

Teaching Critical Literacy with Challenged and Controversial Books

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Abstract

This article explores the benefits and problems of teaching with challenged books in the English language arts classroom. Challenged books initiate important discussions and provide opportunities for students to explore diverse perspectives. Methods for helping teachers and schools prepare for potential challenges are also discussed. The authors present three young adult novels and offer strategies for teaching these novels through a critical lens.

Keywords: *critical literacy, banned books, book challenges, teaching young adult literature*

Given recent social trends to challenge books in school libraries, teacher educators must prepare future teachers for possible backlash over book choices that may be viewed as controversial by parents and community members. In some states, books by Black American authors have been pulled from school library shelves for suspected Critical Race Theory indoctrination (Bellamy-Walker, 2022). The American Library Association (ALA), which tracks book challenges in the US, recorded 729 book challenges targeting 1,597 titles in 2021, more than double 2020's figures (VanDenburgh, 2022). According to the American Library Association (ALA.org), only a few hundred

books were challenged each year between 2000 and 2020.

In the state of Texas, lawmaker Matt Krause created a list of books that “could make students feel uneasy” (Chappell, 2021). Most of these books are young adult novels with LGBTQ characters and related themes. In Katy, Texas, a suburb of Houston, parents requested specific books be removed from middle and high school libraries because parents believed these books promoted critical race theory and Marxism, and/or addressed issues of gender identity and sexuality (Dellinger, 2021).

Organizations such as ALA (American Library Association) and NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) recognize the issues teachers may face when choosing books and materials for multicultural classes. For example, NCTE's position statement Guidelines for Dealing with Censorship of Instructional Materials (2018) states, "These are complex challenges that require recognizing the needs of students, the responsibilities that educators hold in day-to-day contexts, and the considerations of power and positionality of adults working with historically marginalized students of diverse cultures and creeds." NCTE's guidelines recognize the ways that teachers are attacked directly or indirectly, which includes teachers' decisions to self-censor to avoid controversy. NCTE offers strategies and lesson plans intended to support teachers interested in applying critical literacy by interrogating racism and sexism through discussions of gender identity or race (Burke & Greenfield, 2016; NCTE.org).

This paper includes guidelines for middle and secondary teachers to plan and respond to challenges to young adult literature. Three recently challenged young adult books, *New Kid* (Craft, 2019), *Girl Mans Up* (Girard, 2016), and *Quinceañera* (Stavans, 2010) will be analyzed for their literary and educational value, along with reasons for previous challenges. Additionally, the authors present examples of activities and methods for teaching these books in a language arts classroom.

The Politics of Book Challenges: Teacher Preparation

Books are banned or challenged in public school libraries for a variety of reasons, and teachers should be prepared to face such challenges. Many public school districts have book selection procedures, so teachers should first consult with their department chair or administrator about the procedures before choosing a young adult book if it has not been taught previously. School districts usually have procedures in place for

book challenges, so teachers should familiarize themselves with these.

Along with NCTE, ALA publishes guidelines and advice for teachers when responding to book challenges. If a book has already been approved, and it is challenged by parents, teachers should take notes on how well the administration and school board follow district procedures. Knowledge of the procedures will help guard against any discrimination or retaliation against individual teachers (ALA.org).

Texas teachers should document reasons for teaching individual novels that contain any material about sexual identity or race. Citing the Texas state English Language Arts standards concerning the requirements for analyzing the cultural contexts and authors' intentions of literature may be helpful. Although it is difficult to predict which books will produce challenges, teachers should collaborate by writing form letters or other documents that describe important themes and messages in books chosen for the classroom. In this way, teachers and administrators will already have prepared, official documents for parents (NCTE, 2018).

Teaching about Race in *New Kid*

New Kid by Jerry Craft, the first graphic novel to win the Newbery Award (2020), visually narrates the experiences of middle school student Jordan Banks as he acclimates to life in a new, prestigious school. Starting a new school is never stress-free for young adults, and Jordan's challenges are complicated by his race. Jordan is one of the few students of color attending the selective school.

Themes For Class Discussion

The class discussion could focus on themes of identity, discrimination, and friendship. Insensitivities to students' economic class and race are two central themes in the novel that should also be addressed to encourage cultural sensitivity. These themes are presented through

visual and verbal humor through the lens of Jordan Banks.

Class Activities and Assignments

Setting the tone for a new school year is important, and students need to feel welcomed into the classroom. Reading *New Kid* (Craft, 2019) with students would work well to engage the class in discussing or writing about goals and concerns for the new year. The visuals and humor may also incite reluctant readers to actively participate. Students could also learn about graphic design, and then create their own graphic novels or comic strips. Guest speakers, such as the art teacher or a local graphic designer, would add to students' interest in *New Kid*.

Teachers who are comfortable discussing critical issues, such as discrimination or gender identity, could encourage students to question cultural constructions of race and culture that emerge throughout the book. After a discussion of Jordan Banks's identity exploration in *New Kid*, the students could also share personal stories through journal or narrative writing assignments.

