

4-2022

Responding to Literature Through Student–Author Interviews: Eighth-Grade Students Challenge Chris Crowe’s Mississippi Trial, 1955

Danielle L. DeFauw

University of Michigan - Dearborn, daniellp@umich.edu

Chris Crowe

Brigham Young University, chris_crowe@byu.edu

Christine Burnett

Mount Clemens Middle School, BurnettC@mtcps.org

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons



Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Language and Literacy Education Commons, Online and Distance Education Commons, Secondary Education Commons, and the Social Justice Commons

Recommended Citation

DeFauw, D. L., Crowe, C., & Burnett, C. (2022). Responding to Literature Through Student–Author Interviews: Eighth-Grade Students Challenge Chris Crowe’s Mississippi Trial, 1955. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 61 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol61/iss1/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



Responding to Literature Through Student–Author Interviews: Eighth-Grade Students Challenge Chris Crowe’s *Mississippi Trial, 1955*

Danielle L. DeFauw, *University of Michigan–Dearborn*

Chris Crowe, *Brigham Young University*

Christine Burnett, *Mount Clemens Middle School*

Abstract

This study explores virtual, student–author interviews eighth-grade students led with Chris Crowe in response to his young adult novel *Mississippi Trial, 1955*. The opportunity to interview the author motivated students to read the novel. Through their text-world development, students connected with the fictional and nonfictional characters, Hiram Hillburn and Emmett Till, respectively. Through their critical reader-responses, students sought truth about Emmett Till’s case as they questioned Crowe about the choices he made as an author and researcher, which supported students’ understanding of character development and historical significance of Emmett Till’s case. Crowe’s answers to the students’ critical questions were not easy, but through the student–author interview preparation and implementation process, participants captured a shared understanding of Emmett Till’s case and how its connection to the U.S. civil rights movement impacted history and is pertinent today. Ultimately, this article advocates for reader-response pedagogy to include virtual or in-person student–author interviews.

Keywords: student–author interview; critical reader-response theory; text world theory; digital media and learning; young adult literature; secondary English

Through Crowe’s (2002) young adult novel *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, eighth-grade students explored the U.S. civil rights movement (1954–1968), which was precipitated by myriad events, especially 14-year-old Emmett Till’s lynching. Hiram Hillburn, a fictional European American character in Crowe’s historical fiction novel, spends the summer with his paternal grandfather in Greenwood, Mississippi, and meets Emmett Till, the African

American adolescent murdered in Money, Mississippi, on August 28, 1955, after Carolyn Bryant accused him of threatening her. Mrs. Bryant's husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother, J. W. Milam, were jailed for kidnapping, and after Emmett Till's body was discovered, an all-White Sumner County grand jury ordered the men stand trial for his murder. On September 23, 1955, ignoring overwhelming evidence, another all-White, male jury in Sumner, Mississippi, found Bryant and Milam not guilty of Emmett Till's murder. Half a century later, Carolyn Bryant withdrew her accusation (Tyson, 2017), but "when asked about the alleged recantation, [Bryant] denied to the FBI that she ever recanted her testimony and provided no information beyond what was uncovered during the previous federal investigation" (Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, 2021, para. 10); thus, the FBI closed the case. Although the case is closed, the critical questions inherent in this case must continue to be asked.

Crowe's novel created a pertinent opportunity for students to internalize Emmett Till's story as they sought truth through their critical questions they used to interview Crowe through the Authors, Specialists, Knowledge (ASK) Program. Kettel (1996) designed the ASK Program to motivate students to read high-quality literature in any genre and write critical questions for an author or specialist of the book's content. The student-author interview process created an opportunity for students to ask complex questions with difficult answers that encouraged students to engage in critical literacy. See Table 1 for detailed ASK Program implementation steps, which may be applied to non-ASK Program student-author interview experiences. The following vignette illustrates the ASK Program.

Table 1

Steps for the Authors, Specialists, Knowledge (ASK) Program

Detailed Implementation Steps

1. Teacher or students select a novel or picture book in any genre.
 2. Teacher schedules the interview with a guest speaker: the book's author or a specialist knowledgeable of the book's content.
 3. Students read the book and write aesthetic journal responses about their reactions to the text, not summaries of the text.
 4. Students review their journal responses and write interview questions for the guest speaker. Students include the page/chapter number to support organization of the whole-class interview document.
 5. Partners share their questions and choose four to six questions to add to the whole-class interview document.
 6. Students practice the interview.
 7. Students conduct the interview after the teacher or a student introduces the guest speaker.
 8. Students debrief after the interview.
 9. Students write a thank-you letter to the guest speaker.
-

After reading Crowe's *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, an eighth-grade, African American student stood in front of the video camera in his midwestern U.S. classroom, prepared to virtually interview Crowe. The student held in his hand an index card with a few interview questions scrawled in pencil. He chose one of his questions and asked, "After Gramma died, Grampa hired Ruthanne, a Black woman, to cook and clean for Grampa. Since Grampa had the opinions he did toward Blacks, why did you have Ruthanne be a Black woman instead of White?"

From his university office, Crowe peered into his desktop computer's camera and stated:

That is a really smart question. At the time I was writing, I didn't even think about it. And here's why: It was common in the 1950s and even in the 1960s for... wealthier White families in the South to have African American maids who worked in their homes. And you think, 'That doesn't make sense. How can you be a racist and say, 'Yeah, now come cook my food?' But for some reason in their minds they did it.... It's a great question.... It doesn't make sense and I don't have the answer.

We (Danielle DeFauw, researcher; Chris Crowe, young adult author; and Christine Burnett, teacher; all European Americans) collaborated to explore this critical case study (Patton, 2015) to answer the following research questions:

1. How do students' critical questions reveal their engagement with required, challenging reading?
2. How can the student–author interview process empower students to challenge what is written as truth?

