Tear the Cover Off

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Abstract

Commercialism has taken over adolescent literature with shelves of books adorned with fanciful artwork. It is possible that young readers may choose their next read by how the book's aesthetics appeal to them rather than the genre or story inside the book. Also, some teachers, or even schools, may be stuck using the same canon of books year after year, not realizing how the world around them has changed. This paper offers a new perspective for teachers to refresh the classroom with a story that could enlighten their young readers. Today's classrooms are blended with many different skin colors and nationalities. This paper asks teachers to tear off the cover of a book and hand it to their students to read. That action will remove any visual introductions and spark curiosity. Lastly, families across America have suffered in dissimilar ways during the recession. The following article suggests that reading the bildungsroman, Bud, not Buddy, holds appeal for post-modern-day adolescents. It is a story of a young orphaned boy who is struggling during The Great Depression to find his long-lost father whom he had never met before. This paper is directed mostly towards educators and how they can introduce new reading material into their curriculum that addresses multiple genres and removes presupposed biases.

Key Words: Adolescent Literature, bildungsroman, young adult, Great Depression, recession, *Bud, not Buddy*

Before you decide to read your next book, ask a friend to choose one for you but tear the cover off before handing it to you. Do not allow commercial artists to instill presupposed connotations in your mind. The Spartan book covers that once filled libraries prior to 1950 relied solely on their titles and authors to lure its readers. Imagine if we could see other humans in this way—as only a cover with a title and an author. That theory was tested after handing a friend a book written by Christopher Paul Curtis entitled *Bud, not Buddy*. The front and back covers along with several pages were ripped off and discarded before handing it over. By doing so, it did Bud a service. It kept the reader color blind until the author chose to reveal him. That was the original intention, but the idea of removing the cover grew beyond just stripping away the skin color of the main character.

The method of tearing off the cover and handing the book to a young adult (YA) reader not only peaks their curiosity, but it also shows them that we do not require predetermined notions in life in order to enjoy something or learn from someone. This article will explore how YAs today can apply Christopher Paul Curtis's story about how a young protagonist, fraught by the loss of his mother, the economic strains of economy, absence of a nuclear family, and a hidden spirituality, conquered all without even the acknowledgment race.

Bud, Not Buddy is the story of a ten year old orphan from Flint, Michigan. The story is set during the time of the Great Depression. The audience watches as Bud takes an adventure from Flint to Grand Rapids in order to find his father using only the few clues left behind by his mother that Bud kept securely locked in an old suitcase. On his arduous journey, Bud teaches about equality, faith, and family with the unspoken language of a child who views the world with childlike innocence. It is an outlook that only a child can lose and can be destroyed by adults whose visions are clouded with discriminations.

Christopher Paul Curtis kept Bud's innocence by not resting his writing on the haunches of racism. President Barrack Obama spoke about a *post-racial* world during one of his 2004 Democratic Convention speeches. He said, "We've got a lot of pent up anger and bitterness and misunderstanding, but what I continue to believe in is that this country wants to move beyond these kinds of divisions—that this country wants something different." He went on to mention that we cannot forget our past and must acknowledge it. How do we move past racism as a society when some people continually strive to bring it up?

Our own government fosters the promotion of racism nearly every second across America as individuals fill out forms that require a person to check a box in order to declare their race. That data enables scientists, doctors, writers, psychiatrists, sociologists, and others to divide our country even further with charts, graphs, studies, and published articles. Even the textbooks that students read display colorful demographic charts and graphs that teach young minds to mentally segregate humans by color or origin. Yet, our President stands before our nation and proclaims that we are moving towards a *post-racial* America.

