Imagine if every child and every young person were a reader. We don’t mean people with the skills of decoding, fluency, comprehension, and the rest—we mean people who loved to read, and who did read, every chance they got. We’re talking about children and young people you could find curled up on the sofa reading a book, or backpacking books on camping trips, or running back into the house to retrieve a Kindle before the family left on a vacation, or reading to a little brother or sister on a rainy afternoon in a city apartment.

We know some things that would be true about them. They would have rich imaginations. They would have big vocabularies, and those vocabularies would make them naturally curious about the large and small wonders of this world (because you notice and think about things when you have names for them). They would have a richer experience of other people, and understand themselves better. We know that as adults they would get along better with others, be healthier, be more productive, and generally be interesting people to talk to. We know these things because there are already such people in the world.

There just aren’t enough of them.

Our job as writers of this book is to acquaint you with many, many books, and the riches they contain. We will give you roadmaps to their qualities and acquaint you with many of their writers, illustrators, editors, and critics so that you can begin to know your way around the world of children’s literature. But above all we will introduce you to many, many books—the folktales, poems, picture books, multicultural books, novels about the range of human experiences, works of fantasy and science fiction, information books, and biographies. Think of this introduction as a handshake, as it were—after you are introduced, you can go off and get to know each other better. And then you can introduce children to the books, too.

New to This Edition

The UPS drivers in Geneva, New York, San Antonio, Texas, and Evanston, Illinois, can find our houses with their eyes closed. They have been stopping by almost daily for decades delivering new books. “New to this edition” most importantly are the new books we are reviewing and presenting—dozens of new titles and many new authors in each chapter.

There were two main ideas that motivated this fifth edition of Children’s Books in Children’s Hands. One was to make a shorter version of the book, to leave the students and the instructor time to read more children’s books in your children’s literature courses. The second was to update the book generally, to keep abreast of the thousands of new books published each year for children, and to keep it relevant to important changes in school classrooms.

- This fifth edition is over a hundred pages shorter than the previous one. While teaching ideas have been included in nearly every chapter, the former chapters on teaching with children’s literature have left this edition and are being expanded into a book of their own.
Just as in previous editions, there are hundreds of annotations of newer titles for children in *Children's Books in Children's Hands*, Fifth Edition, with a strong emphasis on books from many cultural groups. There are entire chapters on multicultural books and international books, and both are expanded from the last edition.

- Traditional genres of children’s books are being challenged and reworked in exciting ways, and our presentation is updated to reflect changes in the genres.
- The chapter on nonfiction has been completely rewritten and expanded. Nonfiction books are a key change that is being promoted by the new Common Core Standards, and our revised chapter with its expanded list of annotated books will help teachers meet those standards.
- The Common Core Standards are addressed throughout the book in other ways. Since the standards ask children to be aware of different genres of literature, to understand how characters and settings are developed, to understand the dynamics of book illustration, to appreciate the craft of poetry, and to read nonfiction with confidence and understanding, these things are clearly presented in the chapters throughout the book and referenced to the standards.
- Throughout the book teachers are given suggestions for finding books that foreground the cultures of English language learners, and also for drawing English language learners into discussions of children’s books.

**How This Book Is Organized**

**PART 1** “Understanding Literature and the Child Reader,” orients the reader to the study of children’s literature, and gives you the critic’s perspective. **Chapter 1**, “Children’s Books in Children’s Hands,” introduces children’s literature as a distinct category, and discusses the genres of children’s books as well as their qualities. **Chapter 2**, “Literary Elements in Works for Children,” introduces a set of literary concepts with which to approach children’s books, describing how plots are organized, how characters are drawn, and how themes are developed. **Chapter 3**, “Picture Books,” focuses on how art and text combine to form unique works. **Chapter 4**, “Literature Representing Diverse Perspectives,” reflects this book’s strong emphasis on multicultural literature. It investigates the ways various cultural groups are depicted in children’s literature, highlights the progress that has been made in publishing children’s books that represent various cultural groups more extensively and fairly, surveys the multicultural books that are available, and sets out guidelines for selecting high-quality multicultural books for children. **Chapter 5**, “International Literature,” introduces books that come to us from other parts of the world. It investigates international children’s literature, surveys the international books that are available, and sets out guidelines for selecting high-quality international books for children.

**PART 2** “Exploring the Genres of Children’s Literature,” surveys the books that have been written for children, type by type or genre by genre. Each of the chapters in this part outlines the historical development of a particular genre, examines the literary qualities that distinguish the genre and the reading demands those qualities place on the child, reviews outstanding examples of works from the genre, and sets out criteria for selecting good works in the genre. Each chapter closes with an extensive annotated list of recommended books in the genre. **Chapter 6**, “Poetry for Children,” surveys the genre from nursery rhymes to contemporary multicultural
poetry for children. Chapter 7, “Traditional Literature,” looks at folk literature from many times and cultures. Chapter 8, “Modern Fantasy and Science Fiction,” considers the artistry that enables readers to enter hypothetical worlds. Chapter 9, “Contemporary Realistic Fiction,” looks at ways authors create believable books that are set in the “here and now” and that address the wide-ranging problems and delights of today’s children. Books set in times that may be many generations removed from our own are discussed in Chapter 10, “Historical Fiction,” which explains the origins of the current emphasis on meticulous accuracy in this genre. Many highly imaginative works are explored in Chapter 11, Nonfiction,” which surveys a growing area of children’s literature, in which talented writers present the real world and its people to young readers in skillfully focused works that can be as riveting as fiction.

Pedagogical Enrichment and Features of This Book

The richly illustrated fifth edition is packed with practical applications and unique pedagogical features:

TEACHING IDEA 2.2

**PLOTTING THE STORY JOURNEY**

Students can make a kind of graph to plot a story journey. Drawing a line from left to right across a chart, they can make the line go up for events when morale is high and down for events when morale is low. Above the line, they can write in what happened. Below the line, they can write in how a character felt or what she or he learned.

“Top Shelf” book lists in every chapter list our best picks of titles that exemplify a particular concept discussed in the chapter (e.g., Humorous Picture Books or Multicultural Audiobook).

“Teaching Ideas” provide valuable, practical lessons and activities for sharing literature with children in the classroom.

**TECHNOLOGY in PRACTICE 10.2**

Many teachers are finding multiple uses for software programs that allow teachers and students to easily create graphic organizers that can be applied in any number of subject areas. Ready-made templates can be used, or designs can be customized. Using such a program, create a Venn diagram of overlapping circles to compare a period of history with today. On one circle, write the things that were unique to the historical time period (e.g., traveling by wagon). In the other circle, write descriptors for the way things are today (e.g., traveling by car). In the center section created by the overlapping circles, write down things that both times have in common (e.g., going to school). Topics such as transportation, clothing, occupations, and men’s and women’s roles can be addressed. Comparisons between cultures can be made. Creating their own Venn diagrams engages students in the subject matter in more complex ways.
Ask the Author... Sharon Creech

Most of my stories begin with the image of a person and a place, and I write to discover the story. Very early on, the main character will mention other people, and I know that these people will have their own stories to tell. It is these stories that evolve into other strands of the plot.

Weaving them together is not as difficult as it might sound, because each day I merely pick up the previous strands and go wherever it feels right to go. If I feel the need to spend some time with the main character’s grandparents, for example, I will do that, and then return to the central story. That central story will be affected by what I’ve learned from the grandparents, and so the different strands begin to interweave.

Often I use the image of clearing a trail to describe the writing process. Like Zinny Taylor, who clears a long trail in Chasing Redbird, I am only clearing a little bit of the story trail at a time. Sometimes there are side paths that look interesting, and I’ll follow those and then return to the main trail.

It is wonderful when you begin to see the patterns emerge—when you can see enough of the story to sense how one part relates to another. If I tried to predict the pattern—or the course of the story trail—in advance, I don’t think I’d be so willing to allow it to change and evolve, and it is this changing and evolving that becomes most interesting to me. At the end, I can see how all the parts of the trail are connected, and then I revise, clearing patches that aren’t yet smooth enough.

Sometimes students worry when they’re writing their own stories that they have to know the whole story before they begin. I find it more exciting to know very little at the beginning, and to run down that trail wondering what I will find along the way.

Sharon Creech is the author of Walk Two Moons, which received the Newbery Medal; The Wanderer; Absolutely Normal Chaos; Bloomability; Pleasing the Ghost; and Chasing Redbird. After spending eighteen years teaching and writing in Europe, Sharon Creech returned with her family to the United States to live.

Each chapter includes an “Ask the Author” (or Illustrator, Editor, or Educator) box, in which a prominent children’s author, illustrator, editor, or educator responds to a question related to the chapter content.

**ISSUE to CONSIDER**

How Much Artistic License Should Be Given to Illustrators as They Create Images of a Culture?

Some illustrators argue that demands for absolute accuracy of every detail rob the illustrator of the right to use imagination and individual style in portraying an image. They contend that unless the illustrations are photographs, the style of illustration will influence the degree of attention to detail.

Others argue that accurate details in illustrations create the overall sense of cultural authenticity. They point out that misconceptions may develop from incorrect images. In some cases, highly regarded illustrators whose work is exceptional from an artistic viewpoint have been criticized for creating images that “mix” cultures. Critics say that this mixing of cultures robs each culture of its distinction. Yet the illustrators express their desire to create unified images of cultures that sometimes share a common voice. One example is Brother Eagle, Sister Sky: A Message from Chief Seattle (1991) by Susan Jeffers. Controversy arose over the text because the words were based on a script for a 1971 television commercial decrying pollution. Controversy arose over the illustrations because of mixed images of Native American cultures that contained inaccuracies of both history and culture. Jeffers defended her position by stating that the important point is that the book reflects a Native American philosophy (Noll, 1995).

How do you view this issue of authenticity versus artistic license in children’s book illustrations? How will the type of illustrations affect child readers who do not intimately know the culture portrayed? How will the illustrations portray child readers whose own cultures are portrayed?

What do you think?

“Issue to Consider” boxes in each chapter present a highly debated issue in children’s literature.
EXPERIENCES FOR FURTHER LEARNING

1. Compile your own anthology of poems for children. Organize it around a theme or an issue—for example, poems for chorale reading, poems from many cultures, or poems to celebrate holidays. So that you can become acquainted with contemporary poetry, use ten different sources, choose no more than two poems per source, and make sure they were published within the last fifteen years. (Thanks to Linnea Henderson for this suggestion.)

2. A good poem may sound natural, but on examination it is likely to turn out to have been very carefully crafted. Take a poem such as A. A. Milne’s “Happiness” (from When We Were Very Young). Try substituting other words for any of Milne’s. Does the poem sound as good?

“Experiences for Further Learning” are end-of-chapter activities that help readers deepen their own understanding of the chapter content.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

* indicates a picture book; I indicates interest level (P = preschool; YA = young adult).

Comprehensive Anthologies

Berry, James, ed. Classic Poems to Read Aloud. Larousse Kingfisher, 2003. An excellent collection of poems from many cultures. (K-10-YA)


Kennedy, Caroline. A Family of Poems: My Favorite Poems for Children, Illustrated by Jon J. Muth. Hyperion, 2005. This collection of over 100 classic and new poems is arranged into seven sections—About Me, That’s So Giovanni, Langston Hughes, and a dozen others who are better known to adults than to children, but who all celebrate the black experience. (K-9-12)


* Bruchac, Joseph. The Earth under Sky Bear’s Feet: Native American Poems of the Land, Illustrated by Thomas Locker. Puffin, 1998. Most of these poems are reflections on the Sky Bear constellation, also known as the Big Dipper. Some of Locker’s rich oil paintings are magnificent. (K-7-11)

Florian, Douglas. Comets, Stars, the Moon, and Mars. Harcourt, 2007. Florian’s rich descriptions of heavenly bodies will enhance the study of space in any classroom.

Each chapter concludes with extensive lists of “Recommended Books” that offer publication data, a brief annotation, and interest level by age for every book listed. These lists have been extensively updated for the fifth edition with scores of new entries.

Children’s Books in Children’s Hands is available as a Pearson eText

The affordable, convenient, interactive version of this text includes tools to help navigate and understand important, current content. The Pearson eText is available with a black and white, loose-leaf printed version of the text.

Features of the Pearson eText include:

- Tools to take and share notes, highlight and bookmark chapter concepts, and search by keyword
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- Extended access upgrade is available

Enjoy the advantages of an eText, plus the benefits of print, all for less than the price of a traditional book!
Supplements to Aid Teachers and Students

Students and instructors will find these supplements invaluable:

Instructor’s Manual and Test Bank provides a variety of instructional tools, including chapter overviews, “pre-reading” directions, questions for class discussion, classroom activities, extending the reading assignments, plus multiple choice and essay questions. (Available for download from the Instructor Resource Center at www.pearsonhighered.com/irc.)

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Joy Moss, teacher educator at the University of Rochester (New York) and an elementary school literature teacher, brought to bear her considerable experiences in sharing literature with children as she read and commented on the first edition of the book in its formative stages.

We have long admired the colorful and vibrant art of Franée Lessac, whose illustrations have graced all editions of the book. We are always delighted with the results of her work.

Thanks also go to the talented children’s books authors, illustrators, editors, and educators who so generously shared their thoughts and experiences for “Ask the Author” features. In addition, several writer and illustrator friends gave us a look inside their craft: thanks to the Rochester Writers Group, especially Cynthia DeFelice, Ellen Stoll Walsh, M. J. Auch, Vivian Vande Velde, and Robin Pulver; also to Barbara Seuling and Bill Hooks. Several children’s book editors did much the same thing; we wish to thank Matilda Welter, Refna Wilkin, Kent Brown, and Richard Jackson.

