

The Role of Critical Literacy in Citizenship

By Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher

Democracy is never a final achievement. It is a call to effort ...

—John F. Kennedy (1963)

Liberty is always unfinished business.

—American Civil Liberties Union, 1957

Many historians support Kennedy's perspective that a strong democracy is preserved and improved through the active participation of its citizenship. Interestingly, a similar sentiment might be interpreted differently when expressed by the American Civil Liberties Union, an organization that has frequently situated itself as an advocate of controversial positions on immigration laws, free speech cases, and affirmative action legislation. Knowledgeable readers might react to the choice of the word "liberty" in a variety of ways depending on who is using it. Support of, or opposition to, the work of the Civil Liberties Union; an understanding of the issues this organization supports; and a knowledge of history all serve to influence the interpretation of the words they use. It seems reasonable to suggest that the interpretation of "liberty" would change if the quote were attributed to John Quincy Adams.

Understanding the various influences on our thinking, questioning the assumptions made by authors when they write, and examining the various perspectives that guide our understanding are at the heart of critical literacy. As we will explore further, critical literacy is vital in the twenty-first century. As citizens in a democracy, we are responsible for thinking deeply about the texts we read and for interrogating our assumptions and the perspectives promoted by authors. In short, citizenship requires participation, and that participation is based on an understanding that we can question without fear.

What is Critical Literacy?

Critical literacy is the practice of challenging texts through an analysis of the roles that power, culture, class, and gender play in the message. Texts are approached with an understanding that multiple perspectives exist and can be influenced by the author's and by the reader's experiences. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) have reminded us that "critical literacy helps us to move beyond . . . passive acceptance and take an active role in the reader-author relationship by questioning such issues as who wrote the text, what the author wanted us to believe, and what information the author chose to include or exclude from the text" (p. 6). Educators in Australia and new Zealand have pioneered this construct since the early 1990s, and there it has grown to be an integral part of literacy education from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. The Tasmania (Australia) Department of Education describes critical literacy extensively in its content standards and frameworks, reminding teachers of three questions readers should consider:

- In whose interest?
- For what purpose?
- Who benefits? (Tasmania Department of Education, 2006, ¶ 4)

Students become critically literate through exposure to and discussion of readings that address social, political, and cultural issues. Critically literate students examine the beliefs and values that underpin texts, question the purpose and the message, take a stance on issues, and formulate action steps when needed. Luke and Freebody (1999) describe four "families of practice" necessary for every reader to assume:

- *Code breaker*—understanding the text at the surface level (alphabetic, structural);
- *Meaning maker*—comprehending the text at the level intended by the author;

- *Text user*—analyzing the factors that influenced the author and the text, including an historical grounding of the context within which it was written;
- *Text critic*—understanding that the text is not neutral, and that existing biases inform calls to action.

It is this fourth practice that we will explore further. We hope to ensure that students develop an understanding of the bias that exists in all texts. To put it another way, an African proverb states, “Until lions have historians, hunters will be the heroes.” Using critical literacy, readers actively seek to understand what the historians say, consider what the voiceless lions might express, evaluate both messages to achieve a more nuanced understanding, and then use the information to take action.

What Is the Relationship between Critical Literacy and Citizenship?

Critical literacy skills are vital for citizens of an increasingly “global village” (McLuhan, 1962). The instant availability of information and misinformation from all corners of the world requires that readers sort through the barrage of messages, analyzing them for truth, authenticity, and integrity. Critically literate citizens are less vulnerable to propaganda because they understand the role of values and beliefs, and consider the sources from which these messages emanate.

The notion of civic literacy is central to a revitalized civics education movement. The Center for Information on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) has called for an overhaul of civics education in the U.S., noting that the majority of current curricula emphasize “great American heroes and virtues,” but lack critical analysis of injustice in the American system (2004). Importantly, young people ages 15–25 who had been exposed to this approach to civics education were “more trusting,” an arguably dangerous belief in a complex world, while the small minority (9%) who had experienced a curriculum emphasizing

critical examination of social injustices such as racism were the most likely to be registered voters. At a time when civic engagement is more important than ever, it would seem that critical analysis of, and within, a democratic system yields a more engaged citizenry. The point should not be lost that the freedom to engage in this discourse is possible because of a democratic system.

