

Citation

McLeod, C. A. (2008). Class discussions: Locating social class in novels for children and young adults. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 4(2), 73-79. Available: http://www.coe.uga.edu/jolle/2008_2/class.pdf

Class Discussions: Locating Social Class in Novels for Children and Young Adults

Cynthia Anne McLeod
 University of Georgia
camcleod@uga.edu

Few studies on representations of social class in children's literature have been published in the United States. As a language arts teacher and media specialist in a high poverty school, the author describes children's novels that directly address social class and the subtopic of the labor movement and consider the continued relevance of social class to educational research in the twenty-first century. Research that examines how children's novels address these issues will assist educators who want to engage students in dialogue about class inequality, past and present.

A seventh-grade boy whom I know to be an avid reader returns *The Breaker Boys*. Because it is one of several books about labor history in our school's media center collection, I ask, "What did you think about it?" "I liked it. Something about it reminded me of *The Outsiders*, but I don't know why." I am impressed and tell him so. I also tell him that I think I know why it reminds him of *The Outsiders* and that when he has time, we can talk about it. Later I hear that his family moved to another state not long after he returned his library book, and I am left to wonder what that next conversation might have included.

His casual remark had touched on the subject of my doctoral research in the field of children's literature, research that aims to fill a gap in existing scholarship. *The Breaker Boys* (Hughes, 2004), set in the late nineteenth century, opens as Nate Tanner is expelled from boarding school and sent home to his father and stepmother. There he finds friends among the young coal sorters who work for the coal company his family owns. He cannot tell them he is the son of the mine's owner, but inevitably his new friends find out. What this has to do with *The Outsiders*, written by 16-year-old S. E. Hinton in 1967 about teenage gangs in Oklahoma, is that the conflict in each of these novels concerns the issue of social class.

I am not surprised that this theme of social class was something a seventh grader could not name; many adults would be hard pressed to acknowledge the presence of social class in a young adult novel, even though the topic is part of the curriculum in many disciplines, including the study of children's literature. Race, class, and gender studies provide means by which to critique cultures and their artifacts and to identify sites of resistance to the dominant culture. These three terms, "race," "class," and "gender," are linked so frequently that it is easy to miss how often the first and third are addressed while the second area, class, receives far less attention. Feminism (Christensen, 1991; Christian-Smith, 1993; Ernst, 1995; Paul, 1996; Segel, 1986; Zipes, 1987) and critical race theory (Harris, 1999; Kohl, 1995; MacCann, 1998; Sims Bishop, 1982, 2007)

examine power relations in books for children and consider how these might shape developing conceptions of identity. However, few studies describe how social class is represented in books for children. When I entered the doctoral program in children's literature, a personal interest in labor history led me to seek out research that would help me better understand the broader issue of social class as depicted in books for children. I was surprised to discover almost no such studies had been published in the United States. To my mind, class is as certain to be inscribed in a text as are race and gender. The ways in which authors depict characters' economic and social circumstances are not always explicit, but they are worthy of scrutiny.

For this scrutiny to take place, practitioners and academics must recognize and acknowledge the presence of social class within texts. My experiences as a lifelong reader, a teacher-librarian in a high-poverty school, and as a graduate student in children's literature led me to awareness of this issue. Here I describe some of those experiences, offer examples of children's books that could be used to initiate discussions of social class in schools and universities, and suggest that researchers in the field of children's literature turn attention to social class to better understand how books about social and economic inequities offer ways in which teachers and students may consider the historical and contemporary role of social class.

