Precocious Knowledge: Using Banned Books to Engage in a Youth Lens

This piece looks at how banned books can offer an illuminating glimpse into social constructions of “healthy” and “normal” adolescent development. Unease with certain materials and topics in the secondary classroom can provide productive points of inquiry for both teachers and students.

Every burned book enlightens the world.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Racy Reading

My first year teaching, I taught Esmeralda Santiago’s When I Was Puerto Rican to a group of ninth graders. The entire time we read the book aloud, I anxiously debated what I would do when we got to a two-paragraph scene where Negrita, the young protagonist, watches a boy masturbate. Would I skip that page? Have students silently read it? Assign it for homework? I was relieved when our in-class reading stopped a page before the scene and I was able to pick up the book the next day a page ahead with students none the wiser. My copy is still marked by scratches of pencil across those paragraphs.

Now, with many years separating me from that first year of teaching, I can laugh (and cringe) at my rookie unease. Aside from being a key plot detail portraying Negi’s coming of age, that page inspired some of the most engaged reading of my future students. A boy I was warned was a “reluctant reader” was transferred into my class the day we approached those zesty paragraphs and afterward declared, “This is the best book ever!” Although I now consider myself pretty comfortable teaching texts that some might deem racy, I do still catch myself in moments of unease.

After finishing a quiz early, Erica, one of my strongest and sweetest students, recently pulled out Fifty Shades of Grey. My knee-jerk impulse was to want to make her to put it away. Taken aback by my inclination to censor reading, I asked myself if the novel offended me more for its explicit sexual content, what I deemed its low literary status, the imagined reaction of a teacher or administrator seeing that now-notorious silver tie, or because of the preconceptions I had of Erica as a “sweet” (and thus innocent) student. While I gathered my thoughts, she read quietly for a few minutes and then put the book away. Although in many ways her reading was a non-event, even after the book was out of sight, my discomfort lingered. I was most uneasy about my own unease with the book.

My reaction to my student’s importation of an erotic text into my classroom embodies what Amy Vetter et al. call “a critical incident” (114), a moment that forced me to reflect on and reevaluate my perhaps unconscious beliefs and practices as an English teacher. Rather than shy away from spaces in my curricula where I feel uneasy, I’ve started to think reflectively about why they generate discomfort. I have come to realize that much of my unease about particular books and topics comes from implicit notions I have about adolescence.

Youth Lens

Hormonal, apathetic, angsty, diffident, developing, risk-taking, emotional, moody, rebellious, insecure, impulsive, contradictory, defiant, self-absorbed, naively idealistic . . .

When I think about adolescence, this unflattering list of descriptors comes too readily to mind.
The terms *adolescence* and *adolescents* carry hefty ideological baggage. Broadly construed as a transitional period between childhood and adulthood, adolescence is charged with both enormous potential and peril. In *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*, educational theorist Nancy Lesko looks at the discourses or “endlessly repeated stories—clinical and anecdotal—of instability, emotionality, present-centeredness, and irresponsibility” (1) that shape how we culturally construct notions of adolescence. In a *New York Times* piece, a photographer specializing in coming-of-age portraits aptly captures these overwhelmingly negative associations: “I feel they’re in this distinct tenuous time, where they feel like they know it all, they have this over-confidence, but there’s no sidestepping the utter ignorance that’s implicit in adolescence” (Buckley). This idea that adolescence is characterized by thinking you know it all but actually being utterly ignorant is a common trope. It isn’t all that surprising that a paradigmatic teen movie from my day is titled *Clueless*.

But how might these ideas influence us as English teachers? Cultural constructions of youth tend to be focused on notions of teens as predictable and hardwired for certain behaviors. Healthy adolescent development is thought to unfold in a slow and steady manner, punctuated by particular age-defined milestones. Developments outside of that linear arc are often pathologized. A large part of my discomfort with Erica’s choice of reading material, I now see, was that it grated against my notions of healthy adolescent development. Through her enjoyment of erotica, Erica threatened to become what Lesko calls an “untimely teen” (178), an adolescent privy to precocious knowledge.

