

Christina M. Desai

What's so important about children's literature?

Nostalgia meets research

How fun!" That's the reaction when I tell people I study children's literature. And they are so right. Children's lit research is fascinating and yes, lots of fun. Often they follow this comment with reminiscences about a beloved childhood book and perhaps (cringe) a remark about how "cute" it was. For many adults, children's literature is comfort food, wrapped in nostalgia, recalling blissful times lost in a book with a happy ending. I confess to some nostalgia of my own, along with a few fantasies about fairy godmothers and that teaser "happily ever after." I came to the study of children's literature as any ex-English major would, through appreciation of the beauty and economy of its written word. I marveled at how authors managed to convey so much in so few words, often putting them into the mouths of their quite inarticulate child characters. I'm still wowed by that, but now it is the ideological content of this literature that interests me more. Nostalgia can obscure the impact of children's literature on our future citizens and prevent critical scrutiny.

In my first children's literature class in library school, the TA seemed to know about every children's book there is, past or present. She knew all the picture books, myths, classics, newest authors, illustrators, graphic novels, fantasies, even nonfiction. Asked how she had amassed this great store of knowl-

edge, she explained that she had held every unpaid and low-paying child-related job there is: babysitter, daycare worker, Scout den mother, camp counselor (She knew all the songs, too), teacher's aide, library assistant, and finally our TA. Let's face it; outside of pediatrics, most jobs involving kids are low paying, low status.

So it is not surprising that in academia, children's literature does not have quite the status of biotechnology or the cachet of art history. Most academic library collections of children's books began as support for education students needing classroom materials for teaching reading and language arts. "Kiddie lit" was not seen as important or worthy in its own right.

Then civil rights and feminist research opened our eyes to the way children's literature reflected and perpetuated inequalities in our society. Such research opened the door to a host of new perspectives. Researchers are now asking questions such as: Does J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series use national character stereotypes to reflect a xenophobic, imperial, or racist worldview?¹ Do Stephenie

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Meyer's *Twilight* books reflect changing racial attitudes and beliefs of Mormons?² Does German children's literature since World War II paper over Germans' complicity in Nazi treatment of Jews?³ Should we burn *Babar*⁴ for its colonial attitudes? Like textbooks, children's literature is loaded with ideology and can be viewed through many lenses. Serious research is ongoing. But this work requires a robust research collection of current and historic children's literature and secondary sources. The average public library's stock of current favorites and classic fairytales won't do.

Applications beyond education

In my library, books for children and teens are among the most frequently circulated books in our whole collection. They literally fall to pieces from use. Yet they may be overlooked by noneducation students. Librarians are well positioned to bring the rich resources of a good academic children's lit collection to the notice of students and scholars from other disciplines. It can offer novel research topics and unexpected sources. For example:

- Media and art faculty and students may find in children's books, illustrations, spin-offs, and animation a wealth of inspiration, ideas, and techniques.
- Sociology and history scholars may analyze notions of family or class in books such as Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* or Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*.
- Counselors may use books about characters coping with abuse, poverty, bullying, etc., as bibliotherapy, e.g., Ann Dee Ellis's *This is What I Did*.⁵
- Language learners may find amusing titles at a comfortable reading level to practice their target language.
- Undergrads (and others who may not admit it) read young adult novels for fun. If you haven't read any lately, you may find the quality amazing.

The "Juv Move" Project at UNM

At the University of New Mexico, children's literature had been left to the mechanics of an

approval plan and LC classification. The non-fiction titles were particularly hard to find, as they were scattered amid thousands of research-level titles in four separate subject-based libraries. Titles like *The Big Bug Book* by Margery Facklam⁶ were sandwiched between the likes of *Hymenoptera: Braconidae (Opiinae)* by Max Fischer.⁷ Our entomologists were not amused coming upon such childish titles, nor were education students pleased to trek to the science library to pry out one slim, outdated volume from between much weightier tomes. Library staff was not served by this arrangement either, since it was impossible to review the children's nonfiction for currency or usage.