Social Class, the Labor Movement, and Children's Fiction

A humanities professor I know once expressed surprise that I was researching representations of class in children's literature. "I wouldn't think social class would even be in children's books," he told me, "It's such a conservative genre." Social class is there, I told him. It is everywhere within these books, and it always has been. When I was the same age as that seventh-grader who read *The Breaker Boys*, among my favorite books were old, tattered copies of *Five Little Peppers and How They Grew* (Sidney, 1881/1938) and *An Old Fashioned Girl* (Alcott, 1869/1928), books I found in my grandparents' attic. The depictions of poverty I glimpsed within their brittle pages romanticized the struggles of the poor, emphasizing their cheerful perseverance in the face of difficulty and down-to-earth wisdom envied by their wealthier friends. These images of the lives of the poor bore little resemblance to the grittier depictions of working class life my students would read many years later. Yet they represented a view of social class just as surely as those later books would. While my friend was correct in assuming that class was not often an explicit theme in children's novels, he did not take into account its inevitable presence in writers' descriptions of characters' circumstances and relationships.

When my seventh-grade language arts class read the 1977 Newbery Medal winner, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976), set in Mississippi during the Great Depression, they did not miss the irony that our copies of the novel, which included extensive descriptions of the poor conditions in the segregated African American school, were old paperbacks with missing pages. (Thankfully, these have since been replaced with new books.) We discussed the fact that the Logans, the African American family who are the main characters, owned their own farm which meant that even during difficult economic times, they were better off than their neighbors who were sharecroppers. Some were surprised that the Logans were landowners while others assumed that anyone living in a rural area would have owned their own property. By calling attention to the commonalities between their own school's lack of resources and those in segregated schools, students made a connection between their own lives and the African American characters in the story. Many of the students in my school also live in homes that their

parents or grandparents rent from landlords. They often move from one school within the district to another, as their families search for housing they can more easily afford. The advantages homeowners or landowners have are ones they can grasp. In this way a novel often used to engage students in discussions of race relations also called attention to the role class played in both the African American community and society at large during the Depression. Students who enjoyed *Roll of Thunder* went on to read the sequel, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (Taylor, 1981). That novel's climactic scene is a devastating depiction of the use of race as a wedge to drive apart those who had been considering an integrated Farm Workers' Union, which would have threatened the local power structure. While race remained the dominant theme of the sequel, the struggle between the poor sharecroppers, both White and Black, and the owners of the large farms on which they worked foregrounded class conflict as well.

Since the publication of *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* over two decades ago, a number of novels about the American labor movement have been published. One that has proven popular with students and teachers at my school is *Esperanza Rising* (Muñoz Ryan, 2000), winner of the Pura Belpré award in 2002. Esperanza and her mother flee Mexico after her father is murdered in the 1930s. With the help of their former servants, they find jobs at a migrant farm workers' camp in California. When some workers attempt to unionize, Esperanza witnesses their round-up by *la migra*. Muñoz Ryan tells of the deportation to Mexico of workers whose employers found them troublesome, including some who were born in the United States, shedding light on a largely forgotten chapter of American history. Its Latino perspective is particularly topical, as many communities including my own are experiencing significant increases in their numbers of Spanish-speaking students.

The following are other examples of novels about social class and/or labor which could be used to invite discussion among upper elementary or middle school students:

Tangerine, by Edward Bloor (1997). Although Paul is legally blind, he is an outstanding soccer player whose performance is overshadowed by that of his older brother Erik, a star football player. When Paul transfers to a school whose students are working class, he finds friends among a group of predominantly Latino soccer players. The themes of social class and race are dominant, with stark contrast between the sterile upper-class suburb in which Paul's family lives and the rough but nurturing atmosphere of his friends' neighborhood.

Uprising, by Margaret Peterson Haddix (2007). The story of the Triangle Factory fire that killed 146 workers in New York in 1911 is told through the perspectives of two girls employed at the factory and another from an upper class family who had joined the 1909 protests of working conditions experienced by the city's garment workers. Haddix is unsparing in her description of the tragedy and integrates social critique into a fascinating narrative.

Princess Academy, by Shannon Hale (2005). After the king's advisors prophesy that the next queen will come from a poor, remote mining village, all those girls of marriageable age are enrolled in an academy aimed at instilling in them the graces befitting a future queen. The heroine ultimately uses her newfound knowledge to end the economic exploitation of her village. Education, gender, social class, and economic issues are tightly packaged into an entertaining fantasy about a small girl who may or may not even want to be a princess.