In the following sections, we detail (a) the conceptual framework, critical reader-response and text-world theory; (b) the literature related to Burnett's pedagogy; (c) the research methodology, critical case study; (d) the study's findings organized across two themes addressing how readers use critical questions to explore the author's choices and how readers develop text-world connections with Emmett Till; and (e) a discussion of the findings related to the literature. Our key assertion is that the student–author interview preparation and implementation process provided an authentic learning opportunity for adolescent readers to develop their critical reader-responses before, during, and after reading *Mississippi Trial, 1955*.

Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framework combines critical reader-response and text world theory to support our exploration of how the student–author interview process, facilitated through the ASK Program, engaged students in their required reading, *Mississippi Trial, 1955*. Rosenblatt's (1978/1994) transactional theory of reading addresses how students respond to texts emotionally and intellectually. While reading within a continuum of aesthetic to efferent stances, a reader's purpose and interest motivate the reader's transaction with the text (Rosenblatt, 1982). McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) added a critical stance to the continuum to empower students to question an author's perspective.

Through a critical reader-response, students read beyond the words. They read with an unwillingness to be swayed by text without contemplating their own reading of the world and being moved to action (Freire, 1970). Critical readers talk back to the text (Leland et al., 2018), contemplate the author's perspective (Lawrence et al., 2009), reflect on multiple perspectives (Behrman, 2006), address cultural and political contexts (Lewis, 2000), and identify voices silenced through the text (R. S. Bishop, 2012). Through a critical stance, readers are empowered to develop critical consciousness regarding the text's present, missing, and misrepresented content (Freire, 1974/2005).

Gavins (2007) argued text world theory builds on Rosenblatt's (1978/1994) transactional reader-response theory as it explores the text-worlds—mental representations—readers make of the language they read. Text world theory explains how readers and authors create discourse or conversational worlds through which the author speaks through writing and the reader listens through reading. Readers make comparisons between their own lived worlds and the text-worlds they visualize as they read (Beach, 2000; Galda & Beach, 2001; Lewis, 2000).

To illustrate, through *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, readers created the text-world, or mental representation, through 16-year-old Hiram Hillburn, the guide or enactor in the text-world who narrated his experience as a White protagonist. R. S. Bishop (2012) would categorize *Mississippi Trial, 1955* as a social conscience historical fiction novel focused on developing readers', especially White readers', attention to social injustice and readers' "responsibility to help make things right" (p. 7). Through Crowe's discourse world and Hiram's first person narration, readers returned to southern Mississippi to spend the summer with Grampa. Hiram developed a growing understanding of the inequalities African Americans faced in the South. Hiram met Emmett Till and wanted to befriend him, but Hiram did nothing to help Emmett when R. C. Rydell, a racist bully, tortured Emmett. Readers felt Hiram's shame as he continued to question how Grampa and other White people embraced racism. When Emmett's body was discovered, Hiram refused to remain silent. He sought to discover what happened to Emmett and believed R. C. had taken part in the murder. Hiram began to see Grampa's ignorance when Grampa revealed he was more concerned about the media attention and its impact on the Southern way of life than he was enraged about Emmett's murder. Hiram planned to testify at Bryant and Milam's trial. Through the court's proceedings, Hiram discovered truth that forced him to acknowledge Grampa's faults.

Because of the text-worlds students created as readers as they read *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, they challenged the author's truth through their critical reader-responses that evolved into their critical questions. Considering the author's and characters' perspectives (Behrman, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009) and the historical fiction setting details (Lewis, 2000), students learned to talk back to the text (Leland et al., 2018) by asking Crowe questions that did not have easy answers.

Literature Review

Committed to social justice, Burnett, the eighth-grade students' English language arts and social studies teacher, applied critical pedagogy as she used young adult literature like Crowe's novel to augment history textbooks' content in order to teach about racism (Behrman, 2006; Villaneuva & O'Sullivan, 2019). Educators must teach all children about the United States' complex history and current events to replace ignorance with understanding, but when traditional curricular materials, such as textbooks, omit key

historical events and perspectives, educators must fill the gaps using young adult literature and other media (Bean & Moni, 2003). Crowe (2018) analyzed more than 20 U.S. history textbooks and found two that provided information about the Emmett Till case through “a combined total of fewer than fifty words” (p. 12).

Addressing social issues and creating “spaces for critical literacy discussions” (Vasquez et al., 2019, p. 300), *Mississippi Trial, 1955* provides one way for teachers like Burnett to support all students’ understanding of the United States’ complicated civil rights movement, a historical era that still impacts the present. Burnett’s students used critical literacy as they engaged with the teacher-selected text “to consider the points conveyed” (Vasquez et al., 2019, p. 301). By requiring the young adult children’s novel, Burnett supported her students’ interest in understanding “race relations and the persistent traumas of racial injustice” (Hintz & Tribunella, 2019, p. 276).

Through their critical reader-response questions prepared for the student–author interview, students revealed comparisons between how they may have handled Hiram’s experiences differently. In order to make such comparisons during and after reading, however, Burnett supported her students’ background knowledge before reading the novel to impact their reading comprehension (Beck & McKeown, 2001; McCullough, 2013). Following classroom practices used to support critical literacy, Burnett required her students to read multiple texts from a resistant perspective (see Table 2), engage in dialogue, and take social action through the interview process as they expected answers to their critical questions (Lewis, 2000; Reidel & Draper, 2011).

