This book is dedicated to my mother
and our family’s rich pasts and presents.

And to Johnathan, Madisyn, and Hayden,
our promising futures.
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Many U.S. citizens think of their country as a land of opportunity—a place where people can create a good life for themselves and their children. Everyone can get a living, and everyone can get an education. It is a promise we collectively make to ourselves, even though it is often a hard one really to achieve. We see evidence of that difficulty year after year, when reports come out about a gap in academic achievement between various ethnic and economic groups.

In recent years, politicians have made law and policy out of their impatience with this state of affairs. The law sometimes known as “No Child Left Behind” has many serious faults, but it also carries the nearly radical message that it is intolerable for schools to write off poor and minority children as necessary losses. The requirement that schools report the scores of various ethnic groups, as well as low-income children, has shone a bright light on American schools, and it suggests that they are not necessarily the places of open and fair opportunity that we would like to think they are. Consequently, schools all over the country are scrambling to find ways of raising the test scores of disadvantaged students.

If they do not raise those scores, the adults in the schools face public humiliation or other uncomfortable sanctions, and so they search for answers out of their fear and anxiety. Fear does not, however, create an environment in which people are likely to look closely at children in order to understand them. The standards and testing regime, rather, sets a bar and asks a binary question as to whether or not individuals make the grade. The question is simply are the kids good enough at the tasks we have authorized? The question is not who are these children now and who are they becoming? but What world have we created for them, and
how does their learning reflect or improve that world? The language of most current education reform does not even permit such questions to be posed. There is little effort, then, to understand the lives and characters of low-income children, only to fix the parts of them that are substandard, as measured on a test, to make them less of a problem for adults, to get them to conform to a strictly enforced image, however fictional, of what is normal, middle-class, and economically productive.

Stephanie Jones’s book speaks into this context, allowing readers a deeper-than-usual look at the lives and thoughts of a few students from low-income households. Based in ethnographic research, the book shows, with great respect, the struggles and strengths of a handful of elementary-age girls and their mothers. Mindful that she is representing some of the most vulnerable people in society, poor female children, Jones treats her informants with admiration, caring, and a sense of identification. She is interested in how they grow as students, but she sees that academic growth as integrated into the whole person, the whole life. In showing us these girls in this way, she humanizes the way we look at students like them—helping us see such children not as demographic categories but as unique individuals who share a position created for them by powerful social and economic interests.

We teachers want and need to hear what Stephanie Jones has to say to us, because every time we interact with a student, we act like we know whom we are talking to. We enact a story in which we, as teacher, are one particular character, and the student is another particular character. With poor students, these imagined stories we play out may be ones in which the students’ homes and families are defective and dysfunctional when compared with our own. They may be stories in which we are awed by the drama in the children's lives. The narrative may be one in which we are rescuers or safe havens, providers or role models. Such narratives are ready-made in the culture, and we sometimes substitute them for the reality of interactions. When we take on these narratives and likewise position children to take on complementary roles, we create identities and interactions that may not always match up to lived reality. It is important that we have evidence-based accounts, detailed and three-dimensional ones, of the lives of children whose families struggle economically, in order to counteract the powerful stories we think we know, from television and other media, and from the lies our culture has made a habit of telling about the poor for two centuries.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was common to think of the poor as being in their economic condition because they were genetically defective. People were thought to be poor because of their lower quality of
character, their intrinsic feeblemindedness, debauchery, and laziness—and such words were common in the language used to describe them. The causes of poverty were assumed to be in the individual, rather than in a social system structured to be unequal, designed to repress some people’s wealth and income in order to grow that of others. Beliefs about the poor were often explicitly tied to eugenics, the project of improving humanity through breeding people with the most desirable qualities. Eugenics was not limited to Nazism, but was considered by many to be a valid scientific program throughout the world, particularly in the United States. After the liberation of the concentration camps in Europe, however, both eugenics and genetic accounts of deficit were mostly discredited and abandoned.

Deficit perspectives later in the twentieth century turned to the idea of culture to explain what was “wrong” with the poor. According to this cultural deficit perspective, poverty produced a culture that was entirely separate from that of the middle class. The poor were thought to participate in a way of life that was noisy, messy, chaotic, sexualized, criminal, violent, distrustful of authority, fatalistic, and hedonistic. The families, assumed to be matriarchal, were dysfunctional and were the main agency transmitting undesirable qualities across generations. Schools were, naturally, handed the responsibility of fixing poor children, instilling in them middle class values so that they could move up, while underlying economic relations creating poverty were left as they were. Adopting a deficit perspective, then, was a way of blaming the victim.

Apparently, it is too painful to think that individuals who are economically disadvantaged are just like the ones who are economically advantaged: created equal and still equal, morally and spiritually as valuable, working as hard to make a living and to make their lives satisfying and meaningful, and as deserving of happiness and full well-being. It is more comfortable to think that others’ misfortune is a result of something that the individual could have avoided, like learning that a traffic accident was a result of recklessness. Better that the poor should be people who are nonverbal, or whose language is deficient, or whose attitudes and cognition are different, or who really asked for it all along. Fictions like a deficit perspective make it possible to think that oppression, like privilege, is deserved. It is a fiction that makes justice irrelevant.

Recently, this deficit perspective has been on the rise again, as schools respond to pressures to raise the achievement of low-income students. Certain professional development programs have made millions of dollars by convincing teachers and administrators of a deficit view of their students. The instructional program that results is usually focused on changing behavior and language patterns, as if learning a code or a register will make up for the lack
of material resources that separates the poor from economically better lives. Too rarely is there any attention to students’ legitimate connection to the lives they currently live and the relationships that give those lives meaning. Too rarely is there any sense that children should not be as poor as they are, that society could and should take better care of them so that they won’t be hungry. There are too few conversations about the proposition that middle class teachers have a role to play in advocating for children, either one by one or through legislation and funding. And too seldom is there any suggested way of approaching conversations with the students themselves about the systems of inequality and injustice that make life difficult for them and their families, about the systems that create poverty and concentrate it in certain groups or neighborhoods. These silences poison an important conversation about children’s lives, families’ values, and America’s future that needs to happen in place of a fixation on an “achievement gap” manifest in test scores.

