



# *the* Dragon Lode

**THE POWER OF LITERATURE TO RESHAPE OUR  
UNDERSTANDING OF IDENTITY, CULTURE, AND HISTORY**

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# The Dragon Lode

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Cameron University  
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**NICOLE MAXWELL** ('26)

University of North Georgia  
[nicole.maxwell@ung.edu](mailto:nicole.maxwell@ung.edu)

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# LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



DEAR MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF  
THE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND  
READING SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP,

In reading the last year of *The Dragon Lode*, I find a kind of solace and sanctuary, a steady hand in the turbulence of the educational and political scene that pushes and pulls teachers, families, academics, librarians. Finding solace and a quiet space in reading the scholarship and thinking of the writers, along with the reflections in the collection of books the Notable Books for a Global Society Committee has curated and selected, feels ironic, so I wonder how the sense of solace works. On the one hand we live and work in a climate of political adversity that influences schools and classrooms and, on the other, teachers and scholars continue their work of research, teaching, and community service, as though buffeted in a storm, chronicling issues and topics that show writers facing headwinds of challenge.

That sense of solace is also in the community of learning that SIG webinars, both sponsored by ILA and by the SIG over the last four years have provided. These have included SIG members, teachers, librarians, students, authors, and ILA officers. The webinars have addressed contemporary issues in American

education, including the studies and new information that represent diverse perspectives and build community, ultimately inspiring action. Their stories and news and views from different parts of the country have added to our wealth of knowledge, extended a network of connections, and provided resources. It is this network of researchers and educators committed to action that brings me solace in the face of so much adversity.

**The *Dragon Lode* research encourages readers to actively engage with and question issues related to advocacy, learning, and inquiry. It highlights that reshaping one's perspective and sense of identity is less about finding comfort and refuge, and more about embracing empowerment and growth. By prompting this shift, the research calls readers to take meaningful action in support of these values.**

In one of the SIG's 2024 webinars, *Voices and Stories of Advocacy: Intellectual Freedom in an Age of Challenge*, Samantha Hull, Pennsylvania librarian, instructor of library science, and US Congress spokesperson, discussed silent censorship, the self-censorship of teachers and librarians who decide not to purchase potentially controversial books for inclusion in their collections. Silent censorship occurs in addition to all of the documented book challenges, meaning that the documented challenges are just the tip of the iceberg. Hull noted that 2023 set a record number of books targeted for censorship in school and public libraries with 4,240 unique book titles targeted, an increase of 65% over 2022, with 46.2% of the challenges occurring in public libraries. So, while there is a sense of solace in hearing the reality of a wide community of people invested in education, literacy, and intellectual freedom, we are also called to action.

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While *The Dragon Lode* has been published since the early 1980s, the vigor and purpose of the articles put scholars and writers at the front of the storm brewing over the last decade. The authors are taking on the challenges, providing encouragement in their reasoned and thoughtful manner, providing insight into cutting edge discovery and teaching. The articles have featured topics and issues of diversity, inclusion, choice, intellectual freedom, empowerment, and the role of genres of literature in the lives of children and their families, caretakers, and teachers, coaches, and librarians. Interesting that the issues of the last year have included the ongoing need for diverse books and resistance in a time when resistance requires courage and diverse books are censored.

Articles in this issue, as in other issues, contextualize books as the authors analyze and comment on their content, but then place them in learning situations, bringing the rigor of analysis to the practice and humanity of sharing and teaching. Kathy Short (2017) writes that content analysis includes a kind of reader-response-oriented research stance. "The texts do not speak for themselves but are read in order to inform another context" (p. 4). The context the authors are working in, coming from different perspectives, is advocacy I think, advocacy for reading, for children, demonstrating wisdom and agency of young readers (Cromwell & Liang, 2023), providing resources for deeper thinking about connected books (Oslick & Fain, 2024), and showing the work of pre-service teachers creating a role of literature in the community (Katz et al., 2023). The pages of the journal show measured responses to the continuing challenges to teaching and to topics, con-

cepts, and the books that teachers share. I remain puzzled by my feeling of solace and sanctuary in the face of such vision and community engagement work but imagine that has to do with a growing community exhibited in these pages and in the work of the SIG.

One of the SIG's challenges is finding ways to sustain the important work to nurture and inform a wide community. The editors of this journal have said they aim to include a wide range of writers and researchers, new scholars in the field as well as veteran academics. The continuing work of the SIG to engage other organizations, reinforce connections within the SIG, forge connections with ILA and with NCTE, and provide a forum for voices, stories, and the new learning that this journal demonstrates are priorities as we step forward. This letter is my last one, as I am stepping into the role of Past-president and I am glad and grateful to have served the SIG as its president. •

Sincerely,

**Sandip Wilson**

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITORS



IN THIS ISSUE, we are excited to share a selection of studies that showcase the transformative potential of children's literature to foster diverse identities, challenge dominant narratives, and empower readers. From picturebooks that celebrate Black beauty and resilience to frameworks that strengthen connections between families and schools, these studies highlight how literature can reflect and shape our understanding of identity, culture, and history.

Sally Brown and Sondra Bellard's content analysis in "My Hair is Magic" delves into how children's literature offers a diverse range of representations of Black hair. Their findings emphasize the importance of moving beyond a singular narrative to showcase the different textures, styles, and stories that reflect the beauty and resilience of Black communities. These picturebooks empower young Black readers to embrace their natural beauty while inviting all readers to appreciate the richness of cultural diversity.

Similarly, in "Asset-Based Conexiones," Julia López-Robertson and colleagues explore how pairing children's literature with the Conexiones con los Saberes (CCW) framework helps early childhood educators build strong, asset-based relationships with minoritized families. By validating family strengths—such as social, linguistic, and resistant capital—this framework underscores the importance of honoring the lived experiences and community knowledge children bring to the classroom. It's a reminder

that education must be a holistic process, one that supports children's journeys by recognizing and uplifting their cultural backgrounds.

Wendy R. Williams, in "Seeing the Complexity of Children's Literature through Critical Lenses and Creative Projects," highlights how critical analysis—through lenses like Critical Race Theory and Feminism—deepens undergraduate students' understanding of literature and fosters a more nuanced appreciation of diversity, inclusion, and social

justice. By engaging in creative projects, students use literature to explore empathy, connection, and the transformative power of critical thinking.

In "Learning from Our Past," Melanie D. Koss examines how historical fiction and fantasy authors connect past struggles to contemporary issues. Her exploration of young adult literature encourages readers to recognize how historical narratives continue to shape present-day challenges, helping young people see the enduring relevance of history in addressing today's societal issues.

Nonfiction, like historical fiction, connects readers to historical events, shedding light on lesser-known figures as well as demonstrating the long-term impacts of people and events. Terrell Young and Barbara Ward's interview with Candace Fleming reveals the fascinating accounts of *The Enigma Girls*. Her book offers a compelling exploration of young women who played a crucial role in World War II's Allied efforts at Bletchley Park. By

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focusing on these unsung heroines—whose contributions were overlooked for decades—Fleming challenges the erasure of young women’s voices from historical narratives. Her work underscores the broader theme of uncovering hidden histories and amplifying marginalized voices, echoing the central message in many of our featured studies: the power of young people, regardless of gender or background, to shape history and challenge injustice.

Finally, in *The Poet’s Corner*, Janet Wong shows how to make phonics instruction more engaging by introducing playful poetic techniques like alliteration, consonance, and assonance. Her “Take 5! mini-lessons” method encourages teachers to approach poetry in a way that emphasizes enjoyment first, while also promoting language skills and critical thinking. Wong connects her approach to the work of cognitive psychologists, illustrating how poetry can enhance learning through cognitive breaks and creative language play.

Taken together, these pieces—ranging from representations of Black hair to the empowerment of young women in wartime—demonstrate the power of literature to reshape our understanding of identity, culture, and history. They

invite us to reconsider the narratives we tell, while emphasizing the importance of diverse voices in creating a more inclusive and equitable world.

As you read these studies, we encourage you to reflect on how literature can serve not only as a mirror of the world we live in but also as a window into the possibilities for creating a more just and compassionate future. The stories we tell—and the stories we choose to amplify—are central to shaping the world we want to build.

Thank you for your continued engagement with *The Dragon Lode*. We hope these articles spark new insights and conversations that inspire both personal and collective growth. •

**Dr. Margaret Osgood Opatz**

Capti

[Margaret@team.captivoice.com](mailto:Margaret@team.captivoice.com)

**Dr. Liz Thackeray Nelson**

Utah Valley University

[liz.nelson@uvu.edu](mailto:liz.nelson@uvu.edu)



# *The* *Dragon* *Lode*

## CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

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Fall 2025 **OPEN THEME**

*MANUSCRIPTS DUE*  
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We invite manuscripts that explore contemporary issues and questions, genre study, literary theory, and research related to children's literature and reading.

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*MANUSCRIPTS DUE*  
*JANUARY 31, 2026*

We invite manuscripts that explore contemporary issues and questions, genre study, literary theory, and research related to children's literature and reading.

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# MY HAIR IS MAGIC: BUILDING IDENTITIES WITH YOUNG LEARNERS THROUGH REPRESENTATIONS OF HAIR IN PICTUREBOOKS



Sally Brown & Sondra Bellard

*“There’s really no such thing as hair not acting right—your hair just wants to be a little more fun today. And that’s okay. You don’t have to change a thing. Just be yourself.”*

From *Stella’s Stellar Hair* (Moises, 2021, p. 21)

PICTUREBOOKS HAVE BEEN used by teachers in early childhood classrooms for a variety of purposes, including developing critical thinking skills (Edwards, 2005; Roche, 2014); promoting anti-bias sentiments (Nguyen, 2022); and, building intercultural experiences (Tomé–Fernández et al., 2019). This article explores hair-focused picturebooks as a means for pushing back against hegemonic narratives about the hair of marginalized children. Children’s literature has the potential to function as a tool for building and embracing positive identities in young learners (Fránquiz et al., 2011; Piper, 2019). Three research questions were investigated through a content analysis of nine picturebooks focused on Black and African American hair. The guiding research questions were: (1) How accurate and authentic were the texts regarding hair representation, vocabulary, and care? and, (2) How did the storylines and images support positive identities for young children? For the purposes of this article, African American and Black are not used interchangeably. African American refers to those who are of African descent residing in America. Black refers to dark-skinned people of African descent regardless of location. These terms reflect historical references as well as words used within the picturebooks themselves.

As perspectives about what it means to be human are embraced, engagement in conversations and activities surrounding culturally responsive texts becomes critical. Brooks and McNair (2015) tell us that African American picturebooks play a role in shaping student “values, beliefs, and worldviews” (p. 299). Well-informed book choice selections are needed to move beyond routine read-aloud, focusing on books with animals or mainstream White characters (Teale et al., 2021), opening new types of student-generated narratives about themselves and their identities. The research presented here attends to these issues by examining recently published picturebooks on hair to facilitate family and teachers’ use of these texts.

This research is critical because of the marginalization particular students face as part of their everyday experiences. The implications provide insights for educators interested in building positive identities for Black and African American students through the use of these picturebooks in classrooms. The analyses show affirmations associated with Black hair have the potential to support positive identity development. The careful selection and use of picturebooks can reframe classroom literacy engagements (Kaczmarczyk et al., 2023). Overall, this work extends the conversation about cultural representations in assertions of identity and meets the call for additional studies of Black girls’ hair representation in picturebooks (Barton et al., 2022). The article concludes with recommendations for classroom instructional practices that include critical interactive and multimodal responses to picturebooks.

## Historical Context of African American and Black Hair

Understanding the history of hairstyling and the expression of culture through hairstyles allows for a better understanding of various backgrounds, while also opening up the possibilities of decolonization to build towards a collective future. Many aspects of a person's values, ethics, and priorities to their culture, such as religious affiliation, can be understood by looking at their hair styling (Dabiri, 2020). In one culture, a mark of tradition may be braiding, while in other cultures, special curling and shaping techniques and accessories or headpieces hold significance to the individuals' identities. An ongoing issue for children of color is the racialization of their hair in schools, which plays out in classrooms (Essien & Wood, 2021). The language used when describing or discussing Black hair is partly why non-straightened hair types have become politicized.

The association of words like unruly, defiant, and unmanageable in relation to hair can lead to the individual being associated with negative connotations rather than the hairstyle or type due to feature-trait association (Blair et al., 2002).

Finding inclusive ways to discuss hair-focused picturebooks can provide spaces for affirming ethnic identities. As young children traverse through schooling, it is essential that they do not come away with long-term adverse effects on how they view their worth and belonging as adults based on preconceived judgments of Black hairstyles.

## Building Identities Using Critical Perspectives

Identities are complicated because they are socially constructed, fluid, and heavily influenced by context, among other factors. Specific identities can be assigned to a person, ascribed identities, even though that person does not take up the identity (Sutherland, 2005). Some identities may be enacted through behaviors, words, and gestures. Yet other identities are co-constructed through social interactions. According to Gee (2005), the key to identity is recognition, which includes "language, action, interaction, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places" (p. 27).

From a critical perspective, identities are produced in political and ideological environments where some people

are positioned as privileged and others as racially or culturally marked (Kubota, 2004). Zirkel and Johnson (2016) assert that racial identity is key to the emotional well-being of Black youth. To construct or co-construct identities of strength and perseverance, Black children need to see their assets, community, and families in a positive light. Crafting a strong, healthy identity that counters stereotypes and negativity associated with Black racial identities requires understanding African and African American cultural roots. Equity is intertwined with identity development.

**Understanding the history of hairstyling and the expression of culture through hairstyles allows for a better understanding of various backgrounds, while also opening up the possibilities of decolonization to build towards a collective future.**

For students to take up affirming identities, they must learn from teachers using culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies, including picturebooks with authentic and accurate cultural representations (Barton et al., 2022; Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2014). Muhammad and Mosley (2021) tell us, "Youth who do not know who they are (including the truth of their histories) risk passively believing anything about their identities; they need to have a strong sense of self to navigate their society" (p. 193). In other words, students need to know and understand themselves independently of social stereotypes.

Early childhood is the time of formative identity development. Building an environment that fosters self-love for Black children and their physical attributes is required for students to develop an appreciation of their likeness (Braden et al., 2022; Essien & Wood, 2021; Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2020). Using picturebooks is one piece of the puzzle for helping young learners create counter-narratives about themselves.

## Racial Literacy

African Americans have historically used children's books to challenge White supremacy and racism by showing African American children accurate tales of themselves and their history (Bishop, 1990). This includes having positive representations of Black hairstyles and people representing a range of skin tones. Racial literacy is a positive cultural resistance strategy with an ability to handle racial stress in a healthy manner. Stevenson (2014) notes, "Stereotypes affect how individuals see themselves and their potential" (p. 69), which can contribute to internalization of inferiority. Curenton et

al. (2022) proposed that racial literacy can be implemented in developmentally appropriate ways in early childhood by using “racially affirming storybooks coupled with conversations grounded in ethnic-racial socialization” (p. 3). They argue that young children can develop racial literacy skills by using a familiar tool (e.g., storybooks) in a familiar setting (e.g., reading with a trusted adult).

Beliefs like these highlight the need to focus on racial self-esteem and identity to evaluate stories that claim to affirm Black girls’ skin and hair and to take a closer look at how Black children, specifically young girls, are being represented and how their physical attributes are discussed. Bishop (1990) claims that children’s books should act as “windows and mirrors,” meaning that children should be able to see themselves and others as they read or listen to stories. Having positive representations of Black hairstyles through picturebooks is not only a mirror for Black children, but it also acts as a window by exposing children who are not Black to a new cultural context in hopes of bridging differences and building cultural appreciation. Affirmation is essential because of the negative stereotypes and connotations assigned to Black hair due to the civic history in the United States (Brooks & McNair, 2015). It is critical that today’s children do not internalize the negativity associated with Black hair.

According to bell hooks (1993), “The first body issue that affects Black female identity, even more so than color, is hair texture (p.85).” Research suggests that having positive representations of hair, such as in picture books, can be affirming and aid with identity development for young readers (Coyne et al., 2022). Hair styling plays a big part in the daily routine of many African American girls. One of the first things an African American girl learns is that her hair should always be “done” before leaving the home. Typically, this means that one’s hair should be styled to align with the Western world’s Eurocentric beauty standards. The standards and expectations of manipulating kinky or coily hair to appear straight or closer to what is considered Eurocentric beauty cause many young Black girls to scrutinize their hair for its’ texture and appearance (Brooks & McNair, 2015).

## Methods

The guiding research questions in this study were: (1) How accurate and authentic are the texts regarding hair representation, vocabulary, and care?; and, (2) How do the storylines and images support positive identities for young children?

## Book Selection

Nine picturebooks were selected, emphasizing fictional stories where hair was central to the storyline. Table 1 outlines the major components of each picturebook along with hair images and detailed hair descriptions to provide an overview of the selected texts. The selection criteria considered several factors. First, the publication date was used to select the most recent hair books, given that these books are likely to have the fewest reviews or criteria. The chosen texts range from 2018 to 2023. The second criterion focused on hair, specifically Black, African American, or biracial hair. The authors also only selected books published by national publishing companies, not self-published books. The authors felt it was important to critique picturebooks that would be easily accessible to families, students, and teachers. The last criterion examined the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of authors and illustrators. Given the emphasis on Black and African American hair, it was critical to locate picturebooks written by cultural insiders (Cueto & Brooks, 2019).










## Researchers’ Positionality

Sally is a White professor of literacy education with decades of research investigating the use of picturebooks with diverse children in early education settings. As a former teacher, she witnessed how Black children were marginalized in schools. Sondra is an African American graduate student with personal experience and professional interest in Black hair. Her interest in this topic grew after attending a predominantly White institution (PWI) and learning of the negative connotations and judgments commonly associated with Afro hair. This experience caused her to reflect on her conceptions regarding hair and the discrimination that people with kinky hair face socially and professionally. This led to research on the associations between Black hair, identity, and professionalism. Sally and Sondra brought familiarity to the research through their backgrounds and experiences.

## Analysis of Picturebooks

Using a critical lens, the qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019) was bimodal, focusing on the images and the written text. The approach wove together two approaches. It drew from multimodal content analysis (Serafini & Reid, 2019) to examine how illustrations work with or against language in other overall stories. Attention was paid to how the pictures created visual narratives (setting and characters) and how this

**Table 1**  
**OVERVIEW OF SELECTED PICTUREBOOKS**

BOOK TITLE / YEAR PUBLISHED	SUMMARY	DESCRIPTION OF HAIR	APPEARANCE OF HAIR	IDENTITY CONNECTIONS: EMPOWERMENT, RESILIENCE, AND RESISTANCE
<i>Bedtime Bonnet</i> (Redd, 2020)	The main character loses her bedtime bonnet and needs it to protect her hair before she can go to sleep.	Corkscrew curls, braided crown, ribbonny-curls		Teaches respect for different hairstyles and routines. Show intergenerational aspects of hairstyle and how one can be unique even in their family. Celebration of family love for the child. Pride for her hair braids.
<i>Don't Touch My Hair</i> (Miller, 2019)	Aria goes on a journey through various fictional settings to hide from people wanting to touch her hair.	Soft, bouncy, big, fluffy		Shows peer pressure and how to say no and respect boundaries. Aria states, "I just want it [hair] to be free," showing the power of hair and how it makes one feel. Empowerment over one's body.
<i>Hair Love</i> (Cherry, 2019)	Zuri wants to get her done to welcome her mom home.	Kinks, coils, funky puff buns		Showcases hairstyling as a part of preparing for a special occasion. Dad confirms how beautiful Zuri's hair is. The ability of dad to make Zuri into a superhero. Family love and support.
<i>Magic Like That</i> (Doyon, 2021)	The main character explains why and how her hair is magic as her mom does her hair at home.	Bantu knots, mischievous, ironed flat, piled high		Empowers and affirms identity through the hair transformation process. Compares the young girl's hair to the natural world describing it as majestic. Theme of I can be anything.
<i>My Fade is Fresh</i> (Grant, 2022)	The main character is going to the barbershop for a new hairstyle.	Biggish, bushy, tangly tousled top, high-top fades		Being empowered in the barber's chair to make a decision about her hairstyle. Importance of a child's voice. Celebration of Black hairstyles. Range of emotions and close community context.
<i>My Hair is Magic</i> (Marroquin, 2020)	The main character describes her hair in imaginative ways in her classroom and town.	Lush, musical, twisty, puffy		The character is empowered to respond to questions about hair and pushes others to change their perspectives about different types of hair. Respect for personal decisions like touching hair. Hair as being free.
<i>Princess Hair</i> (Miller, 2018)	A celebration that princesses, little girls, can have any type of hair.	Afros, twist outs, nappy		Affirms Black hair. A princess crown works well with any kind of hair. Hair style does not define who one is. Different types of hair bring joy to your life. Love for your hair no matter the type.
<i>Stella's Stellar Hair</i> (Moises, 2021)	Stella needs a new hairstyle for the Big Star Little Gala so she travels through outer space for advice from her family.	Curly Q's, graceful, lion's mane		Builds feelings of confidence about hair. There is no such thing as hair not acting right. Hair is beautiful just the way it is. Overcoming worry about what others think. Affirmation statements like "so proud and fierce."
<i>Wanda</i> (Nontshokweni & Tlali, 2023)	Wanda is being bullied for her hair/looks at school and seeks help from her grandmother.	Crown, cloud, bird's nest		Shows the emotional toll on a girl who is bullied because of her hair. Ignoring negative comments. Real struggle of a young Black child. Statements of positivity and learning to be proud.

