

Creating Literary History

The honest scholar must concede that choice influences almost all aspects of academia, especially in schooling. Authors or editors of textbooks serving kindergarteners through the twelfth grade must narrow down the very best of their research to a concise yet informative study of their particular fields, often including not only text but also pictures and charts. They no doubt hope that their choices in these areas honestly and accurately summarize the facts, represent situations, and actively engage the learner. In the same way, Louise Bernikow's quote, "What is commonly called *literary history* is actually a record of choices," reflects this very notion. Although some might initially view her statement as limiting, I find it to be encouraging, for as a result, teachers have a chance to contribute to the literary history being formed every day in the literary choices they present to their students.

Encompassed in Bernikow's one sentence is a recognition that can be fully substantiated. To start, we can easily determine that only the most ambitious of individuals can possibly read all of the children's novels and picture books published in one calendar year. Truthfully, in order to complete such a task, one would virtually have to make this objective his or her job. Even if such an individual could read every children's book published in 2008, it would be impossible to read all of the children's books published in preceding years and decades. Why? The hurried and often hectic lives of educators do not always allow for *time* to do so. Consequently, when searching for "good" literature, we naturally look for something or someone to guide us on our quest.

So then, it is important to first analyze some of the current methods that influence our decisions in choosing literature. To start, the term "literary history" is very much a misnomer, for as Bernikow pointed out, it only reflects the choices made by the many different individuals and factors competing for our attention in selecting the best literature choices for our students— children, parents, teachers, publishing firms, scholarly works, and so on. Even booksellers set up whole shelves and tables of children's "classics," reaffirming their status and reminding consumers that there is something

considered special about these “must reads.” Each choice, then, is usually constructed from a variety of factors. For one, choices can be affected by personal experiences and tastes; choices can also be the result of someone else’s influence or authority. Teachers, for instance, often teach what they have been taught, thus perpetuating the choices that have previously been made. This can work both positively and negatively, for it can affirm the good choices that have perpetuated our society. On the other hand, it can offer the teacher a net of complacency, since the work in choosing literature for students has essentially already been done in one particular way. In some cases, the chosen work is often a huge commercial success. Scholarship teaches us that *Little Women* was one of the most popular novels of its day, a characteristic that only disseminated the novel further. Today, some educators might look to J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series in a similar light, choosing one or more of her novels in the classroom setting because of its overwhelming popularity with young readers and adults alike. Of course, the traits mentioned above are not necessarily exclusive, nor are they an exhaustive list. They merely form a starting point in understanding how choice is influenced.

Now that we have determined that Bernikow has correctly described what truly entails “literary history,” it is crucial to set up a criteria that will better help guide the English teacher in his or her classroom choices. This criteria should never become stale or concrete. In truth, the criteria for making “good” selections in the classroom must be flexible and adapted to the specific needs of the students and requirements set forth by school systems and even applicable cultures. With this in mind, we must first look at the literary choices we have today. In a recent issue of *The Reading Teacher*, a monthly journal for English and reading teachers, Kathy E. Stephens notes that “with such an abundance of children’s books on any topic and in every genre, making good choices can be a dilemma for teachers and students.”¹ Much like Louise Bernikow, Stephens immediately recognizes the significance of *choice* in the English classrooms of today, and that these very choices shape the way students think about and relate to literature. One would hope that the search for these choices would begin much in the same manner as this class – a search for the qualities that are “good” in a novel or picture book.

¹ Stephens, Kathy E. “A Quick Guide to Selecting Great Informational Books for Young Children.” *The Reading Teacher* 61, no. 6 (2008): 488.

Although the definition of “goodness” as it relates to literature can be fluid at times, a few characteristics seem to remain constant. As many of my classmates pointed out, “good” books actively engage the reader, providing an interesting read while also examining deeper themes or exploring situations outside of a reader’s personal schema. Often these types of books contain situations that the reader can relate to.

The qualities that comprise a “good” book often push that particular book toward award-winning and for the fortunate few, even “classic” status. Not surprisingly, these award-winners (especially Newbery and Caldecott awards) and classics are usually what make up our literary choices and thus our literary history. Nevertheless, as educators and facilitators of this “choice,” we must be discerning in what we deem “good enough” to choose for our students. There is the temptation to create “goodness” in a book because others have done so. *The Secret of the Andes* was considered such a “good” book that it was awarded the esteemed Newbery Medal in 1953. Because of this honor, I could have easily relied on others’ estimation of the novel, without giving much thought to it myself. However, I was not drawn to the novel in any way, and I found myself searching for something, anything, that could have positively struck the attention of the Newbery committee that year. In the end, I was left with very few reasons. Although some have probably found “good” traits in *Secret*, I am not left wondering why it is that *Secret* hasn’t made its way into literary history. Conversely, a certain Newbery runner-up that same year has, for many, achieved “classic” status in the world of children’s literature, and a majority of readers young and old would find this novel, *Charlotte’s Web*, to be rich in the characteristics that make up “good books,” – good writing, relatable characters, emotion and heart, and lessons on friendship, life, and death.

