

## Fifty Alternatives to the Book Report

Diana Mitchell

Students tire of responding to novels in the same ways. They want new ways to think about a piece of literature and new ways to dig into it. It is hoped that this diverse group of suggestions will whet the interest of students in exploring new directions and in responding with greater depth to the books they read.

### 1. Character astrology signs.

After reading brief descriptions of the astrology or sun signs, figure out which signs you think three of the main characters from your book were born under. Write an explanation of why you think they fit the sign, drawing on their actions, attitudes, and thoughts from the book.

### 2. Heroes and superheroes.

Select two or three people your character would think of as a hero or superhero. Describe the characteristics of the hero and why those characteristics would be important to your character. Also describe which characteristics your character would most want for himself/herself that the hero or superhero possesses.

**3. Create a childhood for a character.** If your main character is an adult, try to figure out what he or she would have been like as a child. Write the story of his or her childhood in such a way that shows why he or she is the way he or she is in the novel.

**4. Critique from the point of view of a specific organization.** Select an organization that might have a lot to say about the actions or portrayals of characters in the novel you

## TEACHING IDEAS

read, and write a critique of the book from its point of view. For example the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals might have a lot to say about Lennie's treatment of animals in *Of Mice and Men*, The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People on the portrayal of Crooks, and the National Organization of Women on the portrayal of Curley's wife and the fact that she was never given a name.

**5. Social worker's report.** If the events in the novel merit it, write up a report as a social worker would on the conditions in the home and whether or not it's a good environment for a child. For example, if a social worker went to the McNabs' house in *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli (1990, Little, Brown) how would she describe the home and parenting style of Mr. McNab? What would her recommendations be?

**6. College application.** Create the application that a character you have just read about could write and submit to a college. Use all the information you know about the character and infer and create the rest of it. On the application include *Name*, *Academic Rank in Class*, *High School Courses Taken* and *Grades*, *Extracurricular Activities* and *Personal Activi-*

*ties*, and *Work Experience*. Choose one of the following questions to answer in a two-page essay from the character's point of view: what experience, event, or person has had a significant impact on your life? Discuss a situation where you have made a difference. Describe your areas of interest, your personality, and how they relate to why you would like to attend this college.

**7. School counselor's recommendation letter.** Write a summary appraisal from the school counselor's point of view that assesses the character's academic and personal qualities and promise for study in college. The college is particularly interested in evidence about character, relative maturity, integrity, independence, values, special interest, and any noteworthy talents or qualities. Why do you feel this student would be well-suited to attend college?

**8. Talk show invitation.** Select a character, think about his or her involvements and experiences, then figure out which talk show would most want your character on as a guest. What would they want the character to talk about? Who else would they invite on the show to address the issues the character is involved in? Write up the correspondence between the talk show host and the character in which the host explains what the character should focus on while on the show. After the show, have them exchange one more letter mentioning how they felt about what happened.

**9. Radio exchange.** Your character calls into a radio show for advice. Choose which show your char-

acter would call in to and then create the conversation he or she would have with the radio advice giver.

**10. Movie recommendations.** From all the movies you've seen in the last couple of years, pick five you would recommend that your character see. Give a brief summary of each movie and explain why you think the character should see it.

**11. Create a home page.** Select several characters and design a home page for each of them, picking out appropriate backgrounds and pictures and then creating information that would tell a viewer about your character. Also, create links to at least five different sites that you think your character would be interested in. Then write up and post on the page an explanation of how you made the decisions you did and what you believe this tells us about the character.

**12. Chat room conversations.** Imagine that your character has found other people to talk with while in a chat room he or she found while surfing the Internet. Describe the chat room your character was in and why your character would be drawn to the kind of group that operates the chat room. Then construct the conversation your character had with others while in the chat room.

**13. E-mail directory.** Create the e-mail directory of all the people you can imagine your character keeping in touch with on e-mail. Explain why you selected the people you did and what it shows about your character. Then construct several exchanges between your character and some of the people in your character's directory.

**14. Title acrostic.** Take a sheet of construction paper and write the title of the book down the side of the paper. For each letter in the title, construct a sentence that begins with that letter and that tells something significant about the story.

**15. Cartoon squares.** Create a series of six drawings in six squares that shows a significant

event in the novel. Under each picture or cartoon, write a few lines of explanation.

**16. Word collage.** Write the title of the book in the center of a sheet of paper. Then look through magazines for words, phrases, and sentences that illustrate or tell something about your book. As you look, think in terms of the theme, setting, plot line, as well as characters. Work to get fifty such words, phrases, or sentences so the whole sheet of paper will be covered. The visual impact of the collage should tell a potential reader a lot about the book.

**17. Yearbook entries.** Imagine what three or four characters from your novel were like in high school. Cut out a picture of a person from a magazine to represent each character. Mount one picture per page and under each picture place the following information which you will create: nickname of character; activities, clubs, sports they were in and what years; class mock award such as "class clown"; quotation that shows something about the person and what is important to him or her; favorites such as colors and foods; a book that has had a great impact on him or her; voted "most-likely-to" what?; plans after high school.

