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"For the first time, all over again" : reading classic children's literature with contemporary children

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“For the First Time, All Over Again”:
Reading Classic Children’s Literature with Contemporary Children
by
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master
of Science in Education

Bank Street College of Education

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Julia Martin “For the First Time, All Over Again”: Reading Classic Children’s Literature with Contemporary Children

Abstract

This thesis explores a simple question: what happens when modern children are exposed to the “canon” of great children’s literature for the very first time? How will contemporary children process and engage with texts that are over fifty years old?

Using qualitative research with my own classroom of second graders I set out to explore student reactions as they discovered a selected set of exemplary children’s literature. I presented these books openly and allowed students to express ideas, questions or connections without judgment while taping their response for analysis. These recordings became the basis for individual essays that probed children’s understandings, apprehensions and journey as readers working with new and challenging texts. Together these essays provide a vivid snapshot of young children making meaning from their reading. More importantly, they presented a compelling answer to the question posed above.

Observing, recording and reflecting on 21st century students’ work with early 20th century texts became a frame for analyzing children’s literature’s power, meaning and vulnerabilities. Analysis of student response to books forms a rich tapestry that reveals how teachers and children as individuals interact with a text.

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Introduction

Rationale

Literacy is considered the heart of early childhood education. Exposure to texts, to words and to “quality children’s literature” are some of the defining factors in children’s school success and reading ability, major markers of a high quality educational program and more often than not a point of pride for parents and educators. There is no doubt that reading to young children is important (F. P., & New Jersey State Dept. of Education. 1967; Yamagata, 2012).

A great deal of research suggests that WHAT we read to young children is equally important (Dennis, Lynch, & Stockall, 2012; Foster & Baker (2005). This is especially true as we consider choosing books for young students whose experience may not be reflected in much of traditional children’s literature, such as students with disabilities, children of color and children whose family configurations do not reflect traditional nuclear compositions (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, (2001); Abellan-Pagnani & Hébert, 2013).

There are many resources designed to help parents and educators select books for young children. Professional journals publish articles about selecting books for students with diverse backgrounds, books to address specific topics, ways to select poetry, non-fiction and multimedia texts. Entire publications such as *Hornbook* and *Booklist*, columns in *Scholastic* and *The Reading Teacher* and large thick books such as *Best Books for*

Children: Pre-school through Grade 8 are printed to help adults sort through the dizzying array of material published for children. Beyond lists and texts that name specific books there is a world of critical literature and analysis examining the elements of strong children's literature (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 1993; Silvey, 2004).

But what do teachers and parents really use to select books for the readers in their lives? Do working teachers and parents actually access all these sources on a regular basis, when they are reaching for a book to quiet busy bodies at snack or to excite a class of would be poets? How do they choose a book to tempt a picky reader or satisfy a voracious one? While many educators turn to the professional resources, or use the literature recommended or required by a school's programming and curriculum, many of us are guided by a third resource, a very powerful one: our own likes and dislikes, our internal sense of what children's books are "good" or not. For example a study of pre-service teachers found that "personal reasons" such as whether a not the teacher connected with the book or enjoyed it as an adult was as important a factor in book selection as its possible instructional uses. Equally important was the teacher's own judgment about the quality of the book's illustrations and text (Hart & Rowley, 1996).

As teachers we have a core idea of books that are "good" books for children. While some of this may be informed by critical writing, education school courses and professional journals, much of it is based on our experience as

readers, both as adults and as children. While everyone's personal favorites may differ, there are certain books that are widely acknowledged as "good" children's literature, a canon of excellent books. Some of these "classics" are established via awards such as the Caldecott and Newbury medals, which honor the finest children's books published each year. Some are simply part of an educator's lexicon; if you ask educators about excellent or classic books for children the same texts will come up again and again. A good example is the NEA's 2007 survey of the top 100 children's books or such guides as *The Literature Teacher's Book of Lists*. An even better example would be to simply walk into the faculty room of any elementary school and begin to ask teachers about their favorite books, the ones they consider "classics." Some examples of these books are: *The Snowy Day*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and *The Cat in the Hat*, *Curious George*, *Goodnight Moon*, and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, as collected by a brief survey of the kindergarten through third grade teachers at my school.

