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*An analytical approach to "Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter" by
Tom Franklin*

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An analytical approach to *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter* by Tom Franklin – Struggling for identity and belonging

by Rita Reischner-Wolf



Larry Ott und Silas Jones sind seit ihrer Kindheit und Jugend auf schicksalhafte Weise miteinander verbunden. Die beiden Protagonisten gehen als Erwachsene getrennte Wege, werden jedoch aufgrund eines dramatischen Ereignisses wieder miteinander konfrontiert. Es beginnt für beide eine schwierige Zeit des Ringens um Identität und Zugehörigkeit. Der Roman "Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter" von Tom Franklin wird anhand ausgewählter Kapitel analysiert, wobei die Charakterisierung der beiden Protagonisten sowie die Entwicklung der komplizierten Beziehung zwischen Larry und Cody im Mittelpunkt stehen. Mit abwechslungsreichen Methoden erhalten Ihre Schülerinnen und Schüler abstrakte Aspekte kooperativ, kommunikativ und kreativ im Unterricht.

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by Rita Reinheimer-Wolf

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Competences and skills:

The unit contains texts and tasks that can be classified as level B2/C1 (*Europäischer Referenzrahmen*). By working with the different parts of *Crooked Letter*, students enhance their **reading skills**. Furthermore, they practise their competences in explaining and **analysing** texts when working with the extracts from the novel. Students improve their **speaking and presentation skills** by presenting oral characterisations and conversations in front of the class. When answering questions on the interview video, they also train **listening and viewing skills**. Creative writing tasks focus on the **writing competence** and the **vocabulary knowledge** of the students.

Overview:

List of abbreviations:

CT Creative Task	D Discussion/debate
C Comment	G Group work
LVC Listening/Viewing comprehension	P Working with a picture/cartoon
PR Presentation	R Research
RC Reading comprehension	S Summary
T Working with a text	VI Working with a video
W Writing	

Topic	Material	Methods/Skills
1: Identity, a sense of belonging, Larry Ott and me	M1	CT, PR, T, W
2: Who are they and where do they belong? – Silas Jones and Larry Ott	M2–M3	CT, G, RC, T
3: Complicated relationships – Larry and Cindy	M4	CT, G, RC, T, W
4: Not belonging anywhere and its consequences	M5–M7	D, G, RC, T, VI
5: All is well that ends well	M8	A, CT, D, RC, T, W
6: Written assignment	M9	A, W

An analytical approach to *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter* by Tom Franklin – Struggling for identity and belonging

Facts

Tom Franklin's novel *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter* was published in 2010 and is set in rural Mississippi. The novel is divided into nineteen chapters that are told from the perspectives of the two protagonists Larry Ott – a white outsider thought to be a murderer – and Silas Jones – a Black constable who has known Larry since they were children. The chapters either narrate the events occurring in the present of the characters' lives or deal with the past. This way, the reader learns about both the more recent past and the childhood or teenage years of Larry and Silas. The flashbacks in the novel complete the picture of the events happening in the present.

Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter deals with identity and belonging, racism, father-son relationships, friendship, betrayal, disloyalty, the influence of the past on the present and healing. On the surface, it might also be read as a crime novel. Larry Ott, a white, unsuccessful mechanic in a small town, has allegedly killed a girl (Cindy Walker) when he was a teenager. Although he was not found guilty, he has been shunned by the rural population; since that time, no customer has ever come to his repair shop. When Larry is shot, a Black constable, Silas Jones, is involved. Silas has spent his childhood in the area, but has been away for several years. He was the son of an impoverished Black single mother. The descriptions in the novel imply that he is Larry's half-brother. Larry and Silas were friends in their teenage years but have lost contact. The present events bring the two men together again.

The title of the novel refers to the letter 's' – the "crooked letter" – in the word "Mississippi", which is also the setting of the story. Furthermore, the title of Franklin's novel represents an allusion to key aspects of the story: "crooked" might imply that something in the lives of the characters is not right, straight, and honest or the way it should be. This lack of honesty is an integral part of Silas's behaviour towards Larry Ott. Additionally, the police do not act in a proper manner either, because they accept that Larry Ott has committed a murder without having any real proof.

About the author

Tom Franklin was born in 1963, in the small town of Dickinson in Alabama where the population was half white and half Black. He studied English at the University of South Alabama. After his B.A., he studied for a Master of Fine Arts at the University of Arkansas. There he met his future wife, Beth Ann Fennelly, who is a poet. Tom Franklin lives with his wife and children in Oxford (USA) now. He spends his time writing and teaching. *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter* (2010), Tom Franklin's best-known novel, won the Crime Writers' Association Gold Dagger Award. Mostly, the author is referred to as a "southern writer" because the setting in his fiction is the American South with its authentic small-town atmosphere.

Further novels written by Tom Franklin: *Poachers* (1999), *Hell at the Breech* (2003), *Smonk* (2006), *The Tilted World* (2013).