Stephanie Jones’s book provides an antidote to that poison. Focusing on a group of particular girls from economically vulnerable families, Jones’s data address specific life stories, not generalities about class and race. It is a small study, focused on a town, a gender, a socioeconomic location, an age cohort, a circle of acquaintance. Jones only researched girls. The poverty she witnessed was particular to a specific location and was undoubtedly different from the lives of the families she now must see in New York City. But looking this closely permits us to see that each of these girls, and each of these mothers of girls, contains multitudes. No one is just a gender, a class, or a race. Each person enacts diverse identities. What might look like a monolith—children of poverty—is really an intricate mosaic of different attitudes, behaviors, capacities, and experiences. I cannot know anything about an abstract category like children of poverty. Jones’s writing makes me realize the degree to which my preexisting categories can cause me to miss the real children in front of me. The only appropriate relationship to these children is curiosity, wonder, and interest, rather than the certainty that I already know something about them once I know their parents’ incomes. I realize that I have to learn an intellectual and interpersonal humility, a willingness to learn. As a teacher, I need to pay attention to the ways Jones went about learning about these students, and the meanings she made of what she discovered.

Stephanie Jones uses herself—her own life history and memory—as an instrument of investigation. Having grown up in a low-income family, she makes herself vulnerable first by teaching from that experience, and second, by writing about it. But this is a vulnerability more powerful than strength. Her family was much more than simply low-income, and she can see their strength
as clearly as she sees the resources they did without. Her use of memory makes her wise, resistant to nonsense, and capable of interpreting the human narratives she sees and hears. She identifies with these girls, and that identification multiplies the information from which she can draw. Some people who write about children from low-income families act as if all teachers identify with the middle class, but many of us came from working class or poor families. It is common for teachers to be the first in their families to attend or finish college. Jones shows us how to use what we know in order to become insiders in our students’ neighborhoods and lives, how to create common ground with students who are distant from our present selves but no so far from the people we were—and those we loved—when we were children. She shows us, too, a possible way to begin talking about poverty with children who are themselves poor, though they may not introduce themselves as being from such a social category. For most teachers, such conversations are hard to imagine having, and it helps to have guides like Stephanie Jones help us picture how it might go, even though we know it might still feel awkward and difficult, and even though we know our own students will respond differently from hers. New kinds of classroom conversations, about literacy or about social class, arise out of images in our mind’s eye of how such conversations might go, and Jones provides such an image.

Among books and articles about poverty and education, Jones’s book is also distinguished by its social hope. She is not content to leave the world’s inequalities where they are, but wants to teach students to understand how systems of power and privilege work, to recognize and critique them, to question and confront their effects. The book includes some of the questions that might help classrooms approach a critical form of literacy—a way of reading that is oriented toward making the world more fair and just. These are important steps toward a literacy curriculum in the interest of a world that is more attentive to the voices, needs, and experiences of the most vulnerable.

In education these days, “achievement” is an important word, but it usually refers to test scores, a spiritless concept not worthy of teachers’ energies and ambitions. The achievement Stephanie Jones focuses on is the achievement of a world in which her students become citizens for whom children living in poverty, silence, and passivity is unacceptable. In a democracy’s school system, that is an achievement for which we should all be striving.

—Randy Bomer
This book grew out of my dissertation research under the guidance of a dedicated advisor, Deborah Hicks, and committee members Rhoda Halperin, Annette Hemmings, Barbara Comber, and Patricia O’Reilly, five women to whom I am indebted for helping me to grow as a researcher, writer, scholar, and activist—thank you. The Spencer Foundation provided funding for this research and I cannot thank them enough for the gift of time, a luxury I had not experienced before receiving the Spencer Dissertation Fellowship. My deepest gratitude goes to each person who waded through early drafts of chapters: Deborah Hicks, Barbara Comber, Lesley Bartlett, Lalitha Vasudevan, Rebecca Rogers, Jen Thiel, Cathy Compton-Lilly, Emily Skinner, Rhoda Halperin, Deborah Anderson, Grace Enriquez, my 2005–2006 students at Teachers College, Columbia University, and my mother, thank you for your patience and feedback that guided me toward better thinking and writing. Lane Clarke and Karen Spector, my dear friends who read and responded to many chapters, thank you for your honesty, energy, and encouragement throughout the process of writing this book; your voices have no doubt found their way into the lines on these pages, but I am solely responsible for any and all shortcomings in the text. And to my editor and new friend, Gloria Pipkin, your words pushed and pulled me along every step of the way; thank you for believing in me.

Unlike most people I know, naming aunts, uncles, great-aunts, great-uncles, first, second, and third cousins, and grandmothers back three generations is something that comes easy to me and most others in my family. There is a long history in my mother’s family of knowing, supporting, and loving every person on the family tree. This history is from where I write, and though it would take

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pages to acknowledge each family member who has contributed to my well-being and my thinking about the world, I want to acknowledge them as a group: Thank you with all my heart.

Mom, you are my hero and my most important teacher—thank you for your wisdom, devotion, and enthusiasm. Thank you to my brother John, for standing with me through thick and thin, good times and bad, and for always questioning and challenging what is happening in our society. Thank you to my baby sister Desiree, who came along when I was a teenager and who has put up with my constant mothering ever since. I am indebted to all three of you for being patient as I rattled on and on about how the world needed to be changed, for correcting me when my perspective was too narrow, and for teaching me what unconditional love means. Thank you to George and Mark, my biological and adopted fathers, for calling to see how the book was coming; it means a lot to know that you were thinking about me and this writing. Thank you to my family through marriage, a father-in-law with a similar history as my own family, and a mother-in-law with insightful understandings of societal injustices, your words of encouragement have meant a great deal. And to my maternal grandmother who is the leader of our enormous extended family, words cannot express the inspiration you provide for me and everyone around you. I hope to some day have a fraction of your strength, determination, resilience, and intuition. And finally, to my husband Casey and my daughter Hayden who spent many daddy-daughter days together as I stared at the computer screen wondering why I decided to write a book; your presence, smiles, and love make everything worthwhile.

I cannot thank enough everyone at Bruger Elementary School and in the community of St. Francis who welcomed me with open arms and talked honestly and openly with me about deeply personal issues such as teaching, learning, and social class.

And finally, the precocious girls written into these pages, thank you for all that you have taught me; I am forever indebted to you and your families. Your tenderness and strength will stay with me forever; I honor you and hope the words on these pages convey the richness of your minds and lives.
Class and culture erect boundaries that hinder our vision—blind us to the logic of error and the everpresent stirring of language—and encourage the designation of otherness, difference, deficiency.