Promoting Civic Engagement through Critical Literacy

Critical literacy often involves the use of essential questions developed for students to use in constructing understanding. For example, the three questions cited by the Tasmanian Department of Education (referenced above) can serve as excellent general essential questions. In addition to these broad questions, we advocate the use of specific questions that promote civic engagement. Students can use two such questions to examine the beliefs, values, and experiences of Americans:

- *How do multiple perspectives enhance and inhibit the practice of freedom?*
- *What is our responsibility as citizens to preserve the freedoms of others?*

To answer these questions, students must engage with a wide variety of texts and they must be encouraged to focus on big ideas. The remainder of this article organizes text selections around four big ideas that students can explore as they read and learn to become critically aware.

Examining Personal Freedom

Books that examine personal freedom challenge students to define the rights and responsibilities of individuals within the context of a local community. These questions can be addressed through a critical examination of the lives of fictional characters by inviting students to examine the decisions characters make as citizens in very different communities. One such character is Sofia, an adolescent girl in *The Tequila Worm* (Canales, 2005) who wins a scholarship to a prestigious boarding school in another city. Her experiences with her classmates

are colored by differences in social class, language, and culture. However, she also feels the pressure from her family and barrio neighbors not to forget the traditions of the Latino community. Her story mirrors the experiences of so many young people in the U.S. who must redefine personal freedom and identity as they move between worlds.

Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1986) challenges readers to determine how their personal freedoms hold implications for a school community's well-being. This novel recounts the experiences of a boy attending a Catholic school who refuses to sell chocolate bars for a fundraiser. With the tacit support of a teacher, he is subjected to bullying in and out of the classroom. This novel raises vital issues about the duty of a society to protect nonconformists, and examines the consequences to an individual who does not receive that support. This novel ends on a dark note, and the use of a school as a microcosm for a larger society is unsettling for some teachers. However, with good reason, this book continues to be one of the most talked-about young adult novels.

"Every war has turning points, and every person, too" (Rosoff, 2004, p. 68). So observes Daisy, the teenage protagonist in Meg Rosoff's *How I Live Now*. Set in England sometime in the near future, Daisy watches as the country is invaded and the norms of society are stripped away. She finds herself in a world without adult supervision, and without the guidance of others must make decisions about what is best for herself and the people she cares about. Her struggle to define what she expects of herself can provide students with insights into the responsibilities of personal freedom when it exists at the expense of others.

Examining Social Injustices

A democratic nation that views liberty as "unfinished business," as suggested in the quote from the ACLU at the beginning of this article, will necessarily uncover its own violations of the freedom of its citizenry. Students

need to understand that discussion of these topics ensures that these mistakes will not be made again. For example, the Salem witch trials of 1692 continue to resonate in our history. *The Witchcraft of Salem Village* (Jackson, 1956) provides an historical accounting of the mass hysteria that plagued a small Massachusetts settlement and ultimately put to death twenty of its citizens. This book serves as a great companion piece to the classic short story “The Lottery,” written by the same author. It is a disturbing story that describes a small town’s annual practice of putting to death one of its citizens to serve as a scapegoat for all the wrongs of the community. Students can discuss how the themes of Jackson’s short story influenced her nonfiction. This case has resonance in modern history as well, especially in the McCarthy-era trials of the 1950s.

Slavery looms as one of the United States’ greatest national tragedies. Even so, it can be a challenge for teachers to lift the institution out of the history books and make it relevant to today’s issues. Teachers can begin with primary source documents such as Frederick Douglass’s *My Bondage and Freedom* (2003) and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1963) to help students understand the context of the time and the experiences of one who lived it. These texts are accessible and compelling, and can lead to an in-depth analysis of the period of Reconstruction after the war—especially in understanding the period’s successes and its broken promises to African–Americans. *Cause: Reconstruction America 1863-1877* (Bolden, 2005) provides students with an understanding of how the stage was set for the civil rights movement, women’s suffrage, and the trampling of Native American rights during westward expansion. *Jefferson’s Children: The Story of One American Family* (Lanier & Feldman, 2002) brings the story of enslaved people into the twenty-first century, as it recounts the work of the descendants of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, an enslaved young woman owned by the future president. This book is written by members of both sides of the family and serves as a valuable resource into the multiple perspectives of Americans today as they continue to grapple with the legacy of slavery.