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Charles Temple
Miriam Martinez
Junko Yokota
chapter 1

Children’s Books in Children’s Hands

What Are Good Books for Children?
What Are Good Books for Each Child?

Issue to Consider: Even Comic Books?!

What Is Children’s Literature?
Qualities of Children’s Literature • Qualities of Outstanding Children’s Literature

Children’s Books and Childhood
Children in the Middle Ages

Ask the Critic: Betsy Hearne
Children in Puritan Times • Children in the Enlightenment • The “Golden Age of Children’s Literature” • Contemporary Children’s Books

The Genres of Children’s Literature
Children’s Books and English Language Learners

Censorship: Which Books Will Make It Into Children’s Hands?

Resources for Children’s Books
A four-year-old child in her mother’s lap hears Margaret Wise Brown’s *Little Fur Family* and is filled with a secure feeling of being a special child, very much loved. In the coming months, the child picks up the book every now and then, and that same feeling of warmth and security comes over her each time she does.

In a first-grade classroom on the South Pacific island of Fiji, the teacher has created a hand-lettered enlarged version of Bill Martin, Jr.’s *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* She reads it to her assembled class, pointing with a ruler to each word. Even before she has finished the first reading, children are anticipating what she is going to say next. The second time through, the children, supported by the patterned text and the illustrations, are reading along with her. There are no bears on Fiji, though, and soon the children are writing their own book based on Martin’s pattern but featuring a mongoose, a mynah bird, an iguana, and other local animals. Martin’s book has helped these children of Fiji learn to read and write.

Trip-trap, trip-trap, trip-trap, trip-trap.

“Who’s that walking on my bridge?” roared the Troll.

“It is I, Little Billy Goat Gruff.”

In a South Texas classroom, Jackie murmurs, “Oh, good,” when Ms. Sloan sends her group to the library center, a favorite in the classroom. Some of her fellow students browse through the collection looking for particular books. Jackie says, “Let’s do ‘Three Billy Goats Gruff.’” Four other children agree and cut short their search. Now the five children—three goats, one troll, and a narrator—are acting out this folktale that is so well known to them from their teacher’s reading it aloud. And of course one performance will not do. Everyone wants a chance to be the troll!

A teacher reads aloud from Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Prietita and the Ghost Woman*/*Prietita y La Llorona*, a modern tale that features the “Weeping Woman,” a ghostly character familiar among Hispanic children in Mexico and the American Southwest.

“We tell about *la Llorona* down in the valley at my abuela’s house,” says Ana Margarita. “But she’s not nice like this lady. She’s the one who catches little kids if they go out at night, especially near the water.” Then she politely provides the pronunciation of *Llorona*, “You pronounce the double L like a ‘Y,’” she says—and goes on to explain some of the other Spanish words such as *curandera* and *remedio* that are given in the book. She has a look on her face that says, “Isn’t it great to discuss a book about things from my side of town?!”

In a fourth-grade classroom in Atlanta, a teacher has just finished reading Carmen Deedy’s *Fourteen Cows for America* (2009) with two-page spreads of lifelike illustrations of a Maasai community in East Africa.

“Look closely in the eye of the person in the picture,” she says.

“Oh!” says a student. “It’s a tiny reflection of a building. It’s burning, and you can see the smoke!”

“So the young man can still see the attack on the twin towers. It’s still in his eyes, even when he’s so far away from it in Africa,” says another student.

“Was that a true story?” asks another.

“Yes, it was. Let’s turn the page.” The next pages give an account of a young man from the Maasai tribe who was studying medicine in the United States when he happened to witness the attack on the World Trade Center in New York. When he returned to his village a year later, his people were so moved by his descriptions that they donated some of their most valuable possessions—fourteen cows—to America.

“But where are the cows?” a student asks. Later the class looks up the event on the Internet and finds newspaper accounts of the
Maasai village's generous act, entries about the Maasai people, and an entry about Wilson Kimeli Naiyomah, the young man in the story.

John Cunningham’s sixth-grade class has finished Louis Sachar’s *Holes* (2000), about a juvenile detention camp. Now he is reading them parts of Adam Rapp’s *The Buffalo Tree* (1997), a book about “juvies,” young people who are incarcerated in a juvenile detention home. One student sighs, shakes her head, and remarks, “This is more like what it must really be like to be locked up in one of those places. I mean, I loved *Holes*, but that book seems kind of like a dream in comparison—not a good dream, but like nothing is quite real. But this, this—you can almost smell the anger, almost taste the blood in your mouth.”

Good books—like good paintings, plays, movies, sculptures, and other creative works—merit appreciation in their own right. But good books serve children in some specific ways. Good children’s books can evoke strong feelings and come to stand for childhood emotions, much in the way a security blanket does. Good books can give children reference points for understanding their own experiences, lessons that may last a lifetime. Good books may make children proud of and knowledgeable about their own culture and open windows onto other cultures. Good books may help children understand how others live, and how they face the same issues in their lives. Good books, and the sharing of them, cultivate children’s capacity for empathy and compassion. Good books educate the imagination, as children stretch to visualize what it would be like to walk in the shoes of a character in a book.

All great things that have happened in the world, happened first of all in someone’s imagination, and the aspect of the world of tomorrow depends largely on the extent of the power of imagination of those who are just now learning to read. That is why children must have books, and why there must be people . . . who really care what kind of books are put into the children’s hands. (Astrid Lindgren, author of *Pippi Longstocking*, from her acceptance speech for the Hans Christian Andersen Award in 1958)

Good books may give children much of the motivation and even the concepts they need to learn to read and the models that show them how to write. Good books offer children delight, mystery, charm, an experience of awe, and companionship. Good books invite children to play with language. Good picture books cultivate
children’s visual literacy and their aesthetic sense. Good books nurture children’s appreciation of the author’s craft.

**What Are Good Books for Children?**

For the student of children’s literature, there is a lot to learn about. Let’s identify some key questions here, and relate them to the upcoming chapters, where you will find answers.

**What Are Good Books for Each Child?**

Answering that question will require that we develop some criteria for quality in children’s books. And since the answer depends partly on the age and interests of the child, we should consider ways in which readers respond to literature and how they differ in their responses at different ages. These issues will be the focus of this chapter.

Knowing what good books are for different children requires some intelligent way of talking about goodness and mediocrity in books—that is, we will need a

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** ISSUE to CONSIDER 1.1  

**Even Comic Books?!**

Although children who are now in school think of Superman, Spiderman, Batman, and Catwoman as characters in action-packed movies, in previous generations young people knew the real score: These were characters from comic books, those pulpy-paged illustrated thrillers from the days before television, that cost only 10 cents—and then 15, and then 25, and then . . . they all but disappeared. Comic books were either a staple of life or a threat to civilization, depending on whom you asked. In the 1950s, during the McCarthy Era when people suspected that the moral fiber of our country was under attack from many quarters, a set of Congressional hearings were held in which comic books were accused of promoting amorality, lawlessness, and perversion. In 1954, the major comic book publishers agreed to police themselves and adopted the Comics Code Authority, which insists, among other things, that:

1. Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals.
2. No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime.
3. Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority.
4. If crime is depicted it shall be as a sordid and unpleasant activity. (Comics Code Authority)

Many comic book publishers went out of business, and the rest quickly lost ground to the growing attraction of television—which, of course, some would argue has become an even greater threat to children’s intellects and morals.

Now comic books are back in a new form, called graphic novels. They are being produced with some sophistication—printed on glossy paper and costing more money. Many graphic novels are reprints of comic books, with several episodes strung together as one volume. Others are newly created as graphic novels. Notable among these are manga, graphic novels from Japan.

The American Library Association is taking graphic novels seriously, and they put out an annual list of the best graphic novels (see the home page at <http://www.ala.org>). Graphic novels are reviewed in *School Library Journal and Kirkus*.

Some advocates of graphic novels are enthusiastic about their exciting multimedia formats. Others note their appeal to reluctant readers—especially children from 11 or 12 and up. (You can, after all, “read” them by only occasionally looking at the words.) Educators we talked to in an unscientific survey weren’t sure. When we asked to review the graphic novels in one middle school library recently, the librarian confided that it was not yet possible: The principal had taken them all into his office, and was still trying to decide if they should go on the shelves.

**What do you think: Should they?**

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serviceable set of terms to help us talk about literary features of children’s books. Those will be the focus of Chapter 2.

Some of the most appealing books for children are illustrated books. Picture books are a unique art form, combining aspects of novels and movies. Appreciating the dynamics of picture books deserves its own focus, and that will be the topic of Chapter 3.

A huge contribution of children’s literature is to help children understand themselves and appreciate people from other cultures. Multicultural books mostly written within North America will be the focus of Chapter 4. Because many good books are available to children from writers in other parts of the world, we will focus on international literature in Chapter 5.

Having considered those background issues, we will then look more closely at the books themselves: the kinds of books available (arranged by genre), the evolution of books over the years, and exemplary writers and illustrators of children’s books. In the pages that follow, we will examine Poetry for Children (Chapter 6), Traditional Literature (Chapter 7), Modern Fantasy and Science Fiction (Chapter 8), Contemporary Realistic Fiction (Chapter 9), Historical Fiction (Chapter 10), and Informational Books and Biography (Chapter 11).

What Is Children’s Literature?

It is surprisingly hard to define a children’s book. In his own apology for not offering a straight answer to the question, “What is a children’s book?” Peter Hunt (1995) writes,

[T]he answer is that we all know what it is, but it is not very easy to tell what it is (or what it is not). . . . [I]t is everything from a Sixteenth Century chapbook to a twentieth century computer-based, interactive device. It is everything from the folk tale to the problem novel, from the picture book to the classroom poem, from the tract to the penny dreadful, from the classic to the comic. (p. ix)

Children’s literature is the collection of books that are read to and by children. That collection is enormous: There are hundreds of thousands of English-language children’s titles in print. Currently about 25,000 new titles are published every year in the English language alone (Library and Book Trade Almanac, 2010). And it is old: The tradition of publishing literature for English-speaking children dates back two and a half centuries, predating the founding of the American republic.

Children’s literature spans the range from alphabet books and nursery rhyme collections for the very young through novels and informational books for adolescents (or young adults, as they are called in the book trade)—in other words, from birth to about age fifteen.

Today, most children’s books are written expressly for children. But there are books written originally for adults that have become popular with children—from an earlier period, John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress and Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe and, more recently, Platero and I (Platero y yo) by Juan Ramon Jimenez. Other works, such as Charles Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty in the Woods” and the anonymous Arabian Nights—were written for adults but have been adapted for children. And the oral tradition—myths, ballads, epics, and folktales—makes up a large body of material that was told to adults and children alike, including the well-known stories “Jack and the Beanstalk,” “Rapunzel,” “Brer Rabbit and the Briar Patch,” “Cucarachita Martina and Ratoncito Perez,” and “Anansi the Spider.”

Today, children’s books are published by the juvenile books branches of large publishing houses such as Random House and Houghton Mifflin, as well as by publishers that serve the children’s market exclusively, such as Candlewick Press.
and Peachtree Press. Many publishers offer books published under imprints, which might, like Atheneum, be the name of an originally independent publisher that has been taken over by a larger house or, like Richard Jackson Books, Margaret K. McElderry Books, and Walter Lorraine Books, reflect arrangements by which publishers allow their most successful editors to publish books under their own names.

We should note that many titles of children’s books are produced by publishing companies that have particular religious orientations. Such books may sell copies that number in the millions; however, because they are not usually purchased for use in public schools, or reviewed in professional journals on children’s literature such as The Horn Book or School Library Journal, they are not treated in this text.

Qualities of Children’s Literature

As teachers of college courses on children’s literature, we sometimes catch ourselves smiling to see an adult student smuggling Frog and Toad Are Friends to class between a copy of War and Peace and a thick tome on organic chemistry. That image sometimes makes us stop to ask: What is the study of children’s literature doing in a college curriculum? Just how significant is the quality of children’s books? There are several ways to answer these questions.

First, although children’s books might seem simple, their simplicity is achieved through hard work by talented writers. Many people try to produce books for children, but the percentage of manuscripts that are actually published is unbelievably small. In a recent year, one major publishing house received five thousand unsolicited manuscripts and published two of them.

Teaching Idea 1.2

**INTERTEXTUALITY!**

“Intertextuality” is a term for the similarities between stories—the features like the problem situation (such as children being left at home alone), the plot structure (the hero as least-likely-to-succeed going on a quest and proving himself or herself a hero), the pattern of actions (such as one thing leading to another), the kinds of characters (such as a trickster spider), or even important details (such as a piece of clothing that identifies the true hero).

Read one of these collections of stories to children; then lead the class in completing a Venn diagram (two interlocking circles) about them.

**For kindergarten through grade 3:**
- Hattie and the Fox, by Mem Fox
- The Little Red Hen, retold and illustrated by Paul Galdone

It’s not just the chicken heroes! It’s also the pattern of the chicken-hero going to one character after another, and having them give the same lazy response that makes these stories similar.

**For older students:**
- The Children’s Homer, by Padraic Colum
- The Homecoming, by Cynthia Voigt
- Bud, Not Buddy, by Christopher Paul Curtis
- Parvana’s Journey, by Deborah Ellis

Here the pattern to observe is the journey. What sends each character or set of characters on their way? What discouragements and distractions do they face along the way? What faith sustains them? How do they grow and change as they travel? What turns out to be more important: the arrival or the journey?
Award-winning author Katherine Paterson (1988) compares writing a children’s book to composing music. She suggests that a good children’s book is like a score for a chamber quartet, rather than a work for a full symphony. The work for the chamber quartet is less elaborate, but if its melodies are pleasing and its harmonies apt, it will have no less quality than a full orchestral work. In the same way, a good children’s book will have fewer layers of complexity than a good book for adults, but if it is created with great care, it can also have excellence.