—Mike Rose, Lives on the Boundary

Each of them had been considered At Risk at one time or another, all of them were thought to have hard family lives, and some of the eight girls in this study already knew how other people perceived them. Perceptions of students from working-poor families are often formed through vision that has been “hindered” as Mike Rose puts it, a narrow seeing that encourages middle-class people to designate children and families as other, different, and deficient. Boundaries erected by class and culture are in desperate need of being deconstructed, taken apart one assumption or stereotype at a time. My brief introductions of the girls will begin with a descriptor that might have been used by a school official, and then I will add one layer to complicate the dominant perception. Two layers, however, only begin to tell the story of each of these feisty and beautiful, sweet and angry, loud and articulate, insightful and manipulative girls. But it will at least initiate the process of seeing and acknowledging the many parts, or “identities,” of all students and considering these from multiple perspectives.

Fair-skinned, blue-eyed Alexis might be considered the quiet one in this bunch, but then I would be shortchanging her rambunctious and inquisitive sides that she demonstrated around the neighborhood by squealing her bike tires, climbing trees, and closely studying dead cats that were found regularly during her second grade year.
Chocolate-skinned, dark soulful-eyed Faith might be described as the happy-go-lucky girl in this book, but then I would be ignoring her sermons around right and wrong according to the Bible, her tendency to compare her younger sister to the Devil, and the pain she felt after her father’s accident at work when his legs stopped working and the wheelchair took over.

Long-, dark-haired Sarah may be thought of as a teacher’s pet, but that performance was limited to the hearing range of the teacher and changed dramatically when the teacher wasn’t around and Sarah would challenge a lesson presented, such as one on bullying when Sarah said, “It ain’t fair to call someone a bully.”

Thin, fair, and dyed-blond-haired Rose could be considered the troubled girl who screamed, cried, and sat silent too often, but then I would be downplaying the joyful part of her who played house with her cousins, worked at a corner store with her grandma, and wrote about her mother “the angel” in her life.

Heather might be called the princess, prancing around on tiptoes during choice time with a paper-made crown atop her long blond-haired head, but she also boasted, loudly, about kicking boys in the “hotdog.”

Tangled-haired Cadence could be dubbed the Bad Girl in the group, turning her back to the teacher and screaming “No!” from across the room, but this wouldn’t capture the kindness she exhibited at home with her mom, grandma, and grandpa as she kissed them, helped them clean, and stood beside them learning to cook.

Black-haired, freckle-skinned Joanie might be the attitude girl, hand-on-hip and head swaying back and forth as she tells a peer what she can do with herself, but I would be ignoring her deep desire for academic achievement and her consistent push for equality in the classroom—characteristics that would indeed make her a good lawyer, as her mother pointed out.

And Joanie’s cousin, Callie, might be considered the least likely to succeed given that her teachers had already “failed” her one year, but cold-eyed, stone-faced Callie wept as she read poetry, journaled with her mother at home, and became the master of the group with manipulating digital photographs.

The lives of these eight young girls, Joanie, Callie, Sarah, Faith, Cadence, Rose, Heather, and Alexis, their classmates, and their families will be peppered throughout this book. Their lives have become a part of my own as I engaged in this research since the girls’ first day of first grade, following them through the fifth grade. Their worlds have seeped into my subconscious much like the lives of my own family members, and I hope they will seep into yours. Another life that is a part of this book is my own, one that mirrors the girls’ and their mothers’ in many ways, but took a different turn in early adulthood as I became
the first college graduate in my family and began taking baby steps toward a
more privileged, but complicated, middle-class existence.

Lives are complex and created through experiences of the social structures
around us including social class, a concept that will be foregrounded in this
book. Class and poverty in the United States and how working poverty is lived
in a predominantly White urban enclave by seven White girls and one African
American girl and their families will be explored. How class is felt, lived, con-
structed, articulated, understood, and resisted in complex, even contradictory
ways grounds the text to build a solid foundation challenging stereotypical
notions of urban poverty. I challenge readers to consider how the “War on
Poverty” in President Johnson’s era became the “War Against the Poor” (Gans
1995) that continues today as people living in poverty are systemically and
socially discriminated against because of their material living conditions and
their economic, linguistic, social, and cultural capital that cannot be easily
exchanged for privilege and opportunity in a world that operates like a market

Lives are also created through literacy practices, and what I will refer to as
critical literacy in this book will serve as an important foundation from which to
critically read interactions inside and outside school as well as texts that perpet-
uate stereotypes and assumptions. Reading, writing, and language, in the
broadest sense, will be used to look at the ways educators understand children
and families, how families and children understand educators, and how lan-
guage learning spaces in the classroom can include and build upon experiences
of working-class and poor children in valuable, validating, and powerful ways.
Transformative education that invites students to attach themselves to school
without rejecting their family or shedding identities they’ve formed within their
community will be an important part of this literacy work. Such work in the
classroom, however, could not be possible without the in-depth understanding
of lives and the ways in which class, gender, and race come together to shape
the social, psychological, physical, and academic lives of the young people with
whom we work.

Lives are created through identities and the experiences of shaping, resist-
ing, performing, and negotiating identities across various social, psychological,
and physical landscapes. The girls in this study lived in homes with strong val-
ues and beliefs that were intertwined with their material lives and social class
and gender positionings. As they crossed the threshold of school they were
faced with adhering to the strong values and beliefs held by teachers, principals,
counselors, and others within the bureaucracy who are closely connected to the
material lives of more dominant classes. The social class divide is a large and
deep one, and one that may be felt more by school-aged children than by anyone else as their identities are challenged, punished, or even used as examples of how not to be successful in our society. Perhaps more than men or women working with others of similar social class status, working-class and poor students are reminded daily of their difference from what is valued in the larger society (hooks 1996; Rist 2000; Santiago 1993; Walkerdine 1998; Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001). Their understanding of classed identities within the educational and justice system begins quite young and will be demonstrated in this book as young as first grade.

Like the lives within these pages, your life, too, has been constructed through your experiences with social structures, literacy practices, and identity work. You, the educator who is committed to teaching students and building relationships with families, the educator who chose the profession to make a difference, the educator who believes that public schooling in the United States can be a vehicle of mobility for children from working-class and poor communities, will also be a part of this book. This book is written to help you reflect on yourself as a reader, a writer, and a literacy educator. You will be invited to work through exercises and think deeply about narratives I share; I hope collaborative work with colleagues will support you in this undertaking as we try, together, to build more sensitive and productive ways of talking with and about children and families who have been marginalized since the beginning of public education. Together we will work toward serving our students and their families in their best interest through literacy.

Let yourself linger a bit with this book without expecting quick fixes. Make explicit and deliberate connections and disconnections between the text and your personal life, your classroom life, and the life you would like to live. Work toward moving beyond this book as you use it as a window of opportunity through which to imagine what might be possible for you and the children and families you serve.