These classics, the best of the best of children's literature, are often quite old. "Classics" are by definition books that have stood the test of time, and the brief list above has books ranging from 30 to 80 years old. There are sources such as Carol Lynch Brown and Carl Tomlinson's *Essentials of Children's Literature* that analyze what makes a classic. But teachers more

often or not pick what they know, what they have read, what their mentor teachers have read ¹

As an educator I find this both fascinating and potentially problematic. The question that kept coming back to me was not “Why are these books considered classics?” or even “Should they be?” but “What will **my students** think of them?” My students are after all, not me. Nor are they professors of literature or children’s librarians. They are seven and eight year little girls who live in the South Bronx in 2013. All of them are “children of color,” African-American or Hispanic. Nearly all of them qualify for free lunch, a standard marker of low socio-economic status. What would they do with the books that I (and other middle class, largely white professionals) consider classics? Would the books that I treasured as a child matter to them? This is an important question to ask. Despite efforts to make it more diverse, the American teaching force is largely white, middle class and female. Our students are increasingly multi-cultural, and more and more are living in poverty each year (*New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/20/education/teaching-degree-minority-enrollment-lags-study-shows.html>). It seemed to me that this was the one question that often goes unanswered as we evaluate, analyze and enshrine children’s literature. I wanted to take these books, famous, beloved, frequently listed classics and actually read them to my students.

¹ In my personal classroom library for example, I have books inherited from my mother, a second grade teacher and my grandmother, a first -grade teacher. My students enjoy them as much as their 1960s counterparts did.

I teach in an all-girls charter school in the South Bronx. Our school is approximately 60% Latino and 40% African American with 90% of our students eligible for free lunch. The children in my class have a wide range of experiences with books and literature, ranging from living in a house full of active readers to never opening a book until the first day of kindergarten. What would my second grade students do with the canon of children's literature? How would they actually respond to the stories that they were supposed to love?

Selection Criteria

My first step in embarking on this research was to determine a list of "classic" books to try reading with my students. I wanted to replicate the way that I and many of my colleagues select books for read-alouds and for inclusion in our class libraries. I also wanted the books I selected to meet a number of criteria. The books needed to be:

- On multiple lists of high quality children's literature (See Bibliography)
- Considered "classics" by myself, colleagues, and mentor teachers
- Books that I read and enjoyed as a child. I felt that this was an important and authentic part of how I often chose books for my classroom. Moreover it would offer a strong point of comparison to the children's views of each book.

- Books that my children had little or no exposure to – I wanted this to be a first reading for the majority of my students.
- Books that I felt had substance and would spark conversation. (This eliminated many early readers such as P.D. Eastman’s *Go, Dog! Go!*, as well as shorter books for younger readers such as *Goodnight Moon*.
 - Narrative picture books or short chapter books, the genres that “classics” typically fall into.

After some deliberation I produced that following list:

- *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, Crockett Johnson, 1955
- *Tikki Tikki Tembo*, Arlene Mosel, illus. Blair Lent, 1968
- *The Story of Babar*, by Jean de Brunhoff, 1933
- *The Runaway Bunny*, by Margaret Wise Brown, 1942
- *Curious George*, by H.A. REY and Margaret Rey, 1941
- *Eloise*, by Kay Thompson, 1955
- *Ferdinand*, by Munro Leaf, 1938
- *Make Way for Ducklings*, by Robert McCloskey, 1969
- *Caps For Sale*, by Esphyr Slobodinka, 1940
- *Millions of Cats*, by Wanda Gag, 1929
- *Mike Mulligan and the Steam Shovel*, by Virginia Lee Burton, 1939
- *The Hundred Dresses*, by Eleanor Estes, 1944
- *Where the Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak, 1963

- *The Little Engine that Could*, by Watty Piper 1930
- *The Story About Ping*, by Marjorie Flack and Kurt Wise, 1933
- *Madeline*, by Ludwig Bemelmans, 1939.

This was an extensive list and despite all my thoughtfulness it was still only partial. I decided to narrow the scope of my project and focus only on texts that were written and published prior to 1945. I chose 1945, the end of World War II as a cut off, as many historians do, because the post WWII period brought such dynamic changes to American life and especially American childhood. (Consider, the advent of the television alone!) The additional dimension of the texts' age, as well as the dynamism of the first half of the 20th century, when all of these texts were published, fascinated me. What would a child reading *Babar* or *Curious George* in 1945 or 1966 have in common with my children in 2013? Could a children's book truly be relevant eighty years after it was first conceived and written?

My newly narrowed list of "classic books" read as followed:

- *The Story of Babar*, by Jean de Brunhoff, 1933
- *Caps For Sale*, by Esphyr Slobodinka, 1940
- *Millions of Cats*, by Wanda Gag, 1929
- *Mike Mulligan and the Steam Shovel*, by Virginia Lee Burton, 1939
- *The Little Engine that Could*, by Watty Piper 1930
- *The Story About Ping*, by Marjorie Flack and Kurt Wise, 1933
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- *The Little Engine that Could* by Watty Piper, 1930.
- *The Runaway Bunny*, by Margaret Wise Brown, 1942
- *Curious George*, by H.A. REY and Margaret Rey, 1941.

