

# *The Outsiders* is Still “In”: Why This Old Novel Is So Popular with Teens, and Some Activities Students Enjoy

Lauren Groot with Martha Story

What is it about *The Outsiders* that makes it such a ubiquitous hit? I suggested to my colleague, Martha Story, that we interview students to find out. I arrived at her eighth grade classroom at Swift Creek Middle School in Tallahassee, Florida, ready to do some activities that prompted discussion and opinion-forming. At the end of the second day, I asked THE question: “Why is *The Outsiders* so popular with teens today, even though it was written over 30 years ago?”

Good reading, realistic, current and kid-oriented are the recurrent remarks, but the eighth-graders say it much better than I can. Here are a few comments:

“I think *The Outsiders* is a story that is still alive and everyone prefers it because it goes back to how things were and you can compare how things are now. The only difference I see is people don’t call themselves Socs and Greasers anymore, but there are groups who still fight!”  
—Ramya

“It deals with kids our age. It deals with problems we face. We get to hear about how time has changed.” —Kelly

I think the reason *The Outsiders* is so popular today is because no matter how old the book is, it tells it the way it is. There’s problems everywhere, with everyone. Nobody gets all the breaks. The author tells about how life is all around.”  
—Lori

“*The Outsiders* let me escape from the real world and it informs me what life was like in the late 50’s and early 60’s.”  
—Sean

“Because the conflict between kids today is the same in many ways as it was in the past.” —Russell

“Because it still deals with situations that we deal with today. Like how Greasers and Socs have their own groups and they don’t really like each other. We still have groups like that.”  
—Tiffany

“I think that this book is still popular because it is a good story...” —Brooke

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“Why I like the book *The Outsiders* is because it is a good story about how a group of kids can survive without any grown-ups.” —Lauren

“The suspense and meaning of the book gives it its popularity.” —Justin

“I think *The Outsiders* is still popular because the book is so realistic. There are groups today who are just like that. We still have our groups and detest others. Nothing has changed, really.” —Stacey

It seems students find this book a validation of what they see in their own lives and appreciate reading about the struggle for individual identity while still wanting to belong to a group. Although Ponyboy deserts gang life after realizing the “waste of human potential resulting from delinquency and violence,” the non-didactic tone of this novel keeps the students tuned in and reading (DeMarr 153). When the students arrive to English/Language Arts

class excited about this novel, usually they simply want to READ *The Outsiders* without interruption! Nevertheless, with such student engagement, there are many opportunities for vocabulary enrichment, literary discussions, reading gains and writing improvement.

## Seeing Stars: Haves and Have-nots in Dr. Suess and *The Outsiders*

I have never had students object to being read to, so I read Martha’s class a story as an introductory activity. Due to the recent big-screen popularity of Dr. Suess’s *The Grinch That Stole Christmas*, I thought that reading a Dr. Suess story to the Swift Creek students would be fun and provide a bit of bonding. I chose *The Sneetches* because of its obvious tie-in with *The Outsiders*. I video-taped the students’ reactions while I read this story (only 3 had heard of it before) and after watching the video, I realized that every student was transfixed. After the story, I asked if the students saw any correlation between *The Sneetches* and *The Outsiders*.

Predictably, the students mentioned how Ponyboy’s gang

was like the Sneetches without stars; the Socs were like the Sneetches with stars. But the conversation took an interesting turn: discussion ensued about how some people they know, as well as celebrities, “ghetto-up,” referring to the fashion statement and attitude that copies the look and countenance of people who are from “the ghetto.” Hippies, who displayed their lack of materialism through an unmanicured appearance, were mentioned in this discussion, also. Sometimes, the students said, “It’s cool to be on the outside.” I asked the students, “What happens when everyone is trying to be cool by being on the outside?” “That is when things change,” Justin said. “Different is usually cooler. Sameness isn’t.” Nodding of eighth-grade heads confirmed this remark.

I found this a very interesting agreement since I often witness teenagers’ adherence to a “cool” code by being identical in attitude, dress and activities. During my tenure as a teacher, I have seen innumerable teens being excluded from the “in” crowd by simply dressing differently than the reigning clique. Discussions brought about by *The Sneetches* and *The Outsiders* opened a door toward a discussion of diversity being about more than race and socio-economic status.

### The Herber Exercise...Using Students’ Experiences to Enhance Reading Comprehension

Drawing from the students’ experiences in life makes for lively discussions about the vocabulary and themes in *The Outsiders*. On day two of my visit to Swift Creek, I introduced the Herber Exercise to them, and they enthusiastically participated and competed.

#### The Herber Exercise Step-By-Step (Simmons and Palmer)

1. Teacher identifies the next section of literature that the students are to read and writes on sentence that captures the main idea of this section. Teacher then chooses two words from this statement that students should learn and explore.
2. Students form groups of no more than four people. The group has one blank piece of paper, and the identified scribe/reporter draws a line down the middle. Reporters write one of the “main idea” words chosen by the teacher at the upper left hand corner of the paper.
3. For a specified number of minutes (four minutes works well), the groups tell their reporter the words that are popping into their head (no dictionary/thesaurus) in relation to the word from the main idea statement. When the designated time is over, the groups count their words and the teacher records the groups’ results on the board. The group that comes up with the most words wins for word number one.
4. For the second word from the main idea statement, do the same as in #3, above.
5. Once the number of words are recorded for word number two, the groups take turns explaining any word-relationships between the two columns.
6. Students agree or disagree with teacher-written *predictive statements*, related to the text that is to be read. The teacher may ask students to orally explain their opinion. See examples below under Step Six.
7. After the identified text is read, students discuss the words and predictive statements again to allow them to revisit their thoughts and opinions.

