
A sporting chance: Class in Markus Zusak's *The Messenger* and *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*

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The final decades of the twentieth century saw a shift in popular attitudes to class. Class location came to be viewed as a product of individual merit and self-responsibility, obscuring the role played by social structure and power. As a consequence, social disadvantage has come to be variously attributed to a poverty of civic values in poor communities, or to the failures and flaws of character of individuals. This ideological inflection of class promotes a culture of blame by endorsing the notion of an undeserving poor and a perception of the working poor, the unemployed and never employed as 'Other' to the middle class. As such, class oppression is not simply a question of economics, but class prejudice and its effects. The question this paper asks is, to what extent do Markus Zusak's young adult novels, *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* (2000) and *The Messenger* (2002), reflect and contest such understandings of those living on the social margins? To answer this question, this paper focuses on the interrelationship between the characters' class consciousness and the potential for individual agency.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of positional suffering, which concerns low social standing, is one function of the culture of blame, and provides a means of discussing the characters' understanding of their class identity. In Bourdieu's (1999) view, the dominant classes tend to view poverty in terms of economic hardship and hence empathize only with the material suffering it creates. They tend to ignore the subjective experience of hardship and the social marginalization it creates. Bourdieu terms this *petit misere*—the ordinary everyday suffering which produces disappointment, disaffection, and low self-worth. Positional suffering concerns one's status within one's own class, but it is also relative to the class hierarchy and, thus, the perceptions and misperceptions of those whose standing is higher. It seems to me that what Bourdieu is talking about here is point of view. Needless to say, literary texts are able to provide insight into positional suffering via point of view, focalization and reader positioning. Both *The Messenger* and *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* are first person narratives and thus written from the perspective of characters whose lives are shaped by positional suffering.

Positioning the players

Fighting Ruben Wolfe tells the story of Ruben and his younger brother, Cameron, and concerns the effects of their father's unemployment on their working class family. The novel reproduces the class-coded language, signifiers and sensibilities of 'the world within the world' (p. 83) of which the narrator, Cameron, is both observer *and* actor. The novel offers an insight into what it may be like to experience one's class location as both self *and* other; to define one's identity from the point of view of the world and its measure of one's worth. According to Cameron, most of their 'neighbours think that Rube and me are kind of hoodlums' (p. 18), and he describes himself and his brother as 'vandals, backyard fighters, just boys' (p. 141). They live with the knowledge that they could easily become 'another couple of boys who amounted to nothin' but what people said we would' (p. 55). They know 'what' they are, but not 'who' they are or where they are going.

The difference between 'what' and 'who' the boys are is elaborated through Cameron's reflections on the public and private. When he walks the streets of his neighbourhood, he 'wonders about the stories inside' the tiny houses (p. 23). He wonders why houses have windows, asking

Is it to let a glimpse of the world in? Or for us to see out? Our own place is small perhaps, but when your old man is eaten by his own shadow, you realise that maybe in every house, something so savage and sad and brilliant is standing up, without the world even seeing it.

Maybe that's what these pages of words are about: Bringing the world to the window.'

(pp. 23–4)

Through the narrative window onto Cameron's family life, the reader is made privy to the humanizing bedtime conversations of these otherwise tough, street-smart brothers, and to the suffering of their father who refuses to claim the dole in spite of desperate need. To accept welfare payments symbolizes personal failure and defeat for this proud working class man. It does so precisely because welfare has been stigmatized by the culture of blame. *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* positions the reader not simply to



understand such suffering, but to interrogate assumptions about their own and other classes.

Like the Wolfe family, the narrator in *The Messenger* also lives with the consciousness of his inferior status. According to nineteen-year-old taxi driver, Ed Kennedy, in the part of town where the novel is set, 'There are plenty of teenage pregnancies ... a plethora of shithead fathers who are unemployed, and mothers like mine who smoke, drink and go out in public wearing ug-boots' (p. 18). Growing up in such a place 'is kind of like everyone's dirty secret' (p. 18) and, as this suggests, the stigma of it influences Ed's perception of himself. Comparing his achievements with those of Salvador Dali, Joan of Arc and Bob Dylan at the same age, he describes himself as having 'No real career. No respect in the community. Nothing' (p. 16).