Methodology

Before I began to share these books with my students I wanted to gather information about their prior exposure to these texts. I felt strongly that I wanted to hear the girls' first reactions to a book. I wanted their ideas, questions, concerns, misunderstandings, enthusiasm or lack thereof to be authentic rather than coming from what they believed they were "supposed" to feel. (Young children, and second graders in particular, are anxious to give their teacher the kind of answers he or she "wants.").

I took some time to ask the children about the books I was planning to read. Had they read these stories before? If so, where? I did this in the form of a one-on-one interview with each child in my class. I simply showed each child the covers of the books I was planning to read (I had taken pains to get "iconic" editions of each work) and asked "Have you read this book?" Even with a simple no-pressure environment, I had to reassure several students that I did not care if they had or had not read a given text, I was only gathering information.

The results of my questioning were surprising. I was concerned that many of my chosen books would be familiar to my students but in fact, very few

were. (Research and analysis about which “classic” books children of different backgrounds are exposed to in home and in school could easily be the subject of a fascinating master’s thesis in its own right.) After my student interviews I collated the data and chose to eliminate books that more than five (or twenty percent of my total twenty-five students) had self-reported exposure to. While most of my children had read *Caps for Sale* in pre-school, I did not need to eliminate a single other text from my proposed list.

In actually conducting the research with the children I began by taking a very simple approach. I would read each book to my class and record their thoughts, questions and comments as I read. After I finished the book I would ask the children for additional comments or questions. Initially I thought that I might need to create a questionnaire or response form to elicit reactions, or at the very least come up with a set list of questions to accompany each book. However I quickly realized that my students needed no prompting to share their thoughts and that the texts I had chosen were more than rich enough to drive complex and thoughtful conversations.

When I went to write about our readings I discovered that the discussions we had lent themselves to sharing verbatim, as the children said them. I offered my own analysis and experience of reading the text alongside that of my students, to create a summary of our collective reading experience.

I presented the books in an open and relaxed style. Unlike most other parts of the day, and unlike the majority of our read alouds, our time exploring these books had no defined objective. I made it explicitly clear to the girls that my only goal was listening to what they had to say about the book, having a conversation together. Even more exciting for these read alouds I suspended (within reason) our usual classroom routines for story-time and allowed students to share their thoughts as they occurred, without waiting to be asked, raising a hand or waiting until the end of the book. The result was a sometimes raucous, always meaningful, deeply authentic exploration of each book. Whether or not these texts are “classics” to my contemporary students I still am not sure. But our experience reading them I know is something they will never forget.

Class Sessions

Curious George

H.A. Rey’s Curious George is one of the most widely read and translated of all children’s books. Originally published in 1941, it has never been out of print. In addition to the original story and the other six “original adventures” written by Rey and his wife Margaret, the book has spawned numerous “new adventures,” and in recent years a television show, a popular children’s movie (with accompanying album) and massive amounts of merchandise. (Silvey, 2004 33-35; Rothstein, 2010)

It is from the latter that my students are well acquainted with George. They watch the PBS television show, have seen the movie and sing along to Jack Johnson's *Curious George* album whenever I play it in class. Many of the "new adventures" are available as cheap paperbacks in Target, Wal-Mart and drug-stores, the primary sources of books for most of my students. These slim yellow books are frequently seen in backpacks or thrust into my face with a happy "look what I got!" But when I surveyed them individually only two of my twenty five second graders said that they had read the original, or recognized its distinctive cover. "That's *Curious George*?" several asked incredulously. I was deeply curious about how their familiarity with new incarnations of the curious little monkey would affect their understanding and enjoyment of the original.

I presented *Curious George* as a whole class read aloud, prefaced with a reminder that I was sharing this book with them as part of my work for "teacher school." Before I even read the title out loud hands shot up and several voices called out that they had watched the movie. "It's a show, too!" Sierra squeaked with excitement. I responded that yes, now *Curious George* was a show and a movie as well as several books. But before all of that H.A.Rey started with this book, the original *Curious George*. I wanted the girls to feel the weight and reverence that I feel for this story, which fathered so many others but still stands so beautifully on its own.

