Who is Ryan Atwood? Social Mobility and the Class Chameleon in The OC

Elizabeth Bullen

Elizabeth Bullen lectures in Literary Studies at Deakin University's Warrnambool campus. She is currently a co-researcher on a research project on representations of social class in recent children's literature and the implications for citizenship.

In the first season of the Fox television series, The OC (2003–2004), a teenager from the wrong side of the tracks finds himself in wealthy Newport Beach, Orange County — the OC of the title. Rescued from an implied future of juvenile delinquency, 16-year-old Ryan Atwood is at first perceived to be a threat to this world of luxury, ostentation and conspicuous consumption. Over the course of the season, Ryan is able to win the heart of rich girl-next-door, the troubled Marissa Cooper, and, it seems, transcend his class origins. According to Tim Goodman, the plotline of creator Josh Schwartz's series distinguishes it from earlier teen dramas like Beverly Hills 90210 and Dawson's Creek and avoids the clichés of the genre. In many respects, however, Ryan is living another cliché, the American Dream, his social ascendency suggesting that success is possible regardless of one's start in life. According to media scholar, Linda Holtzman, explains, the pervasiveness of the American Dream leads some Americans to believe that the United States is a "classless society" (99). However, social mobility is implicit in the American Dream since it is very much about leaving one class location for another, more desirable, station in life. From this point of view, the way in which The OC portrays those who can and cannot ascend in the class hierarchy, and the resources that aid or assist them in their progress, is worthy of investigation. Indeed, it is worthy of investigation for reasons beyond the merits or not of this particular television series.

Firstly, class has languished as an area of critical analysis in children's literature, particularly in relation to contemporary texts. Writing in 1993, Ian Wojcik-Andrews described "the absence of a sustained class analysis in children's literature criticism [as] surprising" (114). Notwithstanding Jack Zipe's Marxist analyses of children's texts and culture as apparatus of capitalism, this state of affairs has not changed significantly, perhaps reflecting the fact that class has become an area of neglect in literary studies more generally. Consensus on the reason for this appears to be that the so-called "cultural turn" in social theory and the rise of postmodernism created a shift away from understandings of class and class inequality as systemic phenomena, integral to the structure of the political economy. Instead, the focus has been on subjectivity and identity politics.

Secondly, there are parallels between this theoretical and critical focus on the individual and the increasing individualization of social life. In his analysis of contemporary society, German sociologist Ulrich Beck argues that social problems formerly attributed to class inequality are now "transformed into ... personal failure" and "are perceived as social only indirectly and to a limited extent" (89). This creates a tendency to understand social problems in terms of personal dispositions or inadequacies. There are resonances here between the broader global social trends Beck identifies and the American Dream. After all, the corollary of the notion that anyone can achieve success is that one is also responsible for one's failure to succeed. Both phenomena make the barriers to success invisible and this ideological convergence leads to my third point.

As a global technology of socialization, US television texts shape the young's understanding of social norms and expectations. Given that The OC has a worldwide audience and, according to Nielsen polls,
was among the top three most watched TV shows for 12- to 17-year-old girls and boys in the US in 2004, the tenor of its representation of class is of some significance. Class is not simply a socio-economic ranking based on material assets, and social mobility cannot be guaranteed by equal access to them. In practice, class ranks the value of individuals and groups according to their dispositions and lifestyles and creates prejudices for and against certain class cultures. Prejudice is as much an obstacle to social mobility as low income, lack of education, inadequate housing and health care, and other forms of disadvantage. At stake in the representation of class in children's and young adult texts, then, is the extent to which they endorse or disrupt assumptions about the worth of individuals and communities relative to their class, and thus shape readers' and viewers' attitudes to themselves and their class 'others'.

