

The politics of children's literature:

Issues, concerns, and controversies

- ◆ Is there politics in children's literature?
- ◆ The myths of reading aloud
- ◆ Poetry and preservice teachers: Perceptions and possibilities
- ◆ Revisiting **Nightjohn**



The Dragon Lode

Vol. 20 • No. 2 • Spring, 2002

©2002 IRA Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group

Shirley Ernst

Eastern Connecticut State University, CT

Is there politics in children's literature?

One of the definitions of politics in my dictionary is "the use of intrigue or strategy in obtaining any position of power or control." Is it conceivable that children's literature could be used to obtain power or control? I suggest that it is. There are numerous ways in which this can happen. I'd like to briefly touch on several of the ways in which I see politics affecting children's literature.

The first way I'd like to consider is censorship. I know that the following experience is not an uncommon one for many of us as it is often the subject of discussion among friends who teach children's literature courses. For several years now I have taught a graduate class called Children's Literature: an Issues Approach. This past semester I decided to focus that class on gender issues, thinking that there is still a need to examine such issues as they relate to literature for children. I was surprised, although perhaps I should not have been, when several class members expressed discontent with the focus. "Gender is not an issue in our classes," several said. "We want to learn about 'regular' children's literature," said others. Throughout the semester these students were resistant to the idea that they might be selecting books or organizing literature activities in ways that might support traditional gender roles and/or stereotypes. Many of these students entered the class with a closed mind to the issue and left the class in the same way.

I suspect that if these students had been open to the idea that books could possibly contribute to how readers think of themselves in terms of gender issues (as well as other issues) they would have had to make changes in the books they used and the manner in which they used them. In order to make such changes teachers have to recognize that perhaps their previous actions have not been the best ones. In effect, that means losing some of their power or control. This is not necessarily bad, but if they take this as a personal insult it effectively reduces the likelihood of any changes being made.

Gender issues, of course, are not the only issues that can be recognized in children's literature. Issues of parent-child interaction, magic and witchcraft, offensive language and sexual activity, and sexual preferences are only a few of the others.

Those who ignore or discount the way that books might affect children, such as many of the students in my class did are just the other end of the continuum from those who suggest that books that are in conflict with their own values are to be denied children. Both groups are responsible for denying children a full spectrum of literature and experiences with literature. Both, in effect, are situations of censorship, although only one of them is easily labeled that way.

Those of us who have a passion for children's books and who seek unlimited ways in which to connect children with books need to find ways to deal with both ends of the censorship continuum. However, it is the lack of acknowledgement of the issues by teachers that concerns me most because it is a "silent killer" rather than a "splashed on the front page" event as is the outright denial of books for children. It doesn't really matter whether it is by neglect or design that children are denied the opportunities to examine issues that affect them and give them control over their own lives.

Another way in which politics affects children's literature is the way literature is affected by the testing craze that occurs in so many classrooms today. Too many school days today are ones in which in many cases even recess has been eliminated. It is not surprising, therefore, that many teachers tell me that there is no time to read to children. "We have to account for every minute of the day, and reading aloud is not one of those minutes," they say. How can children develop a love of books and stories without hearing someone read aloud to them on a regular basis? How do they develop an ear for the rhythm and rhyme of language? How do they develop the "I'm a reader" identifica-

tion without teachers sharing books and demonstrating that reading and books are integral parts of one's life? So here again is an issue of control by someone (those who determine that testing is the most important part of a child's learning experience) controlling children's access to literature.

There's another political issue revolving around children's literature. It's connected to how the books are used once the decision to use them is made. The use (or misuse?) of children's books to teach literacy skills is considered by some to be problematic. One of the major speakers at an IRA conference one year (I believe it was Mem Fox, but I'm not sure) once said, "Whatever happened to simply reading a book for pleasure?" In too many classrooms, probably a function of the issue mentioned above, books are not to be enjoyed by children, but rather they serve as vehicles for learning skills and/or information. Children may be given the opportunity to read or hear a wonderful story, such as **Charlotte's Web**, but instead of savoring it and talking about it from an aesthetic perspective they are asked a series of questions and have to give definitions for a set of vocabulary words and other such efferent activities. The love of the story is lost. The opportunity to learn that stories give us insights into our own lives is overshadowed by the concept that books are to be read simply to gain knowledge and information.

It's not difficult to explain why teachers might not have a comfortable enough knowledge of literature to understand that books and love of books are very different from the use of books to teach skills. From politicians to pediatricians, everyone is getting into the education act today. People whose only knowledge of learning and/or teaching comes from their own school experiences and biases are making decisions about curriculum and instruction. This is true not only at the elementary and secondary levels but also at the university level. When I began teaching at the college level twenty-five years ago the inclusion of a children's literature course in a teacher certification program was pretty common. In many of today's certification programs that requirement has disappeared. At best, children's literature is squeezed into a reading or language arts course and students preparing to become teachers have minimal exposure to or opportunities to study the wide range of literature for children. How then can we expect teachers to fight for literature study for its own benefits? How can we expect teachers to know that books such as **Charlotte's Web** have much more to of-

fer than vocabulary study and comprehension questions? How can we expect teachers to understand that literature can give children the kind of prior experience that they can use to connect to other learning?

The lack of recognition of children's literature study as being a significant and academically rigorous by many is another issue. If children's literature is defined as "non academic" then it can be dismissed as trivial and the lack of attention to it in children's lives can be justified. Just this past evening a student in a graduate children's literature class recounted an incident from her own personal experience. It seems as if her high school aged daughter walked into the room to see her reading her assignment for class. She happened to have selected five picture books to read and her daughter's comment was, "Hey, Mom. If that's your reading assignment I can see why you get A's." I would contend that this statement is not all that uncommon and that too many people see children's literature as being an "easy" subject of study. I cringe every time I hear someone call such study "kiddy lit." It's a term I don't allow in my classes as I believe it trivializes both children and the literature. However, it's a pretty common statement. Referring to

picture books as "baby books" is a similar reflection on the lack of significance or rigor to literature for children.

Politics is also an issue in the publication of the books themselves. Who, for example, gets published? Why are there so few books written or illustrated by people who represent non-mainstream cultures and/or lifestyles? Granted that this has changed over the years, but I still see it as a problem. At the same time there continues to be much controversy over who can and/or should write about certain topics or cultures. Related to this issue is whether literature accurately represents characters and situations from different cultural groups or even whether they are represented at all. These issues have been discussed in journals over the years and still can be found in them.

Looking back at my original question "Is there politics in children's literature?" I would say, of course there is, and there probably always will be. However, we need to be aware of such issues and to be open to dealing with any problems that ensue from them. If we are, then there will be more solutions than there are problems and children will have opportunities to enjoy the benefits of the wonderful literature that is available for them.