### The Herber Exercise Applied to *The Outsiders*

#### Step One:

The class was to begin chapter 7 of *The Outsiders* the day after my visit, so my main idea statement (step 1) was drawn from that chapter: *Ponyboy realizes the bleak future of violence between gangs, and that individuals, not gangs, are what is important in forming relationships.* “Bleak” was a words within chapter 7, and I thought “individual” warranted some discussion.

#### Step Two/Three/Four:

The groups (of four students each) came up with an average of 20 words for both “bleak” and “individual.” I would like to note that the video captured a phenomenal, atypical happening in this middle school classroom: All students were participating and engaged; everyone seemed to be having fun. The students were out of their chairs leaning around the group’s elected “reporter” as they came up with words; the video validates that all students had words to share. Here is an example from J.B., Justin, John and Casey’s group (spelling errors excluded):

Bleak	Individual
dreary	lonesome
somber	independent
gloomy	Self-confident
dark	single
lonely	strong
sad	separate
depressed	willing
weak	powerful
stress	one
helpless	indivisible
low	particular
vulnerable	smart
cold	spiritual exclusive
raw	odd
bearing	unitary
dismal	special
cheerless	expressed
dejection	difference
bare	exclusive
blank	entity
windswept	sole
	unique

#### Step Five:

Matches drawn between the words were explained by the group: “Lonely and single, because sometimes people who are single get lonely. Weak and one, because if you’re just one, you could be weak. And bare and independent, because people are left out in the open, ya know, bare, when they’re independent and don’t care what people think about them.”

#### Step Six:

As if on cue, I could tell the students appreciated shifting from “group work” to an individual, “no pressure” activity of simply applying their opinion to the predictive statements. They obviously enjoyed placing their no-penalty “A” or “D” for Agree/Disagree on their paper I handed them.

### Predictive Statements (related to Chapter 7, *The Outsiders*)

1. "Funning around" in a serious situation makes everyone feel better.
2. Chocolate cake is a nutritious breakfast.
3. Underprivileged people think that everyone else is better off than themselves.
4. If children were burning inside a house, anyone would run inside and save them.
5. Ponyboy and Sodapop should go to a foster home where grown-ups more responsible than Darry could take care of them.
6. Dallas only risked his life by going into the fire because Ponyboy and Johnny needed help.

The predictive statements I wrote created discussion that was animated, silly, as well as serious. At times, the conversation was loud, and not a one-at-a-time discussion, but I let them continue and did not "shush" them; ALL of the discussion was about the topic at hand. They eventually quieted down and took turns again. I was excited to see their enthusiasm. Sometimes you just have to say your opinion to your neighbor and not wait to be called on, especially when you are 13.

I was surprised to find that 15 of the 24 students agreed with the first statement. All but 2 disagreed with statement number 2, and statement number 3 shifted the jokes about chocolate cake to serious conversation about how people perceive themselves and others. Statement 4 was equally split, and the students who believed it amoral to not save the burning children accepted the other students' rationale that risking one's own life could ultimately be a "stupid move." All of the students believed that Darry was the right person to be raising Ponyboy and Sodapop; and all of the students thought Dallas only went into the fire to help Johnny and Ponyboy.

### Dress Up and Go to the Movies

As fashion is so important to teens, much discussion centered around what the teenagers in *The Outsiders* wore. Martha brought in a madras shirt one day; the students loved this visual, as it answered some of their questions about style in this novel.

Martha and I decided that since the students were especially interested in the fashion preferences of the Greasers,

we would have a Greaser dress-up day. We brought in pictures of Greaser-like attire and discussed that no knives, cigarettes, etc. (real or pretend) could be brought onto campus.

Most of the eighth graders in the school dressed up and completed their look with greased-back hair or pony-tails. The boys rolled up their sleeves and flexed their muscles while the girls painted on bright red lipstick. It seems they began to understand the irony of these "tuff" characters: that much of the "tuffness" was superficial; it was a shield to ward off anything that might hurt them.

The movie *The Outsiders*, from the 1980's, was a tremendous hit with these modern eighth-graders. They enjoyed knowing that S. E. Hinton was the nurse that came into Dallas's room, and they recognized some of the stars that are still popular and prevalent in today's movies. Chocolate cake and eggs, served with grape jelly were movie-time snacks

brought in by the parents, or prepared in *Teen Challenges* (Home Economics) class to further enhance students' ability to make connections with *The Outsiders*.

This high-interest novel, written near the middle of our previous century, has a hook into our teens that allows for many more teaching opportunities. In my opinion, remembering that students are not blank slates, that they are people full of opinions, experiences and knowledge is one of the first steps in helping students become readers. Responsible, critical, and

"pleasure" readers are what we hope for, and *The Outsiders* is just the novel to prompt students to join the reading "gang."

### Works Cited

- DeMarr, Mary Jean & Jane S. Bakerman. *The Adolescent in the American Novel Since 1960*. Ungar: New York, 1986.
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