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## READING THE JOURNEY MOTIF IN THREE MIDDLE GRADES NOVELS FROM TWO CULTURES

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### ABSTRACT

The journey motif has been used for a very long time in literature beginning with the Greeks. For example, in *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus in running away from Thebes to forestall the words of the gods from coming to pass finds out who he really is and what he has done. - killed his father and married his mother as was foretold. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, undertaken by a group of pilgrims allows each narrator to tell us who he/she really is and enables the reader to see not only the irony but the hypocrisy for some of the characters in the *Tales*. This paper analyzes three young adult novels from two cultures using the journey motif as the vehicle for the analysis. The three novels are *Bud Not Buddy* and *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* both by Paul Curtis and *Journey to Jo'burg* by Naidoo (1986) A content analysis approach was used. It was found that these novels are suitable for young adult readers. Finally, five strategies for reading these novels were also discussed.

**Keywords:** apartheid, discussion web, education, family, friendship, graphic organizers, identity, journey motif, literature circles, race relations, reading journals.

### INTRODUCTION

The journey motif has been used for a very long time in literature beginning with the Greeks. For example, in *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus in running away from Thebes to forestall the words of the gods from coming to pass finds out who he really is and what he has done. - killed his father and married his mother as was foretold. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, undertaken by a group of pilgrims allows each narrator to tell us who he/she really is and enables the reader to see not only the irony but the hypocrisy for some of the characters in the *Tales*. In recent times, Bauchi Emecheta, a Nigerian female author has used the journey motif in the *Bride Price* to discuss youthful exuberance and the pitfalls of not listening to the voice of the elders and heeding to tradition. Chinua Achebe, the renowned Nigerian novelist and essayist has used it adroitly in *Things Fall Apart*. etc. Okonkwo, because of his killing of Ikemefuna has to leave his ancestral home. When he returns seven years later, he finds that things have changed. His failure

to adapt to the changes results to some extent in his tragic downfall.

According to Howard (nd), the journey is "a process of discovery in which the heroes learn essential truths about themselves, their society, and the nature of human existence" (page 7). Lawson (2005) using Campbell (1949) pointed out that the theme of the hero's journey presents itself in stories throughout the world. He continued-

The hero's journey is set in motion by means of a supernatural event that casts the innocent into a strange and unfamiliar arena. At this point, the individual is presented with a choice, and this serves as a call to adventure. The choice profoundly affects the character...Those who choose to accept the call begin the journey from the known to the unknown.... Once the journey is underway, the hero faces many tests standing between him/her and the ultimate goal.... The hero must rely on the assistance of others encountered in the journey in order to overcome the challenges. Those who are able to pass the tests of the journey demonstrate, through the journey itself, that they already possessed brains, courage and heart. (pp 134-135).

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Lawson (2005) also pointed out that another important element in this journey is the ability of the hero to return to his/her community and communicate what has been learned. (p.136).

This paper analyzes three middle grade novels from two cultures using the journey motif as the vehicle for the analysis. The three novels are *Bud Not Buddy* and *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* both by Paul Curtis and *Journey to Jo'burg* by Naidoo (1986). The middle school years are years where young preteens often ask many questions- who am I? Why am I here? What is my role in society? Why are things the way they are? Etc. The study will show how the novels relate to preteens and some of their developmental needs and finally, give five possible reading strategies for teaching any of the three novels.

The three novels were chosen because these novels are on the reading list for students in many school districts in the USA at the middle grade level. Secondly, the two novels by Paul Curtis has won several literary awards including the Coretta Scott King Award and the Newberry Award. *Journey to Jo'Burg* has also won the Parents' Choice Honor Book for Paperback Literature (1988) and the Notable Children's Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies (1986). The three novels are also at the 6<sup>th</sup> grade readability level using Fry's (1968) method and therefore are easily readable for students at this grade level.

