and other worlds slip into the background. Girls are primarily groupies who come to watch them fight and pursue Ruben for brief interludes. They are largely faceless characters in a masculine novel. Ruben and Cameron

forge very different identities as fighters but manage to hang onto their brotherhood and strong family ties. In the end, they must fight each other in the ring and, under duress, they reveal this to their family.

Critical literacy and identity in the novel

The following discussion prompt categories adapted from Morgan (1998) serve as a framework for reading and discussing young adult novels, which we model in the following section.

- Structural prompts: Consider cultural and ideological power relations expressed in character identity (Nodelman, 1996).
- Subject and reader positioning: Acknowledges first, that novels are adult constructions portraying a particular view of adolescent identity that may have reference points in gender, ethnicity, urban or rural, and other contexts; and second, that the author has constructed an ideal reader for the novel and that readers may choose to accept or reject this positioning.
- Gaps and silences: Address voices and positions not included in the novel that may alter identity construction.
- Classroom transformations: Ask students to go beyond the novel to create alternative expressions of identity construction.

It is important to note that it may not be necessary to use all these prompts to engage students in a critical discussion of key aspects of a young adult novel. We recommend using these prompts as a guide and being selective in their use. Figure 1 provides examples of critical questions in each category.

The following responses represent classroom discussion composites of some of the ideas that emerged in constructing a reading of *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, scaffolded by critical literacy elements. Student responses are labeled S-1, S-2, and so on, to illustrate the flow of discussion.

Figure 1

Critical discussion prompts

Structural prompts

- Where does the novel come from? (its historical and cultural origin)
- What social function does the novel serve? (discourse in fictional worlds often mirrors and sheds light on power relationships in society)

Subject and reader positioning

- How does the adult author construct the world of adolescence in the novel?
- Who is the ideal reader for this novel?
- How far do you accept this positioning?
- What other positions might there be for reading this novel?

Gaps and silences

- Who gets to speak and have a voice in the novel and who doesn't?
- What is left out of the novel? (this may include events that take place outside of school)
- How else might these characters' stories be told?
- These characters inhabit certain places and spaces where they construct their identities. What alternative places and spaces could be sites for constructing identity?

Classroom transformations

- How might we rewrite this novel to deal with gaps and silences?

Subject and reader positioning

How does the author construct the world of adolescence in the novel?

S-1 (female): It's a tough, working-class world mostly made up of male views. The two brothers try to help out their dad who is out of work by boxing in illegal matches on the weekends.

S-2 (male): But Ruben and Cameron are both pretty sensitive. The print in the book changes at night when they have private conversations about their lives before going to sleep. I think it's a pretty accurate account of two guys who are tough on the surface but sensitive and troubled when they are alone.

S-1: Yeah, but they treat girls like window dressing! It's a guys' novel.

Gaps and silences

Who gets to speak or have a voice in the novel and who doesn't?

S-3 (female): It seems like the only woman who has a voice is their Mom when she discovers they are doing illegal boxing. She chews them out! Their dad is depressed all the time and really not much part of the story. Girls are shown as mindless groupies at the boxing matches, idolizing Ruben.

S-4 (male): But the novel is about Ruben and Cameron, not, men are like this, women are like that.

What is left out of the novel?

S-5 (male): School scenes are not there. Ruben fights in school but that's all we see of it.

No teachers or coaches, just Perry the illegal boxing promoter. In fact, it seems to me that most of the adults in the story are bumblers, or at least portrayed that way. These brothers only have each other for support.

Classroom transformations

How else might these characters' stories be told?

S-6 (male): Maybe set the novel in rural America rather than a city in Australia. In a small town, everything might be different. My family is from a small Utah dairy town where everyone knows each other and watches out for each other. These guys seem to be toughing it out in the big city with no support from their school or family.

S-7 (female): I would make the characters girls or at least give more power to women in the novel. As it is, they are almost invisible and I don't think this is accurate today. There are women surfers and boxers holding their own in those tough worlds.