A youth lens (YL; Sarigianides, Lewis, and Petrone) invites us to challenge these cultural discourses and to think about their dense entanglements with the curricula we select and the books we invite into our classrooms. If I censor a racy scene or an erotic book, how much is my decision motivated by the implicit notion that my students aren’t mature enough or ready to handle the content? How do ideas about slow and steady development mark this knowledge as coming too early? Do I resist allowing this literature into my classroom because I’m afraid of stoking already raging hormones or inciting teenage rebellion? By desiring to censor it, am I pinning an “utter ignorance” onto my students, already ruling out that they might bring critical perspectives and creative approaches to these materials?

What we don’t or refuse to include in our curricula—or what we are prohibited from including—speaks as loudly as what we do include. In thinking about the ways certain knowledge is foreclosed from adolescents, I’ve become interested in what’s being pushed from English classrooms—particularly banned books. Commonly banned or challenged books map strikingly onto broader cultural constructions of “proper” or “healthy” adolescence. Exploring banned books can also offer an invigorating entry point for bringing a YL into the secondary classroom. In reading and discussing banned books, secondary students gain an opportunity to think through adolescence as a social construct.

**Banned Books and Untimely Teens**

Banned Books Week is often recognized in ELA classrooms. Nothing sparks more interest in a book than mentioning it’s been banned, which is part of what Emerson means when he quips that “every burned book enlightens the world.” In addition to giving space to celebrate freedom of expression and our students’ right to read, Banned Books Week and challenged books in general offer an opportunity to explore how youth are culturally constructed and the effects these constructions have on the texts deemed age appropriate for them. Many banned books feature Lesko’s “untimely teens” (178). These adolescents defy cultural expectations (or wishes) for the slow and steady unfurling of adolescence. Students taking up a YL can explore the following questions in relation to banned books:

- What are the adolescents up to in commonly banned books? What behaviors, actions, and/or ideas do they hold that are considered ahead of (or behind) their time? What assumptions about adolescence does this work challenge?
- How might these “untimely teen” characters defy linear narratives of progress and development? Do they stray from a traditional dynamic character arc where there is a gradual transformation from childhood to adulthood, ignorance to knowledge, innocence to experience?
Do the adults and adolescents sometimes switch traditional roles in this book? For example, is an adult less knowledgeable or ethical than an adolescent character, or does an adolescent enact more change or effect in the book than an adult?

When adolescents take on seemingly adult behaviors, attitudes, or thoughts in these works of literature, what is the result? Are they punished in the plot or not? How might lack of punishment contribute to certain books being considered objectionable by some?

What precocious knowledge might this book be thought to offer adolescent readers? What topics might this book address that some assume adolescent readers are not ready to handle?

Impressionable Young Readers

Adolescents are culturally constructed as being particularly impressionable to literature. The *Fifty Shades* novels have forced many libraries to reevaluate their lending policies. Several have refused to stock the series, the most common rationale being that shelving the books will facilitate easy accessibility to young and—the almost reflexively coupled—impressionable readers (Bosman). Youth have been historically configured as more deeply influenced by literature than adults. Indeed, many obscenity laws found their authority on the potential effects of texts on young readers. In 1787, King George III railed against “all loose and licentious prints, books and publications, dispensing poison to the minds of the young and unwary” (Horowitz 39). The 1868 Hicklin Test, which determined what was permissible to be circulated through the US Postal Service, used young adults as the bellwethers for what was to be considered obscene. The test declares that the obscenity of literature should be judged by its capacity to “deprave and corrupt the morals of those whose minds are open to such influences and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall” and by its potential to “suggest impure and licentious thoughts in the young and inexperienced” (Horowitz 433).

That Book’s the Bomb!