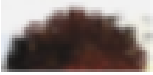
was influenced by design, including salience and background. A critical approach was also applied to the content analysis to supplement multimodal aspects and examine race, inequities, resistance, and resilience (Beach et al., 2009). According to Short (2019), “Language and visual image can impact readers’ perceptions of specific groups of people and influence the power that people within those groups may or may not have within a society” (p. 6). Therefore, the analysis valued the interaction of the visual and text.

The unit of analysis was the entire picturebook, with particular attention to visual representations of hair and words describing Black or African American hair. The storyline or

plot was scrutinized to determine the implicit or explicit messages it gave readers. These were embedded in the research questions. Multiple readings of the picturebooks were used to conduct open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) with the words and images to identify emergent patterns focused on authenticity and accuracy.

The constructs discussed in the findings arose from the connections made through the constant comparison method that yielded consistencies across analytical categories. Google Sheets were used to organize the data collection and synthesize the analysis. The resulting axial categories (Saldaña, 2015) are represented in Table 2. Each element was broken down into

**Table 2**  
**ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES WITH SAMPLE DATA**

CODING CATEGORIES	EXAMPLES OF DATA FROM PICTUREBOOKS
Entirety of Character	Text: Develops over time in a social context where several young people are getting their hair styled. The character is faced with making a decision about her hairstyle and the barber tries to talk her into particular styles. But the character is empowered to keep going until she gets the hair she wants. It is an emotional journey.
	Illustration: Typical American style clothing; Dark-skinned main character and family community support
Physical Characteristics of Hair	Text: Bushy, brownish, biggish hair, perm, press, trim, chop, fro, cornrows, tangly tousled top, puff, waves, high-top fades, taper fades, twists
	Illustration: 
Hair Care	Text: “What’s this goopy, gooey stuff”, greasy-glossed groomed, “grab a pick” Illustration: “What’s this goopy, gooey stuff”, greasy-glossed groomed, “grab a pick”
Contextual Elements	Text: Uses phrases that are common slang like “line me up” Community Support Illustration: Displays a barbershop with a variety of customers with different shades of skin and hairstyles
Stereotypes or Biases	Goes against stereotypes because she wants her hair cut into what is typically considered a boy hairstyle
Plot (Storyline)	The main character is going to the barbershop for a new hairstyle. While she is there, members of the community suggest different hairstyles for her. In the end, the young girl has to make the decision.
Racial/Emotional Development	Speak up for yourself or use your voice. Pride is an element of Black hair. Dealing with a range of emotions including frustration.
Identity (Mirror)	Cultural aspects of going to the barber shop in an African American community. Communal or social experience.
Window	Clearly states and shows a variety of hairstyles. A window into hair diversity. But commonalities with the experiences of selecting a new hairstyle.

written text and visual information presented through the illustrations. Both were analyzed, and this resulted in a group of similar ideas or themes

As data examples were identified and codes refined, there was a reorganization around more prominent themes. For example, the vocabulary and image settings were interrogated for stereotypes and biases by comparing them to existing ones found in the literature and larger society at large. Each picturebook was categorized as perpetuating bias/stereotypes, being neutral, or pushing back against existing ones. In *My Fade is Fresh* (Grant, 2022), the main character, a young girl, wants a haircut that is traditionally worn by males. This book does not perpetuate stereotypes but offers a new narrative about gender and hair. Personal biases were checked through ongoing data analysis meetings as the researchers challenged each other's viewpoints and talked through implicit and explicit messages contained in the picturebooks.

### Findings

Themes of empowerment, resilience, and resistance emerged in the findings and addressed the research question on the ways in which the storylines and images support positive identities for young children. Below are examples of these findings as the fictional book characters use their sense of agency in the face of hair-related events in a variety of contexts. Later, the findings address authenticity and accuracy of written and visual vocabulary in terms of hair representation and care. The last section of the findings highlights the characters' affirmations of their own identity leading readers to appreciate and build their own identities.

#### Empowerment of Characters' Actions in the Storylines: Resilience, and Resistance

Strong main characters in the picturebooks yielded a larger theme of empowerment. This relates to exerting control over one's life in ways where the characters built confidence and developed a sense of pride and accomplishment related to their physical appearance. There was a change in beliefs about self that exuded a positive identity as a character of color.

#### Resilience Embedded Within Empowerment

Resilience, the ability to overcome difficulties or challenges, revealed itself as a subtheme within the storylines when the book characters dealt with negative hair situations. The main character in *Wanda* (Nontshokweni & Tlali, 2021) hears her

Mama's words, "Intombi mayizithembe, Wanda. A young girl must always remain confident," as she struggles against bullying by the boys at school. Her Mama's message pushed Wanda to be resilient and stop crying. As the story continues, Wanda faces more adversity. In the end, Wanda's grandmother, Makhulu, empowers Wanda by reminding her that she is a queen, and her hair is her crown. This picturebook rejects Eurocentric values of beauty and instead celebrates a Black girl and empowers the reader to think about how they might resist or negotiate similar situations (Braden et al., 2022).

**Resistance Embedded Within Empowerment** Resistance, or the refusal to comply with negative stereotypes or microaggressions was another theme found across the selected stories. Similar messages are embedded in the text and illustrations of *Don't Touch My Hair* (Miller, 2018). Sharee Miller, author and illustrator, created a cover with the protagonist's hands on her hips and eyes closed with her fluffy hair, acknowledging beautiful curls. This physical stance exudes resistance and resilience to other children who attempt to touch her hair without permission. Young readers are invited to take the main character's perspective when the author asks, "Will Aria be able to escape the curious hands that want to touch her hair?" The book concludes with Aria deciding not to run away. Instead, she claims her hair and confronts the situation. The character offers a verbal solution for little girls. Use your words. Ultimately sending the reader away with an understanding of the power of words to enact change.

Across the picturebooks, the protagonists often confront others about their hair. The main character sometimes faces internal scrutiny of their hair, like in *Stella's Stellar Hair* (Moises, 2021), where Stella says, "My hair's not acting right," and "It's not at all how I want it" throughout the story. Each of her aunts offers her a new hairstyle, but in the end, she states that the style is perfect for them but unsuitable for her. That is until she meets Auntie Solona on the sun. Solona tells Stella that there's no such thing as hair not acting right and just to be yourself. Then, Stella uses a method from each of her aunts to create her unique style. While Wanda's negative perspective of her hair is triggered by teasing and lack of actions from others, the lesson she learns from her mother and grandmother is internal love and acceptance.

Cureton et al. (2022) theorize that learning how to appropriately handle racial stress in a nonproblematic way can also be done through literature for young readers. *My Hair is*

*Magic* (Marroquin, 2020) and *Don't Touch My Hair* (Miller, 2018) open spaces to discuss uncomfortable situations and the feelings that may be sparked from the storylines. In *My Hair is Magic*, the protagonist describes her hair using metaphors and explains what happens when she is approached with questions about her hair. People ask her, "How do you comb all that hair?" she responds wittingly, "with tender love and care." Aria in *Don't Touch My Hair* is overwhelmed and frustrated by people wanting to touch her hair. She eventually explains that although everyone loves her hair, "just look and don't touch without my permission." These picturebooks act as a model of responding to racial stress and can inspire young readers to set their boundaries.

### **Authenticity and Accuracy**

The authenticity and accuracy of the selected picturebooks are presented in terms of hair representation, vocabulary, and care. Fox and Short (2003) define cultural authenticity in picturebooks as "the reader's sense of truth in how a specific cultural experience has been represented within a book, particularly when the reader is an insider to the culture portrayed in that book, is probably the most common understanding of cultural authenticity" (p. 5). This was a critical element throughout the findings as African American and Black experiences around hair vary. There was not one story to tell. Accuracy, a truthful depiction of a cultural group, is equally essential (Mikkelsen, 1998).

**Hair Representation** The authors' and illustrators' use of written and visual vocabulary crafted the storylines and depicted Black children and families through rich, colorful illustrations are reported below. This included specific vocabulary, both written and visual, involved in caring for Black hair. Visual vocabulary is the "use of visual details in an image to showcase content and information that a student is not yet able to communicate through language" (Brown & Allmond, 2021, p. 217). The importance of the messages contained in the illustrations is equivalent to the written word for young readers.

### **Written Vocabulary Associated with Hair**

The vocabulary used when describing hair is one tool used to affirm Black girls' identity and appearance. The selected books utilize empowering adjectives and a variety of metaphors and similes to describe the main character's hair. In *My Hair is Magic* (Marroquin, 2020), the protagonist's hair is described as

musical and fierce, as well as "fearless as surfers riding waves." In the picturebook, *Wanda* (Nontshokweni & Tlali, 2023) describes hair as "tall like Tat' uVuka's peach tree" and "a crown made of thorns." In this instance, "a crown made of thorns" can be interpreted as a biblical reference referring to beauty in the face of adversity. These descriptions hold positive meanings, reaffirming that Black hair is beautiful and special. The authors also encourage imaginative thinking by comparing how the hair shapes or moves to familiar objects and concepts.

*Hair Love* (Cherry, 2019) and *Don't Touch My Hair* (Miller, 2019) describe the characters' hair by its physical properties. Words like kinky, coily, big, fluffy, and soft are used to paint a picture of the beautiful variations in Black hair. Other authors use this opportunity to introduce and identify Black hairstyles and accessories by name. Of particular note, *My Fade is Fresh* (Grant, 2022) utilizes a barber shop setting to name countless Black hairstyles varying from traditional to modern styles. Some hairstyles modeled include cornrows, high-top and taper fades, perms, locs, and spikes. Using the real names of hairstyles allows for a connection to be made to American and Black history (Brooks & McNair, 2015). Knowing the names of the hairstyles that children see or wear, along with the history, may aid in racial identity development for young Black girls.

**Hair Care** Overall, a limited amount of hair care or routine was explained in the text of the picturebooks. For example, in *Hair Love* (Cherry, 2019), Daddy "combed, parted, oiled, and twisted" the protagonist's hair, while the illustrations detail the actual process. *Bedtime Bonnet* (Redd, 2020) is the primary picturebook explaining hair care processes or routines. It features each family member, including the main character, taking care of their hair, getting ready for bed, and leaving the house the next day. Some actions describing the family member's routines involve gathering corkscrew curls in a scarf, locs in a durag, braids in a bonnet, and brushing to make waves appear.

### **Visual Vocabulary through Illustrations**

The images shared with children have the power to affect their identity development and self-worth (Koss, 2015), and a part of empowering and affirming Black girls is allowing them to see themselves represented in a positive light. The selected books display stunning images of Black girls proudly showing off their curls. Picturebook covers reveal a theme of protagonists flaunting afros. The illustrations are detailed and drawn

with attention to the volume or thickness of the hair. Even with *Magic Like That* (Doyon, 2021), where they have opted for a straighter style on the cover, the hair appears thick and healthy. While the afros vary in texture, color, and size, there are missed opportunities to showcase other hairstyles and accessories commonly associated with Black culture.

Another theme was the variety of hairstyles shown within the picturebooks. While Aria in *Don't Touch My Hair* (Miller, 2018), rocks one style for the majority of the story, the protagonists in *My Fade is Fresh* (Grant, 2022), *Stella's Stellar Hair* (Moises, 2021), *Hair Love* (Cherry, 2019), and *Princess Hair* (Miller, 2018) take a journey through an array of hairstyles showcasing just how versatile and fun hair can be. The illustrations also play a crucial role in adding context to the storyline. For example, *Hair Love* shows Zuri preparing for a particular day, which is later revealed as a welcome home party for her mother through the context provided by the illustrations.

Many characters express feelings or emotions that they do not say out loud. For instance, while the protagonist of *Magic Like That* (Doyon, 2021) is waiting for her mom to finish her hair, she is seen scowling to represent the pain of detangling her hair. Wanda, from *Wanda* (Nontshokweni & Tlali, 2023), is shown crying after being bullied, almost smiling after trying on a headband, and then crying again. The illustrations allow us

to travel through Wanda's range of emotions without a written explanation of each change.

**Hair Care** There were powerful illustrations representing hair care. *Bedtime Bonnet* (Redd, 2022) displays the hair care process through illustrations depicting family members in front of mirrors, combing, twisting, and brushing. The different hair care processes culminate in a family photo where everyone's hair is prepared for bedtime in various ways. The endpapers of *Bedtime Bonnet* and *My Fade is Fresh* (Grant, 2022) highlight hair care by dedicating pages that illustrate products, accessories, and tools for styling and processing hair (see Figure 1). These items include combs, rollers, creams, bobby pins, razors, and more. Highlighting the prominent products when styling Black hair allows young readers to make connections and comparisons with their own lives.

#### Affirmations of Identity

*Magic Like That* (Doyon, 2021), *Princess Hair* (Miller, 2018), *Hair Love* (Cherry, 2019), and *My Hair is Magic* (Marroquin, 2020), contains a loving and celebratory message about Black hair. The protagonist in *Magic Like That* journeys through various hairstyles while her mother does her hair. The authors of *My Hair is Magic* and *Magic Like That* use metaphors to com-

Figure 1

### PAGE SPREAD FROM *MY FADE IS FRESH* (GRANT, 2022)



pare Black hair to a sensation or feeling of something beautiful. For example, *Magic Like That* reads, “bouquet of hydrangea blossoms—my hair is elegant like that.” Zuri in *Hair Love* describes the quirks of her hair growing bigger when it is wet. The storyline emphasizes how her mood or play changes alongside different hairstyles. These books focus on positive representations and affirmations stressing that Black girl hair is beautiful, unique, and inspiring.

*Princess Hair* (Miller, 2018), does not follow the main character throughout the plot. Instead, the book contains a variety of characters across an array of settings and emphasizes that all types of hair are fit for a crown. The message affirms that princesses, little girls, can have any hair. It is worth noting that Sharee Miller takes a chance by using the word “nappy” to describe hair on the last page. She reimagines and reclaims a word with negative connotations and uses it positively, highlighting that nappy does not mean ugly or unworthy. Instead, readers come away with a sense that nappy is an upbeat, confident term.

## Discussion

When protagonists of color are portrayed as fully human, picturebooks can invite readers and viewers into the world of hair, and Black hair can be re-imagined and celebrated (Cueto & Brooks, 2019). The storylines offered opportunities for the protagonists to be agentive and resilient through the various fictional challenges they faced, which mirrored real life. Revisiting the notion of critical perspectives using the featured characters and storylines, pushes thinking about identity development, privilege, and power. If picturebooks featuring empowered characters of color are never read in classrooms, then students are missing role models like Aria and Wanda. Black and African American students may not have the language or confidence to be resilient on their own. In order to construct a self-affirming identity, students need to be able to counter or resist negative Black racial identities (Zirkel & Johnson, 2016). These picturebooks have the potential to help students discover who they are as was the case for the main character in *My Fade is Fresh* (Grant, 2022). It is a step in building a counternarrative that is often perpetuated by society and recycled in classroom discourse (Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2021).

Therefore, interrogating nuanced or implicit written and illustrative details for stereotypes and biases provided insight into the accuracy and authenticity of the picturebooks. In the case of *Princess Hair* (Miller, 2018), the author transforms the word nappy to dispel a traditional stereotype and move forward in

transforming perspectives in a positive light. This has the power to change how a young girl might feel about her culture and self (Brooks & McNair, 2015). Other written vocabulary provides rich, authentic descriptors for the care and styling of Black hair. This window allows Black students to see kinky, cornrows, oily, and bonnets as a rich tradition to be celebrated while at the same time providing a space for students from other backgrounds to develop respect and an appreciation for differences. The use of metaphors in *My Hair is Magic* (Marroquin, 2020), and *Stella's Stellar Hair* (Moises, 2021), compare the beauty of Black hair to magnificent things in the world. All pushing against the hegemonic practices and selection of read alouds found in classrooms (Coyne et al., 2022). Instead, these picturebooks lead students to avoid internalizing inferiority (Stevenson, 2014).

Equal to the words written on the page are the complex illustrations that affirm identities and evoke positive images of Black hair embedded in a sense of pride. The illustrations convey their own implicit and explicit messages about the physical characteristics of hair and hairstyles within the characters' body language and the facial expressions associated with events. These details add to the authenticity and accuracy of Black hair experiences. For example, Wanda is dismayed when school peers laugh at her hair and yell insults. This can be a common experience for many young students, and the picturebooks' illustrations reveal the emotional toll this takes on her. In other words, it makes her human and provides a window for those who may use derogatory terms with peers to see the impact of their words. In other cases, the illustrations show the pure joy of Black hair, which may help students resist negative feelings about self-worth (Blair et al., 2002). Essien and Wood (2021) note that Black hair is frequently seen as a biased marker of second-class citizenship. The picturebooks offer an avenue for reshaping young girls' perceptions of themselves in an affirming way that sends a counter-message to others and works to counter biases.

Fránquiz and colleagues (2011) state that resilient identities are needed as society attempts to deculturalize marginalized communities by ignoring students' and families' rich cultures and histories. Bringing attention to hair-related issues offers opportunities to acknowledge and praise the rich history of African American hair. This may lead to changes in perceptions of African American girls regarding how they view themselves and their hair and how others may perceive them. Black girls have the right to secure a positive racial identity and resist or reject identities offered by society (Stevenson, 2014).

## Implications

Building from the cultural experiences of Black children provides a comprehensive approach to teaching literacy (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2014). Picturebooks about hair can be a tool for critical consciousness, resistance, or problematizing the status quo and have the potential to foster child activism through a platform to condemn unfairness and disrupt colorblindness (Nguyen, 2022). This requires the books to be viewed, read, and discussed appropriately in a critical interactive read-aloud (Kesler et al., 2020; Piper, 2019), requiring a safe dialogic space where stress is low and openness is high (Nguyen, 2022). In this type of practice, students gather closely together as a community to interact with a selected picturebook. However, this recommendation differs from a traditional interactive read-aloud. In this case, there is no set of scripted discussion questions or worksheets.

Instead, the discussion is guided by the students who critically explore the content of the book by asking and answering questions from their peers. The teacher assumes a non-dominant role or facilitator where they are equal to the students and share authority. Teacher responses expand student thinking and encourage a diversity of ideas and perspectives (White, 2016). Ultimately, the goal is to deepen read-aloud interactions in ways that help students understand social justice issues like hair discrimination, fairness, who defines beauty, etc.

A second suggestion is to involve students in a multimodal meaning-making process in response to the picturebooks (Brown, 2021). This allows students to build upon what they understood from the story and integrate it into their own understanding of the topic, which in this case would be hair. Give students art materials like paper, markers, tape, scissors, etc., and ask them to respond to the book using whatever means possible given the resources. Then, offer sharing time where students are given opportunities to talk about their productions, which offers insights into their thinking about this critical issue. It may reveal personal experiences or new revelations. Unexpected ideas may be uncovered and lead to changing stereotyped or biased beliefs.

Implementing literacy practices that encourage students to assume the perspective of others, interrogate texts, and ask questions yields growth in an appreciation of differences and

positive changes in students' identities. Young children should be encouraged to discuss biases and race even though they may be difficult conversations for teachers and other adults.