Second, because much of our contemporary children’s literature grew out of the folktales from oral traditions, children’s books contain many timeless stories that know no age boundaries. In *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye (1957) wrote that all literature is one fabric, woven of many strands of plot, image, and theme that have been told over and over in stories around the world, throughout all time. The most essential stories—those that tell of virtue rewarded, of straying into danger and struggling to get back out, of learning to distinguish the things of lasting value, of finding one’s true qualities and putting them to the service of others—are the materials out of which all literature is made. They are found in their purest form in myths and folktales from around the world, and in books for children.

Third, children’s books are worthy of serious study because the education of children warrants society’s best energies. Good books will help children by making them literate, giving them knowledge of the world and empathy for those with whom they share it, offering them stories and images to furnish their minds and nurture their imaginations, and kindling their appreciation for language used well. Given such worthy goals, such literature deserves attention and respect.

What makes a book a children’s book? A children’s book usually has these qualities:

- **A child protagonist and an issue that concerns children.** A children’s book usually has a central character that is the age of the intended audience. Children identify more easily with one of their own. Even when the central character is not a child—as in “Cinderella,” for example—children need to feel that the central issues of a story concern them in some way.

- **A straightforward story line, with a linear and limited time sequence in a confined setting.** Books for younger children usually focus on one or two main characters, cover short time sequences (they are usually—but not always—told straight through from problem to solution, without flashbacks), and most often are set in one place. When writing for older children, authors gradually take more license with time sequences and may interweave more than one plot strand, as Louis Sachar does in *Holes*.

- **Language that is concrete and vivid and not overly complex.** The words in children’s books—especially in picture books—primarily name actors and actions. Books without pictures need to have more verbal description to help children visualize characters and settings. They use dialogue to move the story along. And they give glimpses of the characters’ motives. In all these cases, readers see more of what characters do than of what they say, and certainly more of both than of what they think.

### Qualities of Outstanding Children’s Literature

What makes a good children’s book? Qualities that make outstanding children’s books apply to excellent literature for any age. If a book satisfies the following criteria, it is a good children’s book:

- **Good books expand awareness.** Good books give children names for things in the world and for their own experiences. Good books take children inside other people’s perspectives and let children “walk two moons” in their shoes. They broaden children’s understanding of the world and their capacity for empathy.
Good books provide an enjoyable read that doesn’t overtly teach or moralize. Many children’s books turn out to be about something—to have themes, in fact—and it is often possible to derive a lesson from them. But if a book seems too deliberately contrived in order to teach a lesson, children (and critics) will not tolerate it.

Good books tell the truth. Outstanding children’s books usually deal with significant truths about the human experience. Moreover, the characters in them are true to life, and the insights the books imply are accurate, perhaps even wise.

Good books embody quality. The words are precisely chosen and often poetic in their sound and imagery; the plot is convincing, the characters believable, and the description telling.

Good books have integrity. The genre, plot, language, characters, style, theme, and illustrations, if any, all come together to make a satisfying whole.

Good books show originality. Excellent children’s books introduce readers to unique characters or situations or show them the world from a unique viewpoint; they stretch the minds of readers, giving them new ways to think about the world and new possibilities to consider.

Children’s Books and Childhood

The criteria for excellence just outlined have not always held true. That is because the life stage of childhood has evolved throughout history as adults changed their definition of childhood and their views of young people. Literature for children has changed, too, following the fortunes of childhood as a life stage. As Victor Watson writes, “Children’s books reflect and are bound up in cultural changes; they are particularly susceptible to developing assumptions about the nature of childhood, adolescence, and education” (2001, p. vi).

Children in the Middle Ages

It has been said that until roughly five hundred years ago, childhood as we know it did not exist in the West (Aries, 1962). That is because up until the Renaissance, children’s activities—the games they played and the stories they heard—were not separated from those of adults.

Children drank alcoholic beverages, smoked tobacco, and used coarse language. After the age of seven, most children were made to work in the kitchen, in the fields, or in shops. When the village storyteller could be persuaded to tell a tale, children and adults alike gathered around to hear it. In medieval England, games such as Red Rover could involve people of all ages in a village.

It is not surprising, then, that books were not written expressly for children in those times. The few children who could read had no choice but to turn to adult fare. The ballad “Robin Hood,” for example, was known as far back as 1360 a.d., and three printed versions of the legend existed before 1534. Child readers, then as now, enjoyed and accepted the romantic concept of robbing the rich to help the poor. Other romantic stories circulating at the time were those about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table and about Bevis, a thirteenth-century hero who hacked his way out of dungeons and slew dragons.

In 1476, William Caxton established the first printing press in England, and in 1477, he published one of the earliest books expressly for children. Called A Booke of Curteseye, it was filled with do’s and don’ts for an audience of aristocratic boys preparing for social engagements and military careers.
Some critics, such as Northrop Frye and E. D. Hirsch, Jr., maintain that there are some stories that all Western children could benefit from being exposed to. Do you agree? Do you believe there are some core stories or works that all children should know, or do you see the issue another way?

The idea of canonizing stories that all Western children should know is understandably controversial. On the one hand, this would solve problems in defining curriculum, testing educational achievement, and establishing cultural frames of reference in a multicultural environment. Yet realizing such an idea raises as many questions as it answers. Literature is not a science with objective, quantifiable standards of measurement. Who will decide which stories belong in the canon? How do we incorporate individual differences (both adults’ and children’s) into the subjective task of assessing a story’s importance? Is it possible to reconcile myriad conflicting values in a small selection or, conversely, reflect representative values in a large selection? In terms of use, a core of “approved” stories is bound to take precedence over other texts. What are the implications for publishing new texts? And how long do we wait before inducting a story?

On the practical front, what are the effects of mandating stories to creative teachers, who may find such a prescription stifling? Sometimes it is more effective to study one story in depth, establishing a process and a set of principles that can then be applied broadly, than to cover a predetermined core, which can easily become an exercise in superficial exposure. Certainly, the identification of a canon of stories, those that have appealed to both critics and children over a long period of time, would require a balanced emphasis on the often warring factors of high quality and general appeal.

Proponents of a clearly defined—and, by implication, required—body of stories common to all children either believe that these questions are answerable or believe that the disadvantages of compromise are worth the advantages of commonality. My own experience of reviewing, teaching, and storytelling over several decades has persuaded me that adult consensus on these issues is rare, if not impossible, and that children and stories are a quirky, unpredictable match depending on personality, peer group, family environment, and many other factors. Of course every child needs some stories. But selecting the same stories for “all Western children” involves the kind of generalized social and aesthetic assumptions that have plagued efforts to establish a literary canon in higher education. I would suggest that a buffet of stories, from which children and adults can choose together, is preferable to a set menu.

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Children in Puritan Times

By the seventeenth century, more works were being written for children, but most did not make for enjoyable reading. The Puritans, the stern religious exiles who established the English colonies in America, infused early American children's works with their certainty that the devil could enter young bodies. They even wrote poems exalting death at an early age—better to die innocent than grow up and be corrupted. Given the didactic and fiery messages of Puritan authors, it is not surprising that most of their works are no longer read. Here is an example of Puritan prose written in 1702 by one Thomas Parkhurst:

My dear Children, consider what comfort it will be unto you when you have come to dye, that when other children have been playing, you have been praying. The time will come, for ought you know very shortly, . . . when thou shalt be sick upon thy bed, and thou shalt be struggling for life, thy poor little body will be trembling, so that the very bed will shake under thee, thine eyestrings will break, and then thy heartstrings will break; . . . then, O then, the remembrance of thy holy life will give thee reassurance of the love of God.

Despite this bleak view, nonetheless, there were some bright moments. Books were generally instructional and religious in nature, but many writers did sugarcoat their instruction with rhymes, riddles, and good stories. Also, children continued to find adult fare to their liking. John Bunyan's Christian allegory, Pilgrim's Progress, was read for centuries. What made it palatable to children was its portrayal of a sense of family. Children are presumed to have skipped over the lengthy religious commentary to savor the happy family life. Indeed, the story of Christian can still hold the imagination of children who read the adapted, abridged, and illustrated versions.

Children of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries also turned to hornbooks and chapbooks for their reading fare. In both England and America, peddlers traveled from town to town selling items such as pots, pans, needles, medicine, and hornbooks—which looked like paddles, averaged two and a half by five inches, were usually made of wood, and often were attached to a leather thong so that children could hang them around the neck or wrist. The lesson sheet or story was pasted onto the flat surface, and then covered with horn, a film of protective material similar to animal horn. Hornbooks were filled with lessons in religion, manners, the alphabet, and reading.

The same traveling salesmen who peddled hornbooks inspired the invention of chapbooks (“chap” is derived from the word “cheap”). Chapbooks were made of folded sheets of paper and were inexpensive to produce and light to carry. They contained popular stories of the day, such as “Jack, the Giant Killer,” “The History of Sir Richard Whittington,” and “Saint George and the Dragon,” and also large numbers of cautionary tales, illustrating the do’s and don’ts of childhood. Contemporary author Gail E. Haley has written and illustrated Dream Peddler, about a fictitious chapbook peddler who was proud of his profession because he gave children fairy tales and adventures to cultivate their dreams.

Children in the Enlightenment

In 1693, John Locke published Some Thoughts Concerning Education, which influenced child-rearing practices on both sides of the Atlantic. The book’s exhortation that “some easy pleasant book” be given to children was good for the circulation of children’s books. Nonetheless, the books still promoted strict moralistic teachings, if in narrative form.

At the dawn of the eighteenth century, more playful and pleasurable literature began to emerge. The verses of Isaac Watts were popular, and although to a contemporary ear they sound overly moralistic and didactic, for their time they
were less so than those of his predecessors. In 1743, Mary Cooper published *The Child’s New Plaything, Being a Spelling Book Intended to Make the Learning to Read a Diversion*. An American edition of the book came out in 1750 with even more “diversions,” reflecting a change in how stories for children were perceived. *The New England Primer*, which combined alphabet and catechism, was the most widely read book of the period, another indication of the instructive mindset of the eighteenth century.

During this period, children also continued to read books written for adults. Many of Daniel Defoe’s works were popular with children. In fact, *The Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Marine*, with its fearless optimism and high adventure, proved popular with children for the better part of two centuries. Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, published in 1726, is another book that was written for adults but adopted by children. Although the book is filled with heavy satire that reflects Swift’s quarrels with the imperfections of humankind in general and Englishmen in particular, its language and plot are irresistible.

Two and a half centuries ago, an innovative entrepreneur named John Newbery (1713–1767) prepared the way for the blossoming of children’s literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Newbery moved to London in 1744 and launched the first commercially successful company dedicated almost exclusively to publishing beautiful and pleasurable children’s books. In his thirty-year career, Newbery published twenty titles for children in attractive, playful formats, including the accordion book, made of one long strip folded accordion-style to form “pages.” He was the first to introduce illustrations by first-rate artists, and he published books in more permanent, attractive bindings than the popular, less expensive chapbooks.

In 1922, Frederick Melcher, the founder of *Publisher’s Weekly*, made a donation to the American Library Association to establish an annual award for the most distinguished contribution to literature for children. Fittingly, the award was named after John Newbery. (A list of the award winners and the honor books over the past eight decades appears on our accompanying website.)

Newbery is believed also to have written some of the books he published, including *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* and *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes*. Read for the better part of a century in England and the United States, *Little Goody Two-Shoes* was the first best seller written for children (and one of the longest lasting). The book might not be familiar to you, but the phrase “goody two shoes” is still used to mean a person with overly refined behavior.

**The “Golden Age of Children’s Literature”**

As the example of *Little Goody Two-Shoes* illustrates, children’s books up until the 1800s were often strongly didactic—if not downright preachy. But in the 1800s, books for children became more entertaining. In the 1800s, delightful works written expressly for children emerged that still rank among the most popular books of all time. During the long reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to her death in 1901, England enjoyed a period of stability. Parents began to sentimentalize childhood, creating what has been called “the cult of childhood.” Some of the very best writers created books for children. Books written in the nineteenth century that still circulate briskly include Clement Moore’s *The Night Before Christmas* (published in 1823), Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Ugly Duckling* and *The Little Mermaid* (translated into English in 1846), Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (published in 1865), Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (published in 1868), Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (published in 1876), Randolph Caldecott’s *The House That Jack Built* (1878), Carlo Collodi’s *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1881), Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883), Joel Chandler Harris’ *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1883), and Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* (1894).
This “Golden Age” of children’s literature continued up until the 1920s. The early 1900s saw the publication of L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), Beatrix Potter’s *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902), James Barrie’s *Peter Pan in Kensington Garden* (1906), Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1910), Hugh Lofting’s *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* (1920), Margery Williams’ *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922), and A. A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh* (1926).

Although the “Golden Age” as a sort of distant period of excellence in children’s literature may have ended with Milne, many other much-beloved books, especially picture books, emerged in the decades that followed. Hardie Gramatky’s *Little Toot* came out in 1931. Dr. Seuss (Theodor Geisel) published *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* and J. R. R. Tolkien published *The Hobbit* in 1937. Virginia Lee Burton’s *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* dates from 1939, the same year Ludwig Bemelmans’ *Madeline* appeared. Robert McCloskey’s *Make Way for Ducklings* and H. A. Rey’s *Curious George* both came out in 1941. Eleanor Estes won the Newbery Award with *The Hundred Dresses* in 1944. C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* was published in 1950, and E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* followed two years later. All of these books are so popular with contemporary children that it may be hard to believe they delighted their great-grandparents, too.