Note

1 The girls will begin their sixth-grade year as this book is released.
One version of Lori’s philosophy of education was presented in Chapter 6, which focused on gaining students’ interest by starting with their lives. The following quote extends her thinking but it turns our attention to the “perfect lives” of book characters that Lori believed many children encountered each day in their language arts education:

Because [kids in St. Francis] see things all the time—and they read these little stories in school about all these perfect lives, and mommy and daddy work and blah—that is not how it is. You have a mom who gets a check once a month whose daddy’s on the street corner selling drugs whose kid is—you know—sittin’ there with people comin’ in and out of the house who buy drugs and they see this, yet they’re goin’ to school learnin’ about perfect little Jill’s life and this and that—and that’s bullcrap because that’s not how it is.

Lori chose a hypothetical “Jill” to represent all that is disconnected from the lives of children in St. Francis within the books they often read in classrooms, and she intuitively understood that constant interaction with these mainstream stories was not healthy for children who lived very different lives. In an ironic twist, Lori’s daughter Cadence was the reader who I first noticed making up “fictions” about her life to seem more like a character that was living a seemingly perfect life—Henry was his name. Like Lori’s reference to a “Jill,” “Henry” will be used in this chapter, but the Henry I refer to is the main character in a series of books written for early readers that Herbert Kohl would describe as “middle class in character, [that ties] well-being to money and portray[s] lives full of comfort and joy” (Kohl 1996, 25).
The Henry I refer to here is the beloved preadolescent White, middle-class boy from the *Henry and Mudge* series written by Cynthia Rylant.

This chapter will begin by reconsidering the “basics” of reading instruction to include a critical perspective in the reading workshop and exploring what I call the Multicultural Trap of critical literacy. Then I will describe a series of events in the second grade classroom around *Henry and Mudge* and my attempt to add one simple tool for challenging the books' representations of a normal life. And finally, this chapter will end with work that I did with the girls as they were entering fifth grade when we critically analyzed *Henry and Mudge* through “Disconnections” between their lives and the books. These disconnections led to insightful conversations around assumptions and stereotypes based on social class.

**Back to the Basics of Reading:**
The Four Resources Model

Allan Luke and Peter Freebody (1990, 1996, 1999) have long advocated for the basics of reading instruction to include four families of practices where students’ repertoires of reading skills and strategies are honed. Their work has been highly influential in Australia through policy and curriculum, making a coherent model that includes critical analysis as a basic practice in the teaching and learning of reading. The four families of practices known together as the “Four Resources Model” are not considered to be linear or hierarchical but rather integrated and necessary for readers to engage with text in meaningful ways as *code breakers, text participants, text users,* and *text analysts.* These four “roles” students will be expected to practice means that readers should be equipped to decode text, make meaning from text, use text appropriately and flexibly across contexts, and evaluate text regarding issues of social, cultural, and political power. These four families of practices are meant to serve as references to what is necessary, but not necessarily sufficient, in the development of critical literacy practices in local contexts. The model is founded on the tenets that since all texts are constructed with none being neutral, readers need a repertoire of tools and practices that will help them decode texts and navigate the complex terrain of multiple perspectives and power relations central to critical literacy (Bigelow 2005; Comber 1998; Comber and Thompson 2002; O’Brien 2001; Wallowitz 2004).

Reading and agreeing with the suggestion that all four families of practices are basic necessities for developing readers is one thing; figuring out
how to make that work with real children in a progressive reading space is something altogether different. After a brief discussion around a critical literacy perspective in the reading workshop, I will share one experience of great tension between supporting early readers with texts they could read with some fluency, while wanting them to develop skills and strategies for questioning and challenging texts that excluded life as they knew it. To put it another way, I wanted readers to be able to read print and to feel comfortable acknowledging and challenging the “perfect lives” represented in the books they were reading, but it didn’t always turn out the way I had hoped—mainly due to my falling victim to the multicultural trap that critical literacy can lure us in to.

- Weaving the Critical Throughout the Reading Workshop

Reading, and reading a lot is the most important thing students can do as they continuously develop as code breakers, text participants, text users, and text analysts. Reading workshop, as defined by progressive educators in the United States (e.g., Calkins 2001; Taberski 2000) is a framework for organizing the practices of meaningful reading in classrooms and has been celebrated for growing readers through student choice, individualized instruction, and large blocks of time reserved for self-selected independent reading. A critical literacy perspective encompasses these cornerstone aspects of progressive literacy education, and at least for some researchers, stands firmly upon these ideals, as Pam Green writes:

> before critical literacy can occur within the classroom, students need the opportunity to engage in meaningful use of literacy, or in other words, to use literacy in ways that relate to their interests and needs. Without the opportunity to write and read for a range of purposes, with access to a variety of texts, there is no basis upon which critical discussion of and reflection on literacy can occur. (2001, 12)

Many progressive literacy educators already have systems in place (such as Reading Workshop) that can easily incorporate critical literacy—but progressive beliefs and structures are not enough (Finn 1999; Schneider 2001). In a great number of classrooms in the United States, children are reading massive quantities of text, making sense of those texts, and responding in interesting and creative ways to their reading. But in most classrooms students are *not* learning to be text analysts; they are not questioning power relations in the text, stereotypes that are reproduced
through text, the multiple ways in which a text could have been constructed, and the ways in which a text positions different readers. In many progressive classroom spaces, three of the four families of practices in the Four Resources Model are being engaged—but the fourth, the critical, is too often left out of the literacy teaching and learning happening in our schools.

A critical literacy stance that includes the serious consideration of perspective, power, and positioning is simply not a part of most students’ experiences in school. A secondary problem however, is that oftentimes a critical perspective is a part of reading instruction in the elementary grades, the texts used as exemplars for recognizing marginalized perspectives are those that would be considered “multicultural” in nature (e.g., Leland, Harste, and Huber 2005; Lewis 2000). These books are often written from the perspective of a character who is not White, and/or who does not experience life in stereotypical, mainstream ways (such as the nuclear family living in a home they own with access to social and economic resources that protect them from the hardships often faced by working-class and poor families).

I fell victim to this multicultural trap as a second-grade teacher; my students were exposed to literature with characters and situations that did not reflect mainstream America. We discussed perspectives, critically considered social issues, asked ourselves about the use of power, and explored how the books made us feel and what they made us think. Our critical literacy “work” with written text was often focused around progressive, sophisticated children’s literature that was read aloud by me given the challenging text and the students’ emerging practices as code breakers. However, I never deconstructed a mainstream text in front of the students, and I never gave them the tools they needed to do it themselves as they read independently in Reading Workshop. When they were faced with books that seemed to present “normal” lives in a mainstream way, the growing readers in the classroom worked hard as code breakers, text participants, and text users. But they were certainly not text analysts. One example was in their reading of Henry and Mudge.