## Conclusion

Literacy reform must include attention to identity issues, given the ways students of color are positioned and the messages they receive in classrooms. There is so much more to literacy learning than skill development. At its core is who someone is and gets to be. Calhoun and Howard (2021) call for educators

to consider creating judgment-free spaces for Black children at school while reading relevant picturebooks. It is crucial to understand Black hair as a cultural expression that is an essential component of the whole child.

Picturebooks, whether read aloud by the teacher or independently by students, impact students and their perceptions of themselves and others (Muhammad & Mosley, 2021). Cueto and Brooks (2019)

note, "The ongoing denial of Black children's humanity reveals a need for a reinvigorated and in-depth look at issues of representation—one that examines exactly how picturebook illustrations embody the potential to initiate, support, and promote change" (p. 41). Viewing and reading culturally responsive books are critical components for building a community where African-descendent learners thrive (Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2020). To enact change requires careful consideration of the picturebooks used with young students. •

**Sally Brown** is a Professor of Literacy Education in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Reading at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, GA. Email: [sallybrown@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:sallybrown@georgiasouthern.edu)

**Sondra Bellard** is a Graduate Assistant in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Reading and a Master's student in Experimental Psychology at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, GA. Email: [sb38562@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:sb38562@georgiasouthern.edu)

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# ASSET-BASED CONEXIONES: THE INTERSECTION OF STUDENTS, FAMILIES, CHILDREN'S LITERATURE, AND COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH



Julia López-Robertson, Melissa S. Wells,  
Mary Jade Haney, & María del Rocío Herron

MEANINGFUL engagement with families remains a sought-after goal in early childhood education. Families of our youngest learners who are from minoritized backgrounds and cultures are extremely important resources that are often overlooked, silenced, or banished. But how can we, as educators, connect with all families in meaningful ways? As a team of teacher educators/researchers and early childhood educators, *confianza* [trust] is vital to the work we engage in with families, children, teachers, and one another; it is not possible to have a meaningful relationship without it. Building *confianza* takes time and an intentional focus on what families *can* contribute to this important relationship.

As we forge meaningful relationships with families that honor their rich backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge, we have found that asset-based theories, like Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), allow us to utilize the rich foundation of children's literature to foster *conexiones* [connections] amongst educators, students, and families in humanizing and empowering ways. After exploring the theoretical foundations of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), we will share children's literature and strategies that align with CCW, as well as stories from early childhood settings that portray CCW in action.

## Theoretical Foundations of Community Cultural Wealth

Through our work, we seek to build on children's and families' ways of knowing and focus on their "repertoires of

practice--the ways of engaging in activities stemming from participation in a range of cultural practices, as well as the learning that occurs in development of those repertoires" (Gutiérrez & Johnson, 2017, p. 251). We take a critical sociocultural approach to teaching and learning and consider that learning occurs in the home and community and believe that families are children's first teachers. We view their funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005)—the cultural practices and bodies of knowledge embedded in daily routines and practices of families and communities—as fundamental entry points for our teaching. Essential to our work is the recognition that all students have contributions to make to teaching and learning. We challenge the beliefs that communities of color have nothing to contribute and that they are deficient (Cano-Hila & Sánchez-Martí, 2024; Kinloch, 2017).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) challenges mainstream deficit thinking of communities of color and re-examines how practices and policies in K-12 classrooms contribute to continuing racial inequalities in education and advocates for ways to change them. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) identified five basic elements of CRT in education: (1) the intercentricity of race and racism: racism is permanent and is beyond classism; (2) challenging dominant ideology: problematizing neutrality, color blindness, meritocracy, and objectivity; (3) commitment to social justice: working to eliminate oppressive structures and empower minoritized groups; (4) centrality of experiential

knowledge: using stories to legitimize the lived experiences of people of color; and, (5) transdisciplinary perspective: examining deficit perspectives across varied contexts.

Yosso (2005) noted that one of the most prevailing “forms of contemporary racism in U.S. schools is deficit thinking,” (p. 75) which is exemplified in two common assumptions: (1) families do not support or value their child’s education; and, (2) minoritized students enter school without “normative cultural knowledge and skills” (p. 75). To combat this deficit thinking, Yosso (2005) developed Community Cultural Wealth (CCW). CCW is an asset-based lens rooted in CRT that recognizes and values the multiple ways of knowing within communities of color. CCW reframes possibilities and capabilities of our students and families of color and considers them holders and creators of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002). CCW consists of six forms of capital:

- Aspirational capital: The ability to maintain hopes, dreams, and aspirations for the future regardless of real or seeming barriers.
- Familial capital: The knowledge, learning, and practices that are nurtured through kinship and extended family.
- Social capital: Social and community networks and the resources that can be accessed through them.
- Linguistic capital: Multilingualism and other communication skills, including storytelling traditions, art, music, and poetry.
- Navigational capital: Includes the knowledge and resiliency to navigate oppressive and marginalizing systems.
- Resistant capital: The knowledge and skills learned by communities of color over generations of resistance to inequity and oppression.

CCW is a framework that legitimizes the experiences of communities of color and places value on the role of family and community in the lives of minoritized children and youth. Acevedo and Solorzano (2021) noted the need for scholars to join forces with practitioners to enact CCW as an “approach to facilitate learning in various PK-20 contexts” (p.12). As a team of teacher educators/researchers and early childhood educators, our work with teachers and families is centered on the various capitals they possess and on bringing recognition to what families and children of color already know.

### Asset-Based Conexiones: Strategies for Supporting CCW in Early Childhood Settings

To leverage asset-based conexiones in early childhood settings, educators can implement strategies that align with CCW. Two specific areas where rich, strategic connections with CCW can occur include children’s literature and engagement with students and families.

#### CCW and Children’s Literature

Children’s literature has long been lauded for its ability to serve as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990): It allows students to see themselves and their own experiences, while also allowing them to build empathy and understanding by experiencing worlds beyond their own. Therefore, children’s literature is a natural conexión for bringing CCW into early childhood settings.

When considering literature that aligns with CCW, it is important to start with sources that portray a variety of cultures and backgrounds. Table 1 lists several award lists focusing on specific cultures that are often underrepresented in children’s literature.

**Table 1**  
**MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN’S LITERATURE AWARDS**

NAME OF AWARD	AWARD/CULTURAL FOCUS
Américas Award	Authors, illustrators, and publishers whose books portray Latin America, the Caribbean, or Latinos in the United States
Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children’s Book Award	Authors and illustrators who depict the Mexican American experience
Pura Belpré Award	Latino/a authors centering the Latino cultural experience
Coretta Scott King Book Awards	African American authors who center African American culture and overall human values
Middle East Book Award	Building meaningful understanding of the Middle East
American Indian Youth Literature Award	Books by and about Indigenous people in North America

Children's literature that aligned with the six areas of CCW were identified after reviewing books from the 2018-2022 award lists, (as well as the Caldecott and Newbery lists). Many of the books on these lists are considered multicultural picturebooks or books that "highlight the lives of people from marginalized and underrepresented groups in the United States" (Short, 2016, p. 5). The awards provided a starting point for locating picturebooks with authentic representations of children's and families' lived realities, thus allowing readers the opportunity to see CCW within the pages of picturebooks. Physical recordings, digital copies, or video recordings of each of the identified books as read alouds were then located and independently coded for elements of CCW. We discovered opportunities to enhance our collection by incorporating books recognized by the Middle East Book Award and the American Indian Youth Literature Award. This approach enriched our offerings and better highlighted the voices of marginalized communities.

Books featuring animals and/or inanimate objects as main characters were not included because these types of books contribute to "colorblind notions" (Boutte et al., 2008, p.953) and "steer away from portrayals of diverse experiences and critical conversations" (López-Robertson & Wells, 2024, p. 12). We espoused the notion that picturebooks with human characters more strongly embodied elements of CCW. While we highlighted two examples within each CCW area below, each area of CCW is frequently interwoven with others. For a full list of books, please see, López-Robertson & Wells (2024).

**Aspirational Capital** Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes, dreams, and aspirations for the future regardless of real or perceived barriers. In *Soñadores/Dreamers* (Morales, 2018), the author uses her own experiences to lead readers on a journey that follows a mother and her sons as they immigrate into the United States. The characters face challenges learning to navigate an unknown country, but also encounter celebrations—like discovering the magic of a local library. (Américas Award Commended Title, 2019; Pura Belpré Award for Illustration, 2019; Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award, 2019)

Another book selection where aspirations abound is *The Me I Choose to Be* (Tarpley, 2021). A recurring refrain beautifully captures the power of self-love as aspiration: "My creativity and curiosity flow without end, and if I meet an obstacle, I just begin again. I am a planet, a limitless galaxy, and I am

the me I choose to be." Families can read this book together to share the dreams they have for their loved ones. (Coretta Scott King/ John Steptoe New Talent Illustrator Award, 2022).

**Familial Capital** Familial capital is about the knowledge, learning, and practices that are nurtured through kinship and extended family. *Grandad's Camper* (Woodgate, 2021) honors the power of family memories. Grandad and Gramps loved to go on adventures together in their camper. However, since Gramps died, Grandad has not wanted to go on adventures. After hearing stories about their adventures, their granddaughter has an idea to help Grandad go on adventures again. This book showcases the power of families to make memories together, even after loss. (Stonewall Honor Book in Children's and Young Adult Literature, 2022)

On the Tapajós River in Brazil, families live in houses on stilts during the dry season, and they move to the forest to stay dry during the wet season. *Along the Tapajós* (Vilela, 2019) follows a family as they relocate to the forest but then return to their stilted house for an important mission: to save their pet tortoise, who accidentally got left behind. In addition to showing a family's bond, this book models how people live in the rainforest, which may be a topic few children have read about in other books. (Américas Award Commended Title, 2020)

**Social Capital** Social capital supports building connections amongst social networks, such as those in schools or neighborhoods. In *A Friend for Henry* (Bailey, 2019), Henry has been looking for a friend in his classroom at school. One day, all the activity overwhelms his needs as a person with autism. It starts to seem like he will never find a friend—but then his social networks come together. (Schneider Family Book Award, Young Children Honor Title, 2020)

*Birdsong* (Flett, 2019) follows Katherena and her mom, who have moved to a new place. When Katherena meets her next-door neighbor, Agnes, they work on the garden together and discover shared interests. When Agnes becomes too weak to go outside, Katherena comes to Agnes's house to help her. This book shows how social networks are built and evolve as individuals' needs change. The book has a glossary that defines the Cree words used throughout the text. (American Indian Youth Literature Award, Picture Book Honor Title, 2020)

**Linguistic Capital** In *Salma the Syrian Chef* (Ramadan, 2020), Salma, a Syrian refugee living in Vancouver with

her mom, utilizes her linguistic capital through her multilingualism and other communication skills. Salma worries that her mom misses Syrian food, so she works with adult translators in the Welcome Center to find Syrian ingredients and spices in her new home. Salma translates ingredients in Arabic into her new language of English, and when she doesn't know the proper English names, she draws pictures for her adult translators so they can teach her the English words. (Middle East Book Award, Picture Book Winner, 2020)

Through poetry and vivid illustrations, *Fuego Fuego! Fire, Little Fire* (Argueta, 2019) explores the importance of fire in glyphs and codices from central Mexico's Indigenous groups. This book supports linguistic capital by including bilingual poems in English and Spanish on each page, and then ends with the entire poem translated into Nahuatl, an endangered Indigenous language from El Salvador. (Américas Award, Commended Title, 2020)

**Navigational Capital** Navigational capital, the knowledge and resiliency to navigate oppressive and marginalizing systems, can be expressed in many ways, even in the simple acts of daily life and survival. *A Different Pond* (Phi, 2017) follows Bao and his father as they go on a fishing trip on a small pond. Waiting for fish to bite, Bao's father tells stories of another pond in which he fished when he lived in Vietnam. Navigational capital appears throughout the book, such as the father working two jobs because everything in America is more expensive and knowing where to get bait and go fishing to obtain affordable food. (Caldecott Medal Honor Book, 2018)

In Kabul, Afghanistan, access to education--especially for girls--is not guaranteed. *The Library Bus* (Rahman, 2020) shows how Pari and Mama use their navigational capital to bring books and literacy to villages and refugee camps via their Library Bus. In addition, when Pari announces her dreams of being able to read one day, Mama shares how her family used navigational capital to allow her to learn to read during a time when girls were not allowed to go to school, and her grandpa taught her at home. (Middle East Book Award, Picture Book Winner, 2021)

**Resistant Capital** Resistant capital emerges in a variety of circumstances, including those where rewriting current or historic circumstances allows for a more humanistic experience. In *Between Us and Abuela: A Family Story from*

*the Border* (Perkins, 2019), María and Juan are excited to celebrate La Posada Sin Fronteras with their abuela; however, they live in the United States, she lives in Mexico, and the fence at the border stands between them. This story demonstrates resistant capital as the children find creative ways to transcend the barriers separating them from their abuela and to celebrate together as a family. (Américas Award, 2020)

*The People Remember* (Zoboi, 2021) is an artful counter-narrative of Black achievements throughout history. Through the seven principles of Kwanzaa, the narrative retells the history of African descendants in America--including their African languages and traditions, how they resisted and survived centuries of oppression and prejudice in the United States, and how they thrived. This book demonstrates resistant capital by presenting a celebratory, asset-based history of these African ancestors and how they have continued to shape and influence American culture and history. (Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book, 2022)

### CCW with Students and Families

When working with students and families, there are many ways to build CCW into instruction, policies, and interactions. Table 2 offers suggested strategies aligned with each form of capital in CCW.

### Conexiones in Action: CCW Stories from Early Childhood Settings

In the following section, we share examples of two early childhood educators who make conexiones between their schools and families in ways that leverage CCW. Mary Jade Haney is a school librarian, and Rocio Herron is a preschool teacher; both have collaborated with Julia extensively for over ten years and with Melissa over the past few years. As time has passed, we have become more intentional in our collaboration and the work we do with children and families to validate the wealth of knowledge and experiences all families share with their children and within early childhood educational contexts. Intentionally selected children's literature is one vital aspect of the way we approach this work, combined with engagements with teachers, preservice teachers, children and families.

Too often teachers are presented with theories, but no ideas or examples of the application of these theories; we feel that the power in this section is in the actionable practice/lived experiences of the people who work directly with chil-

dren and families. We invited Mary Jade and Rocio to reflect on the practices they engage in with children and families that encompass CCW and asked them: (1) how do you build on families' strengths; and, (2) what are your stories of families demonstrating CCW?

### Building on Families' Strengths

CCW is a framework that legitimizes the experiences of communities of color and places value on the role that family and community play in the lives of minoritized children and youth. The examples below highlight some ways that Mary Jade and

Table 2

## SUGGESTED STRATEGIES FOR UTILIZING CCW WITH STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

CCW AREA	WORKING WITH STUDENTS	WORKING WITH FAMILIES
Aspirational Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brainstorm both short-term and long-term hopes, dreams, and aspirations with students.</li> <li>Invite varied guests to talk to students about their roles and lives, and constantly interrupt stereotypes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brainstorm hopes, dreams, and aspirations with families, both for their children and for themselves.</li> <li>In conferences, focus on celebrating what is going well and on planning for future dreams and goals.</li> <li>Listen and build <i>confianza</i>, which is shared trust “reestablished or confirmed with each exchange [between families and educators that] leads to the development of long-term trusting relationships” (González et al., 1993, p. 3).</li> </ul>
Familial Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Validate all kinds of family structures.</li> <li>Write classroom books about family.</li> <li>Curate books that portray multiple family structures and how families support each other.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use inclusive language (“family” vs. “parent/guardian”).</li> <li>Schedule events where other family members are welcome.</li> <li>Revisit school policies and traditions to be inclusive of all families.</li> </ul>
Social Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Model and explicitly teach social networking, collaboration, and problem-solving.</li> <li>Integrate collaborative learning (such as STEM design challenges).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask families to suggest classroom visitors from their own social networks.</li> <li>Give families formal and informal spaces for building community and supporting each other.</li> </ul>
Linguistic Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explore texts in various languages and dialects.</li> <li>Incorporate translanguaging into learning experiences. Translanguaging affirms students’ linguistic backgrounds, views them as assets, and encourages multilingual individuals to use all their linguistic skills fluidly (García &amp; Wei, 2014; Vogel &amp; Garcia, 2017).</li> <li>Practice contrastive analysis, which directly compares multiple linguistic systems (i.e., Wheeler, 2008). For example, a sentence could be presented in three different linguistic systems, such as African American Language (AAL), Spanish, and English, to compare syntactical features like negative sentence structures (both AAL and Spanish do use double-negatives, whereas English does not).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage families to speak their home languages.</li> <li>Educate families on the benefits of bilingualism. For example, multilingual people have strong thinking skills (Cummins, 2007) and can learn other languages with greater ease (Jessner, 2008).</li> <li>Consider how your school can be welcoming and inclusive of multilingual families.</li> </ul>
Navigational Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invite community members to be expert speakers.</li> <li>Complete community mapping projects.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Build a resource center for families in a central location (front office, family room, etc.).</li> <li>Make “invisible norms” in social institutions (including schools!) transparent.</li> </ul>
Resistant Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read and write counter-narratives.</li> <li>Model interrupting deficit assumptions encountered in classroom discussions, books, media, or other sources.</li> <li>Explicitly teach strategies for practicing resistant capital (like role-playing).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish trusting forms of communication where families can offer suggestions or critiques.</li> <li>Follow up with families when they demonstrate resistant capital.</li> <li>Be willing to grow.</li> </ul>

Rocio build on the families' strengths and enact CCW by engaging with the families through a variety of events that occur both in and away from school. We focus this section on aspirational, familial, and social capital.

*Aspirational capital* is about the ability to maintain hopes, dreams, and aspirations for the future regardless of real or seeming barriers. Rocio values the importance of family time and has found ways to build quality time spent together as a family into her classroom throughout her career as a preschool teacher. She shared, "I have learned that having a direct connection with parents opens the doors for me to be able to help my students in a more authentic way, not only academically but holistically."

Rocio prioritizes home visits to families (throughout the year, not only at the beginning) and holistic teacher-parent conferences that address not only academic performance, but also socio-emotional needs of students and assisting families with accessing healthy habits, financial aid, school registration, and any other areas in which families need support. During these home visits, she also talks with families about their hopes for their children for the school year, throughout their schooling and for the future. These home visits and holistic conferences support families' aspirational capital as experts in and advocates for their children's growth and well-being.

As the school librarian, Mary Jade celebrates families' cultures at family literacy events, as a way to support *familial capital*, which is the knowledge, learning, and practices that are nurtured through kinship and extended family. For example, she collaborates with other teachers, such as the Multilingual Learner Specialists and the Spanish Teacher, during school literacy events to integrate read alouds, food, dances, and the arts that celebrate all families' backgrounds and nurtures co-learning among teachers, students, and families. At one event early in the year, Mary Jade read *The Day You Begin* (Woodson, 2018). The story is about a little girl starting school and experiencing loneliness because she feels different. As the day progresses, she learns that everyone is different and decides to take the brave step to get to know her classmates. Mary Jade asked everyone to think about what makes them feel different. One family shared that they knew how to speak Spanish while another shared that they lived with their grandparents and always ate dinner together on Sunday. As the families and children continued talking, they learned that they enjoyed Sunday dinner together because it gave them time to talk with each other and have fun as a family.

*Social capital* refers to social and community networks and the resources that can be accessed through them. To acknowledge social capital, Rocio intentionally holds events in the community that utilize families' existing social networks. Several families live in a mobile home park that is located across the street from the school; in the middle of all the homes is a large plot of land, some playground equipment, and a large cement gathering area. This location has become a gathering place for the annual 'Palmetto Night'. After the first year of the event, the families have taken it upon themselves to organize the food and clear the area for the event while Rocio and her team arrive with everything else.

After a puppet show performed by students from a local university, families rotated through different stations, including a reading comprehension game; technology information, (e.g., the district's family portal, WhatsApp, and Google Translate); outdoor games; Lotería (a traditional Mexican game of chance like BINGO but played with a vibrant deck of cards); forms for at-school flu shots; and, two stations (face painting and a family traditions book), hosted by students from a local university. The university students also organized a passport that families took to each center to be stamped upon completing the activity, with prizes awarded accordingly. Many teachers from the school volunteered to help and participate, and families loved seeing their children's teachers in their community. Rocio supported social capital by uniting teachers, families, and community members in a community-based event where families organized food, decorations, and seating.