Sections of the book would also work well for Readers Theatre, for example, the first day of school when Jordan meets some of his new classmates or the scene in which Jordan confronts a school bully in chapter 12. *New Kid* (Craft, 2019) has many possibilities for active reading and discussion. The Texas state education standards for Middle School English Language Arts include recommendations for teaching students to analyze the author's purpose and theme (TEA).

Teaching Gender Identity in *Girl Mans Up*

Girl Mans Up by M. E. Girard (2016) is a novel about a gender-nonconforming girl named Pen, who struggles to find her identity and place in the world as she faces pressure from her traditional Portuguese parents to conform to gender norms. As Pen navigates the complexities of high school and family

expectations, she learns to embrace her true self and stand up for herself and her friends.

Themes for Class Discussion

Although the book is an honest portrayal of a nonconforming character, it is often banned or challenged because of the themes of gender dysphoria and lesbian sexuality. LGBTQ young adults, often bullied, are especially at high risk for depression and suicide (Barton, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2019). Researchers have recommended that students who read about LGBTQ characters improve their sensitivity and understanding of classmates' gender identities (Bean, et al., 2014; Christenbury & Lindblom, 2016). Teachers can make a difference in students' lives by modeling acceptance of LGBTQ and gender-nonconforming students (Hazlett & Smith, 2020). Recommended for high school students, *Girl Mans Up* (Girard, 2016) could be used in the classroom to discuss themes of friendship, gender identity, and family relationships. Pen's struggles to maintain authentic friendships while coping with abuse from parents and classmates could lead to small group or whole class conversations about identity, friendship, and bullying.

Reading LGBTQ-themed Young Adult literature can foster positive feelings and generate empathy, curiosity, and connection among middle and high school readers. For LGBTQ+ students, seeing themselves in literature is essential for healthy identity development (Batchelor et al., 2017). Students frequently model their lives after personalities they encounter through reading and viewing. Discussions about LGBTQ+ characters can empower young adults to embrace their true selves and stand up against societal pressure, promoting empathy and inclusivity for queer and culturally diverse individuals. The themes and issues presented in the book offer chances for students to discuss meaningful issues through a critical lens.

Teachers who may feel uncomfortable tackling these issues in a language arts class could

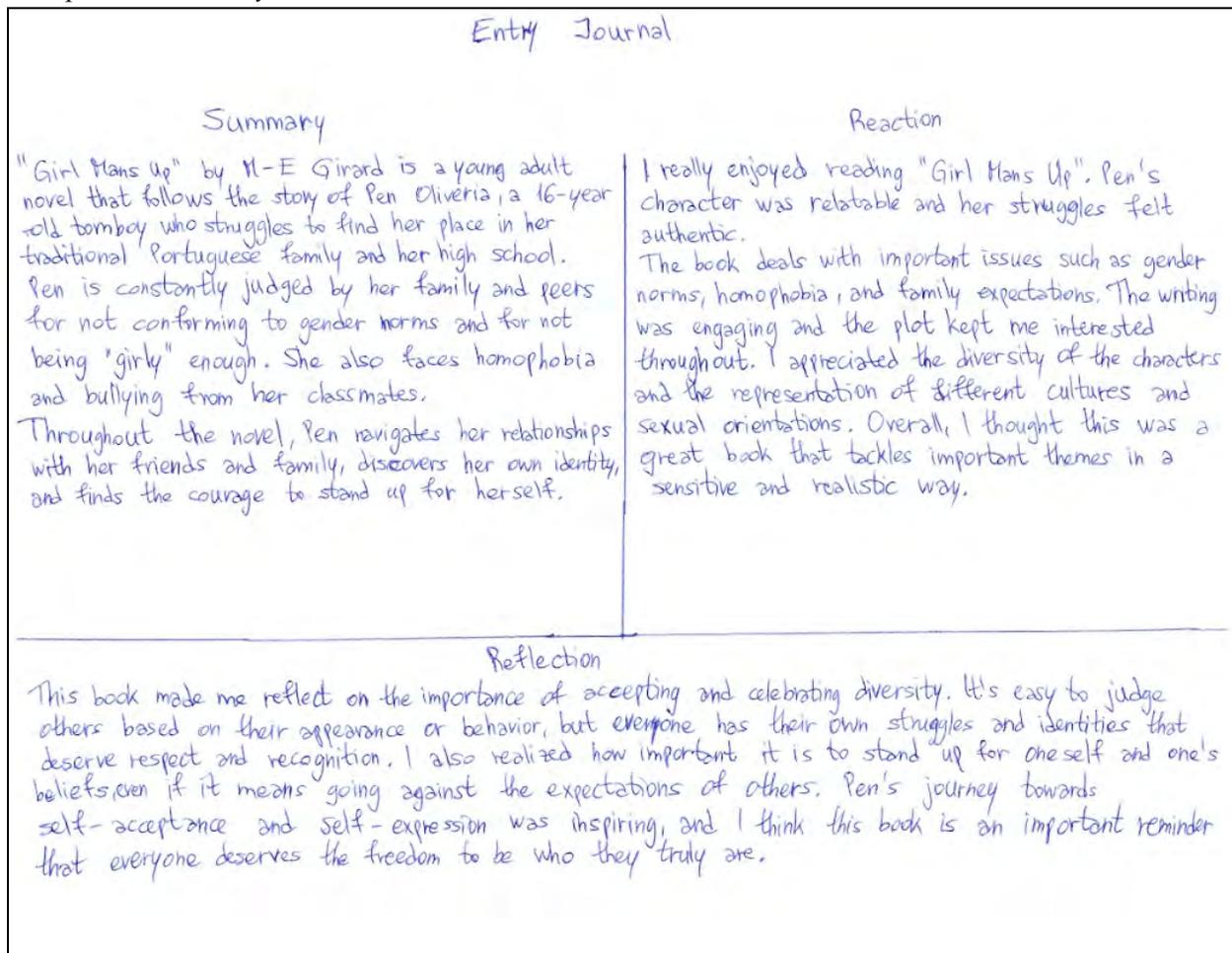
recommend *Girl Mans Up* for book clubs or individual reading. Currently, the Texas legislature has begun to restrict rights for LGBTQ children, young adults, and parents, creating a societal climate unsupportive to LGBTQ students. As a result, LGBTQ students will continue to experience bullying in school. English language arts teachers can support students through recommendations of young adult literature with LGBTQ characters that address themes of gender identity.