Kira-kira, by Cynthia Kadohata (2004). Few realize today that during the 1950s and 1960s, many Japanese immigrants moved to the southern United States to work in poultry processing plants. Told from the point of the view of the younger daughter, much of the story revolves around her relationship her older sister who is critically ill with leukemia. When union organizers, citing dangerous and degrading working conditions within the plants, attempt to

unionize poultry workers, the parents are initially fearful of losing their jobs and reluctant to vote for the union. Later, emboldened by grief, they each take a stand against the company which has exploited them and their co-workers.

Lyddie and *Bread and Roses, Too*, by Katherine Paterson (1991, 2006). *Lyddie*, the first of Paterson's two novels about the labor movement, is about a fourteen-year-old who working in the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, to pay her impoverished family's debts. The young women of the Lowell mills were among the first Americans to engage in what they called a "turn-out," or strike. Paterson's second novel about labor, *Bread and Roses, Too* is a fictionalized story of the derivation of the phrase that would come to name the 1912 Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile strike.

The Continued Relevance of Class

Novels such as these create opportunities for students to consider how class, in combination with race and gender, has played out historically in American society and the role it continues to play. Novels that focus on class issues can help initiate dialogues that are long overdue. They also provide a wealth of material for analysis by scholars of children's literature. As an educator, I want more conversations about these books, conversations that take place in classrooms, but also in academic journals devoted to the study of children's books. Just as studies of race and gender have guided practitioners in their understanding and use of children's books related to those topics, studies that explore social class can inform the decisions teachers and media specialists make in selecting books that are culturally relevant to students in their communities. Research can offer rich descriptions of some of the conversations about class that are already taking place in schools today. Why, then, have so few academics taken up the topic?

Earlier this year I attended a session in which professors and graduate students presented their work on race and class at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Three young women (Stricker, Nunez, & Konkoi, 2008) had just shared their critique of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Payne & Krabill, 2002), a popular and controversial book purporting to describe a "culture of poverty" that prevents poor students from achieving academically. I was surprised to hear a member of the audience argue that discussions of class distracted from more important discussions of race, but I was stunned when the session moderator then asked whether in a postindustrial economy, class was even a useful descriptor. Such comments imply that consideration of social issues is a zero sum game in which attention paid in one area means less attention to another and suggest that class analysis is obsolete in any case.

Fortunately, other members of the audience explained why they considered the issue relevant - namely, the growing disparity in income between the rich and the poor in the United States and the implications of this gap for people who care about the future of public schools. Also, race, class, and gender are inextricably linked, with women and people of color bearing the brunt of poverty, raising the impossibility of talking about race and gender while ignoring the issue of social class.

I was reassured to hear others attest to the value of paying attention to what I thought was a fascinating issue, but at the same time I realized that I had just seen how easily social class might slip away from public discussion. Recent events, however, have reminded people of the importance of social class, as images of Hurricane Katrina devastating poor neighborhoods of New Orleans in 2005, extensive coverage of the mortgage-backed securities crisis, and general

concerns about a troubled economy have managed to break through a superficial popular discourse that too often serves to distract or to entertain, rather than to inform.

The increasing gap between rich and poor in the United States (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2008) cited by my fellow conference attendees at AERA suggests that the lens of class remains relevant to educational research. Gorski (2008) and Berliner (2005) argue that the extreme vulnerability of the poor to societal problems such as lack of health care and affordable housing prevents many children from achieving in school. One suggestion (Gorski, 2008) is for teachers to provide instruction that specifically addresses historical and contemporary class inequities and movements that have attempted to alleviate them, including the labor movement. Children's books addressing social class are one means of offering such instruction. Discussions about the role class plays in American society, particularly as it intersects with race and gender, are critical to recognizing the extent to which the playing field remains unequal. When children's novels address these issues, it is important to examine their messages and to reflect on their implications. Such studies can assist in the development of a language that speaks to class inequality, past and present.