### Stories of Families Demonstrating CCW

In the section above, Mary Jade and Rocio shared stories of how they built on families' strengths; in the section that follows, we asked them to consider and share stories of how they see families demonstrating CCW. We focus on linguistic, navigational, and resistant capital.

*Linguistic capital* refers to multilingualism and other communication skills, including storytelling traditions, art, music, and poetry. In the example above, Rocio's Palmetto Night included a family traditions book station where families engaged in a read-aloud of a few stories from *Family Pictures/Cuadros de familia* (Lomas Garza, 1997), a beautiful book about the author's childhood, filled with colorful paintings and accompanying short stories. Families were invited to consider a family memory, create an illustration and then write about it. These pages were then bound together in a class book.

Families were asked to write in whichever language they preferred. Rocio overheard one child asking his mother to write in Spanish to which the mother shyly replied, “I don’t know how, we don’t speak Spanish”. Her son looked at his mom and said, “It’s okay, Daniel will help us”. Sure enough Daniel used his multilingual skills and helped his friend write in Spanish while both children’s mothers looked on smiling.

As the school librarian, Mary Jade builds the library’s collection based on students’ and families’ needs: Families know they have voice and agency to share their preferences, and they know they have a librarian who is adept in using the funds and resources available to add to the collection in ways that honor their strengths and backgrounds. The library’s collection of bilingual (Spanish/English) books has increased, and Mary Jade has also noticed the children’s curiosity in learning Spanish; she has heard children talking and expressing a desire to be bilingual like several of their classmates.

*Navigational capital* includes the knowledge and resiliency to navigate oppressive and marginalizing systems. Rocio has noticed families using the information she provides in the weekly newsletters, which includes explicit recommendations for families on how to build upon school learning, revealing unspoken academic expectations within American schooling norms. For example, the attendance officer commented that she was surprised at how many of Rocio’s families are calling to let them know why their child was absent from school. In several of the weekly newsletters and in conversations with families, Rocio explained the importance of attending school and of letting the school know why the child was absent; she explained the connection between absences and federal funding.

In addition to the family traditions book station mentioned above, Rocio’s Palmetto Night had a station for filling out forms for at-school flu shots and a technology information station which explained key technology tools that families and teachers could use to communicate with one another. Free tools such as WhatsApp and Google Translate allow families and educators to utilize a multitude of linguistic systems while also helping families navigate the unfamiliar terrain of American public schools.

*Resistant capital* is the knowledge and skills learned by communities of color over generations of resistance to inequity and oppression. Mary Jade highlighted opportunities for students to share their culture at a summer literacy camp. Unlike the state-mandated Summer Reading Camps utilizing scripted reading curriculum for students who are not reading proficiently at grade level, Mary Jade designed Camp Discovery STEAM Academy to be inquiry-driven and standards-based. (Both camps ran simultaneously at the school.) While the state-mandated camp is limited to students in grade

three, Camp Discovery is multiage and is open to students ages 5-10 and includes middle and high school students serving as counselors/leaders.

Students in Camp Discovery engaged in a variety of activities throughout the week, including read-alouds of stories intentionally selected for their high relatability to students’ lives. *The People Remember* (Zoboi, 2021) presents a counternarrative of Black achievements throughout history and was a popular read-aloud. Through the book, students engaged in an exploration of African-American history and learned how African descendants resisted, survived, and thrived despite centuries of prejudice and oppression in the United States. Mary Jade’s Camp Discovery

STEAM Academy modeled a culturally relevant, engaging approach to build literacy skills and passion in ways that united multiple generations of students, where they were asked to listen, think about, and respond to the read-aloud.

It is evident that Mary Jade and Rocio validate the humanity, experiences, and wisdom families already possess, offering them space and resources to interrupt limiting, deficit-based assumptions often imposed by school structures and norms. Additionally, both teachers seek to introduce and engage children and families in topics beyond academic achievement to help families network, navigate, and resist systems that are sometimes designed to exclude them. Further, community-based events such as festivals, bonfires, movie nights, and game nights in the mobile home park show that not everything starts in the school building and that families and communities are equally important in building home/school partnerships.

**Asset-based conexiones with families take effort to intentionally cultivate; it does not happen overnight. One must acknowledge the time it takes to establish and build relationships based on confianza, along with the commitment and shared belief that families can—and do—take active roles in their children’s education.**

## Conclusion

Asset-based conexiones with families take effort to intentionally cultivate; it does not happen overnight. One must acknowledge the time it takes to establish and build relationships based on confianza, along with the commitment and shared belief that families can—and *do*—take active roles in their children's education. Finally, one must respect the multiple ways of making meaning that minoritized families possess and share with their children.

We hope that our explorations of CCW, our suggestions of children's literature and strategies for utilizing CCW when working with students and families, and our stories of how we have seen CCW in action in early childhood settings will inspire you to amplify opportunities for families to share their gifts of aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, navigational, and resistant capital. While working with families within the CCW framework may be a slow process, it is also engaging and dynamic. CCW offers one avenue to build conexiones with families that uphold their assets and positively impact education for young minoritized children. •

**Julia López-Robertson** is a Professor of Teacher Education at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, SC. Email: [lopezrob@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:lopezrob@mailbox.sc.edu)

**Melissa S. Wells** is an associate professor in the College of Education at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, VA. Email: [mwells@umw.edu](mailto:mwells@umw.edu)

**Mary Jade Haney** is a Library/Media Specialist in Richland School District One in Columbia, SC. Email: [mary.haney@richlandone.org](mailto:mary.haney@richlandone.org)

**María del Rocío Herron** is a teacher in Richland School District Two in Columbia, SC. Email: [mherron@richland2.org](mailto:mherron@richland2.org)

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# LEARNING FROM OUR PAST: HOW FOUR AUTHORS CONNECT HISTORY TO CONTEMPORARY TIMES THROUGH HISTORICAL FICTION AND HISTORICAL FANTASY



Melanie D. Koss

READERS OF EVERY AGE are drawn to history and historical fiction because stories connect us powerfully to times and places that may feel strange yet oddly familiar. In fact, the most relevant historical fiction helps us to see our current time through a vivid new lens - both the areas of progress we have made and the problems we have yet to solve (Penridge, 2021; Sheffer, 2020). Historical fiction and books that authentically weave historical elements into their narratives allow students to forge personal connections to characters and situations that may, in some way, parallel their own lives. Using literature to teach history can illuminate new ways of seeing the world, as historical fiction adds a humanistic element to learning about past events and time periods, adding relevance to facts and figures (Dwyer & Martin-Chang, 2023; Mintz, 2023). How we share history with students can inform them of causes and effects of behaviors and events, as well as the connections to contemporary times. Historical fiction is a useful tool to teach students how to identify and grapple with social issues that bridge across time.

Authors Jerdine Nolen, James Klise, Elana K. Arnold, and Trang Thanh Tran each wrote novels set in or influenced by a past historical era that explore how elements of the past intrinsically impact society today. Ranging from 1848 through the end of World War II, these authors' novels explore how themes of freedom and identity—critical issues that today's teens explore and experience—affect individuals across time and place, including people in the present day. Strong characters who must make difficult decisions—decisions that inevitably impact who they are and where their lives will go in the fu-

ture—are depicted with all their flaws. These novels lend themselves to critical introspection and discussion, encouraging and challenging readers to consider how, as individuals, we are simultaneously impacted by the past and have ownership of the present. (See Table 1 for a description of each book and related teaching resources.)

This article will first introduce readers to four authors, their recent novels, the settings in which their novels take place, and their rationales for writing their novels. A discussion of the richness and possibilities allowed for by infusing history into fiction is addressed, followed by ways to make connections between the novels and contemporary times. The article concludes with ideas for connecting the novels to their readers, as well as strategies for teaching these novels and highlighting the connections between the past and the present.

## Author Interviews

During the 2023 National Council of Teachers of Education (NCTE) Annual Conference, I moderated an author panel titled *Learning from Our Past: Connecting History to Contemporary Times*. Three of the four authors highlighted in this article—Jerdine Nolan, James Klise, and Trang Thanh Tran—participated in this panel. After the conference, the content addressed in the panel resonated with me and I wanted to explore more deeply some key concepts and ideas that were discussed. I reached out to the four authors involved in the panel, as well as one additional author whose recent book had captured my attention, Elana K. Arnold, and asked if they would participate in a written in-

interview with the end goal of publishing a journal article on the topic that highlighted their, and other authors', voices. One author from the NCTE panel declined to participate. The interviews were conducted via email between January 10-21, 2024. Authors were sent a list of questions that pertained to their individual book, such as their inspiration for writing it; how they chose the genre and time period; any personal connections to the book; and, thoughts on take-aways for readers and teachers. (See Appendix for a list of individual interview questions.) All author quotes come directly from their written interview answers obtained via email communication.

### The Authors, the Novels, and their Foundations

#### Jerdine Nolen—*Hope's Path to Glory: The Story of a Family's Journey on the Overland Trail (set in 1848-1849)*

Educator and award-winning author Jerdine Nolen's newest book, *Hope's Path to Glory: The Story of a Family's Journey on the Overland Trail* (2023), is a historical adventure that challenges the United States' bygone idea of Manifest

Destiny, the belief that the United States of America was destined to expand westward and grow its borders and economic capital. Told in a journal format, set during the Gold Rush in the mid-19th century, *Hope's Path to Glory* depicts a slaveholder in financial trouble who heads west in the hope of finding gold and financial freedom to save his family's legacy. The slaveholder selects three of his family's enslaved people to accompany him, including twelve-year-old Hope and her parents, and all four characters are forced and/or inspired to consider their own freedom. The novel begins in Alexandria, Virginia, and follows the foursome through Independence, Missouri, and across the United States on the Overland Trail to California.

According to Jerdine, Hope's story needed to be told. As she researched historical events and time periods for her other books, including *Eliza's Freedom Road: An Underground Railroad Diary* (2011), *Calico Girl* (2017), and *Thunder Rose* (2003), she found herself wondering about the time periods, "what was this like for an enslaved person—an enslaved child?" During her research for *Thunder Rose*, for example, she learned that some enslaved people traveled

**Table 1**  
**BOOK DESCRIPTIONS AND TEACHER RESOURCES**

AUTHOR	TITLE	SUMMARY	TEACHING RESOURCES
Jerdine Nolan	<i>Hope's Path to Glory: The Story of a Family's Journey on the Overland Trail</i>	Set during the Gold Rush in the mid-19th century, <i>Hope's Path to Glory</i> depicts a slaveholder in financial trouble, along with three of his family's enslaved persons, who head west in the hope of finding gold and financial freedom to save his family's legacy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Reading Group Guide</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Overland Trail Game: A Lesson Plan</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Traveling on the Overland Trails</a></li> </ul>
James Klise	<i>I'll Take Everything You Have</i>	In this queer coming-of-age novel, sixteen-year-old Joe leaves his small town and heads to Chicago to earn money for his family in 1934 during the Great Depression. When Joe gets involved in a criminal scheme, he must make choices that will impact his life forever.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Gangsters during the Depression</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Making Chicago's Boystown Interactive Map</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">From Boom to Dust</a></li> </ul>
Elana K. Arnold	<i>The Blood Years</i>	Based on her grandmother's experiences living as a Jewish person in Romania before and during World War II, this novel chronicles the complicated life of Frederieke and her family before and during the war.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Harper Stacks Book Club Guide</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">US Holocaust Memorial Museum Online Teaching Guide</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Life in Nazi Controlled Europe - Romania</a></li> </ul>
Trang Thanh Tran	<i>She is a Haunting</i>	Set in contemporary Vietnam, Jade must spend the summer with her father, pretending to be straight, Vietnamese, and American. The French Colonial house her father is restoring begins to haunt her with characters, memories, and dreams of 1920s Vietnam. Jade's family's past impacts her present as Tran explores the effects of intergenerational trauma.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Reading Group Choices Discussion Questions</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Digital History: The French in Indochina</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Intergenerational Trauma</a></li> </ul>

West instead of North. She noted that while there were other books for children and young adults on the subject of the Overland Trail and the Gold Rush, there were none that focused on the experiences of enslaved people, and specifically, enslaved children. To Jerdine, these children deserved to have their stories told. The late 1840s was a rich time period to explore, as it allowed for discussion of not just issues of slavery in the American South, but also the difficulties of the wagon train journey West, interactions with indigenous peoples during the Gold Rush, and the idea of Manifest Destiny. In addition, aspects of freedom were ripe to be unpacked, freedom from slavery and Hope's freedom toward determining her own path and sense of belonging.

#### **James Klise - *I'll Take Everything You Have* (set in 1934)**

*I'll Take Everything You Have* (2023) is Stonewall and Edgar Award-winning author and educator James Klise's newest novel. Set in Chicago during 1934, amidst the Great Depression, this novel is a queer coming-of-age story that explores hiding who you are from outside pressures and expectations. Elements of the gangster era are portrayed as sixteen-year-old Joe leaves his small-town farming community to head to the big city of Chicago with the goal of earning money to help his family get out of debt. Authentic details of 1930s queer Chicago are seen through Joe's eyes as he explores things unfamiliar to him, including "cute fellows." After Joe gets sucked into a criminal scheme by his shady cousin, he must discover who he is and what and who are most important to him, questions readers are invited to ask themselves.

James's love for the city of Chicago and its rich culture and history led him to use it as his novel's setting, and the year 1934 opened up a wonder of possibilities. When asked what drew him to 1930s Chicago, he mentioned a variety of significant events that allowed for the richness of time and place to build an authentic world. The Great Depression hit Midwestern farmers hard, and the summer of 1934 brought record heat, drought, and insect blight causing people to head to big cities like Chicago to look for work (Public Broadcasting Service [PBS], n.d.). It was the summer of the Century of Progress World's Fair, held in Chicago (Encyclopedia of Chicago, 2004). 1934 also saw the murders of many well-known gangsters, such as John Dillinger, influencing criminal activities, especially in big cities (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI.gov], n.d.; John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY, 2023). And, for James's purposes:

1934 was most important because it was the summer before the city's mayor, Edward Kelly, began his battle against the queer community. Kelly was a powerful mayor, and toward the end of 1934, he and his cronies shut down all the queer taverns and cafes they could find; he instructed the cops to patrol the parks and the lakefront, everywhere queer people discreetly met up. That was when queer life across America truly went underground—until the late 1960s and Stonewall. The summer of 1934 was the last year when Chicago's queer community was vibrant and might be visible to a young visitor like Joe. So that's where I began.

#### **Elana K. Arnold—*The Blood Years* (set in 1939-1945)**

National Book Award honoree and Michael L. Printz honor winner Elana K. Arnold recently won both the Sydney Taylor Award and the National Book Award for her novel *The Blood Years* (2023) based on her grandmother's experiences living as a Jewish person in Romania before and during World War II. This novel chronicles the complicated life of Frederieke (Rieke), beginning with her childhood in which her father left them; her mother—who needed a man for her self-worth—spun into depression; her Opa (grandfather) took in Rieke and her sister in to provide them with a stable life; and, her experiences through the war years. Antisemitism was always a part of life in Czernowitz, Romania (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019), where the author's grandmother grew up, but it intensified after the war started. The book explores Rieke's complicated relationships with her Opa, who does whatever he can to protect her yet still follows the old ways; her sister, who begins pulling away when she finds a man of her own; her sister's husband, who both takes away her sister yet works to save her family; and, her family "friend" whose help comes at an awful price, the trading of sexual favors for food and safety. The encroaching horrors of the Holocaust impact Rieke and her family, and they must make difficult choices to ensure their survival. Ultimately this is a story of family, hope, and freedom.

Elana grew up hearing her grandmother's stories and knew she needed to honor her by writing the story of her life. This was a labor of love, as family history inevitably impacts who a person is and how they came to be. She wanted to capture the richness and complexities of her grandmother's life, including the funny, the horrible, and everything in between,

and to “do my very best to bear witness to what I knew of my Nana’s childhood and teenage years, and to bear witness to the thousands of other Jewish Czernowitzers, and to the millions of other Jews in Eastern Europe.”

Every human being is unique and flawed, yet there are some universal experiences. Elana seeks to ask and attempt to answer questions that appear in her life in her writing. Although *The Blood Years* took place in Eastern Europe during 1939-1945, certain themes and issues are timeless. Questions Elana sought to “untangle” include:

What do we owe our family members? Who owns our bodies and gets access to them, and under what circumstances? What is it, to be a girl/a woman in this world? (Note: though I firmly hold the truth that trans women are also women, my work reflects my experience as a cis woman.) What do I believe about the idea of God, and how do reverence and awe exist outside of a traditional religious structure?

These questions can be universal and exploring them through the lens of history can lead to contemporary discussions and discoveries.

#### **Trang Thanh Tran—*She is a Haunting* (set in 1920s/2020s)**

In *She is a Haunting* (2023), debut author and Morris Award finalist Trang Thanh Tran takes readers on a fantastical journey to contemporary Vietnam with wisps of 1920s French colonial history seeping through. In this gothic horror novel, seventeen-year-old Jade has one goal—to survive five weeks with her estranged father pretending to be straight enough, Vietnamese enough, and American enough to get the college money she’s been promised. There is one big problem. The French colonial home her father is restoring has other plans. It takes the idea of a haunted house to a whole new level and becomes a character. Jade experiences strange happenings, sleep paralysis, noises, and visions. She interacts with the house and its history through memory, dreams, and characters from 1920s Vietnam. The house and its angry spirits are warning her. On the surface the novel is a tale of horror—a haunted house ghost story that explores the concepts of colonialism and its lasting effects on people and places. Underneath the surface is a novel of an individual bridging multiple cultures, the exploration of how a person is shaped by both their family history and their present experiences. Aspects of 1920s and contemporary Vietnam run through the novel,

most notably in the restoration of the villa, which is a part of an ongoing restoration project in Vietnam to save degrading historical houses (Congar & AFP, 2022).

Trang noted that they wrote *She is a Haunting* due to their passion for horror, a way to explore intergenerational trauma, and for their “need to see a Vietnamese American teenager as the Final Girl.” French Indochina played a role in their family’s history and inevitably influenced the way they grew up and the stories they heard as a child of refugee parents. Trang wanted to explore questions of “Who gets to be remembered in history? Who is allowed a legacy? What buildings are torn down while others are protected?”, grounded both in contemporary and past influences and places. They crafted their main character, Jade, as a representation of a child of refugees and wanted to depict a realistic view of how “Jade’s experience of the world is shaped by how these colonizers indirectly and directly displayed her family.” Integrating historical elements into a contemporary story showed how the past and present are connected, through family history, geographical history, and cultural history.

#### **Connecting to Social Issues**

All four authors shared aspects of the how and why of their work, and although all four had different entry points into writing historical texts, ultimately their reasons all aligned with the idea that people need a connection to time and place. Stories have impact over our lives, and we are all inherently shaped by our experiences and the ways they have shaped our past. James Klise wrote, “We’re all products of the times we live in, the places we live in, the mindsets we’re raised with,” yet contemporary issues are inevitably impacted by past events. Elana K. Arnold built on this by sharing, “All stories...are truly about the time they are written.” An author must infuse their own beliefs and value systems into their work, as their way of viewing the world is impacted by their personal experiences. It is by grappling with the present that a story of the past can emerge. Crafting a historical novel from the viewpoint of contemporary times allows for significant parallels to take shape—parallels that invite comparison and exploration.

Historical novels allow us to engage not only with history, but also to make connections to the ways social issues have occurred in the past yet remain threaded through time and into present day and can add “context to modern day problems and social issues” (J. Nolan). For Trang Thanh

Tran, the genre of horror adds an additional element. They wrote, “Horror can be a lens to meaningfully engage with this history because it is—ironically—a safe space. Teens get to confront monstrosities on the page but also close the book if they’re not ready.” Sometimes tackling tough issues takes scaffolding, time, and support. Literature allows for readers to take a step back and to consider characters’ choices and experiences as proxies for choices and experiences they might be having in their own lives (Adams, 2020).

Events in the past inevitably impact contemporary times, yet we, as humans, often do not learn from our mistakes. Novels with historical content allow us to compare time periods and make connections between issues from the past that still plague our world today. One challenge we, as teachers, have in contemporary times is the uptick in censorship and educational gag orders (PEN America, 2023, 2024), something that makes exposure to and the opportunity to discuss literature even more important. These four authors and their novels tackle complex and contemporary problems: the division and polarization of America today, identity politics, racism, attacks against individuals that identify as LGBTQ+, antisemitism, and immigration/refugee experiences.