Table 2

Supporting Students’ Questioning for the ASK Program

Teacher Prompts

1. Write a response, not a summary. Anyone who reads the book knows what’s in the book. Write your reactions to what you have read.
 2. From your reactions, create questions that will put the author in a position to explain why they wrote the book the way they did.
 3. There are two restrictions to these questions: (1) If the answer can be found in the book, you cannot use the question. (2) The answer must require an explanation; thus, you cannot ask simple yes or no questions.
-

Burnett strengthened their critical reader-responses through engagement in a critical stance as they listened to, viewed, and read the following supplementary media (Wolk, 2003):

- oral history interviews regarding Jim Crow laws (Chafe et al., 2001)
- photographs such as Figures 1 and 2, which show the Bryant Grocery and Meat Market and the Tallahatchie River bridge where Emmett Till’s body was discarded
- documentaries about Emmett Till’s biography (Beauchamp, 2006; Nelson, 2003)



Figure 1. *Bryant Grocery and Meat Market in Money, Mississippi*



Figure 2. *Bridge Over the Tallahatchie River in Money, Mississippi*

Through the student–author interview process, Burnett engaged students in asking critical questions, a reader–response that went beyond reader–to–text and reader–to–reader (Park, 2012). Reader–to–author responses can be facilitated through annotating and talking back to text (Leland et al., 2018). Although Beck and McKeown (2001) created the questioning–the–author approach to encourage students to discuss their textbook reading with their class as they “grapple with ideas in the service of constructing meaning” (p. 231, italics in original), students are rarely given an opportunity to critically “talk back” to the author in person. The only similar reader–to–writer process is an author visit. Author visits are typically a 1-hour author presentation void of critique (Moynihan, 2009).

Reader–to–author responses facilitated through the virtual or in–person student–author interview process created an authentic learning opportunity that put students in charge of the interaction with the author as they responded to text through their critical questions. Although the literature does not explore authentic student–author interview opportunities to promote critical literacy development, this study explored the impact an authentic student–author interview process had on students’ engagement with required, challenging reading; critical questions; and conviction to challenge what is written as truth.

Methodology

ASK Program Participants and Context

Burnett taught at an urban, sixth- through eighth-grade middle school in the midwestern United States that serves about 200 students, of which 85% are economically disadvantaged and receive free or reduced-price lunch. The school's population consists of 69% African American, 18% European American, 8% two or more races, and 5% Latino/Hispanic students. This school is situated in a district with one elementary, one middle, and one high school, serving about 950 students.

Participants enrolled in Burnett's 1-hour, eighth-grade English class were invited to participate in this study. The ASK Program interview was delivered via distance learning technology, or videoconferencing, in February 2018 and February 2019. As detailed in Table 3, on February 28, 2018, Crowe answered 22 questions from 16 of Burnett's students and another alternative school that could not participate in this study. To extend the study further, 1 year later, DeFauw, fulfilling an observer-as-onlooker role (Patton, 2015), observed three 1-hour preparatory sessions with Burnett's students. On February 28, 2019, Crowe answered 24 questions from 14 of Burnett's students and no other school.

Table 3

Eighth-Grade Participants of the ASK Program

Date	Initial students	No. of students who met teacher's requirements	Parental consent provided	Participant demographics
February 28, 2018	24	16	11	4 females (2 African American, 2 European American); 7 males (3 African American, 4 European American)
February 28, 2019	26	14	9	5 females (4 African American, 1 European American); 4 males (3 African American, 1 European American)

For this critical case study of 20 research participants (Patton, 2015), DeFauw collected the following data from February 2018 to February 2019:

- two video recorded and transcribed virtual interview sessions from February 28, 2018 and February 28, 2019
- documents, which included students' critical questions written on index cards and Burnett's lesson plans (see Table 4 for examples)
- one audio recorded and transcribed focus group interview with 11 students from February 28, 2018
- one audio recorded and transcribed interview with Crowe from March 1, 2018

- field notes recorded during and after five classroom observations, two of which included the two virtual interview sessions noted above and three preparatory sessions: February 5, 8, and 21, 2019
- one audio recorded and transcribed interview with Burnett from February 28, 2019

Table 4

Examples of Eighth-Grade Participants' ASK Program Questions

Sample Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In the book, you had Gramma Hilburn pass away. What was your purpose of making her pass away and bringing in Ruthanne?• In the book, you implied that Grampa Hillburn was the third person in the murder of Emmett Till. What information did you uncover during the research that led you to believe there was really a third person?• In the documentary <i>The Untold Story of Emmett Till</i>, a letter was written to President Eisenhower requesting help for the Till family, but the Till family did not receive a reply. Why do you think President Eisenhower chose to ignore the letter?• In the book <i>The Blood of Emmett Till</i>, Mrs. Bryant admits to lying about what happened in the grocery store. What do you think was her motivation for lying and keeping it a secret for so long?• In the book, Hiram was the main character. Why was Hiram the main character when the book was about the murder of Emmett Till?• If there wasn't the law of double jeopardy, do you think today [Bryant and Milam] would be tried again if they were still alive?• Even though Hiram was gone for a long time, why does Naomi still trust him?• What made you want to write the novel as a historical fiction instead of historical nonfiction?• In the book, why didn't you have Grampa tell the sheriff what R. C. did to Emmett at the river?

To inductively analyze the data, DeFauw utilized NVivo software for descriptive coding, pattern analysis, thematic analysis, and memo writing (Saldaña, 2013). The first round of coding included descriptive coding. DeFauw read the data and highlighted certain parts, inserting reflective comments. Next, she reread the data and labeled pertinent data references with 33 descriptive codes. For the second round of coding, using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) for pattern analysis, she reviewed and sorted the 565 coded data references to determine natural categories. To ensure the categories' accuracy, an outside researcher analyzed 15% of preselected categorical data to determine an inter-rater reliability of 91% (Smagorinsky, 2008). For the third round of data analysis, DeFauw developed two themes relative to the categories: (1) Readers use critical questions to explore the author's choices; and (2) Readers develop text-world connections with Emmett Till.