#### ANALYSIS

**Bud, Not Buddy:** For Bud in *Bud, Not Buddy*, his whole life is a journey aimed at finding a home to belong or to find out who he is / his identity. At age 6, his mother is dead but leaves him a few wise sayings, newspaper clippings of his "father" and a few fine stones. As the novel opens, we find that in Chapter 1, he is undertaking a journey to the Amoses, his new foster home. When he arrives, he finds his stay there is short-lived. He cannot cope with Todd, the Amoses young son who is vicious, conniving, a liar and unwelcoming to anyone who will try to take his parents attention and love from him. Todd is not willing to share his parents with anyone and will go to any length to destroy any competition. Bud recognizes this fact when he declared- "I can't all the way blame Todd for giving me trouble though. If I had a regular home with a mother and father, I wouldn't be too happy about other kids living in my house either." (p. 32).

When he runs away from the Amoses, he goes to the mission in search of food. The picture about a rich family

undertaking a journey on the wall in the mission is illustrative. It points us to the contrast between the poor standing in line looking for food and not knowing where it will come from and the rich who ride in big cars and had "big shiny teeth and big shiny eyes and big shiny cheeks and shiny smiles" p 49. Bud expands on their rich life style when he declared-

You could tell they were rich cause the car looked like it had room for eight or nine more people in it and because they had movie star clothes on. The woman was wearing a coat with a hunk of fur around the neck and the man was wearing a suit and a tie and the kids looked like they were wearing ten dollars apiece jackets. (p.49)

When he travels to the library, he is told that his teacher is now married and given a geography lesson on map reading, finding distances between two cities and state capitals. He tries to hop on the train for a journey west; but this is not possible. His real journey begins when he decides to go to Grand Rapids in search of his father and his geography lesson from the librarian becomes very useful.

This is how he describes the start of his journey to find his father-

And then I headed out for Grand Rapids. IT'S FUNNY HOW IDEAS ARE, in a lot of ways they're just like seeds. Both start real, real small and then... woop, zoop sloop... before you can say Jack Robinson they've gone and grown a lot bigger than you ever thought they could. If you look at a great big maple tree it's hard to believe it started out as a little seed. I mean if you pick up one of those maple tree seeds and turn it over a couple of times in your hand there's no way your brain will buy that this little thing can grow up into something so big you must bend your neck back just to see the top of it. Something so big that you can hang a swing on it, or build a tree house in it, or drive a car into it and kill yourself and any bad-lucked passengers that might be taking a ride with you. Ideas are a lot like that, that's what the idea of Herman E. Calloway being me father started as, something so teeny that if I hadn't paid it no mind it would've blown away with the first good puff of wind. But now here it was so big and important and spread out. (p55)

So, he leaves Flint-

Flint ended all of a sudden and I was in the country. It was like one of those days that it's raining on one

side of the street and not on the other. Here you have Flint and a sidewalk, you take one baby step, and here you have country and a dirt path. On the sidewalk side a sign said, YOU ARE NOW LEAVING FLINT, HURRY BACK, and on the dirt path side, YOU ARE NOW ENTERING FLINT -- ENJOY YOUR STAY. I jumped in and out of Flint around seven times before that got boring and I decided I'd better head for Grand Rapids. It was already very, very dark and unless things were different in the country it wasn't going to be getting light anytime soon (Chapter 10, lines 1-10).

Grand Rapids was 120 miles away and he leaves in the night. He does not go too far when he is accosted by Mr. Lefty Lewis who after persistence and love is able to get Bud out of the bush and into his car for their drive to Grand Rapids. Bud describes the point of his entry into Mr. Lewis car this way- "I was glad I was going to be getting a ride but I said, "Sir, I left my suitcase over in the bushes, can we please get it?" (chapter 10, p 63 At the home of Mr. Lefty Lewis, he is showered with love, care and attention by Ms. Sheets, the daughter (of Mr. Lewis) and his grandchildren. This serves to contrast the Lewis' family and Mr. Amoses' family, one showing love and attention for a little boy and the other wickedness and pain inflicted. When he finally meets his father, he discovers that Mr. Colloway could not be his father but his grandfather. He is well treated by the band and the attitude of his grandfather changes towards him when he learns that his daughter, Bud's mother is dead. Bud also finds out that the dead girl's room he has been sleeping in all this time is his mother's.