America today is politically polarized, with identity politics playing a large role in the public psyche (Dimock & Wike, 2020; Gonzales, 2020). Conservatives and liberals are divided on how to teach many topics, including American history and issues of race. Concerns about the teaching of “woke” ideologies, including systemic racism, LGBTQ+ rights, and social justice are increasing (Gross, 2022; Walker, 2023). Immigration issues are a focus of news articles and political pressure, including not only concerns about the U.S./Mexico border but also about allowing entrance to refugees (Sullivan, 2023). Antisemitism is on the rise, as well as comparisons to fascism and Hitler (Anti-Defamation League, 2023; Karl, 2023). Significantly, instances of censorship are rapidly increasing (Meehan et al., 2023), impacting the books that might get into the hands of our nation’s teens. Books are seen as threats; books encourage people to think critically, obtain facts, and come to their own conclusions (Zwiers & Crawford, 2023).

*Hope’s Path to Glory* tackles issues of slavery, causing readers to consider a human’s rights to freedom from enslavement and oppression. The Civil Rights Movement fought for equality, yet historical precedents die hard. Systemic oppression continues to impact society, and current legislative pol-

icies are challenging teachers’ rights to teach authentic history, especially regarding race relations in America (Alexander, 2023). *Hope’s Path to Glory* is set before the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and offers teachers and students the opportunity to compare life then to life now. How does historical racism impact contemporary economics, policies, and opportunities for Black and Brown people in America today? Although Hope and her family are ultimately set free, they have many challenges and face discrimination both leading up to and after earning their freedom. According to Jerdine Nolen, “I think one of the tenets of our Constitution tells us it is incumbent upon each of us to realize liberty -- that each individual, each living thing matters and to live life to the fullest whatever that means and how we decide.” How can Hope’s story inspire all individuals to realize liberty and be their true selves, even in the midst of societal challenges?

Discriminatory practices are still in play today, against not just Black people but other marginalized groups as well, including people who identify as LGBTQ+. In *I’ll Take Everything You Have*, Joe exists in 1934 Chicago, a period of time in the 1920s and 1930s where gay culture thrived, especially in the city of Chicago (Fleeson, 2007). However, the tide quickly changed. Just as The Civil Rights Movement was a significant moment in history, so too was the 1969 Stonewall Uprising—riots against the criminalization and mistreatment of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals that directly impacted their lives and rights. Stonewall became “a symbol of resistance to social and political discrimination that would inspire solidarity among homosexual groups for decades” (Britannica, 2023, para. 6). Although the Gay Rights Movement was not a direct result of the Stonewall Riots, it did present a catalyst for political activism and the Pride movement (Blake-more, 2023). Before the riots, many LGBTQ+ identifying individuals had to hide their true selves and were made invisible. For James Klise, he wrote this novel because he had a story set in an intriguing period of Chicago history to tell. He did not know:

that it would be published during a time of unprecedented efforts to make queer people (especially young people) invisible again. Book removals, and muzzles on class curriculum, legislation to ban treatment for trans kids—that’s all come as a terrible surprise to those of us who have lived for decades, watching things getting better.

Students who identify as LGBTQ+ may see themselves reflected in Joe from *I'll Take Everything You Had*, or Jade in *She is a Haunting*. They may feel the mounting discrimination happening in contemporary society. Characters like Joe and Jade can inspire readers to consider their own identities and the similarities and differences to their right to be themselves in different periods of history.

Antisemitic attacks are increasing in contemporary society, evoking feelings of fear and connection to The Holocaust in Jewish people and their allies (American Jewish Committee, 2024). Links to Hitler have been made in news based on recent rhetoric by presidential candidates and politicians (Egan, 2023). Being Jewish in Eastern Europe during World War II was challenging, and it is not easy in the U.S. or the greater world today. Elana K. Arnold reflected that she was writing *The Blood Years* “throughout the Trump years.... I remember when he was running for president; Nana was horrified. She recognized many of his slogans and talking points as echoes of Adolf Hitler. She told me the writing was on the wall.” How powerful that someone who lived through The Holocaust was seeing similar signs in political and responsive speech and actions. Although novels about The Holocaust are not new, the realities of the characters and the events can be extrapolated to events happening today.

A final social issue tackled in this novel set is intergenerational trauma and the experiences of being a refugee in America. There is currently a refugee crisis in America. A significant number of people are trying to emigrate to the United States from Central and Southern America, leading to a border crisis (Davis, 2023). Numerous wars across the world, such as those in Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine, have led individuals to flee their homes in the hope of finding a safer life in the U.S. (Concern Worldwide U.S., 2023). Inevitably, new immigrants in the U.S. face issues of belonging, cultural changes, and family dynamics. What are the challenges people newly arrived in the U.S. face? And significantly, how do children of refugees, both new and old, adapt to life straddling two cultures? In *She is a Haunting*, Jade is the descendent of refugees from Vietnam and she grew up hearing the stories and the fears of her grandmother and parents. Those family experiences put expectations on Jade, and she internalized a need to behave a certain way and be a certain type of person. What pressures are put on today's refugees, immigrants, or their family members?

## Connecting to Readers

Once an author releases a book into the world it is no longer their book, but the world's. Meaning comes through the interaction between a reader and a text, as readers bring their personal experiences with them when reading (Rosenblatt, 1994). An author may have a message or take-away goal in mind, or something they hope will resonate with readers, but ultimately it is the reader who will decide based on their individual experiences. However, an author can still share wishes and ideas of ways readers will connect with their books. This section allows Jerdine Nolen, James Klise, Elana K. Arnold, and Trang Thanh Tran to share what they hope readers will wonder and think about after reading their books.

First and foremost, all four authors hope readers enjoyed the story. A book exists through its readers, and authors want their readers to be entertained and motivated “to start with page 1 and read to the end (J. Klise).” What good is a book if it goes unread? The interest to the story is ultimately what will connect a reader to a book, its time and place, and its personal meaning.

The authors also hope that readers walk away with questions—questions not only about the story but also to and about themselves. Books offer opportunities for readers to challenge themselves and the way they view the world. They can help build empathy and understanding, and through reading, “if we allow ourselves, we can grow in awareness, intelligence, and empathy for others thereby becoming more and more of ourselves (J. Nolan).” Although these authors wrote books either set in or influenced by history, their readers live in the present time. What questions might readers have about their own identities in comparison to identities of people from the past? For example, James Klise poses questions to his students. He asks them “to imagine what it might have been like to live when queer people and trans people were expected to hide their identity. We talk about the cost of invisibility.” What makes teens feel invisible today? Elana K. Arnold wants her readers to ask questions not only about the historical time presented, but also its connection to what is happening in the world today as well as to each individual reader's world. She “would be thrilled if readers leave *The Blood Years* brimming with questions: about Czernowitz and the Holocaust, yes, but also questions about their own present time and place, about their own assumptions, fears, and passions; about their own families, too.”

Books have the power to evoke emotion and promote change. James Klise hopes that books inspire advocacy, for

readers to see an injustice in the world and be motivated to confront and do something about it. For example, in relation to the events that happened in *I'll Take Everything You Have* and the parallels to contemporary attacks against people who identify as LGBTQ+, James wrote:

I hope the story raises questions about what happens when some politicians and community groups are suddenly fired up to make queer narratives and queer identities invisible again. It's happened before, right here in Chicago, and it can happen again—and will, unless all of us together fight back and say: No way. Never again.

Advocacy can also emerge in the fight against racism, antisemitism, and any form of discrimination and oppression. Trang Thanh Tran acknowledges again that individuals are products of their time but also pieces of history. And as such,

We also make history—right now—through our choices: which books we teach in schools, which monuments we preserve and ideologies we uphold, how we treat the colonized people of the world, and who we as a collective identify as the oppressor. We write the narrative.

James Klise sums it up: “If we don't pay attention to the recent past, we're much more likely to return to those hard times.”

Lastly, and most importantly, authors hope that their books can validate their readers, who are complex human beings grappling with their place in the world. Trang hopes that LGBTQ+ teen readers “walk away knowing that they are always enough—no matter where they are in their journey and coming out.” This sentiment was echoed by the other three authors, who all noted that they wished their readers discovered their true worth and, as Elana K. Arnold beautifully wrote, “I always hope a reader of any of my books will leave it feeling more in love with being a person alive in this world, and more curious to connect and discover.”

### Connecting to Teachers

Historical fiction and books that integrate authentic historical elements are salient venues for exploration in the English Language Arts classroom. In addition to making historical facts and figures come alive, historical fiction allows readers to connect with themselves. The four authors highlighted in this article suggest several ways their novels can effectively be

used in classroom settings as avenues to reading enjoyment, to critically explore literature and examine different perspectives at different points in history, and to consider one's own personal identity.

As Trang Thanh Tran simply puts it, “Let them have fun reading first!” While story and analysis and history are important, so is encouraging a student's love of reading. One way to do that is to give students choice. Having ownership over book selection is a great way for students to engage in a book as they can select something that piques their interest. As a teacher, if your curriculum allows, you can choose a variety of texts related to the time period or topic you wish to teach and allow students to explore what interests them. James Klise suggests, “Let them see all the different lenses we have to explore that specific time in history” and then allow students to teach each other and share the most interesting things that they learned. Unfortunately, one issue from the past that is reemerging in the present is the challenging and banning of books. Text choice may be restricted in today's climate of censorship, and the integration of texts outside of the curriculum might not be a possibility.

Historical fiction can be a unique way to explore literature from an English literary perspective. Educator Jerdine Nolen suggests that historical fiction is a “fine way to begin to critically think, analyze, and discuss English conventions—character, setting, dialogue, language/word choice, plot, character motivations and choices and get an in-depth first-hand look at what life may have been like during that time period.” The connection between literary conventions and social issues is rich with opportunities. The element of character opens up many possibilities related to choices—what choices did characters make and how might you act if presented with a similar choice?

Lastly, how might students connect the literature to themselves? What elements of their personal identities can be explored through the questions that arise from the experiences of the characters in the books? Assignments that require family trees or family histories can be problematic and directly avoided. All students may not have access to their family's stories or extended family members, and some might not have good or healthy relationships. However, most students have an adult in their life of whom they can ask historical questions, an adult who does not have to be a part of their family or home life. Some students may want to dig into their personal family history, perhaps talking to grandparents and other family members, to see how family challenges are passed down. Other stu-

dents might wish to explore the history of someone they know that intrigues them, or be interested in exploring the city, town, or neighborhood in which they live. Looking into others' histories allows us to compare the past to the present and "see \*how\* they ended up where they are" as the "past is in everything around us and is sometimes responsible for the stuff that just doesn't make sense. Realizing that it's the interaction between environment and people that create the world we live in—that's powerful", says Trang Thanh Tran.

Finally, consider the words of Elana K. Arnold:

I'd love for grown-ups who read my book (including teachers) to remember that what makes a story stay alive—what compelled me to keep my grandmother's story alive—was how vulnerable and honest she was with me. She didn't need to be the hero for her story to be worth sharing to me; she understood that the act of sharing stories is itself heroic. It's like opening your chest, to share vulnerabilities, to admit weaknesses and faults. It's terrifying. It's like writing a book.

We have the power to empower our students. Share literature with them, challenge them to be vulnerable and thoughtful and critical, and encourage them to connect to and learn from the past so that they may become change-makers in the present. •

**Melanie D. Koss** is a professor of Literacy Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL. Email: [mkoss@niu.edu](mailto:mkoss@niu.edu)

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## Appendix

**WRITTEN INTERVIEW QUESTIONS SENT TO EACH AUTHOR**

AUTHOR	INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS
Jerdine Nolan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me a little bit about <i>Hope's Path to Glory</i>. Why this book? Why now?</li> <li>• Why were you drawn to writing historical fiction over another genre? How did it impact your writing? Why did you choose to write using a journal format?</li> <li>• How did you use historical fiction to explore contemporary issues? What contemporary issues were you hoping to explore? What connections did you make from the past to the present?</li> <li>• How do you see the principles of Manifest Destiny as applied to contemporary times?</li> <li>• Has your personal definition of freedom changed in the process of writing this book?</li> <li>• Do you connect personally with any of the characters?</li> <li>• What do you hope readers will walk away wondering about after reading your novel?</li> <li>• What is your best advice to teachers who may teach your novel?</li> <li>• Are there any strategies you'd like to promote for teachers that you feel can be used to promote critical discussions around your book on how students might connect the past to the present and make the past relevant to their lives?</li> </ul>
James Klise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me a little bit about <i>I'll Take Everything You Have</i>. Why this book? Why now?</li> <li>• Why were you drawn to writing historical fiction/historical noir over another genre? How did it impact your writing?</li> <li>• What drew you to the 1930s and Chicago and why was that history meaningful for you to explore?</li> <li>• How did you use historical fiction/historical noir to explore contemporary issues? What contemporary issues were you hoping to explore? What connections did you make from the past to the present?</li> <li>• Thinking about the characters in your book, how much of yourself is in Joe, Eddie, and Raymond?</li> <li>• How do you think you'd respond if you were in Joe's or another character's position?</li> <li>• How do you think Joe and the supporting characters might have responded if the novel was set in 2023?</li> <li>• What do you hope readers will walk away wondering about after reading your novel?</li> <li>• What is your best advice to teachers who may teach your novel?</li> <li>• Are there any strategies you'd like to promote for teachers that you feel can be used to promote critical discussions around your book on how students might connect the past to the present and make the past relevant to their lives?</li> </ul>
Elana K. Arnold	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me a little bit about <i>Blood Years</i>. Why this book? Why now? What about your grandmother's history and your personal story was meaningful for you and inspired you/compelled you to write this book?</li> <li>• Why now, in 2023/4?</li> <li>• How did you use historical fiction to explore contemporary issues? What contemporary issues were you hoping to explore? What connections did you make from the past to the present?</li> <li>• There are a lot of books on The Holocaust. What did you set out to do to make yours different?</li> <li>• The characters in your novel are all flawed making them exceptionally human and, in some ways, relatable. What was the most challenging thing about writing such complex characters? How do you hope today's readers will see themselves in your characters?</li> <li>• What do you hope readers will walk away wondering about after reading your novel?</li> <li>• What is your best advice to teachers who may teach your novel?</li> <li>• Are there any strategies you'd like to promote for teachers that you feel can be used to promote critical discussions around your book on how students might connect the past to the present and make the past relevant to their lives?</li> </ul>
Trang Thanh Tran	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me a little bit about <i>She is a Haunting</i>. Why this book? Why now?</li> <li>• Why were you drawn to writing contemporary fiction so infused with a historical element and the horror genre? Why is this how your story had to be told? How did it impact your writing?</li> <li>• How did you use historical elements to explore contemporary issues? What contemporary issues were you hoping to explore? What connections did you make from the past to the present?</li> <li>• How much of yourself and your family's history is infused in this novel?</li> <li>• What led you to make the house a character?</li> <li>• Do you connect personally with any of the characters?</li> <li>• What do you hope readers will walk away wondering about after reading your novel?</li> <li>• What is your best advice to teachers who may teach your novel?</li> <li>• Are there any strategies you'd like to promote for teachers that you feel can be used to promote critical discussions around your book on how students might connect the past to the present and make the past relevant to their lives?</li> </ul>

# SEEING THE COMPLEXITY OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE THROUGH CRITICAL LENSES AND CREATIVE PROJECTS



Wendy R. Williams

SOME UNDERGRADUATE students enroll in children's literature courses with the mistaken idea that reading picture-books and illustrated chapter books will be fairly simple, surface-level work. However, over the course of the semester, they inevitably learn how complex these texts can be. Presenting undergraduate students with both critical and creative approaches to examining children's literature in university-level courses can help them gain a deeper appreciation for these literary works.

This article discusses a qualitative study conducted with undergraduate students in a children's literature course. It found that participants used various critical lenses (i.e., schools of literary criticism) to make sense of children's literature. Through these lenses, the participants critiqued characters and situations, connected literature to real life, and appreciated inclusion and difference. In addition, the participants made meaning as they composed creative projects such as picture-books. These projects were informed by the literature and lenses they had studied, involved personal meaning making, and gave students a chance to learn from each other.

## Using Critical Lenses with Children's Literature

Appleman (2009) compares the practice of applying critical lenses to texts as putting on driving glasses that bring out the red and green tones of stoplights. She writes, "contemporary theories highlight particular features of what lies in our line of vision. If used properly, they do not create colors that weren't there in the first place; they only bring them into sharper relief" (p. xii). In other words, a critical lens can help a reader see

a text more clearly, illuminating elements that may have been obscured. Having access to a collection of critical lenses enables readers to choose those that are appropriate for the different texts they encounter throughout their lives as readers.

Many schools of literary criticism can be used to make sense of children's literature. Table 1 details all of the lenses that were presented in the course described in this article. Although visual analysis is not technically a school of literary criticism, I teach it with the other critical lenses because it similarly helps students make sense of what they are reading in visual narratives such as picturebooks and illustrated chapter books.

One of the lenses, Critical Race Theory (which focuses on issues of race and power), has been in the news in recent years. As an example, Tom Horne, Arizona's Superintendent for Public Instruction launched an "Empower Hotline," giving K-12 students, parents, and others a place to "voice their concerns about [K-12] classroom materials...including lessons that 'focus on race or ethnicity rather than individuals and merit'" (Sun, 2023). In Florida, where the ban on Critical Race Theory also extends to universities, there have been reports of professors canceling such courses as Race and Social Media in response to the state's Individual Freedom Act (2022) (Golden, 2023). Idaho's legislature has similarly banned the teaching of Critical Race Theory in its universities, with a sponsor of a bill commenting:

[Critical Race Theory (CRT)], rooted in Marxist thought, is a pernicious way of viewing the world. It demands that everything in society be viewed through the lens of racism, sexism, and power. CRT

tries to make kids feel bad because of the color of their skin, or their sex, or any other category—one group is seen as an aggrieved minority and another group is the oppressive majority (ABC4, 2021).

Those of us who teach literature at the college level may find ourselves on the front lines of these battles.

Teaching our students to dig into texts—to look closely, question, reflect, and connect—is incredibly important work. Using critical lenses such as Critical Race Theory, Feminism, Queer Theory, Ecocriticism, and others in undergraduate courses can give students important tools for literary analysis and for making sense of the world outside of our colleges and universities. These careful readers can also notice racism, poverty, sexism, homophobia, and environmental issues outside of the pages of a book.

### Using Creative Projects with Children's Literature

Undergraduate students in children's literature courses can also benefit from composing creative works. When making a picturebook, the storyteller must consider not only the story but also the visual elements that communicate information to readers (Albers & Harste, 2007; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Serafini, 2014). Instructors can support students' visual literacy development by teaching visual elements, analysis, and composition; in fact, students have been known to show great dexterity in transferring knowledge of visual elements from analysis work to their original visual compositions (Williams, 2019). Communication in today's world is becoming increasingly visual and multimodal, so it is important that students of all ages have opportunities to communicate through a variety of modes including language, visuals, gestures, and sound (New London Group, 1996).

Using creative projects in higher education can also open up opportunities for students to draw upon their cultures, languages, experiences, interests, and talents. The cultural assets, or "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) that students of all ages bring with them to the classroom deserve to be recognized and honored in formal instruction. This work can also put students in touch with authentic audiences. We know that writing is more relevant and meaningful when there is a real audience to hear, read, or see our work (Williams, 2018). Like other forms of composition, creative projects can support "habits of mind," such as creativity, curiosity, openness, engagement, flexibility, persistence, and responsibility (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al., 2011). Assigning creative projects

in children's literature courses can also help nurture the next generation of authors. Unfortunately, there is still a shortage of literature by and about people of color (Zhang & Wessel-Powell, 2023). Although we are starting to see more diverse authors and illustrators in the world of children's publishing, incorporating creative projects as a component to literary study can be a catalyst for further growth in this area.

### The Children's Literature Course

In Spring 2019, I designed a new upper-division undergraduate English course entitled *Critical Approaches to Children's Literature*, giving our students the opportunity to examine children's literature through various critical lenses. This English course typically enrolls English majors, current and future parents, those interested in art or design, or those needing to meet a general studies requirement. Pre-service teachers tend not to enroll, as they are already required to take a different children's literature course in their college.