Discussion

Posing discussion prompts and responding to young adult fiction in the model described above changes how literature is taught and discussed in the classroom. Critical literacy shifts the boundaries of discussion between teacher and students, changes relationships, and generates substantive conversations about texts. The texts themselves become manipulable, transparent constructions that can be accepted or rejected, and in which multiple meanings are explored. For example, literature becomes a representation of one worldview that may be questioned and for which alternatives may be provided. Activities that allow students to read from different positions, such as describing the family from Steve's perspective or from Sarah's perspective, allow the students to explore how different positions can influence a reading of the events described. Events in the novel can also be read from the perspective of traditional authority figures; for example, the

police in *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* are figures to be pitied and ridiculed:

I don't even hate cops. To tell you the truth, I actually feel a little sorry for them. Their hats. Wearing all that ridiculous cowboy gear around their waists. Having to look tough, yet friendly and approachable at the same time. Doing all those push-ups and sit-ups and chin-ups at the academy before they get a licence to eat donuts again. (p. 3)

Writing accounts or statements of events from the perspectives of the police allows students to challenge Cameron's views of the world. As an extension of this activity students can study counter-texts that offer a different view of Cameron and Ruben's world (Gold, 1998). For example, for older students, excerpts from the movie *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999) may provide an alternative perspective of the underworld in which the Wolfe brothers find themselves. Students can be empowered to connect the discourses of their worlds with those of literature through varied dimensions of response, using the texts of popular culture as analysis tools. Activities such as "Instant book" (Watson, 1998), developing a film script, and rewriting and resetting scenes within their own communities offer ways to creatively frame novel critiques.

Comparing and contrasting students' and characters' lives offers additional dynamic tension for discussion. Role-playing and drama activities compel students to consider aspects of the novel from different perspectives. For example, a role-play in which students conduct a public meeting about banning a book such as *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* makes students consider how different groups in a community might read the novel and, in turn, how such groups also position students based on their identity as adolescents and what they should be allowed to read or be protected from. *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* in particular lends itself to a talk-show format in which the Wolfe family may be subjected to a hostile audience and have to defend their actions and relationships with one another.

Activities such as those previously described let students focus on the decisions writers make in constructing their novels, on how language works, on lexical choice, and on how their own responses are shaped by these decisions. Perhaps more important, students develop an understanding that the worldview represented in a novel is not a "natural" one, and it can be challenged and actively resisted. Such analyses move beyond responses that are efferent and aesthetic to place the reader in a position of power in relation to texts.

Thus, the critical literacy questions we posed for the novel from a critical discourse model of teaching can scaffold vibrant discussions with many young adult novels. These questions can serve to guide discussions of other young adult novels with male or female main characters. In addition, they may be modified to fit the particular context and genre being considered (e.g., romance novel, play, television show).

In addition to the novel featured in this article, there is a growing body of excellent young adult fiction. We have listed some of these titles in Figure 2.

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Figure 2 Australian and American young adult novels

In addition to *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, we have found the following Australian and American young adult novels to be powerful identity quests that lend themselves to critical literacy discussions:

Australian Novels

- Earls, N. (1999). *48 shades of brown*. Camberwell, VIC, Australia: Penguin.
- Gwynne, P. (1998). *Deadly unna?* Camberwell, VIC, Australia: Penguin.
- Gwynne, P. (2000). *Nukkin ya*. Camberwell, VIC, Australia: Penguin.
- Marchetta, M. (1992). *Looking for Alibrandi*. Camberwell, VIC, Australia: Penguin.
- Moloney, J. (1997). *A Bridge to Wiseman's Cove*. Brisbane, QLD, Australia: University of Queensland Press.
- Zusak, M. (2001). *When dogs cry*. Sydney: Pan Macmillan.

American Novels

- Iida, D. (1996). *Middle son*. New York: Berkely.
- Klass, D. (1994). *California blue*. New York: Scholastic.
- Klass, D. (1996). *Danger zone*. New York: Scholastic.
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