Findings

The findings reveal that readers prepared and asked critical questions for the student–author interview that demonstrated engagement with required, challenging reading because they connected the text-worlds, or mental representations, they developed with their lived-worlds. These text-worlds spanned time and space from past to present to future. Students felt connected to the fictional and nonfictional characters through their text-world development. These connections propelled students to ask critical questions that explored Crowe’s choices as a researcher and writer. Through the student–author interview, students challenged the truthfulness of the novel’s content as the two research themes revealed: Readers use critical questions to explore the author’s choices and develop text-world connections with Emmett Till.

Readers Use Critical Questions to Explore the Author’s Choices

Students’ critical questions regarding the author’s choices as a writer and researcher revealed their engagement with the novel and the text-world connections they made with Emmett Till. Students sought truth as they questioned why Crowe chose to write about the Emmett Till case. Highlighted in the findings, students questioned his inspiration, Emmett Till’s murder as the trigger of the civil rights movement, and factual details about the trial. Crowe’s answers to students’ questions allowed for deeper understanding of character development and historical significance of Emmett Till’s life and death, as the following three representative pieces of data illustrate.

First, during the fall 2018 session, one student asked, “What inspired you to write about Emmett Till’s murder?” Crowe pointed to the bookshelf behind him in his university-office library and stated:

Writers often talk about looking for “the hole on the bookshelf,” places on bookshelves where you should be able to find a book about a particular subject, but that doesn’t exist yet. When I started my research, there was a big hole on the bookshelf about the Emmett Till case, so I knew there was an opportunity to tell the story. I wanted to tell the story to teenagers, and that got me excited to think about the possibility. It was also intimidating because I wasn’t sure I was up to the task. It’s such an important story. I was haunted by my own inadequacy. What if I do a crummy job? What if I don’t do the story justice? Emmett’s mom deserves my best... because she’s been trying to get his story told herself without a lot of help. So, my original motivation to write about the case was my own ignorance of it; later, curiosity and then opportunity motivated me to keep at it.

This student did not ask about Crowe’s inspiration to write a novel. He asked about the inspiration to write about a teenager’s murder. This African American student crafted his question for Crowe purposefully, as one student stated during the fall 2018 focus group interview: “[The hardest part] was like trying to come up with the question that was... like an actual good question.” The student, cognizant of the cultural and historical

significance of the civil rights movement, needed to question why Crowe, a White author, would write about Emmett Till's murder (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004).

Second, students' critical questions challenged Crowe's historical interpretations. For example, one student asked during the fall 2018 session, "Why do you think it was Emmett Till's death that started the civil rights movement and not the other Black deaths that happened?" Crowe stated:

That's really a great question, and I would say there are a couple reasons. One big one is because he was a kid. An innocent kid. There's something about the tragic death of a child or a teenager that makes it more tragic. We mourn the loss of a young life, because they had a lot of life left to live. Emmett was just a kid, and so his murder sets it apart from so many of the other lynchings.... In addition to that, Emmett's case received lots of media because his mom, instead of just letting him be buried, opened that casket and had a viewing for 3 days. And so that viewing exposed the real face of racism, this innocent victim of torture. People saw the results, and it horrified them.... And not just African Americans, White people too. And because of the intense media attention it received, it really paved the way for Rosa Parks. You can't have a protest or a movement if nobody knows about it, so the fact that the news media covered the funeral and the trial... the news made it different from all the other murders before Emmett's.

Asking why Emmett Till's death was deemed more important than the other African Americans' deaths is a pertinent question to explore. The question challenged Crowe's choice to write about Emmett Till and draw historical conclusions that may be debatable. Students empowered with critical literacy can debate history. "The work of the historian—the writing of history—begins to resemble the writing of fiction: both are stories and reflect a set of choices" (Hintz & Tribunella, 2019, p. 283).

Third, many students' questions emphasized details of Emmett Till's biography and the trial. For example, during the fall 2018 and 2019 student–author interviews, students asked questions about the novel's missing details related to witnesses who testified. In fall 2019, one student asked, "There were a number of people who were witnesses to some parts of Emmett Till's murder, such as Willie Reed. Why did you choose to leave them out of the novel?" Crowe stated:

That's another good question. I like how you know some facts about the case. Willie Reed does testify in the novel in the courtroom scene as he did in real life, but there were others, like you say, there were others who were witnesses. Some heard things. Some heard things later. Some were actually there. So, at the time I was writing the book, the FBI hadn't reopened the case, so there was a lot that we didn't know except what was reported in the trial.

So, Willie Reed testified in court, but at the time I was writing the novel, we didn't know much about him. Willie Reed and some people who had seen things were afraid for their lives, so they didn't want their stories to be told, so it was hard to find much about their stories. The research didn't give me much to work with.... After this book was written and when I got to know Wheeler Parker and other cousins of Emmett Till, they told me about Willie Reed and how the trial affected him and how terrified he was. There were threats against

his life for testifying. At the time I was writing the book I didn't have access to some of that information.

During the fall 2018 session, Crowe highlighted his other book, *Getting Away With Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case* (Crowe, 2018), which details his research and new developments in the case. He also detailed his interactions with Emmett Till's two cousins who had been in the house the night Emmett was kidnapped:

One cousin was in the room next to the room that Emmett was in when he was kidnapped.... And [another cousin] was in the room... when Emmett was kidnapped.... These were kids who were in the house when these... killers came through.... [One cousin] talked about what it was like when they burst into the room looking for Emmett and made him get out of bed.... It's not every day you can talk to somebody who was right there in a moment of history.