Thinking Critically About Henry and Mudge

Henry and Mudge stories are written as readable text, the illustrations support problem solving of difficult words, the main character is a young child, and there are many books within the series. Such characteristics are
considered important for early readers as they negotiate sign-symbol relationships and construct understandings of texts, or, to use Luke and Freebody’s model, perform as code breakers and text participants. But, like all texts, the *Henry and Mudge* series signifies much more. In this case the storylines are situated within a White family’s life that includes a mother, father, young boy, and a dog. The family lives in a free-standing house with a wide front porch, a living room, breakfast nook, dining room, and a bedroom for Henry where he has a twin-size bed and a fish aquarium, a large front yard, and a spacious backyard that is home to a swing dangling from a tree branch and a picnic table, all framed by a white-picket fence. The family eats at the dining room table together, has a separate table and chairs in the kitchen, a full basement for storage, a tool shed with rows of tools, etc. The parents throw elaborate birthday parties for Henry, and have relatives who live in nice homes in the country with materially rich interiors.

In the book *Henry and Mudge and the Best Day of All* (Rylant 1995) Henry invites friends to his home for a birthday party. Guests are welcomed by colorful streamers wrapped around columns on the front porch and balloons stretching into the air from either side of the front steps. The children’s creatively decorated packages tied with perfect bows are piled in the living room and they make their way to the backyard for the games set up by Henry’s mom and dad.

Though much critical literacy work had been accomplished through whole-class read-alouds, and small and large group discussions as presented in Chapters 2, 4, 8, and 9, students were not reading *Henry and Mudge* books critically, nor had I taught them to do so. Instead, they were constructing fictions of their own lives incorporating themes from the series in an attempt to make “connections” with the books. After reading about Henry’s elaborate birthday party with games, prizes, balloons, and many friends leaving the party with goldfish in plastic bags, Cadence told three nearby classmates, “I had goldfish at my party too.” The children in the classroom seemed to try desperately to *connect* with Henry and his experiences rather than question them as “normal” or consider them as valuable within themselves but not the definition of a happy child’s existence. The day after Cadence’s statement about her birthday party, I planned small-group work to suggest two practices they could use to critically read mainstream texts:

1. Permission to question the text and compare it to their own lives, and
2. A simple tool for reconstructing, or changing, the text to align more with students’ experiences.
The following transcript is from one of the videotaped small group meetings around *Henry and Mudge* books. Beginning with general questions about the books within the series, I eventually moved toward scaffolding students’ critical reading of the text by asking, “What would you change about this story to make it more like your life?” Once I began questioning the text, its representation of “family,” and asking the students what they might change, the discussion moved toward text analysis and the critical reading of oneself into a story.

**Stephanie**: So you have told me all the things you like about these stories, what if you could change something about them—what would you change?

**Sarah**: Like the names of the characters and the characters.

**Stephanie**: Who would you change?

**Sarah**: The dog or the father.

**Annie**: First change the father.

**Stephanie**: Okay, change the father or the dog. Into—what do you mean?

**Sarah**: Change him into a scientist (giggles from all three girls).

**Stephanie**: Okay, he could be a scientist. Or maybe he wouldn’t have to be there at all, right? You could take the father out of the book altogether?

I inserted this possibility because Sarah’s father was in jail at the time and she seemed under pressure to suggest an alternative “father” that would fit within the mainstream discourse of the *Henry and Mudge* series (a white-collar professional father) rather than suggest something that might reflect her world.

**Sarah**: And add the father as a big brother or somethin’.

Sarah had several older male cousins and uncles that were important in her life, but no older brothers. However, she suggested an alternative to the family structure in the text that she understood intimately.

**Stephanie**: Ohhh. So maybe there could be a big brother instead of a father? I’m wondering if you started writing a new series like this, hmmm. I’m wondering where you could say the father went. Why wasn’t the father there?

**Sarah**: We could say he’s at work.

**Alexis**: Or he’s lazy.
Sarah and Alexis were speaking within competing discourses around fathers, or men in general, in the community of St. Francis. Sarah suggesting that fathers do, in fact, work, and Alexis suggesting that if they don’t work, they are lazy. A more critical reading of not working, however, would recognize the lack of work available to many of the adult men in St. Francis who had not completed high school and relied heavily upon their manual labor and market demands for such things as painting, drywall installation, and so on.

STEPHANIE: Okay, he could be lazy or he could be at work.
ANNIE: Or he could be in jail.
STEPHANIE: He could be in jail.
SARAH: He could be in a car.
STEPHANIE: Okay, so if you each started thinking about . . . hmmm. I love to read Henry and Mudge stories too, I think they’re great stories—but, when I look at this family it doesn’t really look like my family. I don’t know if it looks like Alexis’ family.

Following this prompt, the girls’ enthusiasm increased as well as their use of gestures and they began moving around on the floor. Considering a change in one character was fine, specific. But opening up the possibility that the entire family structure can be called into question seemed to excite them.

ALEXIS: No. I have mass more people.
STEPHANIE: How ‘bout you Annie? Does this look like your family?
ANNIE: No (shakes head no and opens eyes wide).
STEPHANIE: How ‘bout you, Sarah?
SARAH: No.

STEPHANIE: So maybe Cynthia Rylant wrote about a family she knew, but if we started to write stories like this we’d have to change it a lot, wouldn’t we? To write about things that we really know.
SARAH: It looks like my aunt’s ‘cuz they live in a house and um, they got a backyard with a dog in it and stuff.
STEPHANIE: Really? So this looks like your aunt’s family?
SARAH: Yeah, my aunt _____, she lives in Florida.

Sarah had discussed her aunt before, noting that she lives in a neighborhood with “big houses” and near “doctors and lawyers.”

STEPHANIE: So is there anything else you might change in these stories?
ANNIE: Switch these [picture on cover of book].
STEPHANIE: What?
ANNIE: [points to Henry and his female cousin]
STEPHANIE: Oh. Have the girl in the real story, in the main story? Oh, Annie, I see what you mean. Here’s Henry in the center of the picture, it’s all about Henry. And the girl cousin is in the background. So you would switch those?
ANNIE: Yeah.
STEPHANIE: So your main character would be a girl?
ANNIE: Yeah.
STEPHANIE: Oh, that would change things, huh? Great idea.