In contrast to *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, in particular the angry tone of Ruben's reflections on his life, there is no resentment or disappointment in these statements. If anything, Ed's tone is apologetic, informed by his consciousness of his younger brother's social mobility, his mother's bitter disappointment at her lot in life, and her anger at Ed's apathy. He thinks that he should want more from life than working a poorly paid, dead-end job, living in a rundown shack, and drinking and playing cards with his friends. He is aware that he lacks the cultural, social and symbolic capital that mainstream society values, but he is also resigned to his situation and has little aspiration to seek more. Whereas the present tense narrative in *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* conveys the urgency of lives lived one day at a time, in *The Messenger* it points to a lack of aspiration or agency.

Ed's attitude to life arguably reinforces assumptions about the 'laziness' of the working poor and unemployed that the ideology of individual merit promotes. Certainly, the fact that his late father 'amounted to nothing' resonates with the view that underclass culture is reproduced by the transmission of 'antisocial' values and culture from one generation to the next. The nature of the problems faced by many of the secondary characters in *The Messenger* and *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, including domestic violence, single parenthood, begging and welfare dependency, could also be understood to reinforce the views expressed by underclass theorist, Charles Murray (1999). His thesis, which informs

public policy in the United States and United Kingdom and has been popularized in the tabloid press more widely, encourages the middle class to view 'underclass' culture as dysfunctional and, therefore, its values and survival strategies as deviant.

Such discourses perpetuate symbolic violence, promoting positional suffering and disguising the fact that subjective aspiration or ambition tends to be relative to the objective chances of success and it is this that leads to the reproduction of symbolic domination. According to Bourdieu,

... the realistic, even resigned or fatalistic, dispositions which lead members of dominated classes to put up with objective conditions which would be judged intolerable or revolting ... helps to reproduce the conditions of oppression. (Bourdieu 2000, p. 217)

Symbolic violence is encoded in language and power relations; it is institutionalized and ideological. A further consequence of symbolic violence is that individuals 'treated as inferior, denied resources, limited in their social mobility and aspirations ... do not see it that way; rather, their situation seems to them to be "the natural order of things"' (Webb *et al* 2002, p. 25). We see this in Ed and his community. Children's literature has the potential to reproduce or to resist symbolic violence and, in my view, Zusak's narrative representations of poverty, of disaffected youth, of aimless or angry young men and easy girls, works with and against symbolic violence. At stake here is the issue of agency.

The games

In Bourdieu's social theory, the fact that there are objective and subjective structures of oppression does not preclude the possibility of individual agency. It does not stop the subject 'from "gambling" for the capital in order to improve their place within a [social] field' (Webb *et al* 2002, p. 23). Social fields are alternatively referred to as fields of play, that is, as games bound by rules and conventions which determine who is permitted to play and where 'players' are positioned. Class is one criterion for this. Zusak also uses metaphors of gambling and games in his novels—a track and field competition, an alcohol-fuelled social football match, and card games in *The Messenger*, and boxing,

dog racing and an impromptu football match played with a pumpkin in *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*—and they are integral to the narrative treatment of class.

Cameron and Ruben are backyard sparring partners. When Ruben beats up a classmate who taunts him about his father (who has been door-knocking in search of work), he is approached by Perry Cole to compete in his organized boxing racket. Cole is a threatening figure who, according to Cameron, lives on ‘money earned off desperates like us’ (p. 42). The boys are desperate enough to commit to a season, ostensibly in order to assist their family with any winnings. However, the real reason is ‘inside’ the boys who ‘have decided ... there is no time to stick our tails between our legs and run ... we have to give it a shot. If we succeed, good. If we fail, it’s nothing new’ (pp. 46–7). The boxing becomes the object around which their search for a sense of identity crystallizes, particularly for Ruben. The fight is his bid ‘to be somebody’ (p. 54) and to be agential in transcending the positional suffering of his class location. As Ruben tells his brother,