The main focus of this analysis of *The OC* is the characterization of Ryan and the qualities that allow him to move from his underclass roots in Chino into Newport Beach society. However provisional and precarious his status within the community may be, it is clear that the gates of this elite enclave are not open to all-comers. This raises the question of the traits the series promotes as facilitating social mobility, particularly in the way they are inflicted by masculinity. What is it about Ryan that allows him to move between what the series explicitly and repeatedly describes as two very different worlds? To answer this question, this paper focuses on the first season (the fourth season of *The OC* was screening at the time of publication) and draws on French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu's social theory. Bourdieu's work has informed research on the production and consumption of children's texts. However, his model of class, which suggests that class location is relative to not only economic capital, but non-economic forms of capital, has been little used in children's and YA literature criticism. This paper evaluates the types of symbolic, cultural and social capital facilitating Ryan's rise and explains these concepts in the context of the textual analysis.

On the surface, *The OC* appears to promote the possibility of social mobility and, at the same time, to acknowledge the obstacles. The pilot episode begins with Ryan and his brother, Trey, being arrested for attempting to steal a car. As a result, Ryan is thrown out of home and this sequence of events proves to be the catalyst for his entry into the Newport Beach community. With no-one to turn to and nowhere else to go, Ryan calls Sandy Cohen, a public defender, who takes in the boy, in spite of the resistance of his property developer wife, Kirsten. This first episode establishes the basis of the friendship between Ryan and the Cohens' son, the geeky Seth. It is also the occasion of Ryan's first meeting with Marissa. They encounter each other on the sidewalk outside the Cohen's house where Marissa asks him who he is. He replies, "Whoever you want me to be" (Episode 1.01).[1]

This is more than a throwaway line, the irony being that when Ryan goes on to tell the truth about how he has come to be there, Marissa does not believe him and assumes that he must be a visiting relative of the Cohens. The notion that she should be having a conversation with a young felon is entirely improbable to her and she is not the only one in Newport society to make this mistake. Much of the drama in the first episode centres on the revelation of Ryan's origins in Chino and how it alters the way the Newport social set views him. Indeed, the first season draws repeated attention to the stigma of Ryan's class origins in order to foreground the operation of class discrimination and class stereotypes. For instance, Marissa's best friend, Summer, describes Ryan as a "brooding bad boy" (Episode 1.04); Marissa's mother, Julie Cooper, attributes the series of violent events which unfold in the first seven episodes to Ryan's delinquent influence, telling him that "In addition to stealing cars, burning down houses and befriending would-be assassins, you've almost killed my daughter" (Episode 1.08). Sandy subsequently points out to Ryan, "You are always one mistake away from someone taking you away from us" (Episode 1.09). It is clear that because of his class origins, Ryan does not enjoy the opportunities available to the teenagers of Orange County, including the luxury of making mistakes.

The series goes to some lengths to expose the injustice of this. The judgements which Julie Cooper makes about Ryan are based on circumstantial evidence and ignorance of facts to which the viewer is made privy. One of the predominant filmic strategies in *The OC* is parallelism and it is used to draw viewers' attention to the double standards in the perception of the difference between class cultures. Thus, Ryan's delinquent act of car theft parallels Jimmy Cooper's white collar crime and daughter Marissa's petty theft. The dysfunction of the underclass Atwood family parallels that of the Cooper family, and Ryan's mother's alcoholism mirrors Kirsten Cohen's battle with alcohol. If Ryan has been abandoned by his parents, so, too, has "poor little rich boy" Oliver Trask. Oliver, who appears in episodes 1.14 to 1.18, lives alone in the penthouse of the Four Seasons while his parents travel. In addition to providing a dramatic complication in the romance between Ryan and Marissa, these episodes serve to highlight the bias of the hegemonic group against the poor. It is in fact Oliver, not Ryan, who is dangerous, dishonest, manipulative and given to illegal activities. His wealth and privilege mask the truth and permit him more than a second chance, while Ryan is suspended from school for trying to expose him.

While it is true to say that *The OC* does not offer the equivalent insight into the complexities producing
Who is Ryan Atwood? Social Mobility and the Class Chameleon in Th...