This course was taught in a 15-week, in-person format in the Spring 2019 term. It consisted of an overview, 13 weeks of literary study (eight weeks matched specific lenses to longer texts; see Table 2 for pairings), and a creative project showcase. Each week, the students came to class after reading a chapter book or its equivalent, as well as background material on the week's lenses. We spent the first part of each 2.5-hour class discussing the assigned book through those lenses. During the second part of each class, I placed dozens of picturebooks around the room. Students spread out in small groups to read and discuss several books together and reported back to the whole class on their discoveries. Each class meeting also contained a sprinkling of other activities, such as read-alouds, videos, quizzes, and extension activities. As an example, one evening we wrote letters to high school students who were also reading *The Little Prince* (De Saint-Exupéry, 2000), which turned out to be an interesting activity to do in a week when we were studying Reader Response.

### Study Design

The qualitative study (Merriam, 2009) examined how undergraduate students in this course engaged with children's literature in critical and creative ways. Two key questions guided the research:

1. How did participants apply critical lenses to make sense of children's literature?
2. How did their original creative projects demonstrate meaning-making?

**Research Site** The course took place at a small campus of a large research university in the southwestern United States, where I work as an Associate Professor of English. The site of a former military base, the campus had approximately 5,000 students at the time of this study, many of whom were studying business, applied sciences, or engineering. The campus has many international students, and some students drive to campus or take the

free intercampus shuttle from another, larger campus in the area. Situated on the edge of town, the site features new buildings and desert landscaping. Occasionally we see wildlife such as desert skunks, roadrunners, and even families of javelina.

**Participants** This course took place from 4:30-7:15 p.m. one night per week, which allowed working students and those

**Table 1**  
**CRITICAL LENSES TAUGHT IN THE COURSE**

LENS	DESCRIPTION
Archetypes	Focuses on character types. Examples include the seeker, orphan, caregiver, sage, friend, lover, warrior, hero, villain, destroyer, ruler, fool, trickster, magician, and creator (Nilsen & Donelson, 2009).
Biographical	Focuses on traces of the author's life in a text.
Critical Race Theory	Focuses on race and power, drawing attention to inequities. This lens comes to literary study from legal studies (Crenshaw, et al., 1995).
Ecocriticism	Focuses on nature and the environment.
Feminist/Gender/Queer Perspectives	Focus on gender, sexuality, and power, drawing attention to inequity. Although Butler's (1990) groundbreaking book, <i>Gender Trouble</i> , came out decades ago, it still has relevance for children's literature, texts that encapsulate ideas about gender and family.
Formalism	Focuses on the literary elements that are at work in a text, such as symbol and theme. Formalism is the dominant lens used in primary and secondary education, and its influence can be seen in formal assessments including state reading tests and the AP English Literature and Composition exam (College Board, 2021).
Marxism	Focuses on wealth, class, and power, drawing attention to inequity.
Moralism	Focuses on the moral or lesson that a text conveys, with the idea that texts should have something to teach us and should ultimately make us better people (Purdue University, 2021). This way of reading goes back to Plato, but it is often criticized as an overly simplified way of reading. It is parodied in Carroll's (2002) <i>Alice's Adventures in Wonderland</i> .
New Historicism	Focuses on texts as cultural artifacts. This is an update to the historical lens.
Postcolonial	Focuses on the harm of colonization.
Postmodernism	Focuses on the postmodern elements of texts, such as multiple truths, experimentation and play in form or content, and intertextuality (how texts are in conversation with each other).
Psychoanalysis	Focuses on the ways that concepts from psychology are at work in literary texts. As an example, the characters in Dr. Seuss's (1957) <i>The Cat in the Hat</i> embody concepts like the id, ego, and superego (Wright, 2021).
Reader Response	Focuses on the reader, who brings meaning to any text. While readers' perspectives can assist them in understanding texts, they can also stand in the way; to illustrate, when I first read Yoon's (2017) young adult book, <i>Everything, Everything</i> , as a parent I missed the hints about the mother, whereas most of my undergraduate students were quick to catch on.
Structuralism	Focuses on repeated patterns of storytelling. This lens can be used in really specific ways, such as classifying a story as "AT 311 Rescue by the Sister," "AT425 The Search for the Lost Husband," and so forth (Aarne & Thompson, 1999, pp. 373-378).
Visual Analysis	Focuses on reading images, drawing attention to the ways that art and design choices convey information. For visual analysis resources, see <i>Reading the Visual</i> (Serafini, 2014), <i>Reading Children's Literature</i> (Hintz & Tribunella, 2013), and <i>Picture This</i> (Bang, 2016).

from other campuses to attend. Using IRB-approved consent forms, I invited all eleven students in the course to participate, and eight students joined. This sample represented a significant proportion (73%) of the class. Of the eight participants, three were female and five were male. They came from various programs: Three students were in Graphic Information Technology; three students were in English-related programs (English; English Literature; Writing, Rhetoric, and Literacy); and two students were in Applied Biological Sciences (one in Natural Resource Ecology). The student in the Writing, Rhetoric, and Literacy program was also minoring in Statistics.

The Graphic Information Technology students were accomplished graphic designers (e.g., as the “Mothman” excerpt illustrates later on). These students had electronic drawing tablets and were skilled at using programs like *Clip Studio Paint* (Celsys, Inc.). Other students were less comfortable with art. One student remarked, “I’m not that artistically gifted.” Some students composed picturebooks that worked around such issues by using photographs, basic shapes, or simple figures in pencil that could be easily erased or adjusted. Other students in the class opted to design a lesson or work on a chapter book for their project. All skill levels were welcome.

**Data Collection** The study took place after the course ended and final grades were posted. At that point, I went into Canvas, a course management program, and downloaded 23 files submitted by the study participants. The files included eight analysis papers, eight creative projects, and seven reflections. In the analysis paper (due in Week Twelve of the term), students analyzed their choice of a chapter book, a graphic novel, and a picturebook using two lenses per book. Collecting these papers was necessary to answer the first research question, which sought to understand how participants applied critical lenses to make sense of children’s literature.

Collecting the creative project and reflection, which were due in Week Fifteen of the term, helped answer the second research question, which focused on how participants had demonstrated meaning-making through their creative projects. Students’ projects included four picturebooks, one graphic narrative, two chapter books, and one lesson. After our in-class project showcase on the last day of the course, students went home and submitted their project reflections online. These reflections included a summary of the project, description of the tools and process used, identification of children’s literature influences, and comments on at least three other students’ projects.

**Data Analysis** All 23 files were loaded into *NVivo* (Lumivero, 1997), a data management program. To answer the first research question, I used descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2009) with the analysis papers, which involved reducing passages of text to a single term. This illuminated the lenses that were used, including Critical Race Theory, Ecocriticism, Marxism, Moralism, Postcolonialism, Feminist/Gender/Queer, Psychoanalysis, Reader Response, and Visual Analysis. After noting these lenses, I examined the passages further to determine what the reader was actually doing with the lens beyond identification. As an example, the passage about Oompa-Loompas discussed in the next section was initially coded, *Postcolonialism*. With additional analysis, that passage also received the label, *Critiquing Characters and Situations*. This two-step process allowed me to group material both by lens and by the type of meaning-making observed. Additional themes that came to light were *Appreciating Inclusion and Difference* and *Connecting Literature to Real Life*. These themes revealed some of the different ways that participants had used critical lenses to make sense of children’s literature.

To answer the second research question, I examined participants’ creative projects and reflections and initially identified the project features, tools/techniques, influences, and com-

**Table 2**  
**LONGER TEXTS ASSIGNED IN WEEKS 2-9**

LENSES	TEXT
Moralism & Formalism	<i>The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm</i> , Vol. 1 (Grimm & Grimm, 2014)
Structuralism & Archetypes	<i>The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm</i> , Vol. 2 (Grimm & Grimm, 2014)
Psychoanalysis & New Historicism	<i>Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland</i> (Carroll, 2002)
Visual Analysis	<i>The Tale of Peter Rabbit</i> (Potter, 2002) and choice of two additional books by Beatrix Potter
Reader Response & Biographical	<i>The Little Prince</i> (de Saint-Exupéry, 2000)
Marxism & Postcolonial	<i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i> (Dahl, 2007)
Ecocriticism & Postmodernism	<i>Holes</i> (Sachar, 2000)
Feminist & Critical Race Theory	<i>Ninth Ward</i> (Rhodes, 2012)

ments on other projects. After grouping these components, I looked closer at these passages to get a better sense of how participants were making meaning. This process resulted in three themes: *Learning about Children's Literature and Critical Lenses*, *Making It Personal*, and *Learning from Each Other*. These findings reflect the text-based, personal, and social ways that participants had engaged in meaning-making through creative projects. Findings for both research questions are discussed below.

### **Making Sense of Children's Literature through Critical Lenses**

The participants in this study used critical lenses to make sense of children's literature, critiquing characters and situations, connecting literature to real life, and appreciating inclusion and difference.

***Critiquing Characters and Situations*** The study found that participants employed critical lenses to critique characters and situations. As an example, a student wrote:

In *Voices from the Park* (Browne, 2001), Charles' mother...discriminate[s] [against] Smudge's family...because of preconceived notions about their class. After she notices Charles is gone, she looks disapprovingly at Smudge's father, likely because of the beat-up clothing he wears, and comments, 'You get some frightful types in the park these days!' (p. 6). *Voices in the Park*...allows the audience to get a unique understanding of each of the four main characters and their mindsets, but some of these mindsets have pre-established biases that prevent them from truly understanding each other.

Using a Marxist lens helped this reader pay attention to bias based on social class, and the analysis uses specific examples and language from the text to make this point.

Another participant applied the Postcolonial lens to *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, noticing that "the Oompa-Loompas were 'imported direct from Loompaland' to serve as the factory workers" (Dahl, 2007, p. 68). This student commented, "They are described as having lived in a terrible, dangerous jungle with nothing much to eat besides disgusting bugs. Since they prized cacao beans, Wonka offered to have them work in his factory where they could have all the cacao they wanted. They were shipped over in crates and have since learned to speak English." The student also noted that Wonka used

the Oompa-Loompas to experiment on, testing his candies on them. Seeing this story through the Postcolonial lens reveals serious mistreatment of these characters.

The Ecocritical lens draws attention to the ways that humans interact with the environment. A participant noticed:

[In *The Giving Tree*,] the tree is happy when the boy spends time with it. Although, throughout his life, the boy gradually shifts from spending time with the tree to exploiting it, from collecting its fallen leaves to selling all of its apples. The tipping point occurs when the child is a grown man and comes to the tree and wants to make a boat. The tree says he can cut down the trunk to get the wood for the boat, and the man proceeds. After this, "the tree was happy... but not really" (Silverstein, 1999, n.p.). Children should be taught that nature is not there for them to use but to take care of and respect.

This participant, an ecology student, was well versed in the ways that human greed and selfishness can harm the environment, so this book was of particular interest to him.

***Connecting Literature to Real Life*** The study found that participants sometimes used critical lenses to connect literature to real life. For example, a participant used Critical Race Theory to explore issues she had noticed as a Latina living in the Southwest. She was especially interested in the following passage:

In *Carmela Full of Wishes*, Carmela followed as he cut back onto the street at Freedom Boulevard, past the crowded bus stop and fenced-off repair shop, past the old folks' home where two hunched old women waved smiles, past the huge improvement store where her dad used to stand around weekend mornings, waiting for work. (de la Peña, 2018, p. 6)

The participant noted the following about this excerpt from de la Peña's picturebook:

Most labor workers do not have the proper paperwork in order to apply for a decent job. Instead they have to stand around different places asking people if they have any type of work for them. White people typically do not have this problem and will actually hire these workers for the benefit of not paying the full price.

In addition, she noticed that the character's mother is not able to afford to stay in the hotel that she cleans, and the participant pointed out that "this job is very common for females in the Hispanic community." She also observed that a character in the story "get[s] his papers fixed so he could finally be home" (pp. 17-18), and the participant explained, "This usually happens to families who move to America and, due to immigration reform issues, some have to leave the country."

She remarked that she appreciated this story for its realism and its hope, and she shared the book with her daughter. "Despite her father's absence, Carmela is depicted as a happy, hopeful kid. Carmela does not show hate towards the country or racism against anyone even though her dad is not around." This positive perspective on de la Peña's story through a Critical Race Theory lens challenges critics who believe it is not possible for readers to see anything positive from this viewpoint.

**Appreciating Inclusion and Difference** The participants appreciated having access to inclusive texts. As an example, a male student in the class selected *The Tea Dragon Society* (O'Neill, 2020), a short graphic novel, to analyze through the lenses of gender and sexuality. He wrote, "I think it's important to look at *The Tea Dragon Society* with a Feminist lens in mind because not only is the main character a girl, the rest of the cast in the book are mostly women. [The book] challenge[s] heterosexuality as the norm or default."

Participants also used critical lenses to attempt to understand characters better, trying to figure out their point of view. For example, applying the Psychoanalytic lens to *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 2012), a participant observed, "Max is trying to get the attention of others (and it could be specifically his mother he's trying to get the attention of) throughout the story." This picturebook could be read as the ultimate "acting out," a sort of imaginative temper tantrum Max had in response to being sent to his room. The student wrote, "Max does have fun being the king of the Wild Things, [but] he does miss his own home and family." As an adult in college, this participant was attempting to get into the mind of this child.

### **Making Sense of Children's Literature through Creative Projects**

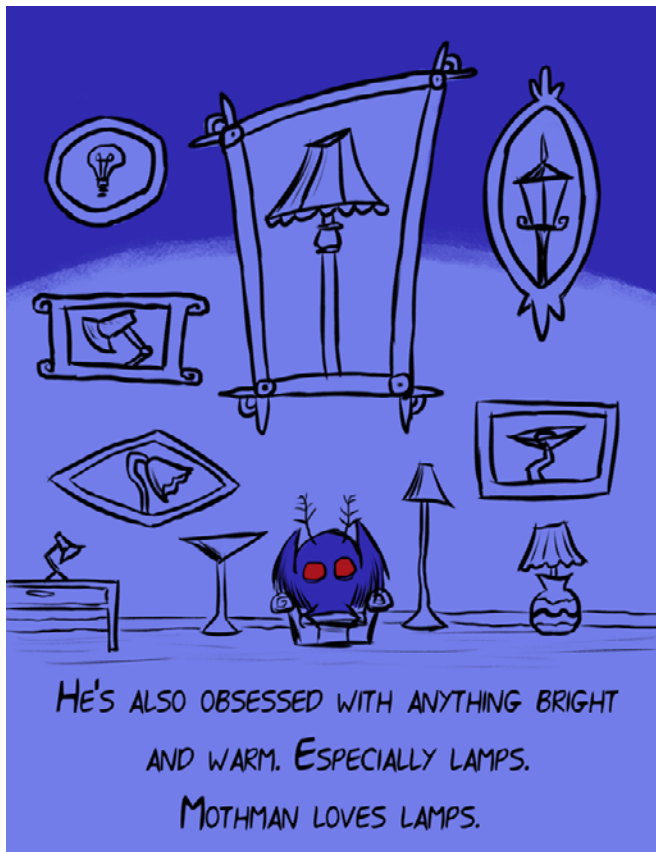
Participants' creative projects were also sites for meaning-making of various kinds. These projects demonstrated learning about children's literature and critical lenses, involved personal connections, and gave students a chance to learn from each other.

**Learning from Children's Literature and Critical Lenses** The participants applied some of what they had learned about the literature and lenses to their own creative projects. As one participant wrote, "I decided I wanted to [make] a picturebook to demonstrate the knowledge I have gained over the period of the course." In fact, the study found that participants were especially mindful about gender, as this seemed to be reflected in many of the works they created. For example, one student created a tooth fairy picturebook that "play[ed] with the fluidity of the main character." Another student constructed a counting and shapes picturebook in which the dog is "gender neutral." One student made sure to have a high proportion of female characters who were not "locked into gendered roles."

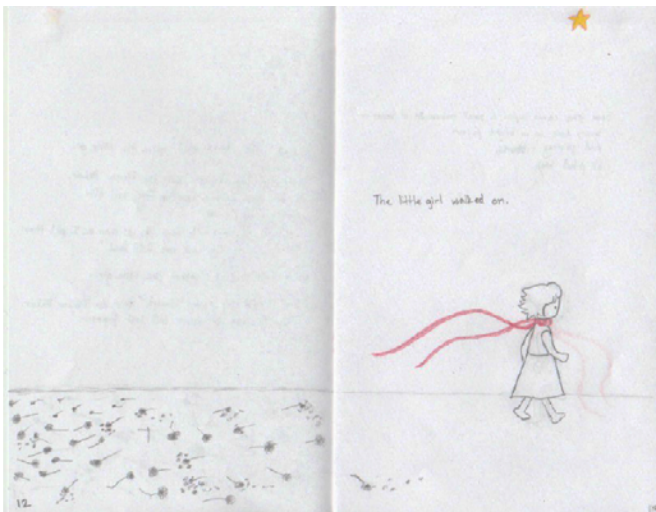
Doing visual analysis work helped participants think more about how to use visual elements in their own compositions. One student wrote that examining color in books like *Adventure Time: Princess Bubblegum* (Ward, 2020) and *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (Johnson, 2015) influenced her creation of the tooth fairy picturebook. Another student's graphic narrative was inspired by the "soft-looking, stylized look from picturebooks we read" such as *The Princess and the Pony* (Beaton, 2015). The student who made the Mothman picturebook [see Figure 1 for an excerpt from this work] explained that he appreciated the "limited color palette [of] books" like *Ghosts in the House* (Kohara, 2010) and *Leo: A Ghost Story* (Barnett, 2015).

Interestingly, participants did not always recognize how the literature that was presented in class had influenced their projects. For example, the tooth fairy picturebook mentioned earlier has text that is crossed out for effect, similar to *Chester* (Watt, 2009), a picturebook that was shared in a class read-aloud with a document camera. This participant did not make the connection in her reflection, however. Another student commented about the project, "Taking inspiration from *Chester*—a character editing the book themselves—can allow for a really funny book that kids enjoy." Another participant in this study composed what very much looked like a feminist response to de Saint-Exupéry's (2000) *The Little Prince* (see Figure 2 for an excerpt from this work). However, when I pointed out this connection in class, the student seemed surprised. By the time she submitted her reflection, she acknowledged a possible connection: "In retrospect, *The Little Prince* may be an unconscious inspiration for this picturebook." Students sometimes need assistance seeing these connections.

**Figure 1**  
**“MOTHPMAN” (AN EXCERPT FROM A STUDENT’S ORIGINAL PICTUREBOOK)**



**Figure 2**  
**“THE STARLIT JOURNEY” (AN EXCERPT FROM A STUDENT’S ORIGINAL PICTURE-BOOK)—THE TEXT READS, “THE LITTLE GIRL WALKED ON.”**



**Making the Project Meaningful** Some participants composed creative projects that were personally meaningful. A participant who was passionate about being in a band created a graphic narrative about his “experience with music and being a musician.” Another student reflected on her larger purposes for the project:

I knew I wanted to do something for my nephews, but I didn’t really know how to go about it...I had the flashback to a dream I had as a kid of a tooth castle and remember[ed] how badly I wanted to be the tooth fairy when I grew up...I decided to roll with that idea, but then my nephews kept popping into my head. How was I supposed to make a story for them with an idea centered around my own interest? Eventually...I was able to come up with *The Tooth Fairy Creature’s Handbook* and felt excited to incorporate my novice graphic design skills in there as well...I spent a tremendous amount of time and effort putting all my creative energy into my project and the amount of satisfaction I feel...is almost indescribable.

She made this project meaningful by working on an idea from a dream she had as a child. In addition, writing the book for her nephews gave her a sense of purpose and audience.

Another participant made a picturebook for her daughter. It included photographs of the child, and she also invited her daughter to help color in the objects. The participant reflected:

This creative project was inspired by [my] daughter’s interest in...shapes and colors. I know this picturebook is very plain, but it means a whole lot to me because my daughter and I had a lot of bonding time creating it, and she’s the one who picked out the colors as well as naming different objects that are triangular or circular. Not only was this a fun learning experience for both of us, but it’s something we can both cherish for a lifetime. It’s more like a keepsake that I can show her as she gets older.