**The Watsons Go to Birmingham:** In the *Watsons Go to Birmingham*, we have a family consisting of the mother and father and three children-Kenny, Byron and Joey. Momma, the mother is from Alabama while the father is from Flint and as the story opens, they all live in Flint. Byron, the older of the two boys has a knack for getting himself into trouble. His first problem is that he gets his lips stuck to the car mirror in a cold day and it takes the resourcefulness of Momma to get his lips untangled. Byron's troubles continue when he plays with matches/fire against the wishes of his mother. He is playing with plastic soldiers and there is smoke in the house. Byron gets into more trouble when he abuses his father's credit card in the food store- he charges for Swedish cream cookies and apples without his parent's

permission. His next trouble is that when he decides to straighten his hair without permission, his father decides to shave his head completely and put an aftershave on it. This is the last straw. His father is tired and upset with Byron and decides immediately to take him and the family to Birmingham Alabama to stay with Grandma Sands. The father believes that this journey down south will enable Byron learn how to act right. The night before they leave for Alabama, Byron is invited to sleep in his parent's room so that he does not get into further trouble. Momma initiates the discussion that follows-

Byron, you come with us  
What for?

We thought since this was your last night you were going to be spending in Flint for a while, that you might like to sleep in our room tonight...

Byron jumped out of the top bunk and gave me this Death Stare.

I just shrugged

I guess the grapevine had gotten back to Momma and Dad that by was going to make a prison break tonight before he got transferred to Alabama. He thought I was the snitch but it was Joey. (p.86)

As they advance on the journey, they begin to see the geography and the issues in society of the day. The father uses a southern accent to inform them that there is a separation between blacks and whites in the south- Dad did an imitation of a hillbilly accent "Cuz, boy, this he-uh is the deep South you-all is gonna be drivin' thoo. Y'all colored folks cain't be jes' pullin' up tuh any ol' way -uh an be 'spectin' to get no room , uh no food, yuh heah, boy? I said yuh heah what I' sayin' boy ( p. 87)

In Ohio, the boys find out that the toilets are outside, outhouses. Byron declared-

Wait, let me dig this, you mean if I gotta go to the bathroom, I got to go outside into a little Nasty thing like that? Ain't they got no sanitation laws down there? How you gonna have a hole for a toilet and not get folks sick? Don't them things attract flies? ... Man, they must be don dope if they think I 'ma wipe my butt on some rough ol' catalog paper. (p.92-93).

When they arrive in Alabama, Grandma Sands welcomes them heartily- "Grandma Sands squeezed me hard and cried all over me. She wiped a bunch of tears away with a twisted-up hand and blinked a couple of times before she looked at me." (p. 103).

We also see that Byron has changed for he is more respectful. When Grandma runs her hand over his head and stating "A little short on hair, but we gonna get on just fine, what you think, By? ", Byron responds "Yes, ma'am" (pp104-105) Kenny commented about Byron's change of behavior this way when he declared - "The way that Byron kept his head down and was smiling and saying 'Yes ma'am 'this and 'No ma'am' that, it looked like he had surrendered before the first punch was thrown" (pp. 105-106). However, their journey to Alabama will be short-lived for a bomb in the church alerts them to the sinister face of racism. In the bombing, Grandma's church is burned, several people are killed, some are wounded and Kenny is shaken. Byron tries to explain the situation to Kenny and for the safety of the children, the parents decide to return to Michigan.

**Journey to Jo'Burg:** *Journey to Jo'Burg*, set in South Africa is a novel that explores the broad themes of family, self- discovery, sickness and death, the apartheid regime and friendships. The novels begin as a journey of mercy- Dineo is sick and Naledi and Tiro, her elder sister and brother have to travel to Johannesburg to find their mother and get her to come home and take their sister to the hospital.

Finally, Naledi could take it no longer. When they had returned with the water, she called Tiro to the back of the house and spoke bluntly.

We must get Mmma, or Dineo is going to die

But how? Tiro was bewildered

Their mother worked and lived in Johannesburg, more than 300 kilometers away

We can get to the big road and walk, Naledi replied calmly (p.2)

This is their first travel outside their hometown and the journey is fraught with danger and early missteps. First, they are almost exposed to the guns of the white farmer when they try to steal oranges after the long day of walking. Only the timely intervention of a little boy warning them of the dangers and eventually providing them some accommodation for the night enables them survive the first day on the road. They are fortunate to be able to hitch a ride in a truck to Johannesburg. The next problem is when they try to enter a bus meant specifically for whites only. Only a friendly warning from a stand-by passenger averts the danger and punishment that would have been meted out on them.

