What Does It Mean to Be a Child?  
Childhood and Adolescent Identity in Books

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So many children’s and young adult books are about developing conceptions of human identity: individual identity, group identity, national identity, and family identity, for example. In fact, the topic is so pervasive in children’s literature that it may not seem like a viable theme for an issue of FOSR—after all, what book could we review that isn’t about identity in some way or another? But I argue that the books reviewed in this issue are particularly and uniquely focused on the growing, changing, conflicting, and sometimes connecting identities of children and youth in radically different settings and contexts, such as schools, detention centers, fishing trips, the forest, a farm, and a swamp. No matter what the setting or context, however, these books all share one theme: figuring out who you are can be a struggle, especially when others around you sometimes challenge your developing sense of self.

What do I mean by identity? Even psychologists can’t always agree on what we mean by one’s identity. Is there a singular identity that we develop and then have forever? Are our identities multiple and changing over time? Can we choose which identity we want to have, or is our identity formed by biological conditions outside our control? Do our family experiences determine our identity? In my book, Teacher Identity Discourses: Negotiating Personal and Professional Spaces, I define identity as:

a general sense of selfhood or understanding of the self; a set of distinguishing characteristics of an individual that emerge from this sense of selfhood. Identity is not singular or unchanging; instead, it can shift over time and vary depending on context. (205)

While I am talking about the developing professional identities of teachers in this book, I think the definition applies to the developing identities of young people as well. Identity may have a core or essential essence, but there can also be a great deal of multiplicity to identity: I may enact a certain set of beliefs about self and others when I’m around my friends, another when around my family, and yet another when I’m at work. Often these multiple, and sometimes competing, subjectivities are a challenge to young people as they have to learn that their self-representation may need to be adjusted depending on their audience and context. Such nimbleness and nuance in expression of personality are sometimes difficult for adults to achieve, much less children or adolescents.
This complexity of identity, both in identity construction and performance, is the subject of many books in this issue: Charlie in *Creature from the 7th Grade* learns that the opinions of others aren’t always as important as your opinion of yourself; the animal characters in both *Ribbit!* and *Jasper & Joop* learn that not everyone is like them, and that’s OK; Digger in *The Journey Back* learns how to begin to like himself after acknowledging his role in a young boy’s death; and in both *Forest Has a Song* and *Gone Fishing*, poems tell stories of learning to appreciate nature and family, respectively.

As you read through the reviews in this issue, we invite you to think about the variety of ways these texts represent the identity building experiences of contemporary youth and perhaps which most evocatively remind you of your own youthful moments of self-realization. Perhaps some of these books will be appropriate and powerful for the young people currently in your life.

**Works Cited**