"It's actually a very old book," I say. I flip to the copyright page and do some quick mental math. "It's over seventy years old." Awed gasps and the

requisite “I’m seven years old!” from the back of the rug. “In fact”, I continue “not only did I read this book when I was a little girl, but my mommy read this book when she was a little girl.” More awed gasps and one “No way!” “And I’m sure most of your mommies and daddies and aunts and uncles did too,” I add then mischievously, “probably even some grandmas and grandpas.” (This is a pretty safe bet since most of their parents are around my age.) “Even Ms. Vazquez?” Keisha asks, pointing to my co-teacher. “Even me” she responds.

There are subtle murmurs from the audience who seem to grasp the full weight of seventy years all at once. I pause, too, thinking about what I have said, about my mother’s copy on my bookshelf at home, about the Reys’ bicycling out of Paris to escape the Nazis, carrying Curious George and little else. Thus prepared, I begin to read.

This is George. He lived in Africa. He was a good little monkey and always very curious. Scattered mutters. “This is a movie,” Kaylyn reminds me. “It makes you think of the movie,” I respond and am met with several nods and signs of approval. Yasmin waves her hand furiously, “It says his name and then that he is very curious and I think that’s why they named the book Curious George.” She beams, this is a major discovery. I read to the end of the next page, two panels where the Man in the Yellow Hat lures George in with his fascinating sombrero. Jada raises her hand “I should make a movie in my head,” “So you can visualize to make your own movie,” I respond. *The hat had been on the man’s head. George thought it would be*

nice to have it on his own head. He picked it up and put it on. “He gets stuck,” Ami sighs. Giggles from the audience. Typically when we are reading in a whole group students need to raise their hands to speak. Today I am letting this go, interested in their spontaneous response to the story. The effect is one of a multi-voiced Greek chorus, interspersing the reading with their own thoughts, questions and agendas.

The hat covered George’s head. He couldn’t see. The man picked him up quickly and popped him into a bag. George was caught.

“Uh-oh” Ami breathes. She is closest to me and I hear her every comment clearly. “Oh no!” a voice from the back row shouts and there is a round of sighs and nervous whispers. I have rapt attention for the next two pages. When I get to *George promised to be good. But it is easy for little monkeys to forget*, there is another round of muttering, this time accompanied by the shaking of heads and some knowing chuckles. Another “uh-oh” from Ami. “Oh my God,” Samantha clucks. “What do you think is going to happen?” I ask the group at large and Samantha specifically. “I’m scared,” one voice says as another few answer “He’s gonna get into trouble.” Nods of assent. “He’s gonna forget,” adds Samantha. *On the deck he found some sea gulls.* Voices continue over my reading, “Oh no,” “He’s gonna jump,” “Oh he’s in trouble.” *He wondered how they could fly. He was very curious.* “Why?” from the back row. *Finally he HAD to try.* Giggles, nail biting excitement. *It looked easy. But-* “He fell.” Faith concludes with a knowing smile and a shake of her head.

I turn the page—lots of laughter as George first triumphantly “flies” and then plummets head first into the sea. “It’s funny,” Kaylyn sighs. We pause to adjust seats, as the front row is frantically signaling they cannot see the pictures. I re-read the last page as the sailors rescue George. Lila raises her hand, “By man overboard they mean monkey overboard.” We giggle.

George and the Man in the Yellow Hat arrive at his house. “I thought they said they were going to the zoo,” asks Faith. “I was puzzling about that, too,” I answer because suddenly I am. “I thought they lived where they were.” Kaylynn says sounded vaguely disappointed. We press on. George in his oversized butcher boy style pajamas gets a big laugh. When I was a second grader I loved this page because the pajamas looked so cozy, but I don’t share this right now. As I flip the page I hear a strangled “Ooooooh,” the definitive you’re gonna be in trouble sound, coming from Yasmin. The bottom panel shows George confidently dialing a rotary telephone. *George was...* I read and several voices join me on *curious*. “Oh my goodness,” Ami is on the edge of her carpet square, rocking on her knees. “Wait, he is going to take him to the zoo, he’s calling them.” Yasmin exclaims. The rest of the crowd wants to get on with the story, shooting her several dirty looks. *GEORGE HAD TELEPHONED THE FIRE STATION!* There are loud cries of “Oh my God!” Serenity’s mouth hangs open in shock and amused disapproval. *They didn’t know it was GEORGE. They thought it was a real*

fire. Moans of both concern and pleasure at the monkey's audacity. Any second grader knows that this is serious trouble.