They were just about to jump aboard, when someone shouted to them in English, "What's wrong with you, are you stupid?"

Startled, they looked up at the angry face of the bus driver and then at the bus again. White faces stared at them from inside as the bus moved along (pp 25-26).

When they both get into the right bus, Naledi begins to understand some of the racial issues in South Africa-racial separation and apartheid. Grace, who has just helped them get in the right bus tells them not to be sorry when they apologize for trying to get into the wrong bus. She added "Why shouldn't we use any bus? When our bus is full, their buses are half empty. Don't you be sorry" (p.26).

When they meet their mother, they are surprised at the tone of the Madam towards their mother-

"The children couldn't follow everything the Madam was saying in English, but her voice sounded annoyed, while Mma spoke so softly. Why does the white lady seem cross with Mma? It is not Mma's fault that Dineo is sick, Naledi thought" (p.32) Apartheid also made it impossible for the children to spend the night with their mother in Parktown (the white suburb) since the police would be after them. They had to be taken to Soweto. However, this journey allows the children to see police brutality against blacks and at the house of Grace who allowed them to spend the night, they are told of the events of the Soweto uprisings in the 1970's "You see", Grace began, "our brother Dunn got picked up by the police in '76. That was the time when the students here and all over were marching, and the place was on fire" (p44). The story that Grace tells the children informs Naledi of the miseducation of black students, police brutality and some students fleeing South Africa for their lives.

On the journey, back home on the train with her mother, Naledi, first is conflicted between the words of Grace (that blacks are taught rubbish in schools and only what the white man wants) and her mother who insists that children ought to be in school (pp 51 -52) She also understands the true nature of her mother's work and life since her mother tells her all-

You know, every day I must struggle. struggle... to make everything just how the Madam wants it. The cooking, the cleaning, the washing, the ironing. From seven every morning, sometimes till ten, even eleven at night, when they have parties. The only time I sit is when I eat. But I keep quiet and do everything., because if I lose my job, I won't get another one.

"It's very bad, Mma", Naledi said in a low voice.

Yes, it's bad. But those children who marched in the streets don't want to be like us...learning in school just how to be servants. They want to change what is wrong. even if they must die. (p.54).

Herein is represented for Naledi the plight of black women as seen by the author- the loss of power and dignity, the pain and suffering to make ends meet in the absence of a husband and the hope that their children will have a better education to make their lives better. Naledi sees the importance of a different type of education when towards the end of the novel she declares-

Suddenly, lying there in the dark, it became so clear to Naledi. It wasn't just their school they were talking about. It was her school too. All those lessons on writing letters.... for jobs as servants...always writing how good they were at cooking, cleaning, washing, gardening. always ending with "Yours obediently" (p.72)

This realization causes her to want to be someone different- not a servant but a doctor. "Yes, that's what she'd like to be. Imagine how useful it would be if she became a doctor especially in her own village. She could even look after her own family" (p.72).

The journey had also helped her at self- discovery-. She can see a cross section of her country and in the process, understands firsthand the geography of her country, the city and the problems surrounding travel in the country. She is able to understand the working conditions of her mother and other black women her mother's age, why they have to work and how she must get a more useful education in order to get out of the situation her mother finds herself in. Her thoughts in two different parts of the novels illustrates the importance of this self- discovery.

Vast stretches of land flashed by; grassland, mountains, grassland again. Naledi felt suddenly very small. Before their journey to fetch Mma, she had never imagined all this land existed. Nor had she any idea what the city was like... and she had never known her own mother in the way she was beginning to know her now. (p.55) and

Naledi turned over and stroked Dineo's cheeks, making her sister smile a little in her sleep. How strange, thought Naledi. If Dineo hadn't been so terribly ill, she and Tiro would never have made the journey to get Mma. It had saved Dineo, she was sure. But also, through this journey, she had begun to find out so much. (p.73).

**SUITABILITY OF THE THREE NOVELS FOR YOUNG ADOLESCENTS.** These novels are suitable for reading in middle grades classrooms for four broad reasons as presented in Table 1.

