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METHODS

Literature Circles: Utilizing Chris Crutcher to Empower Youth

CRAG HILL

Adolescence as a category is fraught with peril. For every criterion we put forward as one of the defining characteristics—the rage of hormones is the scourge of youth—we can point to a group of young people whose bodies are producing hormones at a prolific rate but whose internal lives have not been demonstrably disturbed by the biological processes they are undergoing, and whose external, social lives play out with few glitches. For every young man or woman told that it is time to act as a responsible adult, meeting one's obligations at home, school, and work in a timely manner, there are many more who are functioning as adults already, some not only taking care of themselves but also others. For every teenager swayed by his or her peers to make a poor choice, there are others who make decisions on their own terms, declining to do something they are not comfortable doing. Though some adolescents may “live up” to the prevailing negative stereotypes, many youths blur—or even erase—the adolescent/adult binary, inhabiting the same adult spaces as their elders.

As a social construction (Finders, 1999; Lesko, 2001; Lewis & Petrone, 2010; Petrone, Sarigianides, & Lewis, 2015; Vadeboncoeur, 2004), the concept of adolescence may reduce the varied, multilayered lives of young people to essentialized variables, denying adolescents any diversity (Finders, 1999), positioning adults—parents, teachers, and other authority figures—as superior to youth. Parents and teachers possess the power to control the discourse of adulthood at home and in classrooms, allowing adolescents to apprentice within their constraints and to learn what is best for them. As Lesko (2001) argues, “To be fully under the influence of others implies that adolescents are not fully autonomous, rational, or determining” (p. 4). This positioning of the adolescent/adult binary, has profound repercussions, constricting the possible give-and-take flow between adolescents and adults in schools and in the larger community.

It is time, then, to expose the machinations behind these positions, first by marking some of the common assumptions about youth. Lesko (2001) identifies four “confident characterizations” that dominate the discourse around adolescence: 1) adolescents are in the process of coming of age; 2) adolescents are ruled by biological factors beyond their control; 3) adolescents predominantly make decisions based on peer-pressure; and, ultimately, 4) adolescents are signified by their age, teenagers acting like teenagers. To these we add the current characterization that youth are captives of technology, residing more in social media than lived communities, unequipped to complete complex tasks. If received as indisputable facts, these characterizations reduce the potential for adults to engage in dialogue with youth so that both have the space to locate and resist the dominant discourses and together find ways to counteract them.

In this article, I suggest a two-week literature circles study of four Chris Crutcher novels, by the end of which students may gain a grasp of the terms that pigeonhole them and begin to look for ways to undo these entrenched narratives independently or in concert with adults. Crutcher, among many other contemporary YA authors, creates characters that buck the dominant characterizations of adolescence. His work, I will show, can be a useful vehicle through which to introduce the youth lens to high school students, who could gain agency by applying its critical vision to their lives in and out of school.

Adolescence as Constructed in YA Literature

Included in required courses for those seeking certification in teaching English Language Arts, young adult (YA) literature has become a fixture in middle schools, reading groups, and bookstores. Recently, many YA novels have been adapted into films, some with blockbuster successes, such as the first two installments of *The Hunger Games* trilogy and John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*. Now occupying a wider cultural field, YA literature has arguably earned a larger sphere of

influence than perhaps ever before (Campbell, 2010; Cart, 2004). But what has it done with that influence? In terms of the understanding and reception of youth in and out of schools, has YA literature foregrounded or blurred the widespread assumptions about adolescence? If YA novels are filled with troubled teenagers, youth as “stock characters in popular narratives...of instability, emotionality, present-centeredness, and irresponsibility” (Lesko, 2001, p. 1), does YA literature contribute to the marginalization of youth?