Curtis' adolescent book never asks YAs to check a box. It was published in 1999, yet it is more fitting of this world's newest generation. Our current batch of young readers has moved closer to a *post-racial* generation than any other society that has inhabited the Earth. Their secret?—they blend. There are no racial check boxes on *YouTube*. All children are born innately color blind when it comes to racism. YAs place their chips on social networking (texting for example) which is also color blind. They seek acceptance and loathe separation. They walk hand-in-hand at school functions and sit in groups of every nationality…and it works. Our young students have strangled the flame of racism not with voice or protest or hatred, but by removing the oxygen that fed it. This fete alone could make them the greatest generation yet, one that does not see race—only friendships. Curtis' book fits this generation. It provides YAs a story that is void of hidden agendas such as racism. Instead, Curtis places his chips on a good story. He delivers outlets to foster children, poverty-stricken children, bullied children, homeless children, children of broken families, and children of color. At the same time, teachers can secretly give their students a history lesson of the Great Depression.

Rip the covers off *Bud, not Buddy* and smell the scent of cardboard as the book becomes free. The trace aroma will dissipate and you will be left holding what Christopher Paul Curtis intended you to read—a YA novel about a young orphaned boy who is struggling to find his father. This bildungsroman's protagonist will take your YA readers by the hand and give them a journey that will make them cringe, then smile, then ponder, then cry, and finally squeeze their little fist with joy when Bud finally finds his family. Some young readers will also be able to relate to the time period in which the story is set due to our nation's current recession, and the government's debt crisis.

Christopher Paul Curtis opens the curtains of his book in 1936—seven years into the Great Depression. By that year, America was in a slow upswing following President Roosevelt's New Deal. The average rate of unemployment was 16.9% that year (Historical Statistics of the United States, 2006). In comparison, "The most recent recession began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009, though many of the statistics that describe the U. S. economy have yet to return to their pre-recession values" (Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2012). There are those youths who are currently occupying the desks of our schools that have experienced the very real effects of that recession. At the peak of that recession, "…employers took 3,059 mass layoff actions in February 2009 involving 326,392 workers…" (Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2012). According to the 2013 American Almanac of Family Homelessness put out by the Institute for Children, Poverty, & Homelessness, "Between the 2006-07 and 2009-10 school years, the number of homeless students increased by 38% (from 679,724 to 939,903)" (p. 41). The bottom line is: young Americans have felt the effects of the economy's downturn—some more than others.

With those statistics, it is certain that thousands of teachers across America have had homeless children within their classrooms. Are English teachers gauging what our society is experiencing and adjusting their curriculum to fit their students' needs or are they simply keeping a perennialistic philosophy and sticking to the old classics? Would a book like *Bud, not Buddy* not provide even a momentary uplift as the YAs realize that Bud could be their modern-day hero? Teachers should be like thermometers and sense when the environment is changing within their society.

Perhaps racism is not the current bully on the playground. Maybe it has been replaced by homelessness. There has to be a stigma associated with being homeless yet still trying to fit your puzzle piece into the commercially-induced dream world called school.

The trials that those students face have caused some humans to take their own lives. A cognizant-English teacher could realize that some of his or her students are suffering and offer them a light of hope from a good read. He or she could rip off the covers of *Bud, not Buddy* books and pass them out as designated reading for that quarter. The strange looking book could ignite the curiosity of the children and want them to solve the mystery as to why the cover went missing. Could it be that the cover was too racy? What is the book about? Their minds would be blank canvases begging for any sort of color to adorn their untouched surfaces. Even after reading the first few chapters, the genre would not be revealed right away. As the students dig in the teacher could lead a discussion of the problems Bud faced and how he overcame them. Relationships would be realized and students would start to understand that this is not the first time that America has suffered and others have persevered. The rough-looking book in their hands, with its moisture-sapping pages, would now be their distraction to the problems they face.

An extreme problematic result of the recession was the foreclosure of a home. Many Americans' watched their savings, belongings, and dignity get sifted away. Vehicles replaced houses and backseats replaced bedrooms. The few shiny nuggets left were considered family.