**Contemporary Children’s Books**

There is one obvious distinction between most of the books published for children through the 1950s and those that followed. Up until the early 1960s, in the United States, children’s literature featured white children almost exclusively. Then in 1965, with the civil rights movement awakening mainstream Americans to the realization that their conception of “us” was largely limited to white, English-speaking children, Nancy Larrick wrote a path-breaking article for the *Saturday Review* in which she pointed out the paucity of nonwhite characters in books for children. Shortly afterward, the Council on Interracial Books for Children was established, with the goal of persuading writers and artists of color to produce works for children. In 1982, the American Library Association added to its Newbery and Caldecott Awards the Coretta Scott King Award, to celebrate books that honorably and accurately depict African American children (see Chapter 4).

These efforts opened the door to a wealth of talent. Not only has the representation of minority children in English-language children’s literature increased substantially in the last thirty years, but the writers and artists of color who have broken into print are among the best we have. Children’s books are written by, and feature, African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, as well as children from families of limited means and those who otherwise depart from the older stereotype of white, middle-class, two-parent homes. Far more international literature is available for the American child reader—especially books from Latin America and Asia—and these books are written with greater sensitivity than in the past. Mostly gone are the stereotypical depictions of people from other continents; the norm is to have people from other cultures either write their own books or be portrayed as they would present themselves. Indeed, a whole subfield of multicultural
children’s literature has emerged to help librarians, teachers, and parents take advantage of the multicultural works that are available. (Chapter 4 of this book is devoted to that subject.)

Even as the “Golden Age of Children’s Literature” was in full flower, there were, as Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli acknowledged, “Two Nations” in nineteenth century England. The children of the aristocrats and the growing middle class were delving with delight into these wonderful new children’s books, while the children of the poor from the age of five were working 16-hour days in the mines and factories. Today in North America, children’s books are not enjoyed by all children, either—at least not in their homes. Although children’s literature in America has exploded with color and diversity, many American children rarely see a children’s book or hear one read aloud at home (Hart & Risley, 1995; Heath, 1983).

The Genres of Children’s Literature

Genre in literature corresponds to the rules of play in a game: If you know the genre you are reading, you know what kinds of actions and realities to expect, and which ones are not allowed. But herein lies a problem: Rules (in games or in literature) are sometimes broken. The breaking of genre rules—or the blurring of genre lines—in literature results in what has been called blended genres, mixed genres, or hybrid books. While this is not a new phenomenon in literature, it seems to be occurring with increasing frequency.

One example of genre blending is the time travel book, in which a character is transported through time to another era or to a fantasy world. In Jane Yolen’s *The Devil’s Arithmetic* (2004), the story begins as a contemporary family gathers for a Passover Seder. Soon Hannah, the story’s protagonist, is transported to a Polish village in 1940, where she is captured by the Nazis and taken to a death camp. In Susan Cooper’s *King of Shadows*, the protagonist travels to contemporary England with an American drama troupe, only to find himself transported 400 years back in time to Shakespeare’s London. Young readers also enjoy this type of blended genre, as evidenced by the popularity of series such as Jon Scieszka’s *Time Warp Trio* series.

Magical realism is yet another example of genre blending. In magical realism the author creates a believable, realistic setting and then infuses elements into that setting that stretch the boundaries of believability. For example, in Polly Horvath’s *The Pepins and Their Problems*, readers encounter a cow that produces lemonade. Cornelia Funke’s *The Thief Lord* is largely a realistic story about two orphaned boys who run away to modern-day Venice and join a community of street children. Only at the end of story do magical elements come into play in this suspenseful adventure.

What is of particular note in contemporary children’s literature is the way in which lines are being blurred across an increasingly wider range of genres. More and more contemporary authors are blurring the lines between poetry and other genres. In *Out of the Dust*, author Karen Hesse (1999) blends poetry and historical fiction, using free verse poetry to tell the story of the hardships faced by young Billie Jo in the midst of the Dust Bowl during the Great Depression. In *Dark Sons*, author Nikki Grimes (2005) further blurs genre boundaries as she uses free verse poetry to tell the story of two boys—modern day Sam and the Biblical Ishmael. In *Song of the Water Boatman and Other Pond Poems*,
Joyce Sidman (2005) combines poetry and nonfiction. Sidman uses a variety of poetic forms to celebrate the plants and creatures commonly found in ponds. Each poem is accompanied by a paragraph that provides scientific information about the featured creature or plant.

In Jason Chin’s picture book, *Coral Reefs*, a young girl at the library begins reading a book about coral reefs and suddenly finds herself immersed in the ocean and surrounded by plants and animals of the sea. So a fantasy framework becomes the vehicle for conveying information about the ocean. The line between fantasy and nonfiction are also blended in the popular *Magic School Bus* series by Joanna Cole.

While there has been some criticism of the blurring of genre boundaries in books such as these, we believe that children can readily distinguish between fact and fiction. Children know that school buses cannot really shrink down and carry the passengers into the human body! However, the blurring of boundaries can sometimes be cause for concern. In *Titanic Sinks!* Barry Denenberg (2011) blurs the line between fact and fiction by creating a newspaper called the *Modern Times*, which becomes the vehicle for conveying information about the Titanic. The author also infuses “journal entries” written by the editor of this fictitious newspaper throughout the book, which is made to appear to be a work of nonfiction by the inclusion of actual photographs from the era. And while the cover of the book notes that the book is a blend of “fact and fiction,” young readers may not have the sophistication to untangle this blending.

Children’s Books and English Language Learners

Two thirds of English language learners in American schools are born in the United States. But among those who were born elsewhere, as well as many who have grown up in relatively isolated communities in the United States, there are quite a few who may find books written for North American children to be puzzling or off-putting.

The genres of American children’s books may be unfamiliar. In the countries outside North and South America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, and Japan, realistic fiction is rarely found, so children from other parts of the world may be confused by books that *seem* true to life in every respect but actually are not true. Science fiction and fantasy genres may be unfamiliar, too. You may need to take the time to explain those genres to English language learners. Folktales, on the other hand, are common virtually everywhere.

The qualities of good children’s books we described earlier in this chapter may not apply to stories that children from other parts of the world have heard or read. For example, books that are popular with children from Argentina, Mexico, and other Spanish-speaking countries may be startlingly unpredictable instead of linear, because their authors equate an unfettered imagination with creativity.

The moral orientation of American children’s books may seem odd. Authors of mainstream children’s literature in America downplay moral teaching, leaving room
for readers to derive their own truths, but children raised in traditional societies more often expect stories to have clear moral messages.

The initiative taking and individualism of characters in American children’s books may run counter to the cultural norms in many traditional societies, where children are taught to be stringently obedient to adults. Children from such cultures may find it hard to identify with characters like Marty in Phyllis Reynolds Naylor’s *Shiloh* (2010), Opal in Kate DiCamillo’s *Because of Winn-Dixie* (2010), and Jennifer Holm’s Turtle in *Turtle in Paradise* (2010), each of whom is depicted with a strongly individualistic personality; in addition, each of these characters formulates and carries out plans that are daringly independent of adults.

### Censorship: Which Books Will Make It into Children’s Hands?

All teachers make decisions about which books to put into children’s hands. Of course, teachers choose books that they think will interest children and that will appeal to the children’s level of understanding. Of course, they choose books that they think have some sort of merit. But at the same time teachers make some books available, they deny children access to others. When teachers deny children access to books because they think those books are too risqué or controversial or when other adults put pressure on teachers to deny access to certain books, then we are dealing with the issue of censorship.

Simply put, censorship means to deny someone access to books or ideas (Naylor, 1991). The First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press. . . .” This language suggests that individual freedom is at issue whenever teachers or other school officials deny children access to written materials. But many parents claim the right to expect teachers not to expose children to material on topics that the parents would rather handle more delicately at home or keep away from their children altogether. Teachers, for their part, may choose to introduce children to a book they know will stretch their minds and not to share books they consider trashy. Whose rights should prevail? And how should the issue of rights be squared with the requirements of responsible education?

Some topics seem to raise more pressures for censorship than others, and the controversial topics are not always the ones we might expect. In society at large, the areas in which the media feel the most pressure for censorship are sex and violence, especially in our entertainment. These topics seem to cause less controversy in schools, though (Traw, 1996), perhaps because there is something closer to a consensus among parents and teachers that books with more than trace amounts of sex and violence should not be circulated at school. It is true that there is the occasional book such as Judy Blume’s *Forever* that describes sexual acts (and, sure enough, this book has suffered campaigns to get it off the shelves). But for the most part, in children’s literature, sex is off limits, and few people want to argue about it. Other bodily functions seem to escape censorship, however. Taro Gomi’s *Everyone Poops* and Shinta Cho’s *The Gas We Pass* are sometimes found in school.
and Dav Pilkey’s *Captain Underpants* series, with titles such as *Captain Underpants and the Perilous Plot of Professor Poopypants*, is freely distributed during “Drop Everything and Read” time, even (especially!) in third grade.

The surprisingly difficult issue is religion. Religion seems to come up in two ways. We are familiar with the direct way, as exemplified by the state school board of Kansas’s decision (later overturned) to require biology teachers to teach Creationism—the bibically based doctrine that God really did create man and woman in his own image—and not evolution—the theory that human beings descended from pre-human primates. The Louisiana Science Education Act allows but does not require teachers in that state to teach Creationism (and also to challenge the science behind claims that human activity has influenced climate change). Usually, religious censorship comes up in less direct ways, as groups of parents and other citizens campaign against books that they believe spread antireligious ideas. Especially vulnerable to censorship are books about magic and witches.

The *Harry Potter* books and even Tomie dePaola’s *Strega Nona* books have evoked campaigns for removal from school libraries by people who believe the descriptions of magic that permeate them are not harmless fun but suggestive of Satanism. Sometimes the criticisms miss the target entirely. For instance, the storyteller Joseph Bruchac described visiting a school district in South Dakota where a citizens’ group had demanded that the school remove all books from the library having to do with Transcendentalism. (The parents apparently confused the nineteenth-century literary movement led by Ralph Waldo Emerson with a popular method of meditation.) But whether the groups bringing complaints about books have done their homework or not, schools and teachers need to be prepared to defend their choice of books.

Arguments over religion and alleged Satanism may deflect attention from another kind of passive censorship that is also serious: What are we leaving out? James Loewen filled a book with teachings that were either distorted in or missing altogether from the typical American school curriculum. He entitled his book *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (Loewen, 1996). If our children are going to sharpen their minds and forge better ways of living in the future, they will need access to materials that challenge the status quo. But teachers who have been beleaguered by parents upset about *Strega Nona* or *Harry Potter* might not be very daring when it comes to looking at the true story of Christopher Columbus, the struggle to improve working conditions in America, or even the constructive role religion has played in U.S. life. Because censorship removes from consideration materials that might stretch children’s minds, the American Library Association (ALA) has issued statements opposing it. Here is why:

**Why is censorship harmful?**

Censorship is harmful because it results in the opposite of true education and learning. In the process of acquiring knowledge and searching for truth, students can learn to discriminate—to make decisions rationally and logically in light of the evidence. By suppressing all materials containing ideas or themes with which they do not agree, censors produce a sterile conformity and a lack of intellectual and emotional growth in students. (ALA web page, November 2, 2000)

What seems clear is that in some districts, at least, there is less of a consensus about what schools should teach and less trust on the part of the parents than there was before the drumbeat of critiques of U.S. schools that began in the 1980s. How should teachers conduct themselves in the face of the occasional demands for censorship of children’s reading fare in the schools?

We recommend the following steps:

1. Stay aware of what is in your classroom library and the groups of books you assign, and know why they are there. You should be confident that the books
you are making available have literary merit, are enjoyable, raise interesting and important themes, and broaden children’s awareness of people and places and events. You should be confident that they are not mean spirited, racist, or prurient.

2. Make sure that your school has responsible guidelines for choosing books. One source of such guidelines is the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). NCTE has a special section on their Web site devoted to the topic of censorship, including suggested guidelines for choosing materials for students to read <www.ncte.org/censorship>.

3. Be prepared to speak up for the contribution that good books make to children’s education. Also be prepared to explain the benefit to individual children and to society as a whole when students learn to distinguish what is worthwhile from what is not worthwhile and to entertain ideas and points of view that are different from their own.

4. Realize that others may disagree with your choice of a certain book, for reasons they believe are right. Be prepared to recognize their concern for their child and to respect that concern.

5. Be aware that, should the choice of books in your classroom or school be criticized in ways that you believe are unfair or misguided, and should calm conversation not resolve the problem, there are resources that can help. One is the American Library Association (ALA), which has an Office for Intellectual Freedom <www.ala.org>; the Office for Intellectual Freedom is also found on the ALA Web site. Another source of help is the National Council of Teachers of English <www.ncte.org>.

Resources for Children’s Books

Studying children’s literature in college differs in many ways from studying other literature, especially in that the focus is turned as much or more toward contemporary books for children as it is toward great works of the past. That is because—with the explosion in the number of books published for children, improvements in the technology of color reproduction, and a growing diversity in the range of people children need to know and care about—many of the very best books for contemporary children have appeared in the past twenty years. And they continue to be published every year. Therefore, to be well read in children’s books, you must read backwards and forwards: Read the best of the books already published, and read the best of those just coming out. For the best books already published, you can count on the Recommended Books section at the end of each chapter (especially those in Chapters 5–11). The most important books in the development of each genre are discussed in each chapter in the section on historical development. If you want a historical perspective on children’s literature, you should read those books as well. But what of the new books? How can you find your way to those that are best?

Several journals review children’s books and promote the best ones. These journals, which include The Horn Book Magazine, School Library Journal, Booklist, and Bookbird as well as the book review sections of several professional magazines such as The Reading Teacher and Language Arts, have slightly different emphases and target audiences. Journals published by other teachers’ organizations such as the National Council for the Social Studies <www.ncss.org> and the National Science Teachers Association <www.nsta.org> also list children’s books that are keyed to topics from those subject areas.


