13 Ways of Looking at a Wild Thing: Teaching Children's Literature in the American Literature Survey
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ABSTRACT: While children's literature remains an important genre in contemporary literature and publishing, we often marginalize its study to elective courses or classes outside the English department. Teaching children's literature, however, foregrounds many issues central to our field as teachers and scholars of American literature. In this essay, I offer 13 reasons for including children's literature in American literature surveys. It is my contention that doing so not only expands our idea of the survey course, but can empower our students both inside and outside of the classroom.

By default, most of us came to reading – and, in turn, our careers as literature teachers – through children's literature. It occupied our nurseries, our local libraries, our bookstores, and our schools. It provided us insights into historical figures and events, other cultures and places, different worlds and different times. We have painted fences with Tom Sawyer, bid the moon "good night," followed Johnny Tremain into the American Revolution, rejoiced when Fern saved Wilbur, spied with Harriet, and cried with Cassie Logan. Yet when the time comes to teach American literature, how often do we return to these texts as exemplars of our literary heritage, narrative innovation, or historical record? How willing are we to take the texts of our childhood – texts many of us still hold dear – seriously as cultural artifacts?

The aim of this essay is straightforward: To consider the inclusion of literary texts for children in the American literature survey. While pedagogical conversations have rightfully drawn our attention to the race, gender, sexuality, and class of writers we teach in the survey course, we rarely consider age a factor, and we rarely debate the genres we include. Fiction (novels and short stories), poetry, and drama seem to have their rightful place. Creative nonfiction is increasingly popular, expanding beyond the sermons of Jonathan Edwards or the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson to include memoir, travel narratives, and even journalism. Even graphic narratives like Art Spiegelman's Maus and Alison Bechdel's Fun Home are garnering increasing attention in the literature classroom.¹

¹ Stephen E. Tabachnick's 2009 edited collection Teaching the Graphic Novel for the Modern Language Association's Options for Teaching series represents an important move towards recognizing this increasingly important narrative form. Though a children's literature volume was published in 1995, it is
But children's literature often remains relegated to education and library science programs, or, at best for us, as an elective course in English departments. Excluding children's literature from the required curriculum underscores its marginalized status, even though critical studies of children's literature remain a vibrant area of inquiry within the academy. My simple contention is that we can also bring it into our survey courses for the reasons outlined below, and in so doing, draw further critical attention to this invaluable body of work. If one agrees with Louise Rosenblatt that the goal of the teacher of literature is "to help the student toward a more and more controlled, more and more valid or defensible response to the text" (267), then I believe children's literature provides a prized opportunity to have students engage with familiar, interesting, and accessible texts that can ease our pedagogical burden of teaching students to produce well-reasoned, well-researched, and well-argued interpretation.

1. **Children's literature helps us to dismantle the high/low culture divide.**

By now, it would seem we had thoroughly dismissed the privileging of high culture over low culture. Postmodernist writers very often embraced popular culture, whereas many recent writers have revised generic conventions in their "literary" fictions, including Margaret Atwood, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Lethem, Karen Russell, and Colson Whitehead. Nevertheless, many of us continue to take an Arnoldian approach to our classroom text selections that promotes the so-called "best which has been thought and said in the world" (Arnold 5). While providing a solid foundation in the most innovative and influential writers has its merits, it often privileges the values of a select few rather than offering a more critical understanding of literature and the canon formation that implicitly dictates what's in and what's out. Children's literature can be evaluated in many of the same ways "adult literature" can, but it also draws our attention to other criteria that may be less obvious, such as illustration, arrangement, and audience. Therefore, it can further develop students' critical

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2 In addition to well-established scholarly journals like *Children's Literature, Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, and *The Lion and the Unicorn*, both Routledge and the University of Mississippi Press have active series for children's literature scholarship.
faculties without necessarily reinforcing a narrow, highly subjective, even elitist idea of "good" writing.

2. **Children's literature allows us to interrogate the politics of literature.**

Complicating the high/low divide offers a productive entry point into the politics of literature, its value, and its appreciation. Literature can be read as a social document, but if we select certain texts as representative samples of a group's work, a time period, or a style, we are inherently celebrating that sample as one of the best. In turn, students may generalize about the group, period, or style as a result, and these presumptions can perpetuate a limited perspective, even stereotypes.

Teaching children's literature in the survey course implicitly calls into question why we have not read children's literature at the higher education level before and what may be inhibiting such study outside of elective courses. Asking students to consider carefully what inclusion and exclusion entails fosters a critical pedagogy that ideally will promote a keener awareness of the world around them, especially the nature of their education. When students call into question how their education is conceived, they simultaneously enact what we teach them and see themselves as a participant rather than a recipient of an education.