However, when we only choose books that would fall under the “classics” umbrella, we run the risk of distorting our students’ perspectives of literature. This, of course, does not denigrate the value of classics in the English classrooms. It simply means that we must present a wider spectrum of experiences for our students, a spectrum that includes classics and much more. Suppose, for example, I was teaching on fantasy in children’s literature and decided to include a novel by C.S. Lewis. In this scenario, I can make my decision based on a variety of influences and reasons. I first could choose *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* because it is the most well-known, and arguably, a

“classic” of children’s literature. For one, it has been made into at least a few different films, which can be used as supplementary material in the classroom. A great deal of scholarship has also been written about this novel, which would aid the learning process. On the other hand, I could also pick *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Although not as popular as Lewis’ first book in the Narnia series and probably not considered a “classic,” there is still one film version of the story. Plus, it is my personal favorite and I would certainly enjoy teaching it. In a third option, I could tread off the beaten path and choose a much lesser known work like *The Horse and His Boy*. As the fifth book in the Narnia series, this work has not received as much attention as the two aforementioned novels. As a result, students are less influenced by outside resources (books, commentary, etc.) that might cloud independent thinking and they are thus more able to critically analyze the novel without as many preconceived notions. Each of the aforementioned scenarios would work in the classroom. Lewis’ material is rich in theme, metaphor, plot, and characterization, and it would be easy to use his work as illustrative for a unit on fantasy or science fiction in children’s literature. As Bernikow made clear, it depends on choice.

In addition, the English teacher should always be identifying ways in which we can improve this “literary history” for future generations of learners? Implicit in the statement of Kathy E. Stephens is the “dilemma” faced by English teachers across the country. As some students’ only portal into the world of literature, English teachers can face a daunting task. Of course, choices should reflect some aspect of critical thinking. In light of this, one step that needs to be taken in creating an authentic type of literary history is to make sure that choice reflects diversity. This does not mean simply diversity in character (although that is extremely important), but diversity is all components of what makes up a book. To start, we can begin by choosing books that do feature a range of main characters. In our class list of children’s “classics,” a list that arguably contained often agreed-upon works, all nine mentioned novels, including well-known-works like *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *Charlotte’s Web* featured mainly, or even solely, white protagonists. The picture books in the list had the distinction of not being as singular in designation of protagonist types, but to be fair, many of the protagonists in the picture books were animals and thus generally exempt from any kind of racial designation. This pattern does not, of course, mean to take away from the good

qualities found in these books. It does, however, pose an important question: Are these “choices” alone a good representative sample of all that there is in the world of literature? I would suggest not. While creating a curriculum that included the aforementioned picture books and novels, it would be helpful to also introduce books with characters from a variety of ethnicities and cultures, like Esperanza in *Esperanza Rising* or Maleeka from *The Skin I’m In*. Secondly, we need to also choose representatively from a wide spectrum of authors, a task that is made much easier when a variety of character types are presented in the novels. We should make the effort to find authors that published when at younger ages and older ages, when in the midst of trial, or when writing for enjoyment. Identifying the vantage points of a diverse selection of authors will easily aid our young readers in their understanding of character motivations, theme developments, and so on. I can speak from experience because reading the speeches of the Caldecott winners certainly supplemented my readings of their picture books.

Thirdly, choices should also reflect a diversity of style. Unless teaching a poetry unit, English teachers often stick with fiction prose as their main method of teaching and analysis, which is not necessarily a bad approach. However, it could only help our students to diversify the selection of analyzed writings. For example, we can choose to reach as far back as the early 20th century to study J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, examining how Barrie uses techniques of drama and scriptwriting to highlight his main themes and how he develops his characters. In turn, students can be encouraged to take a favorite book excerpt and translate the most important parts into their own form of drama. We should also choose to incorporate non-fiction works. One such activity could be to read and contextualize Martin Luther King Jr.’s lesser-known “Letter From Birmingham Jail” in understanding and evaluating the power of words to produce change. In one last example, a more recent publication proves that certain writing styles do not have to always remain separate. Nikki Grimes’ *Bronx Masquerade* showcases a unique writing style that seamlessly and almost equally interweaves prose and poetry, melding rhythm and words through the voices of young teenagers.

Finally, choices should reflect diversity in conflict. For instance, *Bridge to Terabithia* and *The Outsiders*, both of which have been around for decades, present two different but very real conflicts still faced by children and adolescents today: “street life”

and the death of a childhood friend. George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which can be read at the eighth grade level, introduces students to socialism, an ideology still very prevalent today, and crucial in forming a better framework of the beliefs that govern parts of this world today. Even *Hatchet* and *Treasure Island*, two books with similar themes, present their conflicts through vastly different methods, and the comparisons of these two novels allowed for a great range of critical thinking to take place.

In many ways, the best scenario would allow for English teachers at the elementary or middle school levels to be in open dialogue about curriculums throughout the grades. Even though one individual may only teach third grade, he or she can still dialogue with the second and fourth grade teachers in choosing and creating a curriculum that will provide students with the type of literary education that transcends a one-year marking period. However, not all teachers are as fortunate to provide such input, and in such situations these teachers can still resolve to choose a diverse selection of works throughout the school year. In truth, try as we may, our selections can still at best provide a mere sample of the literature available. As a result it is important that we make this clear to our students, and always encourage them to love and explore literature and to choose different kinds of literature outside the classroom, in their own lives.