Primary (books for reading aloud)


Cronin, Doreen. (2000). *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type*. Illustrated by Betsy Lewin.


Upper Elementary


Middle School


LEARNING ABOUT BOOKS ONLINE

The online bookstore, <www.amazon.com>, is a valuable source of information about books. Click on "Books" from the menu of tabs arrayed horizontally across the top of the home page. When the window labeled "Books" opens on the left side of the page, immediately click "Advanced Search" underneath before entering other information. That will take you to another page where you can search for books by title, author, or subject. You can limit your search there to books on a certain topic for specific age groups, such as 4–8 or 9–12.

When you click on the title of a book, you will be taken to a page devoted to that book. If you click on the author’s name at the top of the page, you will be taken to other titles by that author or illustrator. By scrolling down to the bottom of the page, you can usually find a publisher’s description of the book and a review of the book, often by School Library Journal, Publishers Weekly, and others.

TECHNOLOGY IN PRACTICE 1.1

EXPERIENCES FOR FURTHER LEARNING

1. Reread the vignettes on page 4. Can you think of books that served you in each of those ways when you were a child? Are there other ways in which books appealed to you? Compare your answers with those of your classmates.


3. This chapter stated that children’s books have changed throughout history, roughly as views of childhood changed. What trends do you see at work in society that may change children’s literature in the next twenty years? What qualities or values would you expect to remain the same in children’s literature?

4. Interview three teachers of the elementary grades. Ask them how many different ways they use children’s books with their students. Compare their answers with the vignettes found on page 4.

5. Find a school librarian or a children’s librarian who has worked in the field for thirty years or more. Ask her or him to talk about the ways in which books for children have changed, children’s interests have changed, and parents’ concerns about their children’s reading materials have changed—and how these issues have remained the same. Prepare a two-column list of ways in which children’s books have remained the same and ways in which they have changed. Share your list with your peers.

REFERENCES


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Perrault, Charles. “Sleeping Beauty in the Woods” (La belle au bois dormant.) Mercure gallant, February 1696.


Rapp, Adam. The Buffalo Tree. Front Street, 2007.
Twain, Mark. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Webster, 1885.
The Artistry of Literary Elements

Genre: The “Rules of the Game”

Settings: How Do Authors Create Times and Places?
Settings in Folktales and Fairy Tales ● Settings in Realistic Fiction ● Settings as Important Features in Themselves

Ask the Editor: Richard W. Jackson

Characterization: How Do People Emerge from the Page?
Characters: What They Do ● Characters: How They Relate to Others ● Characters: What They Think and Feel ● Characters: What They Say and How They Say It ● Characters: The Roles They Play in the Plot ● Characters: As the Author Describes Them ● Round Characters and Flat Characters ● Round Characters Undergo Changes

Plots: How Do Stories Happen?
Plots and Conflicts ● Plot Structures ● Recurring Plots ● Episodes: Stories within Stories ● Layered Stories: Surface Plots and Underlying Stories

Themes: How Do Stories Convey Meaning?
Explicit and Implicit Themes ● Reading against the Grain

Issue to Consider: Are Themes Really There?
The Stance of the Implied Reader
Identifying with Characters ● Taking the Intended Moral Stance ● Filling in the Gaps

Point of View
Stories in the First Person ● Stories in the Second Person ● Stories in the Third Person

Style
Words ● Images ● Metaphors ● Voice, Tone, and Mood ● Intertextuality

Visual Literacy
For English Language Learners
Kneeling in the sand, Paulie shredded dry seaweed and fluffed it into heap between the three black cooking stones, half forgetting that she had no food to cook. She broke palm fronds over the seaweed, then propped two pieces of driftwood with their tips just above the palm. Raking the sand together with her fingers, she built up a ring around the outside of the stones, careful to make room for the air to blow in and give life to the fire, a little and not too much.

Paulie leaned back, still kneeling, circling her upper arms in her hands to warm them. Night had come. The tree frogs stopped singing all at once.

“You got matches, Uncle?”

Paulie’s uncle was washing in seawater from a bucket, pouring it down his back to get off the sweat and the sawdust, rinsing his arms.

“All the matches gone, Paulie.”

“Go see if you can borrow a coal,” her grandmother said. Sitting on the steps of her house, a cloth around her thin shoulders, Grann Adeline leaned toward the fire as if it were already lit. She frowned, slapped at a mosquito on her ankle. “Go on, girl. Ask sweetly and somebody bound to give you an ember.”

Paulie wandered down the sand path. The small houses clustered under the trees were mostly dark. She could hear voices talking softly, a baby crying. A thin dog came out and sniffed at the backs of her knees. Paulie looked for the glow of a cook fire, smelled the breeze for one. She could feel the sea air, and hear the waves coming in, but it seemed like nobody was cooking.


The Artistry of Literary Elements

Literature is a miracle. With words on a page, a writer can take readers to a place that never was, let them know people who never lived, and help them share adventures that never happened—and, in spite of the artifice, create something truer than life itself.

It can enhance our appreciation of a work to have a vocabulary and a set of concepts to help us admire its wonders, or note the shortcomings of a less-than-satisfactory work. In this chapter, we describe the literary qualities that critics and teachers most often refer to when they talk about texts, both narrative texts and informational ones. Knowing these characteristics will give us a vocabulary for exploring the elements of texts that move readers, and also for evaluating works for young readers.

The main elements of a literary work we will discuss are genre; setting; characterization; plot; theme; stance of the implied reader; point of view; the author’s style, voice, tone, and mood; and intertextuality. Let’s first take a closer look at each of these literary elements. Later we will consider some special literary features of informational books and poetry.

Genre: The “Rules of the Game”

Genres in literature are categories of writing recognized for their patterns of organization, their style, and their effects on readers. Genres matter. Imagine you are passing by a TV on a Saturday afternoon and see a game in progress. Your brain quickly registers what kind of game it is—football, baseball, soccer, tennis—whether it is played by women or men, and so on. Likewise, when you hear a story being told or come across one in a book, you soon decide whether it is truth or fiction, is based in fantasy or reality, is meant to be funny or scary, has human or animal characters, follows a dramatic
plot or has a repeated series of actions, and so on. In your experiences with both sports and literature, you rely upon a set of categories to recognize what you are observing, what the rules are, and what you can expect to happen as well as not happen.

The genres most often treated in children’s literature are folktales and other traditional literature, poetry, contemporary realistic fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, biography, and informational books. Genres let readers know what to expect as they read a work, and how to make sense of what happens.

In a work of fiction, the story usually begins with characters in a setting who soon face a problem. The reader implicitly appreciates the problem and begins to wonder about its solution. Like rules in different sports, the range of possible solutions of a literary work is controlled by the genre. If the work is realistic fiction, we expect a solution that would be possible in real life. If the work is a fairy tale, we know that the solution may be magical. If the work is fantasy, we are prepared for the story to take us into a kind of reality removed from our own, and then tell us, indirectly, something about our human nature or the world we live in.

Some works blur the distinction between realistic fiction and fantasy. Magical realism is the term used to describe works that mix the real and the magical. While true fantasies like J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series and Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials take readers to a fantasy world, works of magical realism stay anchored in the real world but introduce just a touch of magical elements. For example, David Almond’s Skellig is the story of ten-year-old Michael, whose sister has been born with a defective heart and is not expected to live. While the family fixes up a decrepit house, they are sleepwalking in the dread of impending tragedy. But Michael finds a tramp—a man looking like a dead thing—in a pile of junk in the falling-down garbage, and living, it turns out, on dead animals that the owls bring him. His name is Skellig, and he is an angel. Really.

Works may even keep the reader guessing as to what sort of genre they are reading. The Magician’s Nephew, the first volume in C. S. Lewis’s Narnia series, keeps readers wondering what is so peculiar about Uncle Andrew—until the two children slip on a magical ring and are transported to another world. In those early moments before the magical ring works its power, readers’ curiosity is aroused as much by the questions of what kinds of things can happen (that is, “What genre is this, anyway?”) as by the question of what will happen.

Note that picture books may be written in any of the genres: folktales, realistic fiction, poetry, informational books. Picture books are a kind of format rather than a genre, so they are not included in our list of genres. Figure 2.1 describes the main genres of literature for children.

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Settings: How Do Authors Create Times and Places?

The setting is the time and place in which the events of a story occur. Because whatever is visualized must be seen in time and space, the setting of the story is part of the reader’s invitation into an imaginary experience. If an author is successful in evoking a setting, the reader may subconsciously supply many details herself.

The development of settings varies from genre to genre. In a folktale, the setting may get scant mention, yet it can still have symbolic significance. In realistic fiction, the setting may be described more elaborately to add verisimilitude, or lifeliness, to the story and make it easier for readers to believe in the events. In a survival story, the setting works against the main character or characters—almost as if it were a character...
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Subtype</th>
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<tr>
<td>Folktales</td>
<td>Works by anonymous authors that were passed on orally from generation to generation</td>
<td>fairy tales: tales in which magic is prominent</td>
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<td>legends: larger-than-life tales of famous people</td>
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<td>fables: stories with a moral</td>
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<td>epics: long, rhymed works that relate a hero’s exploits</td>
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<td>myths: ancient stories about the gods</td>
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<td>pourquoi stories: stories lighter than myths that explain, often delightfully, about the reasons for things</td>
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<td>Realistic Fiction</td>
<td>Fictional stories that <em>might have happened.</em> In realistic fiction, events are plausible, and settings are usually drawn from actual geography.</td>
<td>adventure stories: works that tell of a character’s struggles against nature or other people</td>
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<td>humorous stories: works that are funny</td>
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<td>relationship stories (or other problem stories): works that focus on relations between people or a character’s struggles with her own self-doubts</td>
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<td>historical fiction: works with realistic characters and plots set in a historical time and place</td>
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<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>Works with otherworldly or supernatural elements</td>
<td>high fantasy: works that create a parallel universe alongside the real world</td>
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<td>low fantasy: works in which a magical element intrudes into life in the real world, and makes possible a series of events which otherwise stay very true to life</td>
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<td>science fiction: works that create a fictionalized setting or set of events based on some projection of scientific knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>Works in verse</td>
<td>narrative poems: works that tell a story in verse</td>
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<td>lyric or expressive poems: verses that convey observations or express feelings</td>
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<td>humorous poems: jokes, funny riddles, or humorous stories in verse</td>
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<td>novels in verse: book-length poems that tell a story</td>
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**FIGURE 2.1** Genres of Children’s Literature
itself. In historical fiction or in stories from other cultures, the setting may share center stage with the characters and events, since readers may be as curious about what life is or was like in that setting as they are about what happens in the story. The same can be said of science fiction or fantasy—genres in which the author is free to make up whole new worlds. Let’s look, then, at how settings vary with some of these genres.

**Settings in Folktales and Fairy Tales**

Settings in folktales are presented with few details. They represent everywhere and nowhere, but they often have particular associations. In European tales, *home* is where normal life is lived, securely. The *forest* is where one may be tested by sinister forces. The *country* is where simple but honest folk live, whereas the *town* is the place of sophisticated but possibly treacherous people. A *cottage* is a place one usually wants to rise above (but may have to learn to settle for), and a *palace* is the residence of those who were born privileged or who have had triumphant success.

Because the genre of folk stories tends to use these same settings with the same connotations again and again, the mere mention of them usually cues the reader to make these associations.

**Settings in Realistic Fiction**

Settings in realistic fiction are usually described in great detail. Just as the genre of a work sets and limits our expectations for what can happen in it, the way a setting is

<table>
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<tr>
<td>“Puss ’n Boots”</td>
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<td>“Sleeping Beauty”</td>
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<td>“Little Red Riding Hood”</td>
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<td>“The Gunny Wolf”</td>
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**FIGURE 2.2  Settings in Folktales and Fairy Tales**
Ask the Editor . . . Richard W. Jackson

What was the best manuscript you ever received, and what qualities do you look for in an author?

The best manuscript I’ve received? Ever? You might have asked me to choose between my children! There are several bests. Paula Fox’s *Maurice’s Room*—she’d written only three chapters at the time I first saw it but I remember reading them aloud to my wife and saying, “This woman will win the Newbery medal someday.” And she did. Such vividness in the people, such kindness in the humor. And such a voice. Also a favorite—the text for *The Relatives Came* by Cynthia Rylant, for somewhat the same reasons. I believe we didn’t change a word, though “best” for me doesn’t mean word perfect. More important than immediate perfection is the breath of life in a piece. Frances Temple’s *Taste of Salt* was another revelation—a “breathing” book about modern Haiti, about brave young people whose lives were, at the time, largely unimaginable by Americans (of any age). The book is written in two first-person teenage voices, and there is urgency in every word. For “I” stories, urgency is crucial.

Even “light” books, such as Avi’s *S.O.R. Losers* or Judy Blume’s *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*, depend on urgency for their success. In funny stories as well as serious, you need to sense the narrator’s urge to bend your ear. *Toning the Sweep* by Angela Johnson is another unique example of urgent voice. It began as a collection of quick scenes, poetic impressions, snippets of conversation about a girl witnessing her grandmother’s struggle with cancer; it grew into a novel over several years. Thrilling years.

I look for long-term associations with writers or illustrators and rarely take on anyone published by many houses—for snobbish reasons—for devotion to hard work and a certain delicacy of touch. I listen for voice. Just this minute the phone rang and—speaking of voice—a cheery one said, “I’ve figured out how to do it, the whole book. It was our conversation yesterday that helped.” The caller was Theresa Nelson, a superb novelist whose first book, *The 25-cent Miracle*, is another best. She’s written four beauties since. My response to such calls has remained unchanging since 1962: gratitude and joy.