Notes on the material

The tasks of this unit provide ways to approach the complicated struggle for identity and belonging experienced by the two protagonists Larry Ott and Silas Jones. Focussing mainly on an analytical procedure, a number of tasks vary in difficulty or offer students with differing abilities additional language support. It should be noted that the topics of this unit can be dealt with separately. The order of the topics, however, follows the chronology of the novel. It consists of nineteen parts and only a selection is covered in this unit. The analysed sections are the following: part one, part two, part three, part seven, part nine and part nineteen. It is **essential** that **students read the entire novel** to achieve a complete understanding of the story.

Topic 1 serves as an **introduction into various questions** referring to identity and belonging of an individual. Students explain the meaning of quotations about identity and belonging; they briefly present their personal experiences in connection with the given topic. On the basis of quotations from the novel, students speculate on the content of the book. In a further step, they visualise their ideas or prepare a presentation outlining a possible setting and plot. It is only after this task that students are asked to read part one of the novel and to collect information about the protagonist Larry Ott. After this, students concentrate on one aspect of the first part they would like to talk about. Topic 1 is rounded off by a creative writing task.

Topic 2 centres on **parts two and three** of the novel. This topic provides a variety of exercises: a pre-reading activity that asks students to reflect on how childhood experiences might influence an individual's personality, followed by a reading comprehension

task. Students continue their work by characterising either Larry Ott or Silas Jones with the help of useful phrases and two lists of character traits including the respective definitions. Slower learners may refer to this language support. Then, students are asked to record their characterisations using their smartphones. Finally, they prepare a conversation with either Larry or Silas that they can also record.

Topic 3 focusses on **part seven** of the novel. After a pre-reading activity reflecting on betrayal in friendships, reading comprehension is checked; students have to finish sentence beginnings. Depending on their ability, they can do this by writing a complete passage or just two sentences. The next task concentrates on the crucial events of part seven and the analysis of the narrative perspective. Finally, students are going to write a diary entry from Cindy Walker's point of view. The application *Book Creator* may be used to share the entries with fellow students. Create a "*Bibliothek*" and share it with your class. Your students can work individually and creatively in the "*Bibliothek*" and see the results of the others.

Multimedia books or presentations with *Book Creator*

Book Creator is a free tool to design e-books. You can create a „*Bibliothek*“ with up to 40 e-books. You need one digital device per person. Students do not have to register for using the application. Your class can also create a digital poster for a gallery walk.



Instructions

1. Open <https://bookcreator.com/> and register for the application.
2. Choose the preferred layout after clicking on „*Neues Buch*“.
3. Fill in the template or create your own ideas.
4. Publish the e-book at „*Freigabeoptionen*“ online, download it or print it out.
5. Share the „*Bibliothek*“ or the e-book with your class via a code.

In **topic 4**, students explore the consequences of acute loneliness as described in **part nine**. After a preparatory activity, students point out the most important events of this part and so demonstrate their reading comprehension. Next, they have to explain selected short passages from part nine. Students then watch a video showing an interview with Tom Franklin about *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter* (running time: about 10 minutes). The students' task consists of answering questions on this video. Revolving around violence, loneliness and the past as referred to by the author in the interview, students analyse these key topics in part nine in a written text. Again, slower learners may refer

to both the info sheet (guidelines for structuring a text) and the language support (connectives) in order to enhance their texts.

Topic 5 deals with the **ending of the novel**. As an introduction, students speculate on the continuation of the story after having read part eighteen. As a next step, students formulate questions on part nineteen that they ask their fellow students. Then, students will explain selected short passages from part nineteen in relation to the whole story. The final task offers an opportunity for students with differing preferences and abilities to become actively involved. The novel is revisited by students in various tasks (creating, connecting, evaluating). Depending on individual decisions, answers can either be recorded on a smartphone or be written into a coherent text to be posted on the application *Padlet*. Follow this link and clone the *Padlet* template into your account (click on "Klonen"): <https://raabe.padlet.org/RAABEVerlag/tue10b4xk9xtb1ti>. Share the *Padlet* with your students so that they can collaboratively work in it and upload their results.



Digital pinboards with *Padlet*

Padlet is a free tool (app or browser) to create various digital pinboards, for example overviews, maps, timelines or regular pinboards, and to collaborate digitally. Your students need one digital device per person. You possibly need a way to project the results onto the wall. Students do not have to register to use the application.



Instructions

1. Open <https://de.padlet.com> and register for the application.
2. Click on „Ein Padlet erstellen“.
3. Choose the layout of your *Padlet* and adjust the first settings.
4. If desired, start to create different types of content (text, document, picture, link...).
5. Choose the data security settings by clicking on „Teilen“.
6. Share the *Padlet* with your class via link or QR code.

Alternative: When registered, copy the link of an existing *Padlet* and clone it into your account.

This material includes a **written assignment in topic 6** based on an extract from **part twelve** of *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter* (pp. 266–268). The test comprises four tasks: students have to outline Silas’s situation in the extract, analyse language and narrative perspective including the impact on the reader, and relate the scene to the general message of the novel. The final task of the assignment focusses on a statement by psychologist Erik Erikson (1902–1994) on the sense of identity.

Edition of the novel used in this unit:

Tom Franklin: *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter*. Stuttgart, 2018, Ernst Klett Verlag, ISBN 978-3-12-579900-4.

The page references in this unit refer to this edition.

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