Trites (2000) argues that “adolescent literature itself serves as a discourse of institutional socialization” (p. 22). As “an institution that participates in the social construction of the adolescent as someone who must be repressed for the greater good” (p. 83), YA literature represents adolescence as a time for youth to push back the boundaries of behavior imposed on them, but only as long as they come back into the fold of conventional behavior. Youth are less encouraged to break the mold, Trites suggests, than to accept their place within it. Lewis and Durand (2014) problematize YA literature by pointing out that “representations of youth in YA literature may not be necessarily accurate because authors create adolescent characters that are either based on their own memories of adolescence or on their commonsensical understandings of the adolescent experience” (p. 51). Despite the author’s best intentions, youth are unable to participate in the construction of narratives that may (mis)represent them.

But there may also be ways in which YA literature can deconstruct this discourse, especially when it is examined in the critical space of a classroom. Explicit discussion of YA literature can scrutinize whether YA literature “redefine[s] adolescence (no longer as opposite to adults) and...advocate[s] for adolescents in different ways” (Petroni & Lewis, 2012, p. 283), whether YA literature “as a whole help[s] to constitute the known and knowable adolescent” (p. 283), or whether it perpetuates the controlling definitions of youth.

Sarigianides (2012), in course work she has developed for pre-service teachers, has sought ways to insure that the study of YA literature does not “become a mirror for reproducing anticipated teen angst” (p. 224), posing the question teachers who incorporate YA literature into their classrooms should be asking: “As a body of literature marketed and marked for a specific audience, young adults, how do such texts represent young people?” (p. 225). In a high school and/or university setting, then, the driving questions for study of YA literature could be: How have YA authors, especially critically-acclaimed authors like Chris Crutcher, constructed adolescence

in their novels, and how might these novels then provide for dialogue about these representations of adolescence?

Resisting Stereotypes: Youth in Levithan, Johnson, and Crutcher Novels

Many teachers claim that YA literature offers adolescents not only a mirror to hold up to their experiences, but also a window through which to view the positive and negative experiences of others—a place to imagine, to empathize, to learn different ways to live a life (Parsons & Rietschlin, 2014). Adolescents are not yet fully equipped to negotiate the adult world, and thus their apprenticeship should be guided and ongoing. If an adolescent is pressured by family, school, or community to conform to normative notions of adolescence, then perhaps YA novels such as David Levithan’s *The Realm of Possibility* (2004), Angela Johnson’s *The First Part Last* (2003), and many of Chris Crutcher’s novels, among other contemporary YA novels that do not replicate stereotypes about adolescence, could provide adolescent readers with a non-normative view while also offering adult readers a new paradigm of adolescence.

In *The Realm of Possibility*, Levithan’s strategy is to paint a multifaceted portrait of adolescents through the subjectivities of 20 teenagers in and out of school, in love, in pain, navigating difficult relationships, interrogating their sense of self, and making decisions that matter in the short- and long-term. *The Realm of Possibility* is a prime example of YA fiction depicting adolescence in all the diversity and complexity that Finder (1999) argues for. Johnson’s *The First Part Last* contests many stereotypes, including the view that black males will not take responsibility for the children they father. Even more importantly, the novel shows that no one, no matter what age, can be fully prepared to be a parent. Like teaching, parenting is an ongoing learning process, which involves unanticipated problems and unforeseen joys. Bobby makes mistakes as a new parent, but ultimately he is a fit parent, taking on adult responsibilities, deciding to do not what is best for him but what is best for his family.

Chris Crutcher’s body of work from *Running Loose* (1983) to *Period 8* (2013) may best present readers with a nuanced, productive view of relationships between youth and adults. Crutcher doesn’t buy into the YA literature trope that coming of age is the flipping of a before-after switch. He demonstrates that becoming is an ongoing process for both youth and adults (his adults are still becoming and are in many cases more unsettled than the youth). Crutcher also

troubles the notion that youth are peer-oriented, victims of peer-pressure. His teenaged protagonists are anything but. In many YA novels, readers are conscious of the character's age—characters wear it on their sleeves, state it, and adults expect them to behave it—but one often forgets the character's age in a Crutcher novel; their age is not what defines them. Further, Crutcher often makes fun of the stereotypes we possess about youth. In a discussion in *Period 8* about how men and women may be wired differently and that teenagers' brains are still forming, one character quips, "Man, if I had to operate in this confusion the rest of my life, I'd take drugs" (p. 26).