She explained that her daughter was involved in the book’s construction, so “a lot of the images have scribbles.” It was interesting to see how the participants used this assignment to pursue their interests, honor their families, and connect with authentic audiences. They demonstrated agency in the

ways that they adapted the assignment to make it personally meaningful for them and those they cared about.

**Learning from Others** Sharing projects during a showcase in class created space for students to learn from and connect with each other. Even though students were asked to comment on just three other projects in their reflection, one student commented on all of the other students' projects. She observed her peers' use of mixed media, marginalia, strong visual details, colors, lines, character design and expressions, pacing, straight-to-the-point storytelling, humor, and ingenuity. In addition, she appreciated that students were able to explore multicultural identity and involve their family members. Some students applied critical lenses to each other's projects, pointing out visual, archetypal, feminist, environmental, and reader response observations, even though that was not required.

In their reflections, students acknowledged the skill and creativity they had observed in other students' projects, and they felt a sense of pride in their work as a class. A participant remarked, "I'm so proud of everyone's work. I can really see a bright future ahead of them." Students enjoyed learning about each other through these projects (seeing the "vulnerable parts of themselves"), and they wanted to see their books in print. One student wrote about the Mothman story, "I would not hesitate in purchasing this book. Take my money!" In fact, several participants commented that many of the projects were already publishable.

### Implications and Limitations

This section explores some of the implications these study findings have for teaching and research. In addition, it considers ways in which the study and course were limited.

**Critical Lenses** In regard to the first research question, this study found that participants used a variety of critical lenses to make meaning from children's literature. Through these lenses, participants critiqued characters and situations, connected literature to real life, and appreciated inclusion and difference. Having access to a toolkit of critical lenses equipped these readers to be able to grapple with the complexities of a vast array of works written for children. They cited examples and language from these works and applied lenses thoughtfully.

These findings have implications for teaching, suggesting that undergraduate students can benefit from using critical lenses to look more closely at texts. Therefore, it is recommend-

ed that instructors use a wide variety of lenses with undergraduate students in children's literature courses. This work can be scaffolded through *direct instruction* (e.g., explaining each lens and showing how it can be used with particular passages of text), *guided practice* (e.g., identifying relevant passages in a longer text together as a class), *collaborative learning* (e.g., applying lenses to picturebooks in pairs or groups and reporting back to the class), and *independent practice* (e.g., selecting texts and lenses and putting these together in a paper). I recommend that students define the lens before applying it, quote several passages from the literary text, and explain how that lens sheds new light on their understanding of those moments in the text.

Literacy scholars are encouraged to investigate how critical lenses are being used with different groups and levels of students. It is especially important to explore how lenses like Critical Race Theory are actually being employed in educational settings. In contrast to the widely circulated idea that Critical Race Theory is all about the demonization of white people, this study found that students were observant and critical but also humanizing and respectful.

**Creative Projects** In response to the second research question, this study found that participants' creative projects were useful for meaning making of various kinds. Participants used literature they had studied in the course as mentor texts that informed and inspired their own picturebooks. They also made their projects personally meaningful, connecting them to people and experiences that mattered to them. The project showcase provided an opportunity for these students to learn from their peers as well. They picked up on other students' uses of techniques, literary texts, and critical perspectives, and they celebrated the quality of the projects they produced as a class. This sharing of projects helped reinforce the idea that students' stories matter, too.

These findings about creative projects have useful implications for education. They suggest that analyzing literature can inform and inspire students as they compose original works of their own. In this way, literature can serve as mentor texts for composition. In addition, composing picturebooks can be part of a larger focus on developing students' visual and multimodal literacies (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Serafini, 2014). This study supports giving students freedom to make their projects personally meaningful and holding project showcases so students can make sense of each others' works together.

Also, project reflections can encourage students to think more deeply about their tools, processes, and influences, while also supporting metacognition and making student decision-making visible.

In previous research (Williams, 2019, 2020), I have observed the strong connection that can exist between analysis of visual works and original creative composition. Systematically analyzing works involves more than close reading or viewing. It also gives students tools and frameworks necessary for communicating ideas and telling stories of their own. Future research should attend more closely to the relationship between analysis and composition, includ-

ing the transfer that exists between such seemingly disparate cognitive tasks.

**Limitations** This research has some limitations. The small qualitative study examined the course documents of eight participants. Future studies could expand on this work by involving a greater number of students and including additional data sources (e.g., class observations, interviews). While the data types and number of participants helped answer the research questions, larger studies could yield additional insights. In addition, it would be beneficial to examine the teaching of critical lenses in other settings.

**Table 3**  
**SOME SUGGESTED LENSES AND TEXTS**

LENS(ES)	TEXTS
Archetypes	<i>The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm</i> (Grimm & Grimm, 2014), <i>That Is Not a Good Idea</i> (Willems, 2013)
Biographical/Historical/ New Historicism	<i>Inside Out and Back Again</i> (Lai, 2013), <i>Ninth Ward</i> (Rhodes, 2012), <i>Alice's Adventures in Wonderland</i> (Carroll, 2002), <i>Rosa</i> (Giovanni, 2007), <i>The Snowy Day</i> (Keats, 1996), <i>Bright Star</i> (Morales, 2021)
Critical Disability Studies	<i>El Deafo</i> (Bell, 2014), <i>Just Ask</i> (Sotomayor, 2019), <i>We're All Wonders</i> (Palacio, 2017), <i>Six Dots: A Story of Young Louis Braille</i> (Bryant, 2016)
Critical Race Theory	<i>Ghost Boys</i> (Rhodes, 2019), <i>Nappy Hair</i> (Herron, 1998), <i>Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story</i> (Mail-lard, 2019), <i>Yoko</i> (Wells, 2009)
Ecocriticism	<i>Holes</i> (Sachar, 2000), <i>The Lorax</i> (Seuss, 1971), <i>The Giving Tree</i> (Silverstein, 1999), <i>A Fish Out of Water</i> (Palmer, 1961)
Feminist/Gender/Queer	<i>Melissa</i> (Gino, 2022), <i>The Country Bunny and the Little Gold Shoes</i> (Heyward, 2014), <i>The Little Engine That Could</i> (Piper, 2001), <i>The Story of Ferdinand</i> (Leaf, 1936), <i>Ghosts in the House</i> (Kohara, 2010), <i>And Tango Makes Three</i> (Richardson & Parnell, 2015), <i>Heather Has Two Mommies</i> (Newman, 2016)
Marxism	<i>Esperanza Rising</i> (Ryan, 2002), <i>Last Stop on Market Street</i> (de la Peña, 2015), <i>Sunday Shopping</i> (Derby, 2019), <i>Voices in the Park</i> (Browne, 2001)
Postcolonialism	<i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i> (Dahl, 2007), <i>Curious George</i> (Rey & Rey, 1973), <i>We Are Water Protectors</i> (Lindstrom, 2020), <i>To Be a Drum</i> (Coleman, 1998)
Postmodernism	<i>Sideways Stories from Wayside School</i> (Sachar, 2019), <i>Tuesday</i> (Wiesner, 2011), <i>The Three Pigs</i> (Wiesner, 2001), <i>Harold and the Purple Crayon</i> (Johnson, 2015), <i>I Want My Hat Back</i> (Klassen, 2011), <i>Math Curse</i> (Scieszka & Smith, 1995), <i>The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales</i> (Scieszka & Smith, 1992)
Psychoanalysis	<i>The Wonderful Wizard of Oz</i> (Baum, 2019), <i>The Cat in the Hat</i> (Seuss, 1957), <i>The Red Tree</i> (Tan, 2010), <i>Where the Wild Things Are</i> (Sendak, 2012)
Reader Response	<i>The Little Prince</i> (de Saint-Exupéry, 2000), <i>The Garden of Abdul Gasazi</i> (van Allsburg, 1979), <i>Cicada</i> (Tan, 2019)
Visual Analysis	<i>Doodleville</i> (Sell, 2020), <i>The Invention of Hugo Cabret</i> (Selznick, 2007), <i>The Arrival</i> (Tan, 2006), <i>Dogzilla</i> (Pilkey, 1993), <i>The Runaway Bunny</i> (Brown, 2017), <i>Fox's Dream</i> (Tejima, 1987), <i>Once a Mouse</i> (Brown, 1989), <i>The Pigeon Needs a Bath</i> (Willems, 2014), <i>Rosie's Walk</i> (Hutchins, 1971), <i>Millions of Cats</i> (Gág, 2006), <i>Peter Rabbit</i> (Potter, 2002)

The course described in this article has limitations as well. I originally taught the lenses largely in chronological order but, since then, have presented the lenses out of order, so I can get to important lenses like Critical Race Theory earlier in the term. I have also added the Critical Disability Studies lens (Purdue University, 2021) and with it, Bell's (2014) graphic novel, *El Deafo*. Another change I made was to assign Gino's (2022) book, *Melissa*, so we could discuss transgender issues. I have given myself permission to drop critical lenses that I find less useful or that students already know from K-12 literary study. In Table 3, I provide some recommended pairings of lenses and texts.

It is worth acknowledging that teaching critical lenses can come with considerable risk. In some settings, instructors may jeopardize their jobs by teaching certain theories or books. In these cases, I recommend consulting with more experienced educators and reviewing applicable policies and legislation.

### Conclusion

Teachers can use critical lenses and creative projects in children's literature courses to show students how complex and sophisticated picturebooks (and other seemingly simple works) can be. Critical lenses can be used to read a text deeply and from different perspectives. Composing original picturebooks can show students just how much effort is involved with making a work of their own. Doing both critical and creative work together in a course can give students newfound respect for children's literature.

Using critical and creative approaches with literature supports diversity, equity, and inclusion goals. Critical lenses such as Critical Race Theory, Feminist/Gender/Queer perspectives, Postcolonialism, Marxism, and Ecocriticism provide useful frameworks for interrogating texts and identifying injustice in the world around us. Creative projects support these goals by communicating to students that their stories matter, too.

As one participant in the study said of the creative projects the class shared on the last day, "I wholeheartedly believe that every book presented could be published and could have been shown to the class as one of our in-class readings." Someone else wrote, "Quite frankly, I think everyone's project was fantastic and amazing, and all are publishable. I want those on my shelf!" I couldn't agree more. The future of children's literature is sitting right in front of us! •

**Wendy R. Williams** is an Associate Professor of English in the College of Integrative Sciences and Arts. She is also a Senior Global Futures Scholar in the Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory at Arizona State University in Mesa, AZ. Email: [Wendy.R.Williams@asu.edu](mailto:Wendy.R.Williams@asu.edu)

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# CANDACE FLEMING ON THE WRITING OF *THE ENIGMA GIRLS*: HOW TEN TEENAGERS BROKE CIPHERS, KEPT SECRETS, AND HELPED WIN WORLD WAR II



Terrell Young & Barbara Ward

AUTHOR CANDACE FLEMING had no intention of writing a book when she first visited Bletchley Park in England. That is until she was at the end of the Bletchley Park experience. “You come back into the main museum part of the visitor center, and on the wall is this huge graphic about how many dinners were served per day, how the population changed from 1939 to 1945, how it grew. Then they broke down how many men versus women were there.” She stopped in her tracks and thought, “Wow! Fully 90% of the people working at Bletchley Park were women. But I have to say, I just walked through an entire park and went through various buildings, and there was little mention of women even though women were the backbone of Bletchley.”

As she continued to read the posted information, Fleming realized that most women were between the ages of 14 and 19 when they first arrived to work as Bombe operators, messengers, interceptors, message encryptors, cryptographers, translators, and indexers. “They were coming in as teenagers,” she realized. She thought about her nieces and other teenagers she knew. “This was something I needed to think about. I know when I must write a book when I stand there and a great pressing question for me—*Huh? Really?*—bothers me. I

discovered several women whose stories had not been told. It was a story I wanted to explore,” she says.

After reading hundreds of these young women’s stories, Fleming struggled to decide whose stories to tell and whose to leave out. Her decision was based on the following criteria: “I wanted to include women from different socioeconomic backgrounds. I also wanted women who came at different times of Bletchley’s development, and I wanted one young woman to represent each job done at Bletchley Park.” Because these women no longer live, Fleming used their memoirs or depositions given to individuals collecting Bletchley Park histories decades after the war. She needed enough information to tell a full story for each young woman she chose out of the many possibilities.

Writing about the teenagers who were involved in breaking the German, Italian and Japanese radio codes instead of writing about the more famous Alan Turing, Alfred “Dilly” Knox, or Tommy Flowers was an easy decision for Fleming. “I thought my readers would be interested in teenagers’ work during the war,” she explains. “Teenagers know they can do amazing things. Here’s the story that showed these teens, all of them, ripped from their ordinary, everyday lives, and they’re thrust

**“This was something I needed to think about. I know when I must write a book when I stand there and a great pressing question for me—*Huh? Really?*—bothers me. I discovered several women whose stories had not been told. It was a story I wanted to explore.”**

into a situation unlike anything they had experienced before.” One major challenge for the girls was being pressed to silence through the Official Secrets Act. “You think about the fact that they were not allowed to tell their parents where they were going,” Fleming says with a note of incredulity in her voice, “Their parents cannot call, and their parents cannot even write to them at their real address. Parents have to write to them at a Post Office Box, and the girls have to write with that same return address.” Fleming says she thought tween and teen readers would connect with the story, drawn in by the fact that “there were teenagers from the past, real life, living and breathing teens, who made a huge difference—an estimated reduction in the length of the war by at least two years and saving thousands of lives.

Even though WWII ended in 1945, Fleming considers the book relevant to 21st-century readers. “Young people really can change the world. They are the future of the world. Young people should never be underestimated. People make changes, make differences, and make sacrifices. They’ve done it, and they continue to do it. Just because they’re not lauded for it doesn’t mean it’s not being done every day. What I like about the *Enigma Girls*, perhaps the most, is that it is a feel-good story. You get to the end, and say, ‘Yes, people can make a difference. Yes, people are extraordinary. Yes, people rise to challenges, and they work hard, and do things that they don’t maybe even want to.’ For instance, Diana Payne [one of the *Enigma girls*] “detested her job. She found it hard and horrible,” Fleming explains. “And she went for three years every single day, and she did it well because she knew it was important, even if no one told her it was important.” It’s important, according to Fleming, for her readers to ask themselves if they would make such a sacrifice if our country faced something similar to what Britain faced in 1939.

### Bringing history to life

Fleming identifies herself as a storyteller who wants to bring history to life for her teen and tween readers. Her goal is for those readers to have the same experience they would have while reading a novel. She looks for true stories that she can tell with “a dramatic arc and some emotional heat,” she explains. Two tools that she uses in her writing are dialog and sensory details. “The dialog comes from quotes from serious source material, so I can tell readers where that dialog came from,” according to Fleming. “I use sensory details that also have to come from sources. I create scenes but never compress

time because that would put things out of order. Then it would become fiction because I’ve made things up.”

Fleming is always aware that how she writes about historical events and figures is extremely important. “I write the truth fully with my readers in mind. I know I have to provide context, and I know that I have to provide sensitivity. Likewise, some details are inappropriate depending on the age group I’m writing for. I look for alternative details that are just as honest and truthful but may not be as shocking. All I can do is write the best, most honest, and truthful nonfiction I can,” she says. She cares a great deal about what her readers discover about history and themselves in the pages of her books. “It is my job to take the facts and provide meaning and connection. Meaning and connection, not just so that they can understand a story that happened in the past, but that that story can illuminate how they’re living in the present.”

Committed to showcasing the multiple sides or perspectives in history, Fleming worries that all “too often, history is written as a moral lesson.” She recognizes that historical events can be uplifting and inspiring. “I also think my job is not to shrug off history’s ugly parts. As Americans, we need to stop doing this. History is our gift, but it’s also our burden.” In the case of the *Enigma Girls*, it’s important to look at World War II from both sides, she says. “Yes, the Americans came in and did amazing things, and the Brits managed to hang on. But people did die. Lots of people did die. Like Patricia recognizes when she says to herself that probably that German on the other end of that enigma machine is likely a kid that got pulled into this just like me. It’s really easy to look at things as black and white, but it’s the gray areas that I like to explore with readers.”

### The challenges of nonfiction writing

Writing nonfiction *is* a literary process. “People often think nonfiction is easier to write because you already know the story. I contend it’s harder because you have a story you want to tell, but you still have to stay within a fence,” she says. “It is just as much of an imaginary process as writing fiction. It’s just that I can’t make anything up, but I still have to imagine it in the same way that I would a fiction story, and I still have to imagine people back to life. So it is an imaginative process.”

Her job in writing history is not to tell readers how or what to think. “I will introduce them to the topics, and give them the information,” she says. “But I also don’t tell readers how to think; that is not my job. We can trust readers. I don’t

have to connect the dots. We can trust readers to come up with the right ideas, to wrestle with the morality of it, to wrestle with whatever aspects of the story they have to wrestle with. And I think we can trust them to come up with the right answers.” She says, “I always love that Edward Gore quote, ‘If a book is only about what it seems to be about, then the author has somehow failed.’” She wants her nonfiction to be about more than a particular piece of history. Although some worry about exposing young readers too much, Fleming reminds us that they already have the facts available on their phones “but those facts have no context, connection, and meaning” unlike good long-form nonfiction.

*The Enigma Girls* includes vivid descriptions that make readers feel as though they are working and living in Bletchley Park. Fleming always considers the experiences her readers have while reading her books. “When we read a fictional novel, we fill in the gaps with our imagination. That’s exactly what I want readers to do when they pick up one of my long-form nonfiction books. I want them to feel that very same fictional novel experience. That’s become my goal over the last ten years.”

Fleming has four paths in her research. “My first path is travel. The second is primary sources where I constantly look for details that bring the story to life. The third is secondary sources to help me understand battles, strategy, in this case, concerning how the enigma works. My fourth path is experts.” Fleming counts herself fortunate to live close enough to have access to the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry, which has a captured enigma machine.” As part of her research, she says, “A curator let me play with it. The Cryptology Club at the University of Illinois was also a great help.”

She needed to visit Bletchley Park a second time, the first time as a tourist and the second time as a researcher. For Fleming, “landscapes speak, and buildings hold memories. They will speak to you if you listen. I hadn’t listened the first time, but I listened the second time.” Several sensory details in *The Enigma Girls* came from her perceptions of how those places

smell, taste, and feel. “I looked way closer and noticed things I hadn’t noticed before: How many steps is it from the grand house to the cottages in the back, which is where Mavis was? How close were Hut 3 and Hut 6 together? I could stand and put out my arms to touch both of them. How did it sound when I walked down that wooden corridor? I took pictures of the weirdest stuff. But I was looking at where trees were, where plants were. What was it like to walk along that lake? How cold

was the water?” Taking the same route to London when the girls took breaks from their work at Bletchley allowed her to travel through the same station they had.

Writing *The Enigma Girls* had one particular challenge for Fleming, who claims to be “the worst mathematician you ever met.” She recognized that she had to deal with science and math while telling the girls’ story. “I realized that I would need to explain to readers what a code is and how it works, what a cipher is and how it works, something as basic as that before readers could understand what was happening at Bletchley Park. It put the brakes on the project for several months because I tried to write that into the text,” she says. Eventually, she decided to remove those portions from the narrative, placing them in brief expository explanations or bridges—“just enough to get to the next scene.”

Fleming reports she learned many things that surprised her about the people who worked at Bletchley Park. What surprised her the most was how the teenagers followed the rules. Likely, the hardest

rule was that they could never talk about the work they did. “They were teenage girls,” she says. “Yet they couldn’t talk about it with their parents, their friends back home, their roommates, or even the girl who might be working with them on the same task.” They intended to keep those rules for the rest of their lives. As a telling example, she notes that “Gwen, who met her poet husband at Bletchley, was married forever, yet they never talked about what they did at Bletchley Park afterward when they were married. Now, that is truly following the rules!”

***The Enigma Girls* includes vivid descriptions that make readers feel as though they are working and living in Bletchley Park. Fleming always considers the experiences her readers have while reading her books. “When we read a fictional novel, we fill in the gaps with our imagination. That’s exactly what I want readers to do when they pick up one of my long-form nonfiction books. I want them to feel that very same fictional novel experience. That’s become my goal over the last ten years.”**

Still, finally, in the late 70s and early 80s after the first accounts came out about what actually happened at Bletchley Park, the girls were astonished to learn they no longer had to keep those secrets. “Mavis Lever’s response was, ‘Wait, I can talk about it now?’ Then she laughed and said, ‘I can finally explain to my grandchildren why I am so good at anagrams and crossword puzzles,’” Fleming says. She was amazed that the teenagers were told to say they were file clerks or secretaries, and that’s exactly what they did. “They never told! I can hardly wrap my mind around that.”