The quest to protect the imagined innocence of “the young and inexperienced” has endured and is today bolstered by organizations such as Common Sense Media, which offers to “rate, educate and advocate for kids, parents, and schools” (http://commonsensemedia.org; see Figure 1). Yet while their stated goals seem to support learning, their service is based on the implicit notion that adolescent reading should be closely monitored and regulated by adults. As Pat Scales writes, “Common Sense Media assumes that all parents want to police what their kids are reading, and they use the following emoticons as warnings: bombs for violence, lips for sex, #! for language, $ for consumerism, and martini glasses for drinking, drugs, and smoking.

**FIGURE 1.** Common Sense Media’s Appraisals of Three Books

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<th>What parents need to know</th>
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<tr>
<td>Educational value</td>
<td>Positive messages</td>
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<td>Sex</td>
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<td>Language</td>
<td>Consumerism</td>
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<td>Drinking, drugs, &amp; smoking</td>
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* Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*
* Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*
* Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*
In addition to rating books in these five categories, the site also decides whether books have any educational value and redeeming role models.”

**Challenging Material**

The categories that Common Sense Media deems “what parents need to know” (http://commonsensemedia.org) are also, not surprisingly, the grounds many adults use to challenge the appropriateness of some books for young readers. The American Library Association has analyzed more than 5,000 challenged books between 2000 and 2009 and summarized their findings. They quantify the most common reasons for book challenges as the following:

- 1,577 due to “sexually explicit” material
- 1,291 due to “offensive language”
- 619 due to “violence” (http://ala.org)

How might these books have been targeted because they clash with larger cultural constructions of “healthy” or “normal” adolescence and adolescent development? In Table 1, I use frequent reasons for banning texts to think about the questions they raise about constructions of adolescence. I want to conclude by briefly examining the three broad areas that elicit the most concern from some adults—language, violence, and sexuality—to explore how many banned books challenge and complicate dominant conceptions of adolescence in addressing these topics.

**Inappropriate Language**

Attempts to control language have a long history with youth. When town minister Jonathan Edwards took issue with a boy’s reading in 1744, he was not so much concerned about the appropriateness of the reading material, but rather its direct links to disrespectful behavior toward adults. As Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz explains, “Ultimately what was at issue in 1744 was not the possession or the reading of Aristotle’s *Masterpiece* or its solitary perusal but the ‘unclean’ and ‘lascivious’ speech of young men to women that accompanied it and the disrespect the men showed to the minister and church elders who questioned their behavior” (23).

Concerns about language in contemporary literature re-invoke this logic. The implicit fear seems to be less about what language might do to teens and more what teens might do with language. Obscenities can be used to wield power over adults, or at least unsettle them. When we balk at a text because of its use of profanity, a racial slur, a homophobic remark, or any other language that might be deemed objectionable, we should consider if we are protecting our students or ourselves from feeling uncomfortable. Language that can be at times unnerving often reveals charged topics that demand messy and uneasy conversations. These discussions may not always lead to clear and recognizable curricular ends and instead, in Nancy Lesko and Susan Talburt’s words, spark “uncertainties, mistakes, misrecognitions, messiness, and knowledge without ‘next steps’ or ‘best practices’” (287). We need to make space for topics that may generate these “bad feelings” (287).

In integrating a YL, we can also use offensive language as a barometer for “untimely teens.” How, for example, does Holden’s angsty use of slang and profanity in *The Catcher and the Rye* (Salinger) set him apart from adults (and perhaps “healthy” or “proper” adolescents)? How does the use of slang and profanity in *Lord of the Flies* (Golding) create a sense of adolescents as from “another tribe” (Lesko 1) than adults? How is the use of the N-word problematized by the characters in *Homeboyz* (Sitomer)? Language deemed inappropriate often brings up difficult topics: racism, sexism, homophobia, anger, violence, and hate. Rather than shy away from these important issues, we can use “inappropriate language” to broach complex conversations.