Richard W. Jackson is editor of Richard Jackson Books, an imprint of Orchard Books, which publishes some thirty new titles a year. His articles have appeared in *The Horn Book Magazine*, *School Library Journal*, and *The New Advocate*.

LITERARY ELEMENTS IN WORKS FOR CHILDREN

Described in realistic fiction sets up and limits our expectations for what can happen in that work. Aspects of a setting can include:

- the immediate social group (that is, the people immediately surrounding the character),
- the wider social setting (that is, the characters’ nationality, race, and social class),
- the geography (including what kinds of activities typically happen there, as well as what has happened there in the past and how people feel about it), and
- the historical period (the current decade or earlier ones).

Rita Garcia-Williams’ *One Crazy Summer* illustrates all of these aspects of settings. The immediate social setting is the family of Delphine, age ten, who has been thrust into the role of mothering her younger sisters, Vonetta and Fern. They live with their kind but somewhat aloof father and their conservative, disapproving grandmother in a crowded Brooklyn apartment. The grandmother and father had moved to Brooklyn from the South some years before. As for the wider social setting,
they are African American, and they are keenly aware of their ethnicity whenever they are in the company of white people. The geographical setting shifts to Oakland, California, where the father has sent the children to visit their estranged mother, Cecile. Cecile seems to lack any capacity for kindness, even motherly instincts. The historical moment is the summer of 1968. A progressive young artist, Cecile is a radical women’s liberationist, and the Black Panther movement is being born right in Cecile’s neighborhood, even in her living room.

**Settings as Important Features in Themselves**

In some genres—especially realistic fiction, fiction based in history, multicultural fiction, and fantasy—settings can figure so strongly as to share attention with the characters in the story. Eugene Yelchin takes great care to paint a picture of life in the Soviet Union under Stalin’s regime in *Breaking Stalin’s Nose*:

> It’s dinnertime, so the kitchen is crowded. Forty-eight hardworking, honest, Soviet citizens share the kitchen and single small toilet in our communal apartment we call *komunalka* for short. We live here as one large, happy family: We are all equal; we have no secrets. We know who gets up at what time, who eats what for dinner, and who said what in their rooms. The walls are thin; some don’t go up to the ceiling. We even have a room cleverly divided with shelves of books about Stalin that two families can share. (Yelchin, 2011, p. 5)

Sometimes, the setting may become a metaphor for the meaning of the work. In Edward Bloor’s *Tangerine*, the artificial gated community, Windsor Downs, was thrown together callously and dangerously over sinkholes and other natural threats in central Florida, a fact the residents try unsuccessfully to ignore. The setting finds a parallel in the life of protagonist Paul Fisher’s family, with its veneer of normalcy built over terrible secrets.

In multicultural literature, details of the setting may seem commonplace to some readers but appear striking to others. For example, Alma Flor Ada’s *My Name Is Maria Isabel* (1995) begins:

> Maria Isabel looked at the cup of coffee with milk and the buttered toast in front of her. But she couldn’t bring herself to eat.
> Her mother said, “Maribel, cariño, hurry up.”
> Her father added, “You don’t want to be late on your first day, do you?” (p. 1)

Children from Latino lineage will find that scene reassuringly familiar. But other readers might be surprised that a young girl would drink coffee for breakfast, moved at the mother’s affectionate shortening of the girl’s name, and impressed that the mother speaks to her daughter in two languages. In effect, the setting is functioning almost as a character in the story.

In a historical novel, the details of the setting may also go a long way toward satisfying young readers’ curiosity about a place that is far removed in time. The earthiness of English village life early in the fourteenth century is brought home in the first paragraph of Karen Cushman’s *The Midwife’s Apprentice* (1995):

> When animal droppings and garbage and spoiled straw are piled up in a great heap, the rotting and moiling give forth heat. Usually no one gets close enough to notice because of the stench. But the girl noticed and, on that frosty night, burrowed deep into the warm, rotting muck, heedless of the smell. (p. 1)

Here again, although the characters also do much to impress themselves on readers, the setting of this historical novel continually surprises and informs them.
Characterization: How Do People Emerge from the Page?

Characterization is the art of creating people out of words on the page. When a writer has done a good job of characterization, readers feel as if they have gotten to know another person. How does a writer achieve that effect? Writers typically introduce characters to us in the same ways people become known to us in real life: by showing us what they do, by sharing their relationships with others, by revealing their inner thoughts and their general outlook, and by letting us hear them talk. Writers also give characters roles to play—protagonist, antagonist, helper, etc.—and this colors the way we feel about them. And, of course, writers come right out and describe characters. Let’s look at each of these dimensions of characterization.

Characters: What They Do

Skillful writers show us, and don’t tell us. In *The Breadwinner*, instead of telling us that Parvana’s older sister is mean and insensitive, Deborah Ellis shows the sister badgering Parvana with cruel insults, even when Parvana cuts her hair, puts on boy’s clothes, and risks her life to get provisions for her family in Taliban-controlled Kabul, Afghanistan. It is left to the reader to interpret these actions and decide what kind of character we are dealing with—just as it is with the people we meet in real life.

Characters: How They Relate to Others

Characters are also brought to life when readers see who “their people” are—and how they relate to those people. Marty in *Shiloh* (Naylor, 1991) is a member of a hard-working and frugal family in rural Appalachia. Bud, in *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999), is a member of the African American culture that conducts its affairs largely out of sight of the dominant white culture. But, as it turns out, his real people are a troupe of jazz musicians.

Often, book characters are portrayed as being out of harmony with their own group. Seventh grader Doug Swieteck in Gary Schmidt’s *OK for Now* (2011) is not only more honest and peaceable than his delinquent older brother and his abusive and barely employable father, but he struggles not to be tarred by the low opinion people have of his family in their newly adopted town of Marysville, New York.

Characters: What They Think and Feel

Characters are revealed to us through their inner thoughts. Pause for a moment and note how rare that is. In real life, you can only know your own thoughts, not anyone else’s, no matter how close you are to another person. But literature gives you the unique opportunity to go inside another person’s head. And when you experience another’s thoughts displayed in well-chosen words, you are likely to gain language for your own inner experiences, too. You become more self-reflective.

Doug Swieteck, just mentioned, has been learning to take a perspective on art and life by studying prints of birds by John James Audubon. As a disabled reader with an abusive father and a thug for a brother, Doug has enormous challenges in
his life, just like the heron in a drawing that is about to intersect with the path of a hunter’s shot. Doug says:

May be the Snowy Heron is going to come off pretty badly when the planes come together. Maybe. But he’s still proud and beautiful. His head is high, and he’s got this sharp beak that’s facing out to the world. He’s OK for now. (Schmidt, 2011).

Characters: What They Say and How They Say It

Literature lets us hear what characters say and how they say it, and we can infer how they think and feel from those utterances. Listen to the words we hear from Caitlin, a child with Asperger Syndrome, in Kathryn Erskine’s *Mockingbird* (2011), who is being visited by her classroom teacher after her brother Devon has died:

She doesn’t move. This means she is waiting for me to say something. I hate that. It makes my underarms prickle and get wet. I almost start sucking my sleeve like I do at recess but then I remember. You’re welcome, I say.

She moves away.

I got it right! I go to the refrigerator and put a smiley face sticker on my chart under YOUR MANNERS. Seven more and I get to watch a video. (Erskine, 2010, pp. 7–8).

With no description at all supplied by the author, we know that even simple social interactions are to Caitlin like advanced calculus is to many of us. We know that Caitlin has been trained in procedures for simple conversations, and we also know that she wants to do the right thing.

Characters: The Roles They Play in the Plot

If a character in a story is cast in the role of the protagonist, or the hero, readers are inclined to be sympathetic toward him or her. If the character is cast as the antagonist (the villain or the hero’s rival), readers are disposed to “fill in the blanks” of that character’s personality with bad qualities. (This happens in real life, too: Just listen to what emotional sports fans say about players on the opposing team!)

In Gary Schmidt’s *The Wednesday Wars* (2007), Holling Hoodhood’s teacher Mrs. Baker is described at first as his enemy. He says, “She hates my guts” (and she really seems to!), but later she becomes his larger-than-life advocate.

Characters: As the Author Describes Them

Authors sometimes give readers descriptions of their characters. J.K. Rowling introduces Dudley Dursley, the spoiled and overstuffed son of Harry Potter’s guardians, this way:

Dudley looked a lot like Uncle Vernon. He had a large pink face, not much neck, small, water blue eyes, and thick blond hair that lay smoothly on his thick, fat head. Aunt Petunia often said that Dudley looked like a baby angel—Harry often said that Dudley looked like a pig in a wig. (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, p. 21)

In case the reader needs more clues to Dudley’s personality, he is immediately shown counting his Christmas presents—and finding that he’s come up two short from last year. Then his fawning mother slips more presents into the pile—so we see his relationship to this overindulgent woman, as well.
Round Characters and Flat Characters

Round characters in a story are actors whom we really get to know, along with their pasts, their relationships, their motives, their inner thoughts, and the changes they go through during the story. Flat characters are the opposite: They are introduced in a story and then they act predictably, as if they are needed as foils for the more prominent characters to play off. We learn little about them, except for their effects on other characters. For example, in Mildred Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (2001), the Wallace boys are mean and violent racists who prey on black people, and who hide behind the privileges of being white. The Wallaces are flat characters. The author, Mildred Taylor, doesn’t show us why the Wallaces are racist. They are described only enough to show what the other characters in the story are up against.

Contrasted with flat characters are round characters, whose motives are explained, who are seen from many points of view, and who usually develop and change as the story progresses. In *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, Cassie Logan is the protagonist of the story. We are let in on her thoughts. We see what she does, why she does it, and what she thinks about her actions. Cassie’s awareness of herself and others expands as she goes through the story, so that she is wiser by the end. She is a round character.

Round Characters Undergo Changes

The protagonists in many books undergo changes as their stories progress. For example, in Kate DiCamillo’s *Because of Winn-Dixie* (2010), Opal learns to move past her feelings of abandonment and become a provider of comfort to others. In Cynthia Lord’s *Rules* (2006), Catherine learns that the way to cope with her brother’s autism is to expand her own capacity to relate to people who are different, to become their ally.

Often, a story demonstrates how events helped a main character to change. This is one of the main ways that stories teach, even when they do not appear to be didactic. The German term
**Plots: How Do Stories Happen?**

A plot is a meaningful ordering of events with their consequences, a “who did what, and why.” A plot is the conveyor belt that pulls readers through the text, helping them get to know characters and scenes along the way, before arriving at a cumulative insight.

In this section, we look at plots in several ways. We look first at the conflicts that give rise to plots; then we examine the structure of plots. Common plot types will be the next topic, followed by a consideration of some of the twists and turns of plots that authors have at their disposal—techniques such as episodes within plots and surface stories with underlying plots.

**Plots and Conflicts**

Plots unfold when a character is drawn toward a significant goal but faces some kind of conflict in reaching it. Conflicts in fiction usually take one of four different forms: between the character and some rival person, between the character and himself or herself, between the character and the environment, or between the character and society.

**Conflict between Characters.** In J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (1998), the ultimate conflict is between Harry Potter and Voldemort, the wicked sorcerer who killed Harry’s parents and who is intent on doing further evil in the world. Along the way, there are other conflicts: between Harry and his stepfamily, the Dursleys, and between Harry and his friends and the residents of Slytherin Hall, a rival dormitory within Hogwarts School.

Roald Dahl’s books often introduce conflicts between characters: between Danny and his father and Victor Hazlett, the wealthy landowner, in *Danny the Champion of the World* (1978) or between Matilda and her ghastly parents in *Matilda* (1988). As we note below, Dahl’s willingness to portray really awful characters that children love to hate makes some parents and teachers uneasy—and by comparison makes us realize how many contemporary children’s books portray antagonists with at least some redeeming characteristics.

**Conflict within a Character.** In Pam Muñoz Ryan’s *Esperanza Rising* (2002), the heroine struggles with overcoming her social class prejudice and her sense of entitlement and accepting her lot as a field hand. She resolves the conflict when she realizes she can move on with her life but keep the core strengths and traditions her loved ones have always shared.

**Conflict between a Character and Nature.** Books with survival themes pit their protagonists against nature. Gary Paulsen’s books do this brilliantly, as in *Hatchet*, (1987) in which a boy learns to survive in the woods after an airplane crash, and
**The Voyage of the Frog** (1990), in which a boy survives an ocean crossing on a sailboat. In Jean Craighead George’s *Julie of the Wolves* (1972), the heroine survives in the Arctic tundra by adopting the ways of the wolves. In Theodore Taylor’s *The Cay* (2002), eleven-year-old Phillip survives on a desert island in the Caribbean with the help of Timothy, an older islander. And in Margi Preus’s *Heart of a Samurai* (2010), in the mid-1800s Manjiro survives being shipwrecked on an island, only to be rescued and carried to America, where the challenge is to understand and thrive in a new land.

**Conflict between a Character and Society.** Characters in books are often at odds with society. Sometimes society embraces some evil or prejudice against which the character must struggle. Such is the case in Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban in *The Breadwinner*. In other books, the struggle with society comes about not because society is particularly evil, but just because it is what it is. In Vera Williams’ *A Chair for My Mother* (1982), a young girl mobilizes her neighbors to raise enough nickels and dimes to buy a chair, so her mother can sit down comfortably at the end of a long day working as a waitress. While poverty is never mentioned, the plot would make no sense without the family’s abject shortage of funds. What rises from the pages is a spirit of community, of the strength of people looking out for each other against a background of need.