**18. Letter exchange.** Create a letter exchange between a character and the author or write a series of self-reflective letters from several characters on what the character learned about himself, others, and life.

**19. Awards.** Create an award for each of the main characters based on their actions in the novel. One might be awarded "most courageous" for fighting peer pressure, another might be awarded "wisest" for the guidance he or she gave other characters. For each award, write a paragraph that explains why this character deserves this award.

**20. Talk show on issues in novel.** Create and perform a talk show around one of the major issues or themes in the novel. For example,

after reading *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* by Chris Crutcher (1987, Dell) you might want to discuss the issue of running away from home. Include people to represent several points of view on the issue. You might include characters from the book, a social worker, a police officer, a gang member, etc.

**21. Dream vacation.** Where do you think your character would most like to go on a vacation? Pick a spot, describe it, and explain why he or she would want to go there or download information from the Internet on the place. Then write a day-by-day itinerary of what the character would do each day and why you think the character would enjoy this activity.

**22. Scrap book.** Think about all the kinds of mementos you would put in a scrap book if you had one. Then create a scrap book for your character, cutting out pictures from magazines or drawing the mementos he or she would have in a scrap book. Think about Willie in *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* by Chris Crutcher. He would probably have something in his scrapbook to represent his baby sister, his love of baseball, his accident, his experiences in L.A., and so on.

**23. Photos or magazine pictures.** Find two or three photos or magazine pictures that would have special significance to your character. Mount them on a sheet of paper and write an explanation of why they would be important to your character.

**24. Music.** After reading a novel, figure out how you would divide up the book into sections. Then select a piece of music that you think captures the feel or tone of each section. Record the pieces and if possible do voice-overs explaining what is happening in the novel during the piece of music and why you felt this piece of music fit the section of the novel.

**25. Poetry.** Write three poems in response to the novel. The poems

can be about the characters, where the book took place, or the themes in the book.

**26. Twenty questions.** Three classmates are each assigned the role of one of the characters in the book. You and your fellow classmates have to figure out which person is which character. Only 20 questions may be used. Create the questions that you and your classmates can use to figure out the identity of each of the three students.

**27. File a complaint.** Adapt the persona of one of the characters who you feel was portrayed in a sexist or racist manner. Write up a complaint explaining what you feel was unjust in your portrayal and explain the actions you would like the author to take to remedy the biased portrayal.

**28. Tangible or intangible gifts.** Select a character and figure out what two or three things you believe your character most needs or wants. Draw or cut out pictures to represent these "gifts" and write to your character an explanation of why you picked these things out for him or her.

**29. Talk to the author.** Write a letter to the author of the book explaining to him or her why you think he or she wrote the book and what he or she was trying to show through the book. Be sure to explain what you got out of the book. If the author is still alive, send the letter to the author via the publisher of the book.

**30. Point of view column.** Write an opinion column like those that appear on the editorial page of the newspaper. Choose a theme or topic from the novel you just read and write the column from the point of view of one of the characters. Your character might write about the importance of education or why we should accept people who are not like us.

**31. Character monologues.** Select an event in the story that characters have different views on. (For instance, Willie in *Crazy Horse*

*Electric Game*, his girl friend, his mom, dad, and friends all had different views on his running away.) Then write up two or three characters' opinions on the same event in the form of monologue (one person talking to him or herself).

**32. Make up a word test for the novel.** Think of fifteen words that are essential to the understanding of the book. Explain why you picked the words you did and how you would define them in terms of the story.

**33. Answering machine message.** Answering machine messages have gotten more and more creative over the years, reflecting the interests and idiosyncrasies of the owner. Select five characters from the novel you have just read and create an answering machine message from each of them. Pay particular attention to diction and tone.

**34. Found poems.** Select a chapter from the novel you have just read that you consider powerful or interesting. Then select words, lines, and phrases that you think project strong images and show the impact the chapter makes. Arrange this material into a poem.

The following example comes from Chapter Twenty in *Spide Fences* by Trudy Krisher (1994, Delacorte):

**Violence at the Lunch Counter Sit-in**

*Fist slammed into George*

*Hardy's face*

*Glasses slid to his chin*

*Shattered into a spider's web.*

*River of red blood*

*Running from his nose.*

*It was the red color of the fence*

*The red color of the earth*

*on which I stood*

*It was red*

*The color of my life this summer*

*The color of Kinship.*

**35. Name analysis.** Select a few of the characters from the novel. Look up each of their names in a name book to see what the name means. Write all the meanings down and then write a short essay for each character explaining in what ways

the name is suitable and in what ways the name does not fit the character.

**36. A character's fears.** One way we get to know characters is to think deeply about them and make inferences based on their actions and on what they and others say about them. Through a person's actions we can learn what they fear and what they want to avoid the most. Select several characters from your novel and write short essays on what you believe they fear the most and what evidence you used to come to this conclusion.

