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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2006 Volume III: Children's Literature, Infancy to Early Adolescence

Introduction

by Paul H. Fry, William Lampson Professor Emeritus of English

The seminar in which these curriculum units were written was called "Children's Literature: From Infancy to Adolescence," but I have preferred to entitle this volume "Children's Literature: Incentives to Read for All Ages," because there is no unit in the volume for which instilling the habit of reading is not a central concern. With great pleasure we primarily read some "classics" of children's literature in the seminar, and many of the units adapted those stories and novels to their purposes, but all of these units, as is quite proper, are chiefly about the students, and the books that may serve them best. The volume contains materials for students all the way from K to 12, in addition to a unit for teachers of students with learning disabilities. The units have in common a deep concern about the literacy crisis facing many public schools, together with an awareness that meeting mandated testing standards must be accompanied by a content- and quality-driven approach that makes reading fun and important to each student as an individual, not just a hurdle to be cleared and then avoided in the future.

Several teachers in the seminar saw the interest of an idea I had floated in a YNI Open House before the seminar began, an idea I had picked up from a unit written for me by a teacher in a New Haven seminar several years ago. It consists simply in noticing that older students can profitably revisit books they read or had read to them when much younger, and understand them now in a new way. The burden simply of parsing such books is no longer a problem (as it may still be for many trying to read "age-appropriate" books), and as a result students can luxuriate in the broad field of the critical reader, learning that books aren't just words to be read but can also be interpreted and applied to real life. The first three units here have this interest in common, using elementary literature as a means of interpreting through illustration (Thomas), learning the "elements of literature" before finding these elements in grade-level literature (Vari), and, in successive years, introducing themes of character development that are then taken up in age-appropriate texts (Sheila Carter-Jones).

A number of teachers — like Carter-Jones — saw a close connection between reading and character development, a broad notion that I'll extend to include the realization of personal identity, with the sense of integrity and emplacement that comes with it. In order, we have a unit that teaches children's experiences of war as a result of the teacher's well-founded belief that her students are too full of justifiable personal resentment to care as they should for the sufferings of others (Isabel Carter); a unit that recommends "bibliotherapy" as a means of empowering students to choose books that allow them to come to terms with personal problems (Short); a unit that explains the importance of getting students to discriminate between relevant but worthwhile and unreflectingly self-mirroring books (Amos); and a unit that actually uses the metaphor of the "mirror" to mediate through children's literature between Hispanic cultures that consider themselves to be at odds — the descendants of the Conquistadors and the "Aztlán" population descended

from intermixture with the Aztecs (Wasser).

Three units saw the advantage of making students understand that books aren't just books but *kinds* of books by teaching a specific genre. The first of these stakes its claim on the belief that all readers have a special relation to the literary realm of "fantasy," and offers a syllabus of books that can be called fantasies (McGowen). Two others concern Trickster stories in the folklore tradition. One, for first through third graders, offers careful definitions of folklore and folktales while zeroing in on African and African-American trickster stories and showing how they can be studied electronically in Computer Skills classes (Sorrentino). The other offers teachers of high school seniors an alternative to standard Senior research projects by suggesting that trickster figures (not just African but from around the world) are excellent topics for research (Humphrey).

Two units, finally, address the uses of children's literature in forming reading habits in the newly literate and marginally literate. One of these explains how picture books, stories for older children with illustrations, and films based on children's books can be used to introduce students with learning disabilities to rudimentary forms of interpretive understanding (Franklin); and the other argues that students from grades one to three who are already being prepared for their first mandated test profit more from reading traditional stories taught in the right way than from doing drills or reading books geared to the occasion (Kennedy).

This seems to me a remarkably comprehensive volume, and I hope it persuades many teachers that children's literature has a great many uses in classrooms for all ages.

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