Examining Controversial Topics

Few classroom experiences engage adolescents and young adults like the opportunity to debate controversial topics. These experiences are critical to the development of an involved citizenry. As citizens of a democracy, they will soon vote and participate in organizations and community efforts on issues large and small, and these classroom debates can help to shape the way the students address the issues at hand. For example, the debate around gun control remains on the front pages year after year, as citizens wrestle with issues of public safety and the right to bear arms. A book such as *American Youth* (Lamarche, 2007) can help students think about this topical issue critically—examining multiple perspectives. Lamarche introduces us to Ted, a ninth-grader involved in a gun accident. The author doesn't take sides, but shows us an American landscape of talk radio, religious influences, gang violence, and changes in rural communities brought on by rapid development.

Like gun control, censorship is a hot-button issue. To what extent should a society exercise control over what is spoken or what is read? These liberties are perhaps never more compellingly challenged than in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1987). This dystopian view of a society in which censorship runs rampant and critical thought is discouraged in favor of a television world of spoon-fed information has implications for the society we live in today. Teachers might invite students to compare Bradbury's world with the equally dark *We* (Zamyatin, 2006). First published in 1921, this book inspired Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*. Zamyatin's novel describes a thirtieth century society in which all individual freedoms have been eliminated. Books such as *We* and *Fahrenheit 451* should prompt discussion on how far a government's freedom should go, and what is the responsibility of its citizenry to preserve freedoms for others.

Students need information to balance what they are reading in these novels, so that they more fully understand the cautionary messages of these authors. Can censorship such as this really occur? How precarious are the rights of individuals? To this end, *To Establish Justice* (McKissack & Zarembka, 2004) is a must-have in any classroom. The authors have created a student-friendly text that describes the rights and responsibilities of American citizens as described in the Constitution, then chronicles the court battles that have addressed these struggles. Short but informative chapters on the rights of non-citizens, African Americans, women, people with disabilities, and gays and lesbians are described in detail. The chapter on the rights of students is of particular interest to adolescents.

Examining a Call to Action

No understanding of the responsibility of citizenship would be complete without an examination of how our beliefs and values as a nation have shaped the definitions of personal and societal freedoms at key points in our history. When these changing definitions conflict with existing practices, Americans answer the call to action. This may occur at the personal level, as it does in Ron Suskind's *A Hope in the Unseen* (1999), a biography of a young African American man's struggles while growing up in Washington, DC, and attending Brown University. The author describes Cedric's lonely high school experience as an ostracized student among classmates who did not share his academic goals. Cedric's vision for himself leads him to take personal action to acquire the education he wants.

There are many examples of rising to a call for action in our nation's history. *Decision in Philadelphia* (Collier, 2007) brings the controversies surrounding our country's birth to life, detailing the ways the founding fathers struggled to balance states' rights with federal power, expand on individual freedoms, and reach a compromise on the issue of slavery. Rather than simply recording an account of the events, the author uses major figures, such as

Washington, Madison, and Hamilton, as well as lesser-known but influential men such as James Wilson and Elbridge Gerry, as lenses to examine the arguments.

World War II represents another turning point in U.S. history, as groups and individuals had to determine how they would answer a call to action. Michael French has adapted James Bradley and Ron Powers' powerful epic *Flags of Our Fathers: Heroes of Iwo Jima* (Bradley & Powers, 2001) in a companion book for younger readers called *Flags of Our Fathers: A Young People's Edition* (2005). The authors follow the lives of six young men through grim triumph, the white-hot glare of media attention, and their conflicted feelings about their roles that day. On the home front, women struggled to redefine their role during the war. *Rosie the Riveter* (Coleman, 1995) tells the story of American women who ventured into the workplace in unprecedented numbers during the war. Coleman continues the story with the transition to peacetime, as many women wanted to continue to work, but met with great resistance from many of their fellow citizens. The 1943 cartoon on page 98 of the print version of RHI is a study in this contrast. A strong "Rosie" carries an air of confidence, as well as a hammer and lunch pail, in this positive image of the contributions of these workers, yet a small character at the bottom corner reminds her, "You gotta come right back as soon as the war is over!"