### Attitudes about nonfiction and history

So many teens and adults claim never to read nonfiction or find history boring. But Fleming conjectures that the problem lies in what they’re reading. “If they are not reading recently published nonfiction, I think that might be the problem,” she says. “They think they don’t like it when they haven’t given it much of a chance.” Often, she says that her readers tell her that they didn’t think they liked history or nonfiction, but they loved one of her books, making her wish that they would read more long-form nonfiction.

She notes that awards sometimes draw teachers and students to books. “I think it doesn’t help that we don’t get a lot of love at awards time.” Even though there are nonfiction awards, “you do not often see the Newbery Medal recognizing straight-up nonfiction. Long-form nonfiction has been shuttled to the side in terms of awards. Yes, we have the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults. But even the Robert F. Sibert Medal, often recognizes picture books.” She was excited that Nicholas Day and Brett Helquist won last year for *The Mona Lisa Vanishes: A Legendary Painter, a Shocking Heist, and the Birth of a Global Celebrity* (Random House Studio, 2023). But that was a rarity. “For the most part, long-form nonfiction is not getting as much love as it could.”

### A preference for long-form narration

Here’s how she responded when asked why her picturebooks typically feature science topics: “I’m going to let you in on this secret,” she says. “I’m not a real fan of picturebook biographies, and I’m not a real fan of picturebook history. I’ve written it, but I do not like it because I think it’s limiting. I never get to tell the whole truth, and it always drives me crazy that there’s more there that I could share. But I’ve had to stick to 32 pages. So occasionally I write it, but I don’t love it.”

Fleming’s fascination with science comes through in her

many picturebooks featuring animals. “What I love about writing animals is what [librarian] Betsy Bird referred to the other day as my ‘animal oeuvre.’ I love that! Here’s the deal. They’re like characters so I can write a biography of narwhals. They are like people so I can follow them. They’re active, they’re characters. They work naturally for me.”

The prolific writer admits that balancing her research, writing, editing, and revision is a challenge. Typically, she writes one book at a time, but sometimes she must temporarily move from one project back to another. “Here’s what I’m doing right now,” she explains. “I have a second pass on my desk for a book called *Death in the Jungle: Murder, Betrayal, and the Lost Dream of Jonestown* that I’ll work on for the next two days,” about the teenagers involved in the People’s Temple. “Some ended up in Jonestown, some did not, some died, some did not.” She noted that she had the opportunity to interview “these amazing people who shared their stories simply because they had something they wanted to say to teenagers.” At the same time, she is working on a book about Bigfoot, part of a Scholastic series called *Is It Real?* Her first title in the series, *Is It Real? The Loch Ness Monster* will be available in March 2025. After researching Bigfoot, she is currently writing that book. At the same time, she is also preparing to write a book about rhino poaching and will travel to South Africa for an entire month. “While there, I will take a forensic wildlife class for a week,” she says. “Then, I’m walking with the anti-poaching canine unit, and I will help release a baby rhino who ended up in a rhino orphanage after a poacher killed his mother.” She will continue that research upon returning from South Africa. “Yes, it’s a lot of different stuff. But once I get down into the nitty-gritty of writing the book, that’s it. I finish the book before I do anything else.”

Clearly, not only is Candace Fleming quite versatile and prolific, but even when she’s on vacation, her fertile brain always seems to be seeking a possible story—much like when she and Eric Rohmann [her husband, who is an author/illustrator] first visited Bletchley Park with friends from Ireland.

### Awards for Her Nonfiction Books

Her work frequently receives starred reviews and is named to lists of notables and best books of the year. Moreover, Candace Fleming has received numerous awards for her nonfiction books. Here are a few of the awards she received: For *The Lincolns: A Scrapbook Look at Abraham and Mary* (Schwartz & Wade, 2008), she won the Boston-Globe Horn Book Award for Nonfiction and NCTE Orbis Pictus for

Outstanding Nonfiction for Children Honor Award. Fleming was named a YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction Finalist for *The Great and Only Barnum: The Tremendous, Stupendous Life of Showman P. T. Barnum* illustrated by Ray Fenwick (Schwartz & Wade, 2009). Awards for *Amelia Lost: The Life and Disappearance of Amelia Earhart* (Schwartz & Wade, 2011) included the Cybils Award for Middle Grade & Young Adult Nonfiction, Golden Kite Award for Nonfiction, and NCTE Orbis Pictus Honor Award. Her *The Family Romanov: Murder, Rebellion, and the Fall of Imperial Russia* (Schwartz & Wade, 2014) won the Boston Globe-Hornbook Award for Nonfiction, Cybils Award for Young Adult Nonfiction, Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Young Adults, Golden Kite Award for Nonfiction, and the NCTE Orbis Pictus Award. It was also a Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal Honor Book, and a YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction Finalist. *Giant Squid*, illustrated by her husband Eric Rohmann (Roaring Brook Press, 2016) earned her the Cybils Award for Elementary Nonfiction, and was named an Honor Book for the Charlotte Zolotow Award, NCTE Orbis Pictus, and the Sibert Medal. For *Honeybee: The Busy Life of Apis Mellifera*, illustrated by Eric Rohmann (Neal Porter Books, 2020), she was awarded the Sibert Medal, was a finalist for the Cybils Award for Elementary Nonfiction, and was an Honor Book for both the Cook Prize and the NCTE Orbis Pictus Award. She won the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for *The Rise and Fall of Charles Lindbergh* (Schwartz & Wade, 2020). •

*This interview was conducted by Zoom on Sept. 18, 2024, from Provo, Utah, and Moscow, Idaho, and Candace Fleming's home in Chicago, Illinois.*

**Terrell A. Young** is Professor Emeritus of Children's Literature, and a former president of the ILA Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group.

**Barbara A. Ward** taught in the public schools of New Orleans, Louisiana for 25 years, and loves long-form nonfiction.

## A SAMPLER OF CANDACE FLEMING'S RECENT NONFICTION

*Crash from Outer Space: Unraveling the Mystery of Flying Saucers, Alien Beings, and Roswell* (Scholastic 2022).

*Cubs in the Tub: The True Story of the Bronx Zoo's First Woman Zookeeper*, illustrated by Julie Downing (Neal Porter Books, 2020).

*The Curse of the Mummy: Uncovering Tutankhamun's Tomb* (Scholastic, 2021).

*The Enigma Girls: How Ten Teenagers Broke Ciphers, Kept Secrets, and Helped Win World War II* (Scholastic, 2024).

*Murder Among Friends: How Leopold and Loeb Tried to Commit the Perfect Crime* (Anne Schwartz Books, 2022).

*Narwahl: Unicorn of the Arctic*, illustrated by Deena So'Oteh (Anne Schwartz Books, 2024).

*Polar Bear*, illustrated by Eric Rohmann (Neal Porter Books, 2022).

*Tide Pool Waits*, illustrated by Amy Hevron (Neal Porter Books, 2022).

*What Isabella Wanted: Isabella Stewart Builds a Museum*, illustrated by Matthew Cordell (Neal Porter Books, 2021).

# THE POET'S CORNER

## Celebrating Sounds

Janet Wong



WHEN WE TALK About phonics and the science of reading, joy is not exactly the first thing that comes to mind. But when we infuse our language arts instruction with a lighthearted celebration of poetic techniques that center on sound, we can provide our students with phonics lessons brimming with silliness and delight.

### Alliteration, Consonance, and Assonance

Alliteration involves the repetition of the same sound (particularly consonants) as the initial sound in a string of words. Alliteration makes a poem fun to hear and to say. Every child enjoys the “Peter Piper” tongue twister, especially when it’s read very quickly and dramatically. Other sound devices that are similar to alliteration are “consonance,” the repetition of the same consonant sound within words, and “assonance,” the repetition of the same vowel sound within words. The poem “Behind the Hidden Door” by Darren Sardelli contains excellent examples of all three devices; see it on page 60 in the context of the full page where it appears in *Clara’s Kooky Compendium of Thimblethoughts and Wonderfuzz*.

### Take a Take 5! Approach

The first several books created by Sylvia Vardell and me together—titles such as *The Poetry Friday Anthology for Celebrations*—contained variations of “Take 5! mini-lessons” that provided guidance for every poem. The *Take 5!* mini-lesson allowed for a consistent approach to poetry that made it simple to teach poetry while also facilitating learning. The steps in our original *Take 5!* method consisted of the following:



**Step #1: Read the poem aloud (perform it with drama).**

**Step #2: Read the poem aloud again with students participating.**

**Step #3: Share a discussion question related to the poem (very briefly).**

**Step #4: Point out the language arts and/or poetry skill(s).**

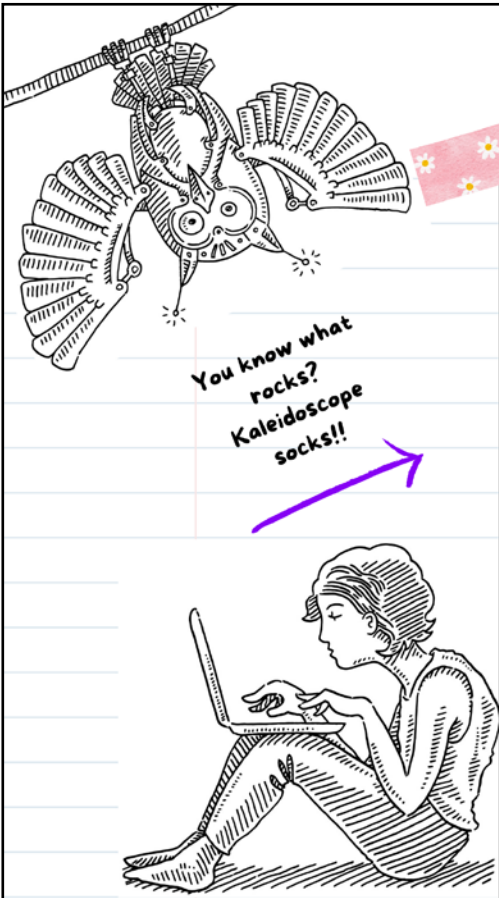
**Step #5: Provide a text-to-text connection.**

In *The Poetry Friday Anthology for Celebrations*, Step #4 suggests a picture book pairing on the same theme as each poem. In *The Poetry Friday Anthology for Science*, Step #4 highlights a science-related topic (usually tied to the Next Generation Science Standards). The key principle of the method remains consistent: let children “get hooked” on a poem before they are asked to look at it analytically. Enjoyment of a poem always comes first.

You could share “Behind the Hidden Door” with these steps:

**#1: Read aloud.** Pantomime or actually open a nearby door as if you’re stepping into a fantastic world where you see the things described in the poem, acting amazed at each line.

**#2: Read again — with your kids.** Read the poem aloud again, and this time have students chime in to say the last line together: “in this video game we were playing.”



**BEHIND THE HIDDEN DOOR**  
by Darren Sardelli

We opened a door to a magical world  
where pumpkins are silver and blue.  
The moon in the sky was a strawberry pie.  
Bananas were shaped like a Q.  
A monkey was wearing kaleidoscope socks.  
Pianos had candy cane keys.  
A mouse with a moustache was zooming around  
in a bright yellow car made of cheese.

Vanilla volcanoes had pudding-filled tops  
that bubbled in blueberry rain.  
We noticed a pig in pistachio pants.  
A hippo was flying a plane.  
Invisible bunnies left tracks in the snow.  
Identical horses were neighing.  
We all were amazed by these things that we saw  
in this video game we were playing.



This poem is full of **alliteration** with repeated consonant sounds at the beginning of many words. Some examples of adjacent alliterative words include: **candy cane, vanilla volcanoes, pistachio pants.**

Other alliterative words that are simply near each other include: **mouse/ moustache, bubbled/blueberry, pig/pistachio.**

**GAME OVER**

**THIMBLE THOUGHT**  
The best-selling video game of all time is Minecraft.

**WONDER FUZZ**  
How do you design and make a video game?

poem © 2024 Darren Sardelli; other text © 2024 Pomelo Books; illustrations © Frank Ramspott from *Clara's Kooky Compendium of Thimblethoughts and Wonderfuzz* by Sylvia Vardell and Janet Wong (Pomelo Books)



**The Weekend Worked!**  
by Your Energized Teacher

The weekend worked wonders.  
Despite the thunder,  
I'm refreshed, refueled,  
and newly bejeweled  
(thanks to a trip to the mall).  
How about y'all?

**SALE**

## CELEBRATING SOUNDS!



**ALLITERATION**  
**W** sounds: weekend worked wonders  
**T** sounds: the, thunder; to, trip  
**R** sounds: refreshed, refueled

**ASSONANCE**  
 Short **U** sounds: wonders, thunder  
**EW** sounds: refueled, newly, bejeweled

**CONSONANCE**  
**D** sounds: wonders, despite, refreshed, refueled, bejeweled  
**L** sounds: refueled, newly, bejeweled, mall, y'all

text © 2024 Janet S. Wong; illustration © Frank Ramspott  
from *Clara's Kooky Compendium of Thimblethoughts and Wonderfuzz*  
by Sylvia Vardell and Janet Wong (Pomelo Books).

**ALLITERATION EXERCISE**  
Take a poem – and REMOVE alliteration by inserting substitute words. Here's an example where the alliteration from "The Weekend Worked!" is eliminated (new words in blue).

**The Weekend Succeeded**  
by Your Energized Teacher

The weekend succeeded marvelously.  
Despite the storm,  
I'm energized, refueled,  
and newly bejeweled  
(thanks to a visit at a mall).  
How about y'all?

text © 2024 Janet S. Wong; illustrations © Frank Ramspott  
from *Clara's Kooky Compendium of Thimblethoughts and Wonderfuzz*  
by Sylvia Vardell and Janet Wong (Pomelo Books).

**#3: Discuss.** Make a list of the images or items that children remember from the poem. See if they can suggest similar (or even sillier) images that a game designer could put into a video game.

**#4: Point out the skill.** Alliteration only requires that words with the same beginning sounds be near each other, not necessarily adjacent. Some examples of adjacent alliterative words: *candy cane*, *vanilla volcanoes*, *pistachio pants*. Other examples have alliterative words simply near each other (*mouse/moustache*, *bubbled/blueberry*, *pig/pistachio*).

**#5: Make a text-to-text connection.** Other examples of alliteration can be found in many poems in the same Clara book. See page 61 for a poem that I wrote in the voice of the teacher character Mrs. Booker, “The Weekend Worked! by Your Energized Teacher.”

You can follow “The Weekend Worked!” with a writing exercise that challenges students to take the poem and remove all alliteration. (Revision is often easier when it involves playing with *other* people’s words.) Also shown is an example written by me in the voice of “Your Energized Teacher” that you can present to your students after they do the exercise on their own.

### Poetry Fits How We Learn

In a podcast for the Arizona K12 Center, cognitive psychology experts Dr. Megan Sumeracki and Dr. Cindy Nebel, also known as The Learning Scientists, suggest that students need cognitive breaks, interleaving, and spacing to create optimal learning conditions. Hopefully the examples in this short essay have shown you that poems are ideal for this purpose. As Peter Piper would say, “Poems play a perfect part in providing pupil pleasure!” •

**Janet Wong** is the author of dozens of books for children and the cocreator (with Sylvia Vardell) of *The Poetry Friday Anthology* series, the *Poetry Friday Power Book* series, the *Things We...* series, and the *What Is...* series, all published by Pomelo Books. Her most recent anthology, with Sylvia Vardell and 70+ poets, is a story in poems called *Clara’s Kooky Compendium of Thimblethoughts and Wonderfuzz*. Email: [janet@janetwong.com](mailto:janet@janetwong.com)

### RESOURCES

Nebel, C. and Sumeracki, M. (2023). The learning scientists part 2: The curse of knowledge (or thinking like your students). *Arizona K12 Center: 3 Ps in a Pod*. <https://www.azk12.org/podcast/detail/the-learning-scientists-part-2-the-curse-of-knowledge-or-thinking-like-your-students/d18c8682-4a4b-4bfd-8503-c89cf5527f04>

### CHILDREN’S LITERATURE CITED

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## **Notable Books for a Global Society Award**

### *Research Award & Practitioner Award*

#### **AWARD DESCRIPTION**

The Notable Books for a Global Society (NBGS) Award is presented by the Children's Literature and Reading (CL/R) SIG through the International Literacy Association to two outstanding educators each year: one with a research focus, and another with a practitioner focus.

The NBGS Award rewards passionate educators dedicated to creative and innovative use and exploration of literature from the NBGS in both pre-K – 12th grade and university classrooms, as well as in other learning contexts (such as libraries, after-school programs, summer enrichment programs, literacy outreach programs, etc.)

#### **RESEARCH AWARD (PROPOSED PROJECT)**

Please submit a proposed research agenda utilizing the NBGS books from the past two previous years' award lists. Please consult the evaluation criteria below in terms of guidelines to follow.

Research award winners will be provided with the opportunity to contribute to The Dragon Lode (Journal of Children's Literature and Reading SIG- International Literacy Association) in order to share their work from the award as well as a 1 year SIG membership.

#### **PRACTITIONER AWARD (HOW YOU HAVE PREVIOUSLY UTILIZED NBGS BOOKS OR FUTURE PLANS)**

Please submit a plan to describe how you have meaningfully utilized NBGS books from the previous three years' award lists, or how you plan to use them in the future. Please consult the evaluation criteria below in terms of guidelines to follow.

Practitioner award winners will be provided with the opportunity to contribute to The Dragon Lode (Journal of Children's Literature and Reading SIG- International Literacy Association) in order to share their work from the award as well as a 1 year SIG membership.

**All applicants must be current members of the  
Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group (ILA CL/R SIG)**

**Applications are due by April 13, 2025.**

**Additional details can be found on the CLR-SIG website.**

**Please submit all complete applications to**

**Dr. Anne Katz, Chair of the NBGS Award, at [annekatz@uh.edu](mailto:annekatz@uh.edu)**



## Call for NBGS Committee Members

**Established in 1994, The Notable Books for a Global Society Committee selects outstanding trade books that promote understanding across lines of culture, economic and social status, language, race, sexual orientation, values, and ethnicity. Each year, a committee of 10 people read the book submissions and select 25 outstanding books, in all genres for young readers, GR K-12, for the award.**

We seek new members for a three-year term on the committee. To be a member of this committee, you must:

- be a member of the Children's Literature Special Interest Group,
- be able to read and discuss over 400 books for K-12 that are typically sent to committee members each year as submissions for the award
- be willing and able to meet periodically through the year, virtually, to discuss books submitted
- participate in the writing about the books for publication in The Dragon Lode and for the CLR SIG website

**The deadline for applications for the coming year is January 16, 2025.**

**If you are interested in becoming a member, send a letter of interest, addressing how you are a good fit for the committee, along with a current CV to:**

**Sandip Wilson (President)**  
[wilsonsa@husson.edu](mailto:wilsonsa@husson.edu)

**Jeanne Gilliam Fain (Chair)**  
[Jgfain@lipscomb.edu](mailto:Jgfain@lipscomb.edu)

**Tracey Hodges (Co-Chair)**  
[traceyhodges@shsu.edu](mailto:traceyhodges@shsu.edu)



## Join the ILA CL/R SIG

The Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group is a community of individuals who have an abiding interest in the development of literacy and in promoting high-quality literature. Our mission is to promote the educational use of children's books by focusing on recently published children's literature, supportive professional books, issues relative to children's literature, and current research findings. Membership typically includes pre-K through 12 teachers, librarians, teacher candidates, administrators, university professors, authors, and publishers.

Membership benefits include:

- Meeting and working with other literacy professionals who share interest in literature for children and young adults.
- Opportunities for national-level involvement and leadership.
- Two issues a year of *The Dragon Lode* journal.

Membership is open to all members of the International Literacy Association. Student members must be enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate degree program.

- One-year membership: \$25.00 (U.S.)
- One-year student membership: \$10.00 (U.S.)

**To join, go to the CL/R SIG website:**  
**<http://www.clrsig.org/join-now.html>**



*Demi*

The Journal of the Children's Literature and Reading  
Special Interest Group  
International Literacy Association