Through their questions regarding Willie Reed's testimony, students challenged Crowe's choices as an author (Behrman, 2006). Granted, students understood *Mississippi Trial, 1955* was historical fiction, but because the novel addressed a nonfictional character's murder, students demanded more answers as they used critical literacy as a tool to deconstruct and reconstruct the text- and lived-worlds (Hendrix-Soto & Wetzel, 2019).

Readers Develop Text-World Connections With Emmett Till

As students read *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, they entered the text-world through Hiram's first person narration. As an enactor, or guide, Hiram provided readers with the internal focalization of the text-world they visualized. Through Hiram's perspective, readers pictured the setting, experienced the plot, befriended Emmett Till, and internalized the personal struggle of ignoring social injustice. The following representative data illustrate how students' text-worlds motivated the critical questions they asked, which addressed Hiram's choices, Grampa's actions, and students' hope for change.

First, some students' questions targeted Hiram's choices because students experienced the story through Hiram's perspective. For example, one student asked during the fall 2019 session, "Explain why you didn't have Hiram stick up for Emmett while R. C. Rydell was messing with him down by the water." Crowe stated:

That's a lot of how bullying happens is that people who could say something don't say something or people who could stop it don't stop it. So, I wanted to put Hiram in that situation where he feels guilt and remorse for not standing up for something he knew he should've stood up for. It wasn't like Hiram didn't know what R. C. was doing was bad. No, he knew it. But because he was afraid of R. C. or because he didn't know how to do it or whatever reason, he didn't do anything and his inaction then haunted him and, in some ways, helped him feel sympathy for Emmett as a victim. To feel like I could've done something to help this kid and I didn't. Obviously, that extrapolated when the adults who were around when Emmett was being tortured could've done something and they didn't. That's still wrong.

As readers entered the text-worlds they had created, they may have wished the main character would have acted as readers imagined they themselves would or did act

in their lived-worlds (Enciso, 1994; Rosenblatt, 1995). This question reflected a level of critical consciousness as the student wished Hiram would have defended Emmett Till (Freire, 1974/2005).

Second, students questioned Grampa's actions. One student asked during the fall 2018 session, "In Chapter 11, after Emmett's murder, Grampa seemed more concerned about his own standing in the community than Hiram's safety. What did you want the reader to believe as part of Grampa's involvement in the murder?" Crowe stated:

I was still trying to be mysterious a little bit there to not give away everything to Hiram or to the reader, but I also wanted the reader to start being suspicious of Grampa and wonder, like you did, what's going on here and what's he hiding? Also, he's trying to shield Hiram from this dirty secret he's got that he's been involved.

Through the text-world, this student wondered why Grampa would care more about his reputation than his grandson's well-being. Connecting intellectually and emotionally to Hiram, the student felt Grampa's lack of care and acknowledged his ignorance (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994).

Students questioned Grampa's subtle and blatant racist acts during each student-author interview. For example, one student asked during the fall 2018 session, "Throughout the novel it was obvious that Grampa was racist. What was your goal in making Grampa racist and Hiram's father not racist?" Crowe stated:

My goal was to show that sometimes parents and children don't get along, and in this case, they didn't get along because of racism, racist views. I was hoping that kids reading this book would learn that sometimes our parents seem like they're bad, you know, because they make us do things we don't want to do, but they're probably not as bad as we think they are. Hiram eventually learns that Grampa's not as wonderful as Hiram thought he was. . . . He also learns the same thing about his dad. That, you know, "my dad's not all bad. I thought he was, but I learned that maybe he's not as bad as I thought." That's real life.

The student asked this question to understand how racism impacted Hiram's relationships with his grandpa and father. Through text-world development, the reader may have felt the racist tension inherent in the characters' relationships and wondered how three generations in the Hillburn family evolved within such turbulent times (Beach, 2000).

Third, students' questions revealed hope that the text-worlds they had developed for the past were no longer a part of the present. For example, a student asked during the fall 2018 session, "When you went to Money, Mississippi [in August 1999], what was the general mood between Blacks and Whites?" As this question suggests, the reader wondered how Money, Mississippi changed from the text-world to the current lived-world (Galda & Beach, 2001). Crowe stated:

When I went to Money, it was kind of like a ghost town. After stopping at the store, I crossed the train tracks and found an elementary school building back

there. I walk in, and I'm a stranger, the only White guy around. I told them who I was, not that it mattered who I was, but what I was doing. I was there to learn about the case.... Once we figured out that we thought the same way, [the teachers and staff members] opened up and talked.

Crowe provided another personal experience to answer the student's question to highlight that, as he said, there "still obviously was tension and division from the old Jim Crow laws."

In Greenwood there were real Black and White divides. For example, in the library when I needed help to make copies of material I was researching, there were several librarians working there. Some were White, some were African American. When I walked to the counter, if there was an African American librarian at the counter, she would step back and wait for a White librarian to come and talk to me. The first time it happened, I didn't think anything about it but then when it happened every single time, I wondered what was going on.... I assumed that the librarians didn't know who was racist and who was not, so it was just easier to let a White librarian work with White patrons.

These students experienced the past setting through the characters' experiences and hoped the setting had changed (Lewis, 2000). Crowe's responses pushed the readers to understand that racism's effects continued. An ongoing process, readers must continue to read the word and the world of the past, present, and future (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Discussion

The student–author interview promoted a critical reader–response to *Mississippi Trial, 1955* as students experienced in their text–world racism's brutality and responded to the text with critical questions to demonstrate their engagement, as the introduction's vignette illustrates. Before the student could ask Crowe why Grampa hired Ruthanne, an African American woman, to care for him after Gramma died, he first needed to imagine the text–world and experience Hiram's emotional turmoil regarding the negative impact the social injustice had on Ruthanne. The readers' text–worlds evolved as they imagined the pain Ruthanne felt due to racism's effects. Such connections made between readers, texts, characters, and authors allowed readers to respond to the text with critical consciousness revealed through their critical questions (Freire, 1974/2005; Rosenblatt, 1995).