In The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society, Bourdieu uses the term symbolic capital to refer to one's reputation, social status and good name on the basis of occupation, income, neighborhood and so forth. Viewed from the perspective of Newport high society, it is clear that Ryan's social standing is low and this makes his situation in Newport precariously precarious. Symbolic capital plays a role in facilitating or impeding one's access to social spaces since it functions "to keep undesirable persons and things at a distance" (Bourdieu, Weight 127), both physically and symbolically. Thus, social mobility is also spatial mobility and this is reinforced in The OC by the way in which setting is used. There are recurring images of doors and gates, entrances and exits, comings and goings, which allude to the themes of social inclusion, exclusion and gate-keeping. The fact that Ryan stays in the pool-house is emblematic of his status as an outsider and even when he is formally taken into the Cohens' guardianship, he continues to occupy this liminal space outside the family's luxurious home with its magnificent views of the Californian coast.

Bourdieu argues that the fashionable neighborhood bestows symbolic capital on its inhabitants and, conversely, the stigmatized neighborhood "symbolically degrades its inhabitants, who in turn symbolically degrade it" (Weight 129). The OC does not escape perpetrating this sort of symbolic degradation. There are relatively few scenes in Chino, but these are invariably associated with danger and what happens there is presented as a threat to Ryan's new life.[2] In contrast to high color shots of the Newport Beach homes and beautiful natural environs, the graffiti-daubed concrete spaces of urban Chino are often shot in monochrome. This creates an aesthetic parallel with the tendency to represent stigmatized communities as homogenous. In this case, low light and grainy hand-held camera work evoke an underworld of social chaos. That said, Bourdieu argues that "bringing together on a single site a population homogenous in its dispossession strengthens that dispossession, notably with respect to culture and cultural practices" (Weight 129). What he means by this is that a particular class environment — or habitat, so to speak — produces a particular habitus in the individual that reproduces oppression. It is the representation of habitus that creates a contradiction in the series' representation of class and, in my view, undermines its pretensions to work against classism.

Habitus refers to the habits and dispositions of the individual produced by his or her socialization into family, culture and class. Learning to belong to — or survive within — the group means conforming to its particular social practices and tastes, including ways of thinking, feeling and acting, as well as manner of speaking, dressing and deportment. Habitus is not destiny, but it does militate against the acquisition of those socially legitimate forms of social, cultural and symbolic capital which are linked with access to economic capital, and in this way links identity with the political economy. Lois McNay writes that "Bourdieu claims that large-scale social inequalities are established not at the level of institutional discrimination but through the subtle inculcation of power relations upon the bodies and dispositions of individuals" (99). My argument is that, however provisional Ryan's social mobility may be, mobility is only acceptable to Newport — and to the audience — because the series erases the cultural, embodied and linguistic signifiers of his class habitus. This is particularly apparent in relation to the representation of class inflections of masculinity and how it functions as cultural capital.

Cultural capital consists of three types: embodied in the dispositions of mind and body; objectified in the form of cultural goods or possessions; and institutionalized in the form of qualifications or credentials, skills and competences. In Formations of Class and Gender, Beverley Skeggs argues that "discourses of femininity and masculinity become embodied and can [also] be used as cultural resources" (8). As she explains, gender and race are not capitals as such, but "they provide the relations in which capitals come to be organized and valued. Masculinity and Whiteness, for instance, are valued (normalized) forms of cultural capital" (9). However, there are hierarchies within those categories and, as Skeggs explains, Bourdieu makes a distinction between cultures (and classes) which are:

... forged through necessity and a harsh day-to-day struggle for survival, and those that can afford a more contemplative stance towards the world and the self. In the case of working class men, a culture of necessity is generated which celebrates the physical body and the attributes of bodily strength: the form of "cultural capital" most readily available for accumulation in these circumstances. (18)

There are "restricted markets" for such masculinities, which is to say, they are not as highly valued by other classes and, as such, do not facilitate social mobility. However, as Lovell notes, in particular
classes and cultures these qualities are seen as assets, not deficits (24).