As a teacher, I was encouraged by Annie’s suggestion that gender made a difference in this story and that she would like to see the main character represented as a girl. This was reflective of the work we had done together as a class and in small groups around gender discrimination and the value of gender-specific experiences. At this point in the conversation I wanted the girls to move into independent reading, and I hoped, but didn’t necessarily expect, that the work we had done together around questioning, challenging, and changing the text in small ways would be taken up during quiet reading time. I was pleasantly surprised, however, that Sarah in particular took on the role of facilitator (or “teacher”) during a small group collaborative reading. With her willingness to mimic my questions and prompts, Sarah continued to plant the seeds of critical literacy that I had started in the discussion about the Henry and Mudge books.

Reading and Discussing Henry and Mudge Independently

Minutes following our small group meeting, Annie, Sarah, Alexis, Tina, and Brian began reading while sitting in a circle on the floor. They chose to read Henry and Mudge and the Best Day of All and began reading round-robin style—likely based on their early socialization in first grade to take turns around a circle when reading. The following transcript is from an audiotape recording of their discussion after they read the entire book. Sarah attempts to scaffold the group to consider “changes” to the story—something I hadn’t requested that they do, but she has taken it upon herself to continue the theme from our small group meeting.

SARAH: Alright, we gotta talk about it alright? Now Annie, we’re gonna
make you talk some alright? Alright. Annie. Talk. Like, what could we change if we made up the story?

**TINA:** We . . .

**SARAH:** Annie.

**ANNIE:** Change . . . (inaudible) to the front cover (she’s talking about the girl and boy in the illustration).

**SARAH:** Like what _word_ can we change?

Sarah continued to position herself in the role of a teacher or facilitator, but had no success in getting the other students to “change” something that was meaningful (in Sarah’s eyes) in the story. She didn’t give up, however, and prodded the students to deepen their thinking and finally ended with her own suggestion for a change in the story:

**SARAH:** Now wait, what could we—what else could we change? I know there are more things, cuz we had a talk about this this morning, didn’t we Annie?

**TINA:** You gotta change somethin’.

**SARAH:** I _will_ change somethin’.

**SARAH:** That Henry didn’t _have_ goldfish [at his birthday party]— that Henry _went_—

**BRIAN:** [inaudible—anticipating Sarah’s suggestion of fishing]

**SARAH:** That’s why I wanted to make a connection, that’s what I wanted to say. Tina, you know what I wanted to change? I wanted to change that Henry _didn’t_ have goldfish—he went _fishin_’. That’s what I wanted to change.

Though Sarah’s change may seem inconsequential to someone not familiar with cultural practices in St. Francis, the change she suggested was closely in line with her experiences of family gatherings, special occasions, and celebrations: going fishing. Sarah challenged the assumption in the book that happy birthdays are spent in someone’s backyard with costly games, prizes, and gifts, and replaced that privileged practice with her family’s preference for spending time together fishing. With the exception of Annie, who was also in our small group earlier on this same day, Sarah didn’t succeed in getting others to suggest changes that might call into question the authority of Rylant’s text. However, it is promising to know that both Sarah and Annie quickly used the tools of our small group to challenge, and change, _Henry and Mudge_, a series of texts that had, up to this point, been considered innocent, neutral, and the construction of normalcy.
Rereading *Henry and Mudge* as Almost-Fifth-Graders: The Critical Disconnect

On a hot, sticky July morning in the summer before the girls entered fifth grade, I met Heather, Sarah, Alexis, and Cadence at a park across the street from Bruger Elementary School. Each of the girls was wearing very short jean shorts and a short-sleeved t-shirt, and as they walked toward our meeting place I noticed a distinct difference in their gait and overall presence from our previous meeting six months before when the girls were in the middle of their fourth grade year. A sophisticated and carefree aura surrounded each of them, but particularly Heather and Sarah, who began talking right away about their summer social lives playing volleyball, rollerskating, going to the local amusement park, and giggling about boys on whom they had “crushes.” These girls had obviously done a lot of “growing up” in the previous months, and I began to wonder whether or not they would even be interested in doing the reflective, critical work I was hoping for on this particular day. Armed with a rolling suitcase filled with books of all kinds, including *Henry and Mudge* books, I sat cross-legged on the shaded concrete, my head flying side-to-side following the conversations that bounced from one girl to the next. Why would they even be remotely interested in thinking back to the life of dear Henry that they had read and talked about so long ago? On that morning I learned a very important lesson, however, and that was that when critical literacy engagements are embedded in students’ lives and driven by their observations and comments, that students (even almost-fifth-grade girls) will find such work interesting, motivating, and deeply stimulating.

After about twenty minutes of catching up in high-speed, multilayered, loud conversations, Cadence offered me an entry point into the work I had hoped we would do together on this particular day. Talking about her fifth or sixth birthday party and getting hit in the head with the swinging stick meant to crack open a dangling piñata, Cadence gave me the opportunity to open a conversation around the *Henry and Mudge* books, “Oh, that reminds me of something I wanted to ask you about today . . .” I insert quickly so as not to miss the opportunity. Quickly unzipping the suitcase and pulling out a dozen or so books about Henry and his dog Mudge, I asked the girls if they remembered reading the series when they were in second grade.

“Oh, we loved those books!” squealed Heather.

“I read that one!” said Cadence snatching up one of the books.

“I read that, and that, and that . . .,” said Sarah.
Digging through the pile of books was fun for the girls, they talked about different storylines, characters, and memories of loving these books when they were “little.” After a brief trip down memory lane, I described the book I was writing for teachers (the one you are reading now) and how I had been thinking about readers making connections during their reading. The girls quickly barked out different “connections” they make as readers: “life connections between you and the book” or text-to-self connections; “texts to other books” or text-to-text connections, and book-to-world connections. They were eager to offer examples, but I wanted to go back, again, to something I had witnessed in second grade. I told them the story about Cadence telling her reading partner that she had “goldfish at her party too” just like Henry at his birthday party in *The Best Day of All*. Cadence giggled knowingly as I told the story, and I continued:

and I thought, hmmm. I wonder if that is really a connection to the book or is Cadence feeling like she has to make up something in her life to fit the book? So then I started listening to other people’s conversations and sometimes it seemed to me that people would make up things to make a connection to the book. So then I thought, ‘Wait a second, maybe I should be teaching kids to find the disconnect.’ So you can find the connections with your life, but you can also find the disconnect. The part that doesn’t go with your life. And you can talk about that—how it’s not the same as your life, and how, um, that can help your understanding. What do you think about that? Have you ever thought about disconnections?