Through the student–author interview, students responded via critical questions with stronger conviction (Whiteley, 2011) when they shared face-to-face context, even virtually, with the author. As students asked the author critical questions, they were empowered to develop their emotional response, critical consciousness, and internal fight for social justice (Laman, 2006). They went "beyond inferences about characters' acts, beliefs, and goals to... use their knowledge of culture and history" to challenge details in the novel (Beach, 2000, p. 242).

Throughout their engagement with the novel and the student–author interview preparation process, Burnett's students pushed their conversations beyond intellectual understanding of the novel's plot to the emotional connections they made with the characters (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994, 1982). Burnett connected her students intellectually and emotionally to the book's characters, plot, and historical context to "encourage [her] students' desire to understand and feel empathy for different people, times, and dilemmas" (Enciso, 1994, p. 524). Rosenblatt (1995) stated, "Literature undoubtedly contributes to

the diffusion of more humane sentiment” (p. 178). Emmett Till’s experience helped students internalize the basic human rights individuals deserve. Students’ discussions drove the critical questions they asked about Emmett’s life and death. “A central role for any teacher, therefore, is to foster a classroom environment where it is intellectually, socially and academically rewarding for students to pose thoughtful questions” (Chin & Osborne, 2008, p. 35). Through their questions, students addressed the issues that bothered them regarding the text-world, all of which increased their engagement with the novel (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Galda & Beach, 2001).

Students used their critical questions to challenge Crowe’s choices as a writer, but the next step in the student–author interview process—void of hierarchical relationships between students, teachers, and authors (Behrman, 2006)—should be a debate in which students “talk back” in person to Crowe regarding his responses (Behrman, 2006; Leland et al., 2018). To illustrate, some readers may speculate about whether Emmett Till’s death paved the way for Rosa Parks, reflected in the student’s question regarding why Crowe thought it was Emmett Till’s death that started the civil rights movement and not other African Americans’ deaths. Even with *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, additional resources should be read for critical literacy purposes (Behrman, 2006; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Vasquez et al., 2019). For example, Hoose (2010) wrote *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice*, a young adult novel, to detail 15-year-old Claudette Colvin’s refusal to give up her seat a year prior to Rosa Parks’ protest. Through such reading, students may thread connections between other individuals’ lives and deaths with the civil rights movement and provide such content as contradictory evidence during the student–author interview.

Teaching students how to question critically or “talk back” empowers them to challenge texts presented as fact (Leland et al., 2018; Vasquez et al., 2019). Students need to respond to reading with their critical stance to analyze the “author’s assumptions and perspectives... to become critical of other texts and to learn to challenge the dominant discourses of racism... that pervade society’s cultural stances and beliefs” (Blake, 1998, p. 239–240). Critical questions riddled with controversial answers need to be asked (Browne & Keeley, 2017). For example, in response to the opening vignette’s question regarding Grampa hiring Ruthanne to cook and clean, Crowe stated, “It’s a great question.... It doesn’t make sense, and I don’t have the answer.” It is acceptable for readers, authors, teachers, students, and characters to not have all the answers, but people must be willing to ask critical questions. “Because questioning leads to problem solving, quality questions will lead to quality decisions” (Nappi, 2017, p. 36). Solutions to problems need to be explored, debated, and contemplated for decisions to impact society. Change often begins with critical perspectives of accepted norms or history even though students may not want to be viewed as critical (Leland et al., 2018). Critical reader-response is a stance students need to learn in order to reflect on the past, contemplate their present, and change the future.

The United States’ history and current events are complex and require critical and culturally relevant stances (Bean & Moni, 2003; Vasquez et al., 2019) so readers continue to question, investigate, and contest the current social or political issues inherent in the world (Hendrix-Soto & Wetzel, 2019; Lee, 2011; Polleck & Epstein, 2015). O’Quinn’s (2005–2006) argument remains:

Because it is likely in this age of political turmoil that such situations will continue to emerge, teachers, as the touchstone of democratic practices, must be

evermore vigilant in teaching young people the critical literacy skills necessary to unwrap sociopolitical rhetoric and pull apart the political messages besieging them. (p. 261)

An important way to support students' background knowledge development and strengthen their critical reader-responses even more would be to engage students in not only critical reading of historical fiction text, but drawing connections to current events to understand the threads of racism that exist from past to present to future (McCullough, 2013; Möller & Allen, 2000; Wolk, 2003). Critical literacy is "grounded in the ethical imperative to examine the contradictions in society between the meaning of freedom, the demands of social justice, the obligations of citizenship and the structured silence that permeate incidences of suffering in everyday life" (E. Bishop, 2014, p. 52).

Conclusion

For more than 17 years, Burnett used Crowe's novel and the ASK Program to engage her students' critical thinking with curricular content (Galda & Beach, 2001). Rosenblatt (1995) stated, "By helping to focus the student[s'] attention on the actual emotions through which [they] ha[ve] entered into the lives of others, the teacher can reinforce the power of literature to develop social imagination" (p. 179). It is through social imagination that readers evolve:

We are able to predict and replicate human behaviour, while at the same time remaining susceptible to having our own behaviour affected by the text-worlds we create. The emotional and physical responses our text-world experiences can induce, may reduce us to tears, provoke laughter, even start revolutions. (Gavins, 2007, p. 10)

For literature to impact students' commitment to social justice, characters' emotions must infiltrate readers' hearts. Young adult literature invites readers to walk in a character's shoes and feel empathy for the character and, in effect, the human condition (Cart, 2019).