**Plot Structures**

Plots have universal features, which literary scholars tend to describe this way. A plot begins with an *exposition* or *introduction*, which provides the information necessary to understand the story. Then comes the *complication*, in which some conflict is introduced and the character or characters begin their attempts to resolve it. The *rising action* follows from the complication, as the characters work their way through the situation in which they find themselves and pursue their goal. Most of the way through the book comes the *climax*, the point of maximum tension, when the character tries to resolve the conflict and things seem to be most at stake. After the climax comes a rapid series of events that can be called the *falling action*, which culminate in the *denouement* (French for “untying,” because finally the tensions introduced in the story are relaxed). The denouement can also be called the *resolution*. Either way, here is where the problem is solved and the conflict resolved (see Figure 2.4).

In Alma Flor Ada’s *The Gold Coin* (1991), the *exposition* is the part where Juan approaches a hut he plans to rob and spies an old woman inside holding a gold coin and saying, “I must be the richest person in the world.” The *complication* comes when Juan breaks into the hut after the woman leaves and finds no gold coin. Now, in order to
meet his goal of stealing her riches (or so he thinks), he must follow the old woman. Tensions mount (the rising action) throughout the story as Juan follows the old woman, Doña Josefa, to one farm after another—where he is told of a generous and helpful act she has just performed and is given work to do to pass the time before the farmers can take him to his next destination. The climax is the surprising events that befall Juan when he catches up with Doña Josefa alone on the road. And the falling action follows when Juan realizes that he has been transformed. The dénouement or resolution is tactfully left for the reader to imagine. How will Juan lead his life, now that he has learned the value of being trusted by others, of being generous?

Recurring Plots

Some plot forms are used again and again in stories. To lump them together by their common forms is to take nothing away from them; on the contrary, it may point out their larger psychic meaning and their contribution to our understanding of the human drama.

The Initiation Story. Children’s literature is full of initiation stories, in which a young character is given some challenge to get through; having successfully met the challenge, she or he is recognized as being more mature or more worthy—and the reader learns lessons about growing up. “Jack and the Beanstalk” and “Hansel and Gretel” are initiation stories.

Becoming initiated sometimes implies trade-offs: The protagonist must trade innocence for experience. Hansel and Gretel lost their childhood and experienced horror before they could be reunited with their father, in what must have been an uneasy relationship. Growing up requires pain and struggle, embracing some things and giving up others—scary steps for a child. Initiation stories point the way, not by revealing the particular path a child will take, because that is necessarily unique to each person, but by offering the hope and assurance that there is sunlight above the clouds.

The Journey. Another metaphor for arduous progress and change is the journey. People all over the world have been motivated by deep urges to uproot themselves and travel long distances. As hunter-gatherers, humans ranged widely over the landscape, following animals or seeking greener habitats. Since ancient times, different cultures have had the custom of making pilgrimages to religious places—to Canterbury, Mecca, Santiago de Compostela—a practice that survives today. Voyages of discovery, for trade, to make war or bring comfort to the suffering—all seem to follow some deep-seated human urge to go, to see, and to be changed along the way.

Frances Temple’s The Ramsay Scallop (1994b) goes to the roots of the tradition, as it recounts a young betrothed couple’s pilgrimage from England to Spain in the year 1299. Rodman Philbrick’s The Mostly True Adventures of Homer P. Figg (2009) chronicles the namesake character’s journey from his cruel uncle’s farm in Pine Swamp, Maine, south to Gettysburg to find his brother, who was illegally conscripted into the Union Army in 1863. Christopher Paul Curtis won a Newbery Award in 1999 for...
Bud, Not Buddy, the story of an orphaned African American boy’s odyssey across Michigan in the 1930s to find some remnants of his family. In Parvana’s Journey (2003), the sequel to The Breadwinner (2001) by Deborah Ellis, the children’s travel across war-torn Afghanistan is fraught with land mines below, bombs raining from above, and uneasy relations among the children themselves. In all of these stories, with every challenge they meet along the way, the characters grow in their awareness of other people, the circumstances that surround them, and themselves.

**Episodes: Stories within Stories**

Many books, especially those for older children, give us patterns of episodes within larger plots. Francisco Jiménez’s The Circuit (1999) is a series of small stories all framed by the reality of a childhood in an undocumented migrant worker family in California. In fact, two episodes from this book have been made into stand-alone picture books.

Jennifer Holm’s Turtle in Paradise is a series of episodes—about a business of taking care of inconsolable babies, curing bungy rash, relating to an eccentric and dyspeptic old bed-ridden relative, riding out a hurricane on a mangrove island, and finding pirate’s treasure—all tied together by the fact that eleven-year-old Turtle is plunked down with relatives who weren’t expecting her in Depression-era Key West.

**Layered Stories: Surface Plots and Underlying Stories**

Some stories have characters proceed through a series of events and then discover clues that lead to another series of events that happened at a different time. Detective fiction in adult literature regularly works on two levels. On one level, the detective is given a set of clues. By following the good clues and rejecting the misleading ones, the detective constructs another story, the story of the crime, and solves the mystery.

In children’s literature, one of the best examples of a story with two layers of plot is Louis Sachar’s Holes (2000), in which Stanley Yelnats, the young prisoner at Camp Green Lake, digs a series of holes that literally unearths an older story from a hundred years before.

**TECHNOLOGY IN PRACTICE 2.1**

**PLOT GENERATORS**

Getting started is the hardest part. Many writers are fully advised about plot structures—they know that they need protagonists and antagonists, problems and attempts, resolutions and consequences—but they still have trouble getting a story started. Several years ago, writing teachers Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter in Writing What If? Exercises for Fiction Writers (1991) came up with the idea of a story generator, where writers are invited to mix and match striking characters with imaginative actions, until they find a combination that gets them going. Now there are several online story generators that randomly produce characters and situations to inspire story writers. Once students have the basics of plotting, using a story generator can be a fun way to inspire story writing, and help students learn to appreciate the creativity that is possible even within the constraints of a story structure. Some recommended sites are:

(For younger writers)

Story Maker—<http://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org>

Seussville Story Maker—<http://www.seussville.com>

(For older writers)

Writers’ Plot Generator—<http://funstuff.pantomimepony.co.uk>
Themes: How Do Stories Convey Meaning?

Beyond the question “What happened to whom and why?” readers sometimes ask, “What is this work really about?” “What does it mean?” or even “Why did the author write this work?” Answers to those questions are usually statements of theme. Here is Rebecca Lukens’s definition: “Theme in literature is the idea that holds the story together, such as a comment about society, human nature, or the human condition. It is the main idea or central meaning of a piece of writing” (Lukens, 2003, p. 129).

Explicit and Implicit Themes

Themes may be stated explicitly or suggested implicitly by the text. Explicit themes were once far more common than they are now. In the 1700s Madame Le Prince de Beaumont closed La Belle et La Bête, an early and popular version of Beauty and the Beast, with a lavish statement of what she took to be the moral of the story, namely that Beauty was of such a sterling and obedient character that she deserved the happily-ever-after life she went on to enjoy with her handsome and well-off partner.

“Cendrillon,” a version of “Cinderella” by Charles Perrault that is a close source of the versions known in the United States, ends with not one stated moral but two: first, it’s better to be virtuous than beautiful; and second, that even if you are virtuous and beautiful it helps to have a fairy godmother.

Most modern readers don’t like to have the morals of stories dictated to them, and explicit themes have largely fallen out of favor.

An implicit theme is an idea that is strongly suggested but not explicitly stated. In Harriet Ziefert’s A New Coat for Anna (1988), a reader can infer a theme that doing something for the good of a child pulls war-weary citizens out of their doldrums and creates a community. But there is also the theme that the mother must trade away sad memories of the past and go forward to build a new life, for the benefit of her daughter, her neighbors, and herself. These themes are suggested as much by Anita Lobel’s brilliant illustrations as they are by the text.

Especially in contemporary literature, stating what themes are is not always an easy or foolproof matter. Good writers rarely start with explicit themes in mind. Author Frances Temple (1994a) explained her approach to themes this way: “At first, I’m just getting out the story. Once it’s written down, I can go through and see what the story is adding up to— and then as I rewrite I can make sure that what stays in the book pulls more or less in the same direction.”

Many authors express surprise, however, at the themes others find in their works. For instance, author Charles Temple was surprised to read in a review of his Shanty Boat (illustrated by Melanie Hall) that the work was about the importance of respecting differences. Temple had thought it was just a rhyme about a quirky old guy who lived on a boat; he had created it as an exaggerated portrait of his own brother.

Themes are sometimes represented or symbolized by an image in a story. In Natalie Babbitt’s Tuck Everlasting (1975), the image of the wheel is used again and again to represent the theme of immortality.
again—presumably to symbolize the life cycle and the sad consequences of stepping off it. In Cynthia Lord’s *Rules*, the rules themselves come to stand for the girl protagonist’s attempts to impose boundaries on her autistic brother; finally she realizes that it is she who has been too hemmed in by an overly ordered view of what behavior is acceptable, who is a friend, and in what form joy may come.

**Reading against the Grain**

The explicit and implicit themes described above were the sort many authors might have agreed were present in their work. But if we define a theme, as the critic Rebecca Lukens does, as a source of “insight into people and how they think and feel” (Lukens, 1990), then there are other layers of themes that we must take into account. Some of these may be insights that the authors did not intend.

Almost every work of literature takes some stance toward the social order—toward the relative roles and attributes of males and females, old and young, rich and poor, and so on. Of course, those stances are not always explicit. A work of literature may overtly argue for the status quo, may implicitly take the status quo for granted, or may argue for a different social order. Reading against the grain is a way to examine the unexamined, question the unquestioned, and hold up to scrutiny the unspoken assertions the text is making about the way lives are lived in society. Reading against the grain means asking, “Is this book a true portrait of how people behave? Is it a portrait of how they ought to behave?”

**“Suppose This Happened to Someone Else?”** A useful way to examine the unexamined is to ask, “What would have been different if these events had happened to another character?” For example, in Phyllis Reynolds Naylor’s *Shiloh*, what if Marty’s little sister, Dara Lynn, had found the dog instead of Marty? Would her parents have taken her devotion to the dog as seriously? Would she have had the freedom to keep it secretly and arrange to give it food? What does this tell the reader about the range of activity boys and girls are permitted? What if Marty’s upper middle class friend David Howard had found Shiloh, instead of Marty, whose family shares a cramped cottage on the edge of the woods? Would David have gone to so much trouble not to confront Judd Travers with his mistreatment of animals—or would he simply have called the authorities? Would he and his family have been so careful not to make an enemy of Judd? What does this tell us about the range of options open to people from different social classes? Readers can ask how any story would play out if one or more key characters were changed, in terms of the following:

- Switching males and females,
- Old people and young people,
- People of different social classes,
- People of different races,
- Americans and residents of developing countries, and
- People who are differently abled.

**“What Did They Do? What Did They Get?”** Another way to read against the grain is to list the actions taken by different classes of characters in the story (male and female, black and white, young and old) and then to match those actions with the rewards the characters receive. Looking at the story “Beauty and the Beast” in this way, we see that males were rewarded for going after what they wanted—although they had to learn the hard way to be respectful of all sorts of people. Women, though, were rewarded for *not* going after what they wanted—for focusing on serving others and being pure. Is that always the way women should behave?
A text is a piece of virtual experience that can be held up and examined from many angles. As the questions above make clear, readers can find interesting meanings to talk about in almost any text, regardless of whether an author intended to stress those meanings.

The Stance of the Implied Reader

The stance of the implied reader is one more device written into a work besides the plot, the setting, the characters, and the theme (Booth, 1961; Iser, 1974). The implied reader is the ideal interpreter of a work, as imagined by the author. The implied reader is not usually mentioned in the text, but his or her activity is essential if the text is to “work.” If events or characters in a text are exciting, funny, sad, suspenseful, heroic, blameworthy, or even understandable, those events or characters must be perceived in those ways by some reader. Those qualities do not exist except as responses of a reader to a work. Therefore, in constructing a piece of literature, the writer must consciously or unconsciously keep an ideal reader in mind and arrange the details of the work in such a way as to evoke the desired responses from that reader.

As they begin to read a work, actual readers implicitly take the perspective of the implied reader and begin to have emotional and intellectual reactions to the work in ways the author has scripted for them. Or else they don’t: If a book is too silly, too “hard,” or too far outside their usual way of seeing things, the actual readers might not be willing or able to take the stance of the implied reader, and the book will not work for them.

There are at least three ways in which an actual reader can take the stance of the implied reader. The first is by identifying with characters. The second is by taking a moral perspective on the story. The third is by filling in gaps to make the story “work.”

Identifying with Characters

Identification with one or more characters in a text is an important function of the implied reader. When actual readers step into the shoes of a character, they suffer what that character suffers, face the dilemmas that character faces, and feel the consequences of the choices they (the character and, vicariously, the readers) have made. For example, the reader of Jack Gantos’s *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* identifies with Joey because of his first-person narrative (see pages 40–41), but then may react in horror as Joey, his impulse control severely limited by his Attention Deficit Disorder, goes from disaster to disaster, including injuring a classmate while running with open scissors. The reader who stays with Joey will gain understanding and sympathy for a boy who struggles with challenges most of us don’t.

Taking the Intended Moral Stance

Another way in which the text influences readers is by inviting them to take a moral stance on the story—a stance the author has staked out as part of the construction of the work. As we noted above, for a story to work, the author has to be able to count on readers to believe that some goals are worthwhile, that some events are exciting, that some things people say are funny or sad or shocking. If readers adopt these views—if only for the duration of the reading—the book will come together for them. If they don’t, it won’t. So far, so good.
But no readers hold precisely the orientations asked of them by all books. They occasionally have to stretch to accept a certain point of view for the time during which they participate in a certain book. This stretching has consequences. We have all had the experience of being told a joke that was so sexist, racist, or otherwise mean-spirited that we had to decide whether to keep listening, scold the teller, or walk away. It’s the times we didn’t quite muster the energy to do either of the latter two that are most bothersome. If, for the sake of the humor, we temporarily agree to take the stance the joke requires of us, we may give a polite laugh, but feel compromised. That is because we have just agreed to live the life of a bigot, if only for two minutes.