Perhaps the best example of civic engagement is when one citizen advocates on behalf of another without regard to personal benefit. *Left for Dead* (Nelson, 2002) describes the efforts of Hunter Scott, an eleven-year-old from Pensacola, Florida, who learned about the World War II disaster suffered by the men of the USS *Indianapolis* while watching the movie *Jaws* with his father in 1996. Hunter researched the court-martial of its captain, who was found guilty of "hazarding" his ship, leading to the deaths of 880 men in shark-infested waters off the coast of Palau. Although the survivors felt their captain was wrongly convicted, they were not able to clear his name. Hunter's interviews with survivors for a history fair project led to a personal campaign to set the record

straight. His advocacy on behalf of the now-deceased captain included politicians, high-ranking Navy officials, and the media. His testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, as well as the submission of new evidence uncovered by Hunter, led to his full exoneration in 2000. *Left for Dead* serves as an excellent example of the power of an individual to right a wrong.

Conclusion

Critical literacy and citizenship come together at a point in time when our country continues to define its beliefs about freedom at home and in the world. We are reminded that, “good-heartedness and power are insufficient for creating a just world. Some modest development of the intellectual virtues seems essential for future human survival and well-being. Whether the energy, the resources, and the insights necessary for this development can be significantly mustered remains open. This is certain: we will never succeed in cultivating traits whose roots we do not understand and whose development we do not foster” (Paul, 1993, ¶ 58).

A critical literacy approach that invites readers to question, debate, consider other perspectives, and take action is consistent with civics education. Kennedy’s reminder that democracy is “an untiring effort” should serve as a reminder of the power of reading critically for teachers in classrooms across the nation.

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Suggested Reading

Fahrenheit 451

by Ray Bradbury

Winner of The National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters

This classic novel poses enduring questions about the role of government: Should it reflect the will of the people? Should government do the people's thinking for them?

Teacher's Guide Available

Del Rey, MM, 978-0-345-34296-6, 208 pp., \$6.99

Ballantine, TR, 978-0-345-41001-6, 192 pp., \$13.95

Flags of Our Fathers

by James Bradley

In this unforgettable chronicle of perhaps the most famous moment in American military history, James Bradley has captured the glory, the triumph, the heartbreak, and the legacy of the six men who raised the flag at Iwo Jima.

Bantam, MM, 978-0-553-58908-5, 576 pp., \$7.99

Bantam, HC, 978-0-553-11133-0, 384 pp., \$27.00

Movie Tie-In Editions:

Bantam, TR, 978-0-553-38415-4, 400 pp., \$14.00

Bantam, MM, 978-0-553-58934-4, 576 pp., \$7.99

Audio Available:

RH Audio, Abridged CD, 978-0-7393-3219-1, \$14.99

Decision in Philadelphia: The Constitutional Convention of 1787

by Christopher Collier and James Lincoln Collier

Includes a complete copy of the Constitution. "The best popular history of the Constitutional Convention available." —*Library Journal*

Ballantine, TR, 978-0-345-49840-3, 448 pp., \$14.95

My Bondage and My Freedom

by Frederick Douglass

"*My Bondage and My Freedom*," writes John Stauffer in his Foreword, "[is] a deep meditation on the meaning of slavery, race, and freedom, and on the power of faith and literacy, as well as a portrait of an individual and a nation a few years before the Civil War."

Modern Library, TR, 978-0-8129-7031-9, 384 pp., \$12.95

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

by Frederick Douglass

Introduction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, first published in 1845, is an unparalleled account of the dehumanizing effects of slavery and Douglass' own triumph over it.