**37. Current events.** Select five current news or feature stories from television or news magazines that you think your character would be interested in. Then explain how your character would respond to each of the stories and the opinions your character would have about what was happening in the story.

**38. Advertisements.** To show your understanding of a character, go through several magazines and newspapers looking for advertisements of goods you think your character would like. Cut out the pictures, mount them on a poster board, and under each picture write a few lines about why this product would appeal to your character.

**39. A pamphlet.** Think of an issue that was very important to your character. Then create a pamphlet aimed at persuading others of the importance of the issue. Include factual information, testimonials, pictures or graphics, etc. For instance, Charlotte from *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* by Avi (1990, Orchard) might want to create a pamphlet explaining the reasons women should have more life choices.

**40. Draw a scene.** If you are artistic, think of an important scene and draw it the way you see it. Place the characters in the scene too and then figure out where you were in relation to the characters when you read the book. Then write or tape your explanations of why you drew the scene the way you did and why

you think you were where you were in the scene. What does it tell you about who you related to in the novel?

**41. New acquaintances.** Select two characters. Then think about three to five people, living or dead, that you would like your characters to meet. Write about how you selected these new acquaintances and what you'd like the character to learn from the people you introduced him or her to. For instance, after reading *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* you might want Charlotte to meet Sojourner Truth so she can see other women who do important work, Madame Curie who worked in a field not many women ever entered, and so on.

**42. Book choices for character.** Select a character and then choose five books for him or her, thinking about what he or she might like and also what you think they need to know more about. Scan library shelves, the Internet, or use the library's computer card file. Why did you select the nonfiction books you did? What do you hope your character will like about or get out of the fiction?

**43. Community resources for characters.** After looking in the phone book and on the Internet, create a file of community resources that would help a character in your novel cope with an issue. If the main character has alcoholic parents, you could collect pamphlets, names of self-help groups, and any agencies that address the problem. Then create a display board so others can see what is available.

**44. Family history.** Create the history of the family of one of the main characters in your novel. For instance, in *Spite Fences*, what would Mama's life have been like? What major events affected her family? How were such things as holidays and birthdays celebrated? What is important to this family?

**45. Detective work.** If a detective or police officer suddenly

showed up in your novel, who or what would they be investigating? Write about what the detective is looking for, how he or she knew something was awry or needed investigating, and what was recommended. For example, in *Spite Fences*, a detective could show up at Maggie's home to investigate the physical abuse or an undercover policeman could be in town investigating civil rights violations.

**46. The Dating Game.** Imagine that some of the characters are writing up resumes so they can appear on the "Dating Game" show. What would they say about themselves and what would they say they would like in a significant other?

**47. Create a character's room.** We learn a lot about people by what they keep in their closets, what they have on their walls, what they select to put in a room. Select a character you know well and create a living room, bedroom, kitchen, or some other room that would mean a lot to the character. Draw it or write about it, making sure to include an explanation of why you designed the room as you did.

**48. CD collection.** Design a CD collection for a character you know well, being sure that the collection includes music that ex-

presses as many aspects of the character as you are aware of.

**49. Photo album.** Think about the events that happened in your novel. Decide which scenes or pictures from the novel a character would want to remember. Then draw several of these "photos" for an album page or write about which pictures the character would want in his or her album. For instance, in *Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick (1993, Scholastic), Max would want a picture of himself opening the Christmas present Kevin made for him, a picture of Kevin on his shoulders, and a picture of Kevin bursting in to save him from his brutal father.

**50. A character alphabet.** Choose a character you liked and then create sentences based on the alphabet scheme that demonstrate your knowledge of the character. If after reading *Spite Fences*, you decided to write Zeke's alphabet it could start like this:

A is for the ABUSE Zeke took at the hands of a racist mob.

B is for his BENDING OVER BACKWARDS to make sure the visiting civil rights activist could work in obscurity.

C is for the CAMERA he gave Maggie so she could begin to look at the world in new ways.

## EJ TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

### English: A Defensive Discipline

"Of all the disciplines, English makes the most extravagant claims for itself as a school study. Mathematics and science, perhaps because of faring well from the Federal government, partly because of their objective nature, and partly because not all pupils take either mathematics or science, hardly need defend themselves, for all they have to do is point to their spectacular technical accomplishments. In contrast, from the beginning of this century, English education has drawn on more and more sources to assert its claims—Freudian depth psychology, the development psychology of Erickson, the psychology of self of Maselow and Lorge, the psychology of freedom of Fromm, and, more recently, group therapy, sensitivity training, and role-playing. A platform speaker has only to quote fervently from these sources, as have the presidents of the National Council for the past eight years at the annual conventions, to bring an audience of English teachers to a standing ovation."

George H. Henry. 1973. "English Education and the American Dream." *EJ* 62.1 (Jan.): 25.