Many of Roald Dahl’s perennially popular books, such as *Danny the Champion of the World, Matilda, George’s Marvelous Medicine*, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, present truly awful characters with no redeeming features as antagonists to the main character. Sometimes they are other children, sometimes teachers, sometimes relatives, sometimes parents. Each of these characters harms the main character in some way, and each of them receives a bad outcome of one sort or another. In the meantime, we readers are invited to hate these characters and to delight in the terrible if quirky things that befall them. For many readers, though—especially those who try to respond to people who annoy us not with hatred but with understanding—Dahl’s books raise moral challenges. The challenge is not in what Dahl says explicitly, but in the emotional stance he sets out for readers to take. Some readers are unwilling to adopt this stance.

**Filling in the Gaps**

The implied reader functions in one last way. A writer friend of ours says, “You have to trust your readers to figure some things out for themselves. They’ll feel more like they’re with you if you let them have the fun of figuring things out. Telling them too much spoils the fun.” Writers leave gaps in their work to be filled in by the reader’s realizations. In Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, for example, a visual clue is given early in the book as to where the Wild Things came from. (Can you find it?) In Harry Allard and James Marshall’s *Miss Nelson Is Missing!*, readers are never told where Miss Viola Swamp, the no-nonsense substitute teacher, came from—or, for that matter, where she went. But at the end of the story the reader sees Miss Nelson reading in bed, next to a closet with an ugly black dress hanging in it—just like the one Viola Swamp wore. And there’s a box on the shelf marked in upside-down letters that spell “WIG.”

**Point of View**

Point of view is the perspective from which the events in a story are perceived and narrated. The choices of point of view are *first person* (in which one of the characters in the work narrates the story, using the first-person pronoun “I”), *second person* (addressed to “you”), and *third person* (in which a narrator outside the story relates events that happened to those in it, using the third-person pronouns “she,” “he” and “they”). When the author’s knowledge of events shifts freely between different characters’ points of view and the author describes events no one character could have known, he or she is writing from the point of view known as *third-person omniscient* (“all-knowing”).

**Stories in the First Person**

Stories in the first person, such as Clare Vanderpool’s *Moon Over Manifest* (2010) and Gary Schmidt’s *OK for Now* (2011) tell the tale through a character’s voice.
Narration in the first person lends immediacy to the action and lets readers know what the character is feeling. But it also limits readers to that character’s perspective.

**Stories in the Second Person**

The least commonly used voice is the second person, “you.” Judy Allen and Tudor Humphreys use the second person both delightfully and informingly in *Are You a Spider?* (2003).

“Are you a spider? If you are, your mother looks like this [picture of a spider] and spins webs.”

The book goes on to share information about spiders, while titillating its young audience with the suggestions that they might have eight hairy legs, eat flies, and so on.

**Stories in the Third Person**

Most of the time, authors describe the action as happening to someone else. This point of view is called narration in the third person. Deborah Ellis narrated *I Am a Taxi* in the third person. She did not narrate the story using the voice of Diego (the taxi) in the first person, but she did stick strictly to his point of view. The author never tells us anything that Diego himself did not know.

*Third-person omniscient* narration occurs when authors tell stories from the point of view of a narrator who knows more than any one character could. Louis Sachar narrated *Holes* in the third-person omniscient voice, as he was able to tell different stories from different time periods that only later came together in an explanatory whole.

Writing in the third person gives the author a broad range of choices of what to show the reader. Nonetheless, skilled writers usually narrate events as if from one character’s point of view at a time. When an author changes the perspective of the narration from one character to another, the results can radically change the meaning. Philip Pullman’s *I Was a Rat!* (2002) reminds us that even a bit player in a story—like a coachman Cinderella’s fairy godmother left in human form—may have an entirely different take on events. Jon Scieszka’s *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs (By A. Wolf)* (1989) and Rachel Mortimer’s *Three Billy Goats Fluff* (2011) tell familiar tales from the antagonist’s point of view, with humorous results.

**Style**

Style is not *what* is said, but *how* it is said. When a book makes you hear a distinct voice in your head or when you find a passage so good you want to read it out loud to a friend, chances are you’re responding to style. Style is not the same thing as talent. A talented author may write in different styles and may have a gift for matching a style with the content of each book she or he writes.

Some of the elements of style are words, images, metaphors, sounds, and voice. Let’s look at each.

**Words**

The poet William Carlos Williams wrote, “Each object in nature and each idea has an exact name.” Good writers behave as if that were true, and they strive to name experiences exactly. Mark Twain wrote, “The difference between the right word, and almost the right word, is the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”
But what makes a word “right”? Good word choices are concrete and vivid—they show, rather than sum up and judge. Or if they sum up and judge, they do so exactly. Good words create fresh images. Good writing crackles with insight.

Writing can be sparse or rich, as writers use few words or many to create impressions. Rich writing was more common in the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth. Note this passage from Kenneth Grahame’s immortal *The Wind in the Willows*:

> Never in his life had he seen a river before—this sleek, sinuous, full-bodied animal, chasing and chuckling, gripping things with a gurgle and leaving them with a laugh, to fling itself on fresh playmates that shook themselves free, and were caught and held again. All was a-shake and a-shiver—glints and gleams and sparkles, rustle and swirl, chatter and bubble. (pp. 3–4)

Grahame’s language consists of long sentences awash with colorful adjectives, images, and metaphors.

Spare writing can also be powerful. Frances Temple told *Grab Hands and Run* in the voice of twelve-year-old Felipe, and so the words she chose are simple and direct. Here is a scene from a parsonage in Guatemala, where refugees from the civil war in El Salvador find momentary protection:

> Another little girl comes in, a child with big dark eyes, younger than Romy. Father Ramon opens his arms to her and speaks gently, but at the sight of him she begins to scream and fastens herself around the leg of a table. Her screams are terrible, and no one can stop them.

> Father Ramon looks so upset that I follow him into the courtyard.

> “Why does she scream, Padre?” I ask him. “Can I help?”

> “Ask the soldiers why she screams, son,” says Father Ramon. I have never heard anyone sound so sad. (p. 62)

Word choice doesn’t depend on a fancy vocabulary—just on exact descriptions.

**Images**

Imagery is the art of making readers experience details as if through their own five senses. Alexander Carmichael had a good phrase for it: “bringing the different characters before the mind as clearly as the sculptor brings the figure before the eye” (quoted in Briggs, 1977, p. 10). The writer mentions, however offhandedly, how things smelled, felt, tasted, sounded, and looked. But the effect is of living the moments described, rather than hearing a summary of them. Here is a moment from *Tuck Everlasting*:

> Shifting his position, he turned his attention to a little pile of pebbles next to him. As Winnie watched, scarcely breathing, he moved the pile carefully to one side, pebble by pebble. Beneath the pile, the ground was shiny wet. The boy lifted a final stone and Winnie saw a low spurt of water, arching up and returning, like a fountain, into the ground. He bent and put his lips to the spurt, drinking noiselessly, and then he sat up again and drew his shirt sleeve across his mouth. As he did this, he turned his face in her direction—and their eyes met. (p. 26)

Read that passage again, and see how many senses it appeals to.

**Metaphors**

To use a metaphor is to describe one thing in terms of something else. Technically, there is a distinction between a *simile*, which is an overt comparison that says, “X is like Y”; a true *metaphor*, which talks about X as if it were Y; and *personification*, which ascribes human features, actions, or motives to something that isn’t human.
Here is *Tuck Everlasting* again:

The road that led to Treegap had been trod out long before by a herd of cows who were, to say the least, relaxed. It wandered along in curves and easy angles, swayed off and up in a pleasant tangent to the top of a small hill, ambled down again between fringes of bee-hung clover, and then cut sidewise across a meadow. (p. 5)

This isn’t quite personification: The road is described as if it were not a person, but a cow—wandering, swaying, and ambling. To describe the road this way is to enliven the writing with unobtrusive magic.

**Voice, Tone, and Mood**

The author’s *voice* in a literary work corresponds to the way an author would sound if she were speaking aloud. Daniel Pinkwater’s voice in *Fat Camp Commandoes* (2001) is funny and sarcastic. Adam Rapp’s voice in *The Buffalo Tree* (1997), set in a juvenile detention facility, is “wired,” pushed to the limit.

The author’s *tone* refers to the author’s apparent attitude toward the contents of the work, and also toward the audience. Joanna Galdone’s tone in the African American ghost story *The Tailypo* (1984) is somber (although her voice is folksy). Lemony Snicket’s tone in the *Series of Unfortunate Events* is also somber—but we would also call it ironic, too, because he has a tacit agreement with the readers that these works are spoofs on older melodramas *(a melodrama* is an overly suspenseful adventure with exaggerated good and evil)—he is writing with his tongue in his cheek. Margaret Wise Brown’s tone in *Little Fur Family* is protective and maternal.

The *mood* refers to the emotional state the work is likely to evoke in the reader. *Little Fur Family* evokes a mood that is cozy and safe, which makes it a favorite bedtime read. The mood of Cornelia Funke’s *The Thief Lord* is enchanting and romantic (in the sense of being emotionally engaging), as it takes us through the canals and streets, backstage in a grand abandoned theater, and behind the ornate doors of aristocratic townhouses.

**Intertextuality**

*Intertextuality* is a literary term for the tendency of writers and illustrators to relate aspects of one work to aspects of another. Sometimes the references are *allusions*: the text or the picture refers explicitly to other works. There is an allusion in Gary Schmidt’s *The Wednesday Wars* when seventh grader Holling Hoodhood is asked to diagram a much harder sentence than his classmates. His reads, “For it so falls out That what we have we prize not to the worth whiles we enjoy it, but being lack’d and lost, why, then we rack the value, then we find the virtue that possession would not show us whiles it was ours,” which comes from Act IV, Scene 1 of *Much Ado About Nothing*, although the author doesn’t say so. It figures in the book, though, because the overly demanding teacher, Mrs. Baker, turns out to be a fan of Shakespeare. There are many visual allusions in Anthony Browne’s *Voices in the Park*, as images of King Kong, the *Mona Lisa*, and *le Jardin des Tuileries* pass through the book’s illustrations.

Other kinds of intertextuality can be more subtle. David Almond was influenced not only by the style of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s magical realism when he created *Skellig*, but also, as Don Lehman (2011) suggests, by a short story by Marquez. There is nothing wrong with this; on the contrary, intertextuality is a way writers reward readers by helping them to develop a fabric of literary understanding, and also pay homage to other writers and artists.
Visual Literacy

Picture books have another set of features of their own. In Chapter 3 we will explore the visual language of picture books—or, to put it more properly, the verbal-and-visual language of picture books. The pictures have visual dynamics that communicate to readers: the colors that are used, the kinds of lines that are drawn, the placement of characters and objects on the page, the flow from page to page, the title page, the back cover, and the end papers—all are used by skillful illustrators and bookmakers to create a pleasing whole. Add to that the interaction of text and illustration; for example, often things are shown in the illustrations that complement or even contradict what is said in print—and there is a kind of language of expression used in picture books that needs to be explored in its own right.

■ American and European stories typically feature deserving characters who strive against adversity through a logical and predictable series of events, actions, and consequences, and are eventually rewarded. In stories from other cultures, though, characters may strive against adversity and not be rewarded at all. Characters may break even, at best, or perish; or the stories may be simply a string of imaginative and unpredictable events rather than problems and solutions. English language learners who are newcomers to Western stories may find them hard to follow. Invite English language learners to tell stories from their own cultures—or to invite family members or neighbors to come to class and do so. Engage the class in discussing similarities and differences between stories read in America and stories from elsewhere.

■ American children’s books include many works of realistic fiction—stories set in contemporary times with true-to-life characters. But realistic fiction for children is rare outside the more developed countries, and newcomers to the United States from many countries may be puzzled by stories about characters who seem like real people, but aren’t. Works of realistic fiction often reveal characters’ inner thoughts and motives, but traditional tales rarely do—and traditional tales are what most children in the world know when it comes to fiction. Teachers will need to take extra care with English language learners who have difficulty talking about characters’ inner lives.

■ American children’s books often celebrate individuality and competition: The youngest child is the hero, or the unlikely character turns out to be the winner. In many parts of the world, though, individuality and competition are discouraged and the stories focus on the successes of the group, or on an individual’s contribution to the group’s success. Similarly, American children’s books give children strong roles as agents and problem solvers, but in many cultures children are expected to follow adult direction, and it is considered inappropriate for children to take initiative. Teachers should take opportunities to have English language learners talk about stories that are popular in their own cultures, and discuss how they differ from stories read in America.

EXPERIENCES FOR FURTHER LEARNING

1. Make three columns on a piece of paper. In the left-hand column, list three male and three female characters in Shiloh. In the middle column, write two or three major actions these people took in the book. In the right-hand column, list the rewards or punishments they received at the end. Discuss these results. Can you formulate a statement that explains the pattern of who is rewarded and who is not in the story?
2. Choose a short but poignant scene from *Tuck Everlasting*. (Chapter 12 will work nicely.) Think through the scene from a different character’s point of view—visualize the scene, for example, from Tuck’s point of view rather than Winnie’s. Which of Tuck’s concerns come to the surface that do not emerge in the scene as written? How does Winnie appear?

### RESOURCES AND REFERENCES


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