Cynthia Anne McLeod is a media specialist at Burney-Harris-Lyons Middle School in Athens, Georgia, and a doctoral student in children's literature at the University of Georgia. She completed her B.S. Ed. at the University of Georgia and M. Ed. at the University of West Georgia.

References

- Berliner, D.C. (2005). Our impoverished view of school reform. *Teachers College Record*, August 2, 2005. Retrieved June 12, 2008, from <http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=12106>
- Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (2008). Income inequality grew in most states over the last two decades. Retrieved April 15, 2008, from <http://www.cbpp.org/4-9-08sfp-pr.htm>
- Christensen, L. M. (1991). Unlearning the myths that bind us. *Rethinking Schools*, 5, 15-17.
- Christian-Smith, L.K. (1993). Sweet dreams: Gender and desire in teen romance novels. In L.K. Christian-Smith (Ed.), *Texts or desire: Essays on fiction, femininity, and schooling* (pp. 45-66). London: Falmer.
- Ernst, S. B. (1995). Gender issues in books for children and young adults. In S. Lehr (Ed.), *Battling dragons: Issues and controversy in children's literature* (pp. 66-77). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gorski, P. (2008). The myth of the "culture of poverty." *Poverty & Learning*, 65 (7), 32-36.
- Harris, V. (1999). Applying critical theories to children's literature. *Theory into Practice*, 38, 147-154.
- Kohl, H. (1995). The story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott revisited. In *Should we burn Babar? Essays on children's literature and the power of stories* (pp. 30-56). New York: New Press.
- MacCann, D. (1998). *White supremacy in children's literature: Characterizations of African-Americans, 1830-1900*. New York: Garland.
- Paul, L. (1996). Feminist criticism: From sex-role stereotyping to subjectivity. In P. Hunt (Ed.), *International companion encyclopedia of children's literature* (pp. 101-112). London: Routledge.
- Payne, R. K. & Krabill, D.L. (2002). *A framework for understanding poverty*. Highlands, TX: aha! Process, Inc.
- Segel, E. (1986). "As the twig is bent...": Gender and childhood reading. In F. Flynn and E. Schweickwalt (Eds.), *Gender and reading* (pp. 165-186). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press. Council of Teachers of English.
- Sims, R. (1982). *Shadow & substance: Afro-American experience in contemporary children's literature*. Urbana, IL: National
- Sims Bishop, R. (2007). *Free within ourselves: The development of African-American children's literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Stricker, K.J., Nunez, I. & Konkoi, P.J. (2008). *Payne's misframing: Why understanding social class requires autobiographical reflection*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, NY.
- Zipes, J. (1987). A second gaze at Little Red Riding Hood's trials and tribulations. In J. Zipes (Ed.), *Don't bet on the prince: Contemporary feminist fairy tales in North America and England* (pp. 227-260). New York: Routledge.

Children's Novels Cited

- Alcott, L.M (1869/1928). *An old-fashioned girl*. Akron, OH: Saalfield.
- Bloor, E. (1997). *Tangerine*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.

- Haddix, M.P. (2007). *Uprising*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Hale, S. (2005). *Princess academy*. New York: Scholastic.
- Hinton, S.E. (1967). *The outsiders*. New York: Penguin Putnam.
- Hughes, P. (2004). *The breaker boys*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Kadohata, C. (2004). *Kira-kira*. New York: Scholastic.
- Muñoz Ryan, P. (2000). *Esperanza rising*. New York: Scholastic.
- Paterson, K. (1991). *Lyddie*. New York: Penguin.
- Paterson, K. (2006). *Bread and roses, too*. New York: Clarion.
- Sidney, M. (1881/1938). *Five little Peppers and how they grew*. Akron, OH: Saalfield
- Taylor, M. (1976). *Roll of thunder, hear my cry*. New York: Dial.
- Taylor, M. (1981). *Let the circle be unbroken*. New York: Puffin.