This distinction is made in *The OC* by way of the contrast between Ryan and the other male characters from Chino. Ryan does not embody his class habitus. Rather, he is a class chameleon. Although his facial expressions may at times be read as ‘brooding’, they signify guardedness rather than repressed anger. Ryan is clean-cut in appearance and, although often taciturn, his diction and accent is middle class; he does not use coarse language or street talk. Overall, his appearance and demeanor is classless, allowing him to be whoever Newport — and the viewer — wants him to be. In contrast, Ryan's older brother, Trey, his mother's boyfriend, AJ, and his former girlfriend's fiancé, Eddie, embody particular types of masculinity that are coded working or underclass. This is conveyed in their dress, speech and deportment and, perhaps most strikingly, the tattoos they both wear as signifiers of a virile, physically domineering masculinity. Such masculinity is symbolically associated with particular forms of male behavior which also function as cultural capital in certain class cultures.

In the dark underworld of Chino, knowing how to steal a car is considered a more useful form of cultural capital than a college degree, or knowing how to tie a tie, dance a waltz, and play golf, forms of cultural capital Ryan acquires at Newport Beach. The fact that Ryan has high SATs, but a record of school truancy and suspensions, points to the fact that education is not a form of cultural capital which is highly valued in his world. Rather, it is implied that the forms of capital Ryan needs in Chino are survival skills and that these are street skills. As Trey tells Ryan before smashing the window of the car they attempt to steal, "I'm your older brother. If I don't teach you this, who will?" (Episode 1.01).

Of course, what is potentially an asset in Chino is a deficit in Newport Beach and this is further signified by the series' treatment of violence. Ryan gets into a number of fist fights in the first season, and sports a black eye in more than one episode. However, it is notable that the consequence of the actions of Eddie and Donnie, a busboy from Corona and the 'would-be assassin' mentioned earlier, is exclusion. They are represented as 'trespassers' in Newport Beach, bringing violence and chaos. They are minor characters, but Donnie is particularly interesting. Ryan and Seth meet Donnie when Ryan gets a part-time job at a restaurant. As Ryan begins to spend more time with Marissa, Seth accepts an invitation to go to a party in Long Beach with Donnie. He subsequently invites Donnie to a Newport Beach party where his new friend draws a gun on the crowd (Episode 1.05). In both cases, Ryan is called upon to 'save' the hapless Seth since he, unlike Ryan who comes from a world like Donnie's, is naïve to the dangers of the underclass. The episode establishes Ryan's loyalty to his new friend and his commitment to his new class location, but in so doing reiterates the undesirability of the underclass.

However, it is not only the class 'outsiders' who initiate violence. In the early episodes, the fights are initiated by Luke, the high school jock. In presenting violence as a masculine as well as a class trait, a distinction has to be made among the characters who perpetrate it. It is notable that Donnie and Eddie are Latino and their actions are driven by emotion. In Donnie's case, his violence is the result of class envy. Yet, while the reason for his violence is given, the series offers no scope for critically assessing the divisiveness of the class hierarchy or understanding the bitterness created by Donnie's consciousness of his low social status. Judged according to middle class values — which he has rejected — he must be excluded from 'civilized' society. By contrast, although Marissa's former boyfriend, Luke, initiates violence, it in no way threatens his status in Newport Beach. Indeed, although initially positioned as an antagonist to the central characters, he ultimately becomes part of their circle. Likewise, while Ryan's physical violence is not actually endorsed, the instances of it are differentiated from Donnie's and Eddie's violence by being presented as acts of selfless heroism and evidence of moral integrity and a male code of honour.

Indeed, it is the show of masculine courage in defence of the friendless Seth against the jocks of Newport Beach that earns Ryan his first ally. In other words, it creates social capital, which Bourdieu describes as a resource "linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" ("Forms" 249). What he is referring to here are social networks. *The OC* draws attention to the impact of class prejudice on the capacity to accumulate preferred forms of social capital. At the same time, however, the circumstances which permit Ryan to develop social capital outside his class depend on cutting existing social and familial ties. This is made to appear possible, even desirable, because of the class-coded representation of families.