#### **EFFECTIVE CHARACTERIZATION**

According to Hassell- Hughes and Rodge (2007), when it comes to leisure reading for urban young adolescents, both genders expressed an interest in reading about "other adolescents (' people or characters like me ' or ' people or characters my age who are wrestling with tough issues'" (p.26). Portraying lovable characters who can solve problems and challenge the reader to look at the world from different perspectives is important in preteen and young adult fiction. As pointed out by Rog and Kropp (nd), "Effective characterization is the key to good narrative text. Readers need to care what happens to the characters and how their problems will be resolved in the story. This is particularly important for reluctant readers. Novels for struggling readers need clearly defined and differentiated characters" Middle school students are often exploring their world and asking questions about their role in society, the fairness of life and how they can solve problems around them. In our three novels, middle school readers can easily relate to the characters since the characters in the three novels are within the ages of 10-14 (students in middle school/ junior secondary school are often between the ages of 10 and 14 just like the main characters in the three novels) are dynamic characters and are engaged in solving some problem often of interest and relevant to the lives of young adolescents. These novels also have a wide range of characters ranging from younger children to adult figures who teach the main characters some lesson in life. The teacher could build lessons on character development, character traits and why some characters are likable while others are not.

**Identity versus Role confusion:** Eric Erickson pointed out that one of the central concerns for adolescents is that of identity versus role confusion (1968). In expanding on this concept, McLeod (2013) pointed out that adolescents explore possibilities and begin to form their own identity based upon the outcome of their explorations. Failure to establish a sense of identity within society ("I don't know what I want to be when I grow up") can lead to role confusion. Role confusion involves the individual not being sure about themselves or their place in society.

Table1. Suitability of the three novels for young adolescents.

Reason	<i>Bud Not Buddy</i>	<i>The Watsons Go to Birmingham</i>	<i>Journey to Jo'Burg</i>
Effective characterization	Bud is about 10 years old, well described with likeable traits- brave, funny, respectful and courageous	Byron is 13 years old and Kenny is 10 years old	Naledi is between 11-12 and Tiro is less than 10. Naledi is a lovable character given her love for her siblings and courage to undertake a perilous journey in search of her mother
Young adult concerns Identity versus role confusion (Erickson)	For Bud, the main issue is Who am I? Who is my father? Where is he? What can I learn from him when I meet him?	The essence of the journey is to help the children establish their roots	The journey helps Naledi situate her place in South African society - Who am I? - What do I want to be in society? - Where is my mother in the scheme of things? - Why has there been a miseducation of blacks in South Africa? What are the consequences of such miseducation? How can we change the situation?
Themes of family, love and friendships	-Comparison of the three families- the Amos family, the Lewis family and his grandfather -comparing the love, he is shown or lack of love he is shown in the three families -Friendships with his friends and teacher.	-Love in families -Friendships between brothers	-The sacrificial love of siblings - love of mother for her children
The issue of social justice	The issue of hunger especially in times of depression and conflicts. Providing food for the needy	Working for better race relations	The evils of apartheid and how to provide better education for blacks

Extending this concept to literature, Campbell (2004), posits that the central focus of the young adult novel is becoming an adult, “. finding the answer to the question” Who am I and what am I going to do about it?” No matter what events are going on in the book, accomplishing that task is really what the book is about “(p.360)  
Each of the three novels is concerned with some level of identity formation. In Bud, Not Buddy, the question of who am I? is very prominent. Bud’s

sole purpose is to find out who his father is- where he is, what he has been doing for a career and how he fits into his father’s life. In the Watsons Go to Birmingham, the focus is helping the children find their roots and their place in the family. In Journey to Jo’burg, Naledi sits out to find her mother and inform her of her sick sister. The very difficult journey by foot and in a truck and back with the mother helps Naledi situate her place in South African society. She wrestles with these questions-

Who am I? What do I want to be in society? Where is my mother in the scheme of things? How has the miseducation of blacks helped them to not fully achieve their true roles in the South African society? Readers could be urged to write about a journey they took and what they learned during the process, how they have been influenced by their peers etc.