We argue that student–author interviews are a powerful source for developing students' critical reader-response as they develop text-worlds through the required reading and challenge the author's motivation for writing the novel's content through their critical questions. As students read literature like *Mississippi Trial, 1955* that deals with racism, they must continue to question what is presented as fact. Students asked critical questions that reflected their connections to the text-worlds they had created and their lived-worlds, worlds still impacted by events that precipitated the civil rights movement.

Although the civil rights movement occurred more than 60 years ago, African Americans still face racism and prejudice in the United States. During the fall 2018 student–author interview, Crowe told the students:

And so this book was published in 2002. That's 16 years ago, and here we are today—I'm talking to you about this book that you just read. When I was writing it, I had no idea that it would have that kind of long-lasting audience and in some ways it's sad that it does because part of the reason that the book is so relevant is because of Trayvon Martin and the Black Lives Matter movement. These things are still happening in our society that make my book relevant, that make Emmett Till's story relevant. I wish that weren't the case. I really wish that we didn't have any more stories like Emmett Till's.

Mississippi Trial, 1955 gave these adolescents an important opportunity to feel empathy for Emmett Till. As the research team, we collaborated to empower these eighth-grade students with knowledge we were never taught in school. We did not learn about Emmett Till's story until our adulthood. Likely, our teachers were unprepared to teach about human rights (Zembylas et al., 2016) and educational resources did not address Emmett Till's case. But for Burnett's students, through text-world development, they experienced befriending Emmett Till so that his murder would not fall on unquestioning minds, but infiltrate their minds and hearts to question, to challenge, and to feel Emmett's human experience. Young adult literature and student–author interviews create space for students to question and respond deeply to text, so deeply that their minds are challenged and their hearts are changed.

About the Authors

Dr. Danielle L. DeFauw is an associate professor of reading and language arts in the College of Education, Health, and Human Services at the University of Michigan–Dearborn. In 2020, Routledge published her book *Engaging Teachers, Students, and Families in K–6 Writing Instruction: Developing Effective Flipped Writing Pedagogies*. Her research interests focus on writing, flipped learning, teacher-writers, and using authentic writing tasks with K–12 students to support writing motivation.

Dr. Chris Crowe is a professor of English in the College of Humanities at Brigham Young University, in Provo, Utah. Focused on young adult literature as a researcher and author, he has published many books, including *Mississippi Trial, 1955* (2002), *Getting Away With Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case* (2018), *Thurgood Marshall (Up Close)* (2008), *Just as Good: How Larry Doby Changed America's Game* (2012), and *Death Coming Up the Hill* (2014).

Christine Burnett, a language arts and social studies teacher for over 20 years at Mount Clemens Middle School, in Mount Clemens, Michigan, passed away August 7, 2019. Instrumental in the successful implementation of the Authors, Specialists, Knowledge (ASK) Program with Dr. Ray Kettel, she opened her classroom in the late 1990s to authors and specialists who supported the ASK Program. Her legacy lives on through her students and the Macomb Intermediate School District's ASK Programs.

References

- Beach, R. (2000). Critical issues: Reading and responding to literature at the level of activity. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 32(2), 237–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10862960009548075>
- Bean, T. W., & Moni, K. (2003). Developing students' critical literacy: Exploring identity construction in young adult fiction. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 46(8), 638–648. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/developing-students-critical-literacy-exploring/docview/216915781/se-2?accountid=14578>
- Beauchamp, K. A. (Director). (2006). *The untold story of Emmett Louis Till* [Film]. Velocity/THINKfilm.
- Beck, I. L., & McKeown, M. G. (2001). Inviting students into the pursuit of meaning. *Educational Psychology Review*, 13(3), 225–241. [https://doi.org/10.40726X/01/0900-0225\\$19.50/0](https://doi.org/10.40726X/01/0900-0225$19.50/0)
- Behrman, E. H. (2006). Teaching about language, power, and text: A review of classroom practices that support critical literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 49(6), 490–498. <https://doi.org/10.1598/JAAL.49.6.4>
- Bishop, E. (2014). Critical literacy: Bringing theory to praxis. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 30(1), 51–63. <https://journal.jctonline.org/index.php/jct/article/view/457/pdf>
- Bishop, R. S. (2012). Reflections on the development of African American children's literature. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 38(2), 5–13. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/reflections-on-development-african-american/docview/1266034800/se-2?accountid=14578>
- Blake, B. E. (1998). “Critical” reader response in an urban classroom: Creating cultural texts to engage diverse readers. *Theory Into Practice*, 37(3), 238–243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849809543810>
- Browne, M. N., & Keeley, S. M. (2017). *Asking the right questions: A guide to critical thinking* (12th ed.). Pearson.
- Cart, M. (2019). Eavesdropping on the hearts of others. *ALAN Review*, 47(1), 72–74.
- Chafe, W. H., Gavins, R., & Korstad, R. (Eds.). (2001). *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans tell about life in the segregated south* [Disc 2: Voices From Behind the Veil: Selections From the Center for Documentary Studies Oral History Collection]. New Press.
- Chin, C., & Osborne, J. (2008). Students' questions: A potential resource for teaching and learning science. *Studies in Science Education*, 44(1), 1–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057260701828101>
- Crowe, C. (2018). *Getting away with murder: The true story of the Emmett Till case* [Revised and updated]. Speak.
- Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs. (2021, December 6). Federal officials close cold case re-investigation of murder of Emmett Till. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/federal-officials-close-cold-case-re-investigation-murder-emmett-till>