3. **Ignoring children's literature means ignoring the work of writers who flourish in this genre, especially women.**

When we overlook children's literature, we often miss out on the work of writers who found success in this genre. Many women writers were attracted to the genre for various reasons: they wrote for their family; the genre was devalued, and therefore seen (unfairly) as appropriate for women writers; they were able to thrive in this genre compared to others. Nevertheless, literary history abounds with women who triumphed in children's literature, even if their names rarely show up in literature classrooms. Swedish author Selma Lagerlöf, the first woman to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, was best known for her children's book, *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*. In 1930, Rachel Field became the first woman to receive the Newbery Medal for "the Most Distinguished Contribution to American Literature for Children," and the subsequent nine awards also went to women writers. The seven Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling comprise seven of
the ten best-selling books of all time in the United Kingdom (Rogers). A 2012 Forbes article reported five of fifteen highest-earning authors primarily wrote for children and young adults, and three of them were women: J. K. Rowling, Suzanne Collins, Stephanie Meyer (Bercovici).\textsuperscript{3} As Lissa Paul noted in an important 1990 essay, "Both women's literature and children's literature are devalued and regarded as marginal or peripheral by the literary and educational communities" (149). And very often, children's literature overlaps with women's literature. Therefore, if we continue to devalue children's literature, we maintain a limited view of literature that ignores voices of women and, potentially, of people of color and even children themselves.

4. Many of the authors we already teach wrote for children, too.

Maya Angelou, Donald Barthelme, Gwendolyn Brooks, Louise Erdrich, Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates, George Saunders, and John Updike are just a few of the major American writers "for adults" who have published children's books. Some—like Sherman Alexie—even have won major literary prizes for their efforts in children's and young adult literature. On one level, these authors' willingness to venture into this supposedly inferior area testifies to the relevance and legitimacy of children's literature. Another approach, however, might consider how these author's style, themes, and worldview comes through in their children's books compared to their more well-known work. For example, \textit{Sun Moon Star} (1980), written by Kurt Vonnegut and Ivan Chermayeff, examines the world through the eyes of the Baby Jesus. Though Vonnegut himself was an avowed atheist, his respect for Christ as a thinker permeates several works including \textit{God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater} (1965). A comparative approach may draw attention to the way artists construct their audiences as well as their visions across time and various genres, thereby destabilizing the tendency to approach authors' work as uniform and transhistorical.

\textsuperscript{3} The other two writers were Jeff Kinney and Rick Riordan. Admittedly, J. K. Rowling has written one adult novel and though they generally write for adult audiences, James Patterson and Bill O'Reilly have successfully written books for children.
5. **Many of the authors we teach owe a debt to children's literature.**

At the outset, I mention the fundamental fondness many literature teachers have for children's literature as the first "genre" of literature we read, and of course, this fondness extends to those who write as well. In 1922, Vladimir Nabokov loosely translated Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* into Russian. George Saunders's essay "Thank You, Esther Forbes" claims the *Johnny Tremain* author "did for me what one writer can do for another: awoke a love for sentences" (64). Building upon the research for his screenplay with Spike Jonze for the film version of Sendak's picture book, Dave Eggers's 2009 novel *The Wild Things* expands *Where the Wild Things Are* by incorporating Eggers's own style and thematic concerns. Children's literature clearly provides a fertile ground of inspiration for many writers, and tracing the influence can prove a productive exercise in literary analysis. Drawing attention to the inherent intertextuality of course texts can show students how genius is rarely singular, but rather the result of learning from a range of texts and generating one's own that both synthesizes and contributes to the literary tradition.

6. **Many authors of children's literature owe a debt to literature for adults.**

Continuing my discussion of the relationship between children's literature and what might be called for lack of a better phrase, "literature proper," I want to also emphasize the ways in which the former draws upon the latter and how this process implicitly reveals not only genre differences, but also differences in how we imagine child readers. In his influential and infamous 1948 essay, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!", Leslie Fiedler discussed "the regressiveness, in a technical sense, of American life, its implacable nostalgia for the infantile, at once wrong-headed and somehow arguable" (5). Fiedler connects this national feeling with the tendency to find the great American books "illustrated, on the shelves of the children's library" (5). Of course, Fiedler views this tendency as emblematic of an immature American culture that has yet to examine properly romantic [heterosexual] love. Yet while these books have been consumed by children as

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4 Despite their shared affinity for chess and alternative universes, Vladimir Nabokov later drew a strong line between Carroll and himself (as he did with many alleged influences on his work). When one interviewer compared Nabokov's work with Carroll's, Nabokov ended his response with "Lewis Carroll liked little girls. I don't" (184).
exemplars of good writing, they have also served as the basis for numerous adaptations for children, too. Some of these adaptations take the form of expurgations (Thomas Bowdler's *The Family Shakespeare*) or re-tellings (Charles Lamb and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*). Other books have simply taken adult literature as a basis, a source, or simply an influence.\(^5\) Examining this relationship provides not only opportunities to discuss the legacy of an author or a text, but it also underscores the fundamental intertextuality of literature.