‘We’re gonna get there, and for once, we’re gonna win. We’re not leavin’ without winning We can’t accept bein’ just us any more. We’ve gotta lift. Gotta be more ... I mean, check Mum out. Killin’ herself. Dad down and out. [Brother] Steve just about moved and gone. [Sister] Sarah gettin’ called a slut’. He tightens his fist in the wire and explains it through half-clenched teeth. ‘So now it’s us. It’s simple. We gotta lift. Gotta get our self-bloody-respect back.’
(pp. 54–5)

Ruben wants to be ‘a winner because he wants to beat the loser out of himself’ (pp. 90–1). His real opponent, therefore, is himself.

As this suggests, Zusak’s use of the boxing metaphor conforms to Detweiler’s observation that authors who use sporting games in their fiction ‘transform the playing of sport into life symbols that become the “deeper meaning” of the novels’ (1976, p. 52). Sporting games are not uncommon in children’s texts. As Kevin Steinberger (2000) notes in his survey Australian and New Zealand teenage fiction, they are becoming more common, and appeal particularly to

boys and reluctant readers. Sports also provide a common plot device in film texts such as *The Mighty Ducks*, *Angels on the Outfield*, *Bad News Bears* and *The Karate Kid*. Such narratives conventionally follow the triumph of the underdog, a point laboured somewhat in *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* by the boys’ family name, associated imagery and the fact that Cameron’s ring name is the Underdog. The underdog trope works particularly well with stories about sport because the competencies required for sporting success are ‘fairly equally distributed among the classes (Bourdieu 2002, p. 214). Success in sport becomes emblematic of the possibility of success in other social fields, but also disguises the obstacles to success.

Moreover, sport stories are problematic to the extent that they betray the same assumptions as ‘triumph-of-the-underdog stories’. Both involve

an unquestioning acceptance of three questionable ideas: (1) that in every situation there always has to be a winner and a loser, so that a happy ending requires not just someone’s triumph but also someone else’s defeat; (2) that the best way to win is to have the individual power to take control and win by one’s own actions; and (3) that a truly happy ending occurs only when a person who was oppressed achieves a position in which it’s possible to oppress others. (Nodelman & Reimer 2003, p. 157)

The issues of power, competition and rivalry flagged here are part of a broader ideology. It is notable that in many YA texts that revolve around sport, the games are institutionalized, that is, as school or club sports. As Crowe (2001) points out, they are more likely to be team than individual sports. Given that the hegemonic group controls the rules of the social game, winning is necessarily associated with socialization and assimilation into the values of mainstream society.

It is significant, therefore, that in Zusak’s narratives the sports are informal, illegal or coded lower class and are not team sports. Rather, they reflect the individualization of social life; the fact that the individual is responsible for his or her social success or failure. As Bean and Moni point out in their reading of the novel, in boxing ‘one’s identity is clearly on the line, all alone and as fleeting as the next

fight' (2003, p. 644). Nevertheless, although Zusak uses the motif of social winners and losers, he refuses the triumph of the underdog, most explicitly in *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*. Ruben plays the season undefeated, and in many respects his victories conform to Nodelman and Reimer's estimation of the ideology of the underdog, involving as they do literally and figuratively beating another. Cameron is the classic underdog, but his trajectory to triumph is forestalled when the brothers are scheduled to fight each other. To survive, Cameron realises that he has to believe he has a chance of beating his brother, but what he ultimately wants is 'Not a win, or a loss, but a fight' (p. 149). In that the contest ends in a draw, it is a metaphor for being in the game, of fighting the fight, for survival and resilience. Winning may not be possible, but it does not mean you are a loser. The surface message—'don't give up'—is about accepting the possibility of agency.