As the new education librarian, I proposed consolidating all juvenile literature into one collection to enable browsing and simplify collection maintenance. This would also make the collection more visible and accessible to researchers from any discipline.

The "Juv Move" project was finally undertaken when, following a fire, other collections were being moved or replaced electronically, so that space could be carved out for a new collection. Added to the original project at the last minute was a huge gift: the College of Education's own juvenile literature library. This windfall came with no catalog records. Access had been limited to business hours. Adding it to the main library's collection would make it searchable online and accessible to more users, many more hours of the day. It also strengthened our own collection considerably. We accepted immediately.

The project turned out to be a massive one involving participation by staff from almost every unit in the library. Administrative support was crucial as staff time (and muscle) were critical elements. Simply identifying the scattered juvenile titles required generating many iterations of lists in our ILS. New location codes and OPAC displays had to be created and approved. As children's literature selector, I evaluated thousands of titles to make selection and weeding decisions, based on quality, condition, usage, and currency.

Other selectors gave generously of their time to evaluate juvenile nonfiction titles in their subject areas and languages. They also volunteered to weed sections of their subject areas to free up space. Special Collections selectors evaluated rare books and local interest titles. Catalogers brushed up on their original cataloging and added subject headings to older, bare-bones records. Preservation and marking staff were kept busy. Access Services staff and student assistants were invaluable in pulling books from the stacks, wheeling heavy carts to selectors for review, then taking them to cataloging and marking units, moving them to a holding area for sorting and staging, and finally making the mass move to the new permanent location.

A new reading area, furnished for group work or private study, completed the project. This reading corner has already become a popular spot for serious researchers, casual browsers, and nostalgia seekers alike. We all agreed, when the project was finally finished: it was so fun.

(“Exploring the learning...,” cont. from page 127)

- **Develop joint learning outcomes and an assessment plan.** Each unit (Hinkley Library, Peer Tutoring, and the Writing Center) has its own set of learning outcomes and assessment tools. Joint outcomes and assessment will present some difficult challenges, but the group is determined to make this happen.

- **Encourage more faculty to hold office hours in the library.** Eight faculty members from across the curriculum have agreed to be available in the library at least one hour per week during the fall semester. They will also complete an evaluation form documenting their experiences. There is no intent to move faculty offices into the library, but to encourage more informal interaction between students and faculty within the learning commons.

- **Train “library tutors” to help students with research projects.** Writing tutors typically receive library research instruction as part of their own classes. Training to help them make the link between tutoring in writing and

Notes

1. Marion Rana, “The Less You Lot Have Ter Do with These Foreigners, the Happier Yeh’ll Be’: Cultural and National Otherness in J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter Series,” *International Research in Children’s Literature* 4, no. 1 (2011): 45–58.

2. Georgina Ledvinka, “Vampires and Werewolves: Rewriting Religious and Racial Stereotyping in Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight Series,” *International Research in Children’s Literature* 5, no. 2 (2012): 195–211.

3. Zohar Shavit, *A Past Without Shadow: Constructing the Past in German Books for Children* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

4. Herbert Kohl, *Should We Burn Babar: Essays on Children’s Literature and the Power of Stories* (New York: New Press, 1995).

5. Ann Dee Ellis, *This is What I Did* (New York: Little, Brown, 2007).

6. Margery Facklam, *The Big Bug Book* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994).

7. Max Fischer, *Hymenoptera: Braconidae (Opiinai)* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976). *zz*

getting quality resources to improve student papers will be a further step in the evolving learning commons.

- **Develop more structured learning spaces in the library.** The library classroom does not provide enough teaching space to serve the busy instruction program and allow faculty who want to teach a class session or two in the library. While there is no obvious space to create additional formal teaching spaces, the learning commons participants will attempt to identify a way to provide such space.

The evolving learning commons at Northwest College has been an exciting project, one that will likely never be finished. Librarians, tutoring staff, and the Writing Center director all brought concerns to the new arrangement. Central, however, was a mutual commitment to student learning. Indeed, not only has the Learning Commons proven to be a success from the staff perspective, but hundreds of students at Northwest are benefiting from this new way of envisioning and delivering traditional services. *zz*