**Sex and Sexuality**

While offensive language is the second most cited reason for banning books, sex and sexuality play the largest role. Sexual knowledge is used as one of the chief demarcations between adulthood and childhood. Yet, while adolescents are thought of as on the brink of adulthood, frank discussions of sex and sexuality are barred from most formal curricula in secondary education. Kerry H. Robinson speaks against the censorship of sex and sexuality in education materials, arguing that young people are “given little critical guidance in negotiating the various and contradictory discourses they encounter, particularly in relation to sexuality” (8). The English classroom can be a space to develop these critical muscles.
**TABLE 1. Using Banned Books to Engage a Youth Lens**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objected-to Content</th>
<th>“Untimely Teen” Character Studies</th>
<th>YL-Oriented Questions</th>
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| **Sexual Explicitness**   | • Esch in *Salvage the Bones*  
• Jolly in *Make Lemonade*  
• Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*  
• Sohrab in *The Kite Runner*  
• Arjie in *Funny Boy*  
• Weetzie in *Weetzie Bat* | • What notions of adolescence do sexually knowledgeable youth challenge?  
• Is the sexually knowledgeable or experienced adolescent in this book punished? How might the consequences (or lack of) make this book objectionable to some?  
• How do characters who suffer sexual trauma get positioned within the adolescent-adult binary?  
• Are adolescent characters allowed to enjoy sex or experience sexual pleasure? Does this change depending on the character’s gender and/or sexual orientation and/or ability? |
| **Offensive Language**     | • Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye*  
• Violet or Titus in *Feed*  
• Sapo in *Bodega Dreams*  
• Peewee in *Fallen Angels*  
• Junior in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* | • Who uses offensive language in this novel? Whom does it offend?  
• What power differentials (e.g., between adults and adolescents, a dominant group and an oppressed group) does it reveal?  
• How is language used to set adolescents apart from adults?  
• Why might some find the language in this book threatening for teen readers? For adults?  
• What uncomfortable topics might the language bring into discussion (sex, sexism, racism, class division, hate, homophobia, violence, intense emotion)? |
| **Violence**               | • Antonio in *Bless Me, Ultima*  
• Marjane in *Persepolis*  
• Ishmael in *A Long Way Gone*  
• Chino in *Bodega Dreams*  
• Lani in *What Happened to Lani Garver?*  
• Luis in *Always Running*  
• Melinda in *Speak*  
• Maya in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* | • How do young people witnessing or experiencing violence challenge dominant conceptions of youth?  
• Do young people who live through war or trauma lose their status as adolescents?  
• What do adolescents learn from the violence they encounter? Do they understand it better or experience it differently than the adults?  
• Do the adolescents in the book have different ethics than the adults in the book? How might they see and understand the conflicts presented in a different way? |
| **Homosexuality/LGBTQ Identity** | • Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*  
• Grady in *Parrotfish*  
• Arjie in *Funny Boy*  
• Jeanette in *Orange Is Not the Only Fruit*  
• Paul in *Boy Meets Boy*  
• Callie in *Middlesex*  
• Lani in *What Happened to Lani Garver?* | • Do LGBTQ identities only gain acceptance in adulthood?  
• Can a healthy, happy, and successful LGBTQ adolescent exist in adolescent literature?  
• If the character(s) identified as heterosexual, would the content likely be considered objectionable?  
• Is LGBTQ identity pathologized or celebrated in this book? How might this contribute to the book being threatening to some? |
| **Racism**                | • Junior in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*  
• Steve in *Monster*  
• Precious in *Push*  
• Malcolm X in *Malcolm X*  
• Narrator in *Invisible Man*  
• Negrita in *Almost a Woman* | • How do constructions of youth shift depending on race? How are African American youth, for example, socially constructed differently than white youth?  
• How do the characters in these novels confront or address the racisms in their society?  
• Do the adolescents in this book have a more complex understanding of race dynamics than the adults? |
Character studies of “untimely teens” can help complicate discussions of sex and sexuality. How, for example, does the intelligent and resourceful Esch in Salvage the Bones (Ward) both reinforce and resist typical narratives of pregnant teens? How does Charlie’s identity in The Perks of Being a Wallflower (Chbosky) complicate binary notions of hetero- and homosexuality? How does Arjie in Funny Boy (Selvadurai) navigate the complexities of both sexual and identity politics in civil war–torn Sri Lanka?

