University College
Common Book Cinematic Connections

Discussion Guide for

AVALON

*Three generations of family. They shared a dream called America in a place called Avalon.*

Drama of an extended family of first and second-generation Polish immigrants and their struggle — oftentimes with each other — in post-war Baltimore to make the American Dream come true. It’s also about grandparents who are stubborn, kids with matches and brothers who love, hate, envy and admire each other. It all begins in 1941, stretches into the 1960s and focuses on a few years in the early days of television. (Source www.reslife.com retrieved 11/1/09)

**Issues:**

- Life Stories
- Personal Achievements
- Personal Relationships
- Historical Events

What do you think it would be like to live in the United States about 100 years ago?

How do you think your family structure would be different had you grown up in 30’s/40’s?

How has television changed family life in the USA as described in the movie?

What did you think of Michael’s teacher’s teaching method (may and can)?

Thinking about the Kaye’s first television set, what recent innovations can you think of that, when they were first came out on the market, you couldn’t do anything with it (staring into a screen with a continuous high-pitched tone)?

What do you think are some similarities and some differences between Russell Baker’s Baltimore and the Baltimore described in Avalon?

Family was important in both Avalon and Growing up. Russell Baker’s mother and the maternal figures in Avalon were very different. How so?

As the Krichinsky family accumulated wealth, what happened to the extended family? How does this contrast or compare with your own family over the years?
Sam Krichinsky was a great story teller. He enjoyed telling the children about how he and the family came to America. Can you think of an elder in your family who tells/told good stories? How has this benefited you? What stories do you think you will be telling your grandchildren about your youth?

Jules Kaye and Russell Baker were probably around the same age based on both the book and the movie. What do you think Russell’s reaction would be to set foot in K and K’s store?

Back in the 40’s and 50’s there were no rules about smoking. What do you think about how the film depicts smoking (e.g., while in a restaurant, while pregnant, in a hospital, in TV commercials)?

How did you feel when the Kaye’s were having Thanksgiving dinner sitting around the TV and eating on snack tables? How does that contrast with the beginning of the movie? What do you like about your Thanksgiving traditions?

**Connection to the Core Commitments**

These films were chosen because they all examine the dual themes of growing up and striving for excellence from a different perspective. *Cinderella Man* compares directly with the book in showing the experiences of a white family struggling to make it during the Great Depression. In contrast, *The Color Purple* shows us how life was different during that same time period for women and African Americans. *Of Mice and Men* tells the story of two men, one with a disability, in the Deep South during the Great Depression, and *Avalon* tells the story of a family of Jewish immigrants in Baltimore during the same time period. Lastly, *Into the Wild*, is set in the present day, but shows a very different perspective on growing up in which a teenager from a relatively privileged background relinquishes all material possessions and tries to reconnect with nature in order to “make something of himself”.

**Taking Seriously the Perspective of Others**

These films encourage students to contrast the varied perspectives of males and females, members of racial minorities and dominant groups, able-bodied persons and persons with disabilities, along with the poor and the privileged. Discussing themes of disability, class privilege, racial and ethnic relations, poverty and oppression encourages students to consider how one’s position in the social hierarchy might influence the lives of individuals.

**Striving for Excellence**

Russel Baker’s mother was always pushing him to “make something of himself”. What does it mean to make something of oneself? Though the characters in the book and films might answer that question differently, each is striving for a better, more fulfilling life. Each of these films depicts a struggle in which characters face various obstacles and emerge as stronger, more determined individuals. While their goals are different, each takes the high road and makes the most out of his or her circumstances. These five films encourage students to strive for excellence despite tough economic times, racism, sexism, or physical barriers they may encounter along the way.

**Refining Ethical and Moral Reasoning**

This program invites students to compare the ideas institutions, philosophies, moral codes, and ethical principles of the past to those they have experienced in the present day. This program
creates an atmosphere in which students can reflect on their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and habits while comparing them to the characters in the book and films.