Ryan's father is in jail for armed robbery and his mother is depicted as a brash bottle blonde with a propensity for gambling, drunkenness and violent boyfriends. She describes herself as not being cut out to be a mother. Reinforcing stereotypes about the inadequate parenting of single mothers, the series implies that Ryan has been unfathered and he is better off without his mother. In this way, the series deals with the problem of Ryan's emotional ties with his family and in his final meeting with his brother in season one, Trey tells him "You've got a chance little brother. Gotta leave me behind. Leave all this behind" (Episode 1.11). Trey is in prison, but arguably also imprisoned by his underclass status. That said, his apparent concern for his brother is countered by the fact that in this encounter he asks Ryan to...
a commit a criminal act. This situates Trey him not as a victim of his class location, but as a threat to Ryan's social ascendency. As such, the series denigrates the social capital of the underclass and, on one level, makes a distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. On another level, the difference between the two brothers points to individual rather than class dispositions which appear to support the ideology of individual merit implicit in the American Dream, but also point to an inherent contradiction. Individualization not only disguises the material obstacles to social mobility but, in terms of Bourdieu's model of class, the role of the non-economic forms of capital.

Needless to say, Ryan would not be in Newport Beach if it were not for the intervention of Sandy. The Cohens are central to the social capital that Ryan accrues in Newport. Both Sandy and Kisten are powerful within the community and the objections of other residents to Ryan's continued presence are mitigated by this fact. They are figured as the 'good family', in particular the wise and benevolent Sandy as father figure. Because of Sandy, Ryan has arrived in a place where he can ostensibly be who he wants to be. In the first episode of *The OC*, Sandy tells Ryan he's smart and that he needs a dream. Ryan is dismissive of such sentiment because where he comes from, "Not having a dream is smart". He accepts that he is whoever society wants him to be based on his class origins and has thus rejected the American Dream. By episode eight, in which Ryan must fight for the right to be enrolled in the elite private school his friends attend, he realises that "I can't control where I'm from, but I can control where I'm going". Ryan is socially mobile.

However, as this reading of *The OC* suggests, the surface message of mobility across class locations is contradicted by the series' passive ideology. Ryan continues to confront the prejudice created by the stigma of his class location, but he is able to accrue social capital because he already possesses forms of cultural capital legitimated by the dominant class. Indeed, social capital proves to be the most important factor in enabling Ryan to escape his underclass roots. The opportunity to amass social capital is not available to the characters marked by their underclass habitus. If the prejudice that Ryan experiences is to shown to be unjust, the series' treatment of the majority of characters from Chino reinforces class difference. The class dispositions erased in Ryan are reinscribed in the likes of Trey, Eddie, Donnie and AJ. In so doing, the qualities and attributes which facilitate Ryan's mobility and those that impede the mobility of the Chino characters are individualized, ultimately denying the material and symbolic conditions in which all of these characters' identities have been formed. In representing Ryan as the class chameleon, *The OC* betrays the very discriminations it seeks to subvert. After all, while young viewers are invited to welcome Ryan into their world each week, the series suggests that no such hospitality be extended to those who do not possess the capital to pass as middle class.  

### Notes

1. This numbering system indicates season and episode numbers.

2. This is the case even in regard to Ryan's ex-girlfriend Theresa's family home (Episode 1.11) because she represents an emotional threat to Ryan's new life in Newport.

3. Sandy and Seth Cohen's Jewishness also marks them as "outsiders" to the extent that Schwartz intended it to make New Yorker, Sandy, "feel a little bit even more out of place in Newport, and ... Seth, as well" (quoted in Engelberg). However, in contrast to Latin culture, Jewishness is presented as perfectly compatible with WASP values, as indicated by the family's celebration of Chrismukkah (Episode 1.13), a synthesis of Christmas and Hanukkah.

4. The final episode of the season appears to contradict this. Ryan returns to Chino when Theresa falls pregnant. It needs to be said that this is not closure, but a cliff-hanger device. According to John Fiske, "The sense of future, of the existence of as yet unwritten events, is a specifically televsional characteristic, and one that works to resist narrative closure" (145). The viewer knows Ryan will be back, and by the end of the first episode of the second season, Ryan has again left Chino for the OC.

5. Trey returns in the second season, endangering the welfare of the teenagers in *The OC*. Significantly, the role was recast, the replacement actor being less class-coded in his physical appearance.

### Works Cited


Schwartz, Josh. The OC, Fox, KMSP: Minneapolis.