Class Activities and Assignments

First, teachers could ask students to brainstorm their knowledge of gender identities. How is gender constructed in our cultures? Other countries? Students could also explore, individually or in groups, where they fit on the continuum of masculinity and femininity. Why does the main character in the book want to remain disassociated from any specific gender? Writing activities could include in-depth character analyses along with persuasive essays or debates on topics explored in the novel. Teachers could ask students to create a double journal entry, such as the example in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Example Journal Entry



These activities can motivate students to reflect on the themes and issues presented in the book while working on their writing skills. Finally, through these practices, teachers can aid students in gaining better comprehension and enthusiasm for the content they are studying while also enhancing their communication and analytical abilities (Alsup, 2015; Bean, 2003).

Teaching about Latinx Activism through *Quinceañera*

Ilan Stavans compiled a volume that highlights the significance of the quinceañera, a coming-of-age celebration, to the Latinx community. The essays in this book offer multiple perspectives on the quinceañera and its role in shaping personal and social identities within the family and the larger Latino community. The reason for the inclusion of *Quinceañera* (Stavans, 2010) on lists of books prohibited for Texas schools may be because the essays address themes of gender and race identity, gender roles within communities, social class, and religious beliefs and practices. The state of Texas has a history of targeting Latino literature and authors, with attempts to ban books that deal with topics such as immigration and sexuality (Gamboa, 2022).

Themes for Class Discussion

This volume provides an illuminating analysis of how the celebration of quinceañeras functions and takes on meaning in the context of the Latinx community. The essayist examines various aspects of the celebration, including gender, family status, class, race, and performance, and emphasizes how these themes play a central role in the festivities. In Part II of the book, Testimonios, Julia Alvarez and Judith Ortiz Cofer narrate their perspectives on quinceañeras. As published authors and cultural critics, their essays offer students opportunities to understand cultural constructions of gender within the Latinx culture.

During Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15 to October 15), students could be assigned

certain essays and testimonies from *Quinceañera* to read and analyze for themes. Then teachers can ask students to share their experiences or any similarities in their own cultures within class or group discussion. The essays by Alvarez and Cofer could be read with one of their novels or short stories to guide students in understanding the characters and events in depth.

Class Activities and Assignments

Quinceañera can be used to teach literary analysis by examining the style and tone of the essays. Teachers can ask students to read selected essays and analyze the author's use of language, structure, and literary devices. Texas state English language arts standards require teachers to cover such literary terminology when teaching literature.

Following class or group discussions, teachers may want to assign a personal essay by asking students to write about a significant event in their life, similar to a quinceañera. Teachers can use the essays in the book as mentor texts to help students construct creative narratives, poetry, or other genres. Students can use themes and topics from the essays, such as gender, family status, and class, to inform their narrative essays.

Cultural conversations are important for teaching students to respect themselves and others. Ask students to read essays from the book and compare the quinceañera to other cultural celebrations. Students can analyze the similarities and differences between these celebrations and the quinceañera.

The Latinx organization Librotraficante attempts to combat book bans and challenges through forms of activism, critiquing book-banning efforts that not only undermine the rich cultural heritage of Latinx communities but also betray the values of free speech and intellectual freedom that should be the heart of a democratic society. After reading about this group's activities, such as their "underground library,"

students could brainstorm activism projects to benefit their school and community (Diaz, 2017). Teachers and students could also create their own “underground library.”

It is vital that teachers are empowered to celebrate the diversity of voices that enrich our world. Additionally, when teachers are allowed to present a broad range of ideas and perspectives, it helps to create a more inclusive environment for all students. This can help to counteract the adverse effects of discrimination and prejudice, promoting a more equitable society.

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