Crutcher's novels afford students, teachers, and parents the counter-examples to the prevalent discourses on adolescence. Youth in Crutcher's novels are capable people in their own right. Eschewing the narrowing lens of this discourse, Crutcher has not lost sight of the complexity of individual experiences, nor does he view the function of the teenage years as the "maintenance of adolescence as a period of incompetence" (Finders, 1999, p. 258).

In many of his novels, the protagonist has earned the mutual respect of adults. Louie in *Running Loose* (1983) is treated as an adult, trusted by his parents. Mobe in *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (1993) is not a child-becoming-an-adult; his mother expects him to act as an adult, as does his Contemporary Issues teacher, Ms. Lemry. Like an adult, Mobe acts to benefit others, even risking his own best interest. He did what was within his power to help Sarah in junior high—"I stayed fat a whole year for [Sarah]" (p. 7), and he sticks by her side senior year when she is institutionalized. In *Deadline* (2007), Ben, the 18-year-old protagonist, makes the most important decision any of us will ever have to make: how to deal with a terminal illness. He withholds his diagnosis from his brother and parents, as is his legal right, determined to handle it on his own terms. We could argue that he might have handled it so his family did not get hurt, but no one can argue that Ben did not own this decision.

Crutcher's characters are autonomous and rational, "all of which," Lesko (2001) argues, "are valued characteristics for successful, modern adults" (p. 4). The adults Crutcher's characters associate with offer advice derived from decades of experience, but few of them patronize the youth. The proffered wisdom includes an implied "it's your life, it's your decision" ethos. Many adults are straight-talking. Logs, in *Period 8* (2013), tells the group of students who meet in his classroom at lunch,

"I'm an old guy and you guys are young...But we have one common reference point: we're all as old as we've ever been. We all have history, and a future.

History is known, the future not so much. My history is longer and hopefully my future shorter than yours. But we have the same challenge: to view what has happened to us in a way that influences what will happen" (p. 20).

He and his students are on shared footing, a site on which authentic intergenerational dialogue can occur.

Youth Study Through Four Crutcher Novels

If some adult views may be an obstacle to dialogic relationships between adults and youth, the classroom may be a productive space to reset the conversations youth and adults engage in. Studying literature through the youth lens may help students identify the current norms about youth. As a result of such study, students may be able to begin to build venues within which they can advocate for themselves, bringing to the surface ways to tip the discourse in their direction.

Toward this end, I suggest a two-week unit at the beginning of the year in a high school English Language Arts course (or, as I have done, in a graduate YA literature class) to open the inquiry around prevalent discourses concerning adolescence. Studying four Crutcher novels can



Young Woman Drawing, Marie-Denise Villers

be one place to start to “consider how this category of [adolescent] experience is more socially constructed than biologically inevitable” (Sarigianides, 2012, p. 225), perhaps fostering the deconstruction of such discourse within and beyond the classroom. Through a collaborative inquiry of Crutcher’s narratives, parsing the models of the youth and adults populating his stories, students can map out the adolescent/adult framework.

Unit Outline

1. To start, ask students to list the assumptions commonly held about youth. The traits my graduate students enumerated included challenging authority; cursing; self-centeredness; risk-taking behaviors; experimentation with drugs and alcohol; fixation on sexual activity; reckless driving; peers more important than parents; and living in the present, with little or no vision of the future.

2. Ask students in pairs to discuss what elements of our culture reinforce these assumptions. What roles do peers, parents, schools, and popular media take in constructing and promoting these “truths”? My students believed that peers and popular media, especially music, held considerable power in reinforcing these negative perceptions. They also mentioned that parents who are physically or emotionally absent make it difficult for adolescents to take charge of their own lives. One student also argued that overbearing parents may not allow the kind of open dialogue needed to challenge these beliefs. “Adolescence” she wrote, “isn’t always the best time to have parents as the only sounding board in your life.” It is important that youth have the opportunity to talk to peers and adults about what it means to grow up.