The game in *The Messenger*, aimed at an older reader, is more complex. Ed's social life revolves around the regular card games he plays with his friends Marv, Audrey and Richie. These are friendly games and Ed cares little about winning or losing. Indeed, the metaphor of the card game is detached from the context of competition and, instead, used to explore the notion of how Ed plays the cards life deals him. When Ed becomes the inadvertent hero in a bank robbery, he begins to receive cryptic messages written on the aces of a card deck. Three addresses and a time are written on the first card and the remaining cards contain clues to further addresses. However, they come with no instructions and Ed has to work out what he is meant to do. Like Ruben and Cameron in the boxing ring, he is on his own.

The game, then, is one of strategy and part of a larger metafictional game that Zusak plays with Ed and the reader. Ed infers what to do from what he witnesses of the lives of the people who reside at these addresses—their needs, their sadness, their suffering. Indeed, while he does not respond immediately to what he sees at midnight at 45 Edgar Street (rape within marriage), he realises that he cannot *not* respond to what he sees. In a sense, Ed has been brought to the windows on the lives of those within his community and he responds not with moralizing, but action. Over the course of the novel, he delivers his own

messages to eleven recipients who include a lonely war widow, a victim of domestic violence, a parish priest, an immigrant Polynesian family, his three best friends and, ultimately, himself. Although he plays alone, it is the interests of community and out of empathy for the positional suffering of those of his own class.

Towards the end of the novel, Ed realises that in helping these people, he is able to 'make myself better—make me worth something' (p. 372) and, in the metafictional conclusion to the novel, Ed *is* the message. According to the authorial presence, 'I *made* you a less-than-competent taxi driver and got you to do all those things you thought you couldn't. ... I did it because you are the epitome of ordinariness, Ed ... And if a guy like you can stand up and do what you did for all those people, well maybe everyone can. Maybe everyone can live beyond what they're capable of' (pp. 381–2, original emphasis). This somewhat sentimental message arguably reinforces the ideology of individual responsibility, albeit informed by the way positional suffering militates against the sense of self-worth necessary for social participation.

Winners or losers?

The Messenger and *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* represent the positional suffering that arises from the low status the characters have within their own class location, that is, the impact of being considered 'losers' by various family members, neighbours and peers, as well as by other classes. Such labelling constitutes symbolic violence and leads the economically marginalized to disqualify themselves from social participation. Bourdieu (1999) argues that it is at the level of symbolic domination that we must act to overcome social exclusion. It involves recognising multiple points of views, and not just those of the middle classes. It is clear that both of Zusak's novels undertake this work. Neither celebrating nor demonizing the worlds their characters inhabit, they reveal the interrelationship between positional suffering and agency.

However, the metafictional elements of *The Messenger* raise questions which extend to the treatment of the game motifs in *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*. If Ed rises to the challenge to play the cards life deals him, the metafictional presentation of the 'message' to the 'messenger' also undercuts the

very agency it attributes to him. In a sense, the game Ed plays is rigged. This is also arguably the case in *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*—if we understand fiction to be itself a rigged game. But, then, so are social games, at least to the extent that ‘Those who talk of equality of opportunity forget that social games ... are not “fair games”. Without being, strictly speaking, rigged, the competition resembles a handicap race that has lasted for generations’ (Bourdieu 2000, pp. 214–5). Zusak’s games are rigged in other ways: they don’t need winners or losers and, therefore, contest the ideological assumptions game metaphors share with the ‘triumph-of-the-underdog’ trope.

Yet, in their refusal of winners and losers, in representing games which are coded lower-class, do the novels ultimately exclude their characters from ‘the main game’—the broader social field that already marginalizes them? This also raises questions about how to conceptualize the literary motifs we use to represent social games, particularly in terms of social mobility. Upward social mobility assumes leaving a less desirable social location behind. *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* and *The Messenger* avoid stigmatizing the classes they represent by proposing ways in which the characters might overcome positional suffering within their own class location. In so doing, however, they encode a kind of passive acceptance of the existence of hardship and the ‘unfairness’ of the class ‘game’. In leaving the problem of class to individuals, does it give them a sporting chance?



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