More and more each day, the cover is being torn off American families as well. Decades of divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing have snuggled single-parent families up alongside nuclear families as the country's norm. In 1929, nearly all children born in the United States, 97%, were born to married couples. By 2010, only 59 percent of all births in the nation occurred to married couples (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The website, *FreedomtoMarry.org*, reported that as recently as October 2013 fourteen states now offer same-sex partners the freedom to marry. Homes with parents of the same sex are not a new concept. While it still holds true that a man and a woman are prerequisite to create a child, the two ingredients are not essential to be demarcated as a family. A child does not peruse a shelf at a store and carefully choose its family. Instead, it is handed a one with the cover ripped off and he or she has to define how they see it. Make no mistake, society has done its part to try and tape the cover back on or define how every family should be, but the reality is a family is what you make it.

When the term family is used, it is often assumed the connection between people is through the same bloodlines or marriage. According to Merriam-Webster's lexical definition (2013), family is "a group of people who are related to each other; a person's children; and a group of related people including people who lived in the past". Christopher Paul Curtis teaches that family is the company you are with. After Bud's loss of his mother, he follows clues left behind by her to find who he believes is his father.

YA readers, such as orphans or children caught up in domestic violence, will be able to relate to Bud's journey from the systematically cold orphanage, to the short stay at the foster home of the Amos's, and then his own road trip to find a family member to latch onto. Bud seems distant and alert when dealing with people in his life, always dissecting words and preparing for the worst. He claims he can no longer produce tears as if any emotion that ignites tears no longer exists. He travels a lonely road to find whom he believed was his father encountering many helpful people along the way that show a peak at what a family feels like. Breakfast with Lefty Lewis' family made Bud realize the security that he had lacked since the loss of his mother. Laughing and enjoying the company of a nuclear family is something that Bud had not experienced. The true sense of belonging came about when Bud was united with the band for dinner at a restaurant. The overwhelming feeling of complete comfort and unity engulfed Bud whom lost control of his emotions, and for the first time in years he not only cried happy tears—he cried! The emptiness was lifted from Bud's conscience, the burden was lightened, and the void in his heart was occupied.

Many studies show that the bonds of the family concept are essential during childhood and instill a strong foundation throughout the journey of life. Although Bud was only blessed with a mother the first six years of his life, the foundation she built was enough to support him throughout his adolescent years. Christopher Paul Curtis defied the Webster's definition of family. He showed that for some, family could mean one parent, a lost parent, or whoever is in your life at that moment; the dynamic could change without warning.

The last thing that Christopher Paul Curtis manages to master without decorated covers, or a pulpit, is spirituality. Many children in our schools can relate to Bud, and may be able to find a spiritual relationship with a family member or mentor that has been taken from their lives. Bud seems propelled by a driving force, his deceased mother, to continue moving down an ostensibly predetermined path towards an ancestor whom he had never met. Whether or not it was divine intervention is left up to the reader.

Not only did Bud overcome every obstacle, he continued to adapt and survive. He established hundreds of his own lessons he referred to as "Bud Caldwell's Rules and Things". Each set had a number designation, a short title, and the actual lesson spelled out in a way that was easy to recall in case of emergency.

In a spiritual sense, Bud's Rules and Things could be considered lessons from beyond the grave. His mother's strong, constant, and serine teachings enabled him to be patient; not responding in a hurry, nor reacting without critically thinking, and to seek resolutions that would be appropriate in various situations. One thing that is certain, YAs want to read about other YAs operating on their own in the "big world" and succeeding. They want to see kids outwit adults without help or guidance, but a warm feeling comes with knowing someone is watching over you while you are in those tough times. As a hero, Bud was devoid of super powers or weapons, but his prowess disengaged him from failure.

Bud, not Buddy is an excellent example for teachers to tear the cover off a book and allow their students to take an adventure while learning moral lessons. The concept is fitting for this up-and-coming generation that ignores race and appreciates surprise. Through the eyes of Buddy Caldwell, we see struggles of hunger and shelter, and the pain of losing a loved one. However, Bud teaches of equality, spirituality, and family with actions of an innocent child struggling to survive. Many children can relate, within their own minds, to Bud, not Buddy's journey.

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