Dell, MM, 978-0-440-22228-6, 176 pp., \$6.99

Rachel and Her Children

by Jonathan Kozol

With record numbers of homeless children and adults flooding the nation's shelters, *Rachel and Her Children* offers a look at homelessness that resonates even louder today.

Three Rivers Press, TR, 978-0-307-34589-9, 320 pp., \$13.95

American Youth: A Novel

by Phil LaMarche

Set in a town riven by social and ideological tensions—an old rural culture in conflict with newcomers—this is a classic portrait of a young man struggling with the idea of identity and responsibility in an America ill at ease with itself.

Random House, HC, 978-1-4000-6605-6, 240 pp., \$21.95

Paperback coming January 2008. Do not order before 1/8/2008.

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7740-0, 240 pp., \$13.95

Enrique's Journey

by Sonia Nazario

In this astonishing true story, award-winning journalist Sonia Nazario recounts the unforgettable odyssey of a Honduran boy who braves unimaginable hardship and peril to reach his mother in the United States.

Teacher's Guide Available

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7178-1, 336 pp., \$14.95

From the Bottom Up: One Man's Crusade to Clean America's Rivers

by Chad Pregracke and Jeff Barrow

Chad Pregracke was a high school student when he first glimpsed the trash that littered the bottom of the Mississippi, a shocking sight that launched him on a quest to clean up the river.

National Geographic, HC, 978-1-4262-0100-4, 320 pp., \$26.00

Ishmael

by Daniel Quinn

"Books like *Ishmael* are a perfect complement to texts that treat of ethics and morality in today's consumptive, destructive climate. College students are grateful for having had the opportunity to read, reflect, and write essays based on the message of *Ishmael*."

—Professor Richard de Grood, University of Wisconsin-Eeau Claire

Bantam, TR, 978-0-553-37540-4, 272 pp., \$17.00

Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete

by William C. Rhoden

Rhoden makes the cogent argument that black athletes' "evolution" has merely been a journey from literal plantations—where sports were introduced as diversions to quell revolutionary stirrings—to today's figurative ones, in the form of collegiate and professional sports programs. Three Rivers Press, TR, 978-0-307-35314-6, 304 pp., \$13.95

The Green Book: The Everyday Guide to Saving the Planet One Simple Step at a Time

by Elizabeth Rogers and Thomas M. Kostigen

Ellen DeGeneres, Robert Redford, Will Ferrell, Jennifer Aniston, Faith Hill, Tim McGraw, Martha Stewart, Tyra Banks, Dale Earnhardt, Jr., Tiki Barber, Owen Wilson, and Justin Timberlake tell you how they make a difference to the environment.

www.readthegreenbook.com/

Three Rivers Press, TR, 978-0-307-38135-4, 224 pp., \$12.95

A Hope In the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League

by Ron Suskind

Ron Suskind tells the story of Cedric Jennings, an African-American teenager who is ferociously determined to study his way out of the inner city and get his piece of the American dream.

Teacher's Guide Available

Broadway, TR, 978-0-7679-0126-0, 400 pp., \$15.95

Confluence: A River, the Environment, Politics and the Fate of All Humanity

by Nathaniel Tripp

Tripp argues that, while our society has made great progress in terms of local environmental improvement, such as cleaner water, we're still dodging the big issues, such as global warming.

Steerforth, TR, 978-1-58642-106-9, 176 pp., \$12.95

Johnny Got His Gun

by Dalton Trumbo

Winner of the National Book Award

This powerful novel tells the story of one man's harrowing experience, revealing, as well, the horror of war for all mankind.

Bantam, MM, 978-0-553-27432-5, 256 pp., \$7.50

We

by Yevgeny Zamyatin Translated by Natasha Randall

"Two of the most iconic novels in the English language—*Brave New World*

by Aldous Huxley and *1984* by George Orwell—owe an enormous debt to

<http://www.randomhouse.com/highschool/RHI/>

Zamyatin. . . . We is the ur-text of science-fiction dystopias: it [describes] an Orwellian society almost three decades before Orwell invented his own version”—*The Wall Street Journal*

Modern Library, TR, 978-0-8129-7462-1, 240 pp., \$12.95

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