The girls were listening intently but admittedly had never really considered how books did not connect with their life experiences. I asked them to give it a try as they flipped through the pages of *Henry and Mudge* books looking at the illustrations. The first disconnection verbalized was by Sarah, when she was referring to an illustration in *Henry and Mudge Get the Cold Shivers* where Henry’s mother delivered several kinds of food and drink to a sick Henry in bed: “My mom don’t bring me all that stuff to my room—she won’t bring me no popsicle, no crackers, actually, she’ll just—I don’t even know.” The girls were adept at articulating connections with the book, but faced with the task of describing the disconnect between the text and one’s life; Sarah struggled with finding the words for articulating such difference. “I don’t even know” is indicative of that struggle—how can you describe difference in a meaningful way?

Shortly afterward, Cadence commented on an illustration of Henry, his mother, father, uncle, and cousin eating at a dining room table: “I have a
disconnection. Uh, my family, they just don’t always eat at one big table. We always go in the living room.”

“Let’s talk about that,” I suggested, turning the book around so that Heather and Sarah could also see the illustration. They immediately jumped in with their own disconnections, “Yeahhh!” agreed Heather, and Sarah added, “Oh yeah, we eat and watch TV.” The girls had a ball talking about all the different places they and their families regularly eat meals and reasons why: small spaces with only a couple chairs and mail piled high on the table were common experiences. One that I hadn’t heard of in St. Francis but forced me to go way back in my own life was Cadence’s story about eating with her sisters on the roof outside the second floor window. I had nearly forgotten about all the snacks and meals and playtime I had with my older cousins after we would crawl through their third floor window and perch ourselves on the gray-shingled, burning-hot, nearly flat surface. Toward the end of this part of the discussion, Heather reminded us all that there is never one “truth” however, and that for her family at least, they “sometimes eat like that at Thanksgiving or something.”

The girls, anxious to articulate disconnections now, tapped into an important insight about illustrations and how they can be read as “text”—illustrations do not only reflect the materiality of lives and hint at social-classed living, but they also frame family practices. These cultural ways of being, not simply the one-dimensional simplistic illustration itself that includes people and objects, were invoked from the image and became the topic of conversation with the girls as they considered connections and disconnections between their family practices and those represented in the images of the text. Soon the group moved into a critical conversation dealing with social class stereotypes as they recognized Henry’s cousin, who seemed different from everyone else in Henry’s family.

Class Stereotypes: Assumptions, Challenges, and a Frilly-Dressed Little Rich Girl

Studying the same illustration of Henry, his mother, father, uncle, and cousin sitting at a long dining room table, Cadence piqued the group’s interest in the girl cousin who was wearing a bow in her curly hair and a frilly white dress.

“She’s like different. She acts like she’s different from the rest of the family,” Cadence pointed out.

“She don’t eat all that stuff,” suggested Heather.
“What do you mean?” I asked.
“She eats like lobster,” Heather told us.
“Oh, you think she eats lobster?” I asked.
“Yeah, she looks like a little rich girl,” Heather sneered.
“Oh, she looks like a little rich girl, what do you mean by that?” I probed.

Heather responded by describing her white frilly dress, her hair bow, and Cadence joined in. Sarah, however, sat quietly.

“Do you think she looks like a rich girl?” I asked Sarah. She responded by shaking her head no quietly. “Tell us about that.”

“’Cuz, I ain’t rich, but I ain’t poor, but I got dresses,” she tells us matter-of-factly.

“She looks like a little spoiled brat. Look at her purse,” added Heather, “this is how she walks, I’m serious,” she told us as she stood up to perform what she considered a spoiled brat walk. Again, Heather is reading the illustration to understand not only material lives, but also the social practices of the characters.

“I never look like that until like Easter or Christmas,” Cadence told the group.

“She just looks like she’s not used to—she looks like she’s from a fancier place,” stated Sarah.

“To eat lobster!” yelled Heather, glad that Sarah is finally seeing her point.

“And eat out,” added Cadence.

The girls continued to look through the books when Heather found the evidence she had hoped for, “Oh my God! She is spoiled, that’s her room! Look at her teacups and her hankies.”

“Do you have a disconnect, Heather?” I asked her.

“Yeah, I ain’t got all that stuff on my wall.”

Sarah jumped in, “Heather, but you’re spoiled too.”

“No I’m not!”

“Yes you are!”

“There’s her bed. She is spoiled,” Heather pointed to a canopy bed in the cousin’s spacious bedroom.

“I have a canopy too, but mine ain’t just like that. But I got the circle,” Sarah told us.

The conversation continued and began to incorporate money when Cadence stated that she was not like that girl (in the book) at all, because she didn’t get everything she wanted and she had to do chores around the
house to even get any money from her mom. The other girls had a different experience with money, however, and Sarah told us that she was given $40.00 each week by her father to have fun with and pay her cellular phone bill. This was a great opportunity for me to challenge the girls, again, to consider multiple perspectives and to resist stereotyping or essentializing people the way that they had been essentialized by people for so long.

“You have a phone?” I asked, surprised.

“I do too,” said Heather.

“I been having a phone since I was eight,” Sarah added.

“Now some people, Sarah, might say that only really rich kids have phones,” I stated.

“Nu-huh,” said Heather.

“Oh, that is not true!” Sarah shouted in disbelief.

“Why?” I asked.

“‘Cuz,” Sarah shrugged.

“We’re not really rich and we both have a phone,” Heather told me.

“My cousin, her mom used to be real bad on drugs and then she got better, she’s been better for a couple months, and they got ‘em an apartment and stuff, and she ain’t got a job yet, but my cousin gots a phone, and her brother gots a PlayStation 2 and stuff like that, and they ain’t rich,” Sarah told the group.

I pulled out a notebook and pen, “So there are lots of in-betweens. So if you have rich over here (I draw a line on a piece of notebook paper)—and you have really poor over here (another line is drawn on the opposite side of the paper). There’s lots of stuff in the middle, right?”

“And you’re doing okay, like,” added Heather.

“Like not so rich and not so poor,” Cadence finished.

After this acknowledgement of the gray areas between the extremes of rich and poor, the girls began talking about people who “act” rich, or “goody-goody” even when they are not. The conversation shifts from material possessions and money to the performance of social class—something that makes thinking about such issues even more complex.

I began to probe them about the goody-goody concept, “And you said ‘goody-goody.’ Does that mean that you have to be rich to act goody-goody?”

“No,” Sarah stated slowly with her eyebrows raised.

“Confusing isn’t it?” I asked the girls.

“Like goody-goody, is like when you’re not really rich, but you’re
really perfect and you just act like you’re rich and act like you got everything but you don’t,” Sarah explained.


“Yeah,” said Sarah.

“Because if somebody is like . . .” Cadence began.

“She has teacups on her wall!” shouted Heather.

“What does that mean though?” I asked.