3. As a class, decide on 3-5 of the most predominant traits, and then interrogate the forces that hold these traits in place. For example, what factors contribute to the assumption that youth are influenced primarily by their peers, are self-centered, and live only in the crucible of the present? In what ways do Facebook and other social media reinforce or resist these stereotypes? Who holds the power in these views and what do they gain? My students, several of them parents of adolescents, were most interested in discussing the kinds of relationships students can have with adults—parents, teachers, coaches—that can help counter these assumptions. Relationships that involved mutual respect, they argued, hold the most promise to undermine common negative assumptions about youth.

4. For the next two classes have students bring in excerpts from books, clips from movies and music, or examples from other sources that either reinforce the problematic social constructions or provide counter-examples that show youth not in a stage of incompetence but as valuable contributors to the world on their own terms. My students pointed to other novels we studied—*Eleanor and Park* (2013), *Page by Page* (2011), and *Aristotle & Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012), all novels with competent characters working hard to engage constructively with their worlds.

5. Read the book excerpts, view the film clips, and listen to the music selections. Are there more examples that bolster harmful assumptions? If so, why? What stake do the writers, filmmakers, and musicians have in these positions? Who wields power and why? For the counter-examples, discuss whether or not they have something in common, e.g. in what ways are youth depicted positively? My students observed that in the novels they cited as counter-examples there was no hierarchy between youth and adults. Characters young and old were on the same level playing field.

6. Looking closely at these samples, are there negative forces that can be exposed and/or positive forces that can be marshaled to push back at the dominant discourse? What roles are schools playing? What avenues in the community are available for youth to enhance their independence? What can be done to bring these counter-examples into greater play? My students felt that more adults needed to be exposed to the youth lens. We have an awareness of racism and sexism, but we do not talk about discriminating against youth.

7. Book talk four Crutcher novels—*Running Loose*, *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, *Deadline*, and *Period 8*, allowing students to self-select the novel they will study.

8. For the next two weeks, ask students to read the novel they chose, and in their literature circle groups discuss the depiction of youth and adults, collecting evidence of assumptions reinforced or dismantled. Throughout, ask students to connect instances in the novels with the examples collected earlier in the unit.

9. At the end of the unit, as a class, brainstorm action plans to move the discussion of established norms of adolescence into the open. One possible plan my students suggested could include a study group for students, teachers, and administrators to explore and discuss youth studies literature and the depiction of youth in film and other popular media. This study group, they argued, could then brainstorm some ways the school community could open up dialogue between youth and adults to break down the binary. One student, a

father of an adolescent, chose to create a plan in which he and his daughter would spend time discussing songs, television shows, and movies, selected by his daughter, interrogating them for the stereotypes about adolescents they reinforce and resist.

Conclusion

For my graduate students, the study of the youth lens through the novels of Chris Crutcher and other YA authors was revelatory, giving them the language to locate and work against the received “truths” about youth. Similarly, this unit could begin to give youth the language to talk back to the dominant discourse. When they can recognize it in YA literature and in other media, they can recognize it in their lives, and they can seek strategies to minimize or eliminate the forces that box them in. Whenever they hear comments such as “that hormonal eighth-grader,” they will be equipped to name—and push back at—what they are hearing: the destructive assumption that all adolescents are victims of their own biology.

In schools and beyond, it is long overdue to shed the limiting conception that youth are in a state of becoming, mired in incompetence, and that adults must show them how to advance from life stage to life stage. Youth may be in the process of acquiring the kinds of skills with which they will navigate their future lives, but as Logs in *Period 8* might put it, youth and adults share the same challenge: making sense of what has happened to us in a way that benefits what will happen to us in the future. Let’s find ways to do this in concert.

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