- Enciso, P. E. (1994). Cultural identity and response to literature: Running lessons from *Maniac Magee*. *Language Arts*, 71(7), 524–533. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/cultural-identity-response-literature-running/docview/196868250/se-2?accountid=14578>
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Freire, P. (2005). *Education for critical consciousness*. Continuum. (Original work published 1974)
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. Bergin & Garvey.
- Galda, L., & Beach, R. (2001). Response to literature as a cultural activity. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36(1), 64–73. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.36.1.4>
- Gavins, J. (2007). *Text world theory: An introduction*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Hendrix-Soto, A., & Wetzel, M. (2019). A review of critical literacies in preservice teacher education pedagogies, shifts, and barriers. *Teaching Education*, 30(2), 200–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2018.1465034>
- Hintz, C., & Tribunella, E. L. (2019). *Reading children's literature: A critical introduction* (2nd ed.). Broadview Press.
- Kettel, R. (1996). Reflections on *The Devil's Arithmetic* by a Holocaust survivor: An interview with Jack Wayne—B8568. *The New Advocate*, 9(4), 287–295.
- Laman, T. T. (2006). Changing our minds/changing the world: The power of a question. *Language Arts*, 83(3), 203–214. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/changing-our-minds-world-power-question/docview/196897268/se-2?accountid=14578>
- Lawrence, S. A., Rabinowitz, R., & Perna, H. (2009). Reading instruction in secondary English language arts classrooms. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 48(1), 39–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19388070802226279>
- Lee, C. J. (2011). Myths about critical literacy: What teachers need to unlearn. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, 7(1), 95–102. Retrieved from http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/archive/2011_1/lee.pdf
- Leland, C., Ociepka, A., Kuonen, K., & Bangert, S. (2018). Learning to talk back to texts. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 61(6), 643–652. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.730>
- Lewis, C. (2000). Critical issues: Limits of identification: The personal, pleasurable, and critical in reader response. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 32(2), 253–266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10862960009548076>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- McCullough, R. G. (2013). The relationship between reader response and prior knowledge on African American students' reading comprehension performance using multicultural literature. *Reading Psychology*, 34(5), 397–435. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02702711.2011.643531>
- McLaughlin, M., & DeVoogd, G. (2004). Critical literacy as comprehension: Expanding reader response. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 48, 52–62. <https://doi.org/10.1598/JAAL.48.1.5>

- Möller, K. J., & Allen, J. (2000). Connecting, resisting, and searching for safer places: Students respond to Mildred Taylor's *The Friendship*. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 32(2), 237–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10862960009548072>
- Moynihan, K. E. (2009). Local authors in the classroom: Bringing readers and writers together. *English Journal*, 98(3), 34–38. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/local-authors-classroom-bringing-readers-writers/docview/237321445/se-2?accountid=14578>
- Nappi, J. S. (2017). The importance of questioning in developing critical thinking skills. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 84(1), 30–41. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/importance-questioning-developing-critical/docview/1942155616/se-2?accountid=14578>
- Nelson, S. (Director). (2003). *The murder of Emmett Till* [Film]. PBS Home Video.
- O'Quinn, E. J. (2005–2006). Critical literacy in democratic education: Responding to sociopolitical tensions in U.S. schools. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 49(4), 260–267. <https://doi.org/10.1598/JAAL.49.4.1>
- Park, J. Y. (2012). Re-imaging reader-response in middle and secondary schools: Early adolescent girls' critical and communal reader responses to the young adult novel *Speak*. *Children's Literature in Education*, 43(3), 191–212. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-012-9164-5>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Polleck, J. N., & Epstein, T. (2015). Affirmation, analysis, and agency: Book clubs as spaces for critical conversations with young adolescent women of color. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language*, 54(1), 78–107. https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol54/iss1/5
- Reidel, M., & Draper, C. (2011). Reading for democracy: Preparing middle-grades social studies teachers to teach critical literacy. *The Social Studies*, 102(3), 124–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2010.538758>
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1982). The literary transaction: Evocation and response. *Theory Into Practice*, 21(4), 268–277. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1476352>
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1994). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Southern Illinois University Press. (Original work published 1978)
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1995). *Literature as exploration* (5th ed.). Modern Language Association.
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Smagorinsky, P. (2008). The method section as conceptual epicenter in constructing social science research reports. *Written Communication*, 25(3), 389–411. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088308317815>
- Tyson, T. B. (2017). *The blood of Emmett Till*. Simon & Schuster.
- Vasquez, V. M., Janks, H., & Comber, B. (2019). Critical literacy as a way of being and doing. *Language Arts*, 96(5), 300–311. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/critical-literacy-as-way-being-doing/docview/2221126990/se-2?accountid=14578>

- Villaneuva, C., & O'Sullivan, C. (2019). Analyzing the degree of consensus in current academic literature on critical pedagogy. *Scenario: A Journal for Performative Teaching, Learning, Research*, 13(2), 71–93. <https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.13.2.6>
- Whiteley, S. (2011). Text world theory, real readers and emotional responses to *The Remains of the Day*. *Language and Literature*, 20(1), 23–42. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-016-9285-3>
- Wolk, S. (2003). Teaching for critical literacy in social studies. *Social Studies*, 94(3), 101–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377990309600190>
- Zembylas, M., Charalambous, C., & Charalambous, P. (2016). Teachers' pedagogical perspectives and teaching practices on human rights in Cyprus: An empirical exploration and implications for human rights education. *Pedagogies*, 11(3), 197–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1554480X.2016.1182436>

Children's Literature Cited

- Crowe, C. (2002). *Mississippi Trial, 1955*. Speak.
- Hoose, P. (2010). *Claudette Colvin: Twice toward justice*. Square Fish.