**Themes of family, love and friendships:** Many middle school novels and short stories deal with the themes of family, love and friendships among other topics. These three novels deal with the theme of family, love and friendships. In these three novels, students can compare the level of love adults show to the young adult characters, the friendship in these novels and the role of families in supporting each child in the household. In 2013, Vespa, Lewis and Kreider wrote about the nature of families in the USA-

- Between 1970 and 2012, the share of households that were married couples with children under 18 halved from 40 percent to 20 percent.
- The proportion of one-person households increased by 10 percentage points between 1970 and 2012 from 17 percent to 27 percent.
- Between 1970 and 2012, the average number of people per household declined from 3.1 to 2.6.
- The percentage of mother only and father only family groups increased since 2007(p 1, 13)

Teachers can use the changing nature of the American family to have students write essays on their family and their place in the family. Teachers can also have students write about.

**The Issue of Social Justice:** According to Kelly, Branes and Orlowski (2004), teaching for social justice encompasses three broad areas: (a) critical analysis of social and institutional inequities; (b) commitment to “principled action to achieve social justice, not only for those around but for strangers” and (c) willingness to question one’s own understanding of social justice, in part through listening to alternative perspectives.

(p. 40). In further amplification of the focus of social justice, Cumming-Potvin (2009) wrote that the shift has moved “ from justice for redistribution to justice for recognition, meaning that the centrality of social justice is recently defined through cultural groups who struggle to defend their identities, end cultural domination and win recognition” (p. 84). The three novels cover several issues that require middle level students’ attention and action- race relations, hunger and homelessness and the power of education to liberate the individual. At the middle school level, teachers can have students write on these topics- What can we do to create more harmony between the races? Argue for or against government providing resources to allow everyone to have a home. Or, describe the type of education you are now receiving and indicate how it can be more relevant to your needs. At the upper grades (grade 7 and 8), teachers can

institute service learning projects where the older students read to the younger students especially in a k-8 school environment or have lessons where students watch movies related to the broad topics of homelessness, hunger and race relations and debate about these topics or bring n guest speakers and parents to educate the learners about these issues.

#### FIVE POSSIBLE READING STRATEGIES

Below, are some reading strategies that will help them understand journeys;

Students with teacher guidance engage in literature circles (Hill, Noe and Johnson 2001) a. The Travel Tracer will track where the action takes place during the daily readings. The Tracer will describe each setting un detail in words or through a diagram or a map.

1. Since all three are historical fiction, students research on the following- apartheid in South Africa, the Great Depression, the Birmingham riots of 1963, and present as a research paper. The Researcher in the literature circles will act as a lead for this project.
2. Students complete a reader response journal where they reflect on some aspect of the different journey experience of the major characters and relate that to a journey they have taken. What were the hardships? What did he/she learn?
3. Partner reading to enable students especially those with reading/ language difficulties to be fully engaged. This would be also very useful for English Language Learners. Students relate that to a journey undertaken in the past.
4. Students prepare a word wall with words related to journeys.
5. Students use graphic organizers to capture some of the events showing cause effect relationships. Here, they use fishbone diagram to show how events during the journey results in some effect in the life of the major characters. They also use a Discussion Web Alvermann 1991) to write their thoughts / debate on such topics as- It would have been better for Bud not to have undertaken the journey. Or, the journey to Johannesburg was not a useful one.

#### CONCLUSION

In middle schools, literature serves many purposes include language development, building reading skills, exposing students to other experiences and cultures and allowing students to reflect on life. According to Landt (2006).

Literature can open doors to other cultures and introduce students to ideas and insights they would otherwise not have encountered. Rather than

reading about cultures in a fact-filled textbook, students experience a culture through the eyes of other adolescents. They get to see people their age meeting challenges and solving problems. Unfamiliar aspects of other cultures— language, dress, beliefs—are less foreign when viewed through the lens of familiar issues (p. 691).

The three young adult novels from two different cultures analyzed here exposed students to the journey motif. Howard (nd), pointed out that the journey is “a process of discovery in which the heroes learn essential truths about themselves, their society, and the nature of human existence” (p.7). These three novels have allowed readers in middle school to experience journeys from the main character’s perspective and in the process enabled them to explore the themes of family and friendships, to discuss social issues like race relations, hunger and the consequences of apartheid etc. During this process, readers have discovered essential truths about society and the nature of human experience. English Language Arts teachers, using various reading and language arts strategies can make these novels interesting to middle level students.

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