“She’s rich!” Heather yelled.

“She could be spoiled, but her family could, probably couldn’t be rich, they probably just like her to,” Sarah began.

“Do stuff,” Heather added, again focusing on the performance of social class.

“People don’t have to be rich and there’s uhhh, ugh!” Cadence was starting to get quite frustrated. It had all seemed so simple before this discussion.

I laughed a little and Heather mimics what she perceived as a performance of a rich girl, “People be like,” she continued in a high-pitched singsongy voice, batting her eyelashes and exaggerating the pronunciation of each word, “’Mommy, can I have the money to get a dress?’ Just like on the Fresh Prince of Bel Air,” Heather brought in her knowledge of girl performances in a wealthy household from a television show.

Throughout this conversation that began with a frilly-dressed girl in a simple illustration, the girls began to articulate their local understandings of social class difference and the roles that material goods, money, and performance play in social class. Beginning with assumptions and stereotypes, the girls were able to work through when and why some were simply wrong and that a perspective that takes into account individual people and practices and relativity might be more productive than the rich-poor dichotomy and how people are perceived and judged based on where they might be considered within the spectrum.

Should We Burn Henry and Mudge?¹

Lori’s quote framed this chapter, focusing on the perfect lives often portrayed in children’s literature and the disconnection between such portrayals and the experiences of most children in St. Francis. As a progressive, critically focused teacher, I agreed with Lori’s insight and worked hard to fill the classroom library with books that reflected many ways of living...
lives, and used those texts as the focal point during my read-alouds and minilessons across the curriculum and the school day. My eye was always on other ways of representing experiences, and I feel confident that the children learned a great deal and grew from such engagements. However, what I failed to attend to at the time was the fact that most texts the children will encounter inside and outside school are mainstream in nature and privilege a hypothetical “hegemonic” American way of living. And though Lori was on the right track with her critique of the stories about “Jill’s” perfect life in school books, the bigger picture is even more daunting: television commercials, newspaper advertisements, sitcoms, cartoons, movies, billboards, magazines, song lyrics, music videos, and so forth are the texts of their worlds that are often placing idealized versions of a White middle-class life as standard or normal, to which people will compare their own daily existences.

Burning *Henry and Mudge* because of children’s unarticulated comparisons of their own lives to Henry’s is not viable. In fact, neither is choosing not to use the books in a classroom. The fact of the matter is that readers of all ages need to understand how power, perspective, and positioning operate in all texts—but most definitely in texts that promote unitary versions of successful lives and those that perpetuate stereotypes of any kind. *Henry and Mudge* can continue to serve important purposes for developing readers as code breakers, text participants, and text users, but it can also be used for developing text analysts—a crucial aspect of basic literacy practice.

**Moving Forward with the Basics: Critical Literacy, the Multicultural Trap, and Disconnections**

The basics of literacy instruction, and reading instruction in this chapter, must include a critical perspective that offers students the tools to deconstruct and reconstruct texts and work toward socially just understandings. In second grade, the first tools I offered students included acknowledging difference and reconstructing (or “changing”) the text in some way that aligned more with the reader’s life. In the summer following their fourth grade year, the girls and I worked together to deconstruct mainstream illustrations and stereotypes and reconstruct the concept of what is “normal” (this was not included here). Instead of generations of children continuing to be raised by and compare their lives with images and books representing perfect lives, readers need basic repertoires of practices to ask critical questions of texts, creators of texts, and of themselves as readers of texts.
Critical literacy practices in the United States have often been focused around the use of multicultural literature and there are many reasons why such literature is imperative in any classroom. However, never using mainstream texts for critical literacy purposes created a serious problem in my second-grade classroom as students were not working to challenge such texts but were instead comparing their own lives to the characters’ lives in the books. Multicultural literature has a lure of its own, but especially in the critically focused reading and writing classroom, this rich body of literature can offer much to readers and writers. However, there is a potential Multicultural Trap lingering in the wings of such practices, and that is the trap of forgetting to help students critique and challenge mainstream texts—those texts they will encounter most often throughout their lives.

Disconnection from such texts can open up spaces for critical conversations around books, images, and social practices. The connection-making pedagogy that has pervaded reading instruction must begin to include disconnection, the articulation of disconnection, and the important conversations that can take place around such acknowledgements. We are often hyperaware of our difference from others, whether in text or life, but these differences are also difficult to understand and even more challenging to discuss. Talking across difference, however, can lead us to insights, just as the girls in this chapter began to realize that “rich” and “poor” stereotypes were not necessarily a productive way of thinking about different people, including themselves. And that conversation began with a comment about a disconnection between a reader and a frilly-dressed girl sitting at a dining room table.

**Exercise 10.1 Deconstructing Children’s Literature**

*Miss Nelson Is Missing!* (Allard 1985) was a favorite book of a graduate student in one of my classes. Each fall she would read this book to her second grade students, laughing along with them at the images of the “substitute” teacher as she was portrayed throughout the text. Given an assignment to critically read a text, this student purposefully chose a beloved book because she did not believe there was anything about it necessary for critique. In the end, however, she was appalled at how the two different “teachers” were presented and recognized the use of standard images of female beauty in the illustrations. Though surprised at what she had not noticed before about gendered stereotypes, this teacher decided not to avoid the book but rather to engage her students
in a critical reading of the text. All texts are constructed, and they all use perspective and power to position readers and characters inside the text in particular ways.

Choose a book that you often use in your classroom. Work through a deconstruction of the book’s images and words by using questions from Chapter 7 about perspective, power, and positioning. Then consider the following:

1. Why were you drawn to this book in the first place?
2. Were you surprised by your deconstruction?
3. What roles did connection-making and disconnection-making play in your choosing of this book and then of your deconstruction of this book?
4. How have you used the book in the past?
5. How might you use the book in the future to incorporate the development of critical literacy and readers as text analysts?

It would be helpful to share critical insights of various books with colleagues and to work with others to deconstruct mainstream world texts such as television commercials, popular cartoons (I recently worked with a group of teachers to deconstruct *Dora the Explorer*), newspaper advertisements, and films. Like the enthusiasm and joy the girls demonstrated in their critical re-readings of *Henry and Mudge*, you may find critically reading texts of all kinds to be stimulating, challenging, and even enjoyable.

This chapter has foregrounded two tenets of critical literacy, deconstruction and reconstruction, and has provided evidence for the necessity of rethinking the basics of reading instruction while cautioning educators of at least one potential trap. Reconstruction and social action will be the focus of Chapter 11 as we reconsider writing workshop and the role of critical literacy within a progressive writing classroom.

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