7. **Children's literature is no less imaginative or technically proficient than other literatures.**

Of course, children's literature requires as much skill as adult literature in the creation of plot and characters. It should come as no surprise then that while at Illinois State University, author David Foster Wallace taught C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* in his introductory literary analysis course (Temple), while Junot Díaz assigns J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* in his creative writing course on "world-building" at M.I.T. (Gupta). If such talented writers can find merit in these works, it seems only fitting literature teachers can, too. Often we confuse accessibility with easiness and lack of artistry, but as John Irving notes in his defense of his former teacher Kurt Vonnegut, "Making a reader's job easy is difficult work" (213). In fact, Irving claimed Thomas Pynchon "has not struggled hard enough to make himself more readable" (214). Though children's literature may seem more accessible than literature for adults, the challenges of obtaining such accessibility and the meaning one may extrapolate from such texts warrant the same amount of critical attention as its counterpart.

8. **Children's literature is not just read by children.**

The crossover success of book series by J. K. Rowling, Stephanie Meyer, Suzanne Collins, and Veronica Roth remind us that the appeal of children's literature transcends its presumed audience. Since these books deal with many of the same themes and often challenge the rigid didacticism and moralism one may suspect from children's literature,

\(^5\) Recent scholarship by Erica Hateley and Laura Tosi, for example, examines the enduring influence of William Shakespeare on children's and young adult literature.
they have rightfully found an audience across ages and genders. This trend was satirized by columnist Joel Stein in his 23 May 2012 opinion piece in *The New York Times* entitled, "Adults Should Read Adult Books," in which Stein sarcastically suggested, "I'll read *The Hunger Games* when I finish the previous 3,000 years of fiction written for adults." Perhaps *Times* readers were unfamiliar with Stein's humorous commentary style, but many of the 454 comments (as of 29 May 2014) take him seriously and rebuke his facetious charge. Though still pervasive, the false delineations between literature for children and for adults is unclear beyond "protecting" children from certain forms of knowledge, sexual or otherwise. Nevertheless, the skill with which children's literature is written has inspired a loyal following among adults and children alike, and our classrooms can reap the benefits of this interest as we show students ways to contextualize these narratives themes, techniques, and style in the history of American literature.

9. **Students feel a certain degree of ownership and authority when discussing these books.**

The lament of many teachers lies in their students' lack of responsiveness in class or, more accurately, the inability to get their students talking. In my own experience, students' engagement correlates with students' authority. Ask a student to discuss contemporary politics, and he or she might clam up; ask them about social media, and the opinions flow effortlessly. In *Teaching Literature to Adolescents*, Richard Beach, Deborah Appleman, Susan Hynds, and Jeffrey Wilhelm emphasize the role of ownership in increasing student engagement, especially in "planning and participating in that activity" (7). While this reasoning may not always ring true for every teacher, it seems quite obvious that students speak more often and with greater clarity when they are discussing something with which they have familiarity, understanding, and comfort. If we work to bring children's and young adult texts into our classrooms and perhaps encourage students to bring in some of their own favorites, we can realign the power dynamic from a top-down model in which we explain texts or guide students toward a model that allows the student to teach us.

When I taught *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, I made the foolish decision of not anticipating my students' ongoing personal investment in the text. Class discussion quickly ventured into discussions of the inadequacies of the film adaptation as well as the
text's position within the series. Basically, the discussion became the students' and not my own, and since I had not read the entire series at that point, I was deficient. Nevertheless, for that day, they felt a level of ownership I wish they had felt throughout the course, especially in their writing. If we are willing to share the burden of being the teacher with the student, ideally we can move them away from being consumers of knowledge to being producers of it. Children's literature in the classroom both respects what they read and have read in the past, but it also respects their right to create the knowledge that comprises their education.