Violence

Like sexually experienced young people, those who witness or experience violence often become “untimely teens” who don’t quite fit into normative conceptions of adolescence. Lesko writes, “When teenagers take on adult behaviors, from having sex to breaking laws, they become monstrous” (179). Lesko’s word choice recalls Steve Harmon in Walter Dean Myers’s Monster. Steve’s experiences with cultural and institutional racism within the justice system mark him as wise beyond his years and congruently a “monster” to society. As Kathryn Bond Stockton writes, “Experience is still hard to square with innocence, making depictions of streetwise children, who are often neither white nor middle-class hard to square with ‘children’” (32). Yet how might these “untimely teens” offer more complex views of the causes and effects of violence than the adults in their worlds? How does Junior in The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (Alexie), for example, have a more nuanced view on racism and violence than the adults in his life as he shuttles between Reardon and Wellpinit? How does violence both mark and transform Ishmael Beah in A Long Way Gone? How does Marjane in Persepolis (Satrapi) defy stereotypes of teenage apathy through her experiences with violent political protests during the Islamic Revolution in Iran? How do cultural constructions of adolescence incite their own forms of violence?

Uneasy Subjects and Impossible Fictions

We have a tendency to want to protect the innocence—or the fictional image of innocence we hold—of the youth we’re teaching. As Lesko and Talburt argue, adults who work with young people are often oriented toward a feeling of “pan-optimism” that manifests in feel-good narratives about successful and meaningful adult intervention in young peoples’ lives. These often “impossible fictions are also maintained by nostalgic ideas of classrooms, reading and books” (282). The reality is that young people live in and read about—as we adults also did—a decidedly complex world where sex, violence, intolerance, and profanity are a reality.

Banned books bring up uneasy topics—topics that often make adults uneasy. These topics are also un-easy in the sense of being difficult and complex. Uneasiness can be used to generate, rather than shut down, conversations in the English classroom. Banned books provide an opportunity to reorient ourselves to topics that might give offence, particularly those that offend our ideas of adolescence.

Banned books often raise topics that don’t yield easy answers, such as addressing racism, dealing with systemic or physical violence, or navigating the complexities of sex and sexual identities. Banned books are often complex, surprising, and confounding. They shake up expectations, challenge norms, and at times raise interminable questions. They’re complex and should be valued in our classrooms, like the adolescents we teach.

Works Cited

Any work is potentially open to attack by someone, somewhere, sometime, for some reason. “A Case for Reading—Examining Challenged and Banned Books” introduces students to censorship and how challenges to books occur. They are then invited to read challenged or banned books from the American Library Association’s list of the 100 most frequently challenged books. Students decide for themselves what should be done with these books at their school by writing a persuasive essay explaining their perspectives. Students share their pieces with the rest of the class, and as an extension activity they can share their essays with teachers, librarians, and others in their school. http://bit.ly/1WjwM7

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Please nominate a teacher-leader who has had a strong, positive impact on his or her school, district, and/or state through work that has focused on exceptional contributions to teaching and local leadership practices, such as team building, coaching, and curriculum development. This award is given annually to an NCTE member who is an outstanding English language arts educator and leader. Your award-nominee submission must include a nomination form, two letters of recommendation, and the nominee’s curriculum vitae. Candidates not selected for the year in which they are nominated will receive consideration for the next two years. The nomination form may be found at http://www.ncte.org/cel/awards. The award will be given for the first time in 2015. Send nominations by February 1, 2015, to Rebecca Sipe at rsipe@emich.edu (Subject: CEL Exemplary Leader) or 8140 Huron River Dr., Dexter, MI 48130-9323.