10. **Children's literature would help us to show how students can apply what we learn in the classroom to texts they encounter outside the classroom.**

One of the greatest challenges we face as literature teachers is the question of relevance. The English major seems to be the perennial scapegoat for the value of the college degree, and in the past year alone, public defenses of English have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *The New York Times*. While a degree that emphasizes close reading, critical thinking, and analytical and argumentative writing seems to need to further justification, we often are faced with the responsibility of legitimizing our subject to our students. If we incorporate texts like children's literature – and perhaps TV shows, films, pop music, social media, etc. – into our classrooms, students' willingness and ability to transfer the invaluable skills of an English degree into their daily lives becomes easier. As we know, critical reading does not just apply to the classics; its value and application transcend literariness and even the classroom context. Helping our students realize and enact this tenet is our responsibility.

11. **Children's literature foreground the role of audience and genre in literature.**

Children's literature has perhaps the stickiest definition of all "genres" in literature. Unlike women's literature and African American literature, which are largely based on the writers' identity, or the Western or horror, which are defined by plot conventions and iconography, children's literature (supposedly) defines itself by its presumed audience. As I have already discussed, children do not always read just children's literature nor are children the sole readers of children's literature. Yet books written with a child in mind reveal not only how we
imagine children, but how we want them to look, behave, and feel. They show us what we want them to know and not know, for what is left out reveals what kinds of knowledge we think children should be excluded from. Furthermore, as Kimberley Reynolds asserts, "Much can be learned about what children's literature is telling children about how the world works from tracing the rise and fall of genres, but perhaps even more revealing is observing how individual genres retain core characteristics while adapting to changing circumstances" (84). Using children's literature in the classroom can reveal to our students how writers construct audiences and the role genre plays in the creation, marketing, and reception of literature. From here, we can also explore how children's literature – and literature in general – becomes a social document for what people were like, what people liked, and how literature and culture exist in an ongoing, ever-altering conversation with society. Though children's literature may help to initiate these conversations, clearly the implications will resonate for other texts we choose to read and analyze with our students.

12. **Children's literature captures what we mean by children, our investment in children, and the function of children in society: legally, economically, religiously, politically.**

Jacqueline Rose, in an influential early study, discussed the "impossibility" of children's fiction because it "sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between" (1-2). Therefore, children's fiction aims to control the child outside the text (2). This disconnect points to the constructed nature of the child in the text, but also the child as a figure in our culture, created not only to ensure the protection of the young, but to legitimate the maturity and capability of adults. Consequently, children's literature can easily default into patronizing didacticism, leading M. O. Grenby to muse, "Perhaps true children's books are only those which take seriously the child's point of view, and represent it sympathetically" (6). Therefore, as we approach literary texts from historical and social perspectives, children's literature in particular can offer our students valuable insights into the development of the child construct, its function in society and across various discourses (legal, political, educational, economic, religious), and even insights into the lived experiences of children themselves.
13. **We should teach children's literature because it is literature—and because it exists.**

The time has come to remove children's literature from the shadows of English departments as an occasional offering, if at all, and fully integrate it into our curriculum, from American literature surveys to seminars. Over the past fifty years, English departments have generally increased their study, teaching, and appreciation for literatures by women, racial and ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, and persons with disabilities, yet literature for (and that even rarer amount by) children seems justifiably ignored. In a recent manifesto, Robin Bernstein asserts, "Because children are people, every department that studies people needs a specialist in childhood. Notice that I am not intoning what departments 'should' do but am instead point what they need to do in order to fulfill their own intellectual missions" (462).

Children's literature should be studied not only because it is popular, widely read, and quite often fun, but because it exists and it exists for an important, cherished, yet understudied and underappreciated segment of our population: children.

When we devalue children's literature worth in the American literary canon, we devalue the interests, experiences, and insights of children. As Seth Lerer poignantly observes,

> For if I have said anything here, it is that the story of the child is a story of literature itself: of finding characters that fit your mold; of telling tales about yourself to audiences skeptical or censoring; of dealing with parental stricture, pedagogic task, and social expectation in ways that preserve the inner self while at the same time keeping on the mask of conformity. Girls and boys do it differently, but what their stories always tell us is that childhood is an age of the imagination, and that every time we enter into fiction, we step back into a childhood of 'what if' or 'once upon a time.' (318)

In short, we teach children's literature because it is literature, and we teach literature because we are humans trying to make sense of the world around us through narrative. Children's literature reminds us of the wonder, curiosity, and imagination needed for and fostered by reading. Teaching children's literature demonstrates the flexibility and viability of
the critical skills we teach and further expands the inclusivity, pluralism, and open-mindedness that are fundamental to a humanities education.
References


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