They are nearly completely carried away by the next page. Someone does a near perfect fire engine whoop. "Why is there a bunch of trucks?" "They're fire trucks," "Hurry, hurry, hurry," "Exactly." I keep reading, as swept up as the girls. *Oh catch him, catch him, they cried.* "Oh no!" (Ami again) *George tried to run away. He almost did, but he got caught in the telephone wire,* "Tripped," from Taylor, "Eeee!" squeals Sierra, *and--* "Bah-bam!" Kaylynn yelps with real satisfaction. I turn the page where the firemen are carting poor George off to prison. Giggles at the contrast between the thin and fat firemen. *They took him away and shut him in a prison.* "Awws" for George's fate mixed with delight, even schadenfreude, at being correct about all the trouble he will get in. "They will say, "Guilty!" Faith pounds her hand with her fist for emphasis. "Oh well," sighs an unidentifiable philosopher from the back of the room.

Laughter and a smattering of applause on the next page where the heavy watchman tips over a bench and George escapes. "Yay, he's saved," Kaylynn says. Continued muttering and yays, and a few murmurings of worry ("I'm scared) as George mounts telephone wires. *He was free!* I read, to which Keisha responds decisively "The end." But George has another adventure up his sleeve. As George reaches over to grab a balloon from the balloon man Samantha again whispers "Oh my god," twice as though she absolutely cannot believe what an idiot this monkey is. I turn the page and

Margaret Rey's vibrant pictures do the story telling for me. "Look!" (pointing as though a monkey was actually flying by our classroom window,) "He grabbed too many," Sierra is beside herself with joy. "*Up, up he sailed, higher and higher.*" Another chorus of "Oh my gods," from several voices. The murmuring is active now, so many voices I cannot pick out individual comments and yet quiet enough that I don't feel the need to stop. It's clearly all about George, a tight, engaged hum of collective energy.

We near the end. The girls read aloud with me as I describe the arrival of the man with the big yellow hat, shouting HAT with glee. *And then George and the man climbed into the car and at last, away they went...* ("To the zoo" predicts Yasmin) - *to the ZOO! What a nice place for George to live!*

I have not even taken a breath when Sierra's hand shoots up. "Why inside the movie, at the end of the movie he lives with the Man with the Yellow Hat?" She's genuinely confused and a bit annoyed. "I was thinking the same question," I answer "because in some of the other books he also lives with the Man in the Yellow Hat." This unleashes a torrent of comments, retellings of the movie, and plots of other books. "So why at the end of this one?" Sierra persists. "I don't know," I answer and she shakes her head, disgusted by me and the Reys' inconsistency. Someone asks about our popcorn party but I redirect the conversation to Curious George. "I want to know what you think about this book," I ask again.

Taylor raises her hand. She is one of my strongest readers and most articulate students and she has been curiously silent throughout the

reading. Indeed the most vocal students during this reading have not necessarily been the children who are typically engaged by read-alouds. “I thought that George is really curious and when people are really curious it sometimes makes them mischievous,” Jackie, another strong reader raises her hand. “I thought this book was a little scary, a little worried. Because I was worried that, that all the times when Curious was really sad, like he was in the bag, when he was in prison.” Jackie is often anxious and I’m not surprised at this reaction. “How did you feel at the end?” I probed. “Happy,” she admits begrudgingly. “Because I like Curious George because he is really funny.”

Keisha, my youngest student, who often struggles to sit through read alouds raises her hand. She has not been particularly engaged by the book but neither has she been as restless as she typically is during whole group times. “I like this book and I think this book is not like the other Curious George books.” “Oh?” I ask “I think the author does a lot of Curious George, and all the Curious George and the movie too. And I think it’s a fairy tale or a fable.” We have been studying fairy tales and fables for several weeks. “There’s nobody who really keeps a monkey,” Keisha tells me confidently. I affirm that some people do keep monkeys although they might not act like George does. There is a burst of yelling about how some people do keep monkeys and what has and has not been seen on TV. Keisha adds that “in the movie Curious George is real curious; he gets a lot of ideas.”

Samantha says “In this one the monkey gets in the zoo, but I never knew that because in the movies the yellow man takes him to his house.” Tianna raises her hand to retell the plot of another Curious George book, noting that George also gets into trouble in that book. Suzette says that Curious George has a lot of questions, and copies things. Serenity brings us back to the movie saying “But in the movie they call him just George, but here he is Curious George.” Luz says “I was kind of curious like George right now because on the cover George and the policeman are smiling.” Half the class still has excitedly raised hands but some of those who have already shared are starting to lose interest. It’s almost time for math. I reluctantly conclude that we need to stop and ask students to let me know later if they want to tell me more about the book.

Looking back I’m struck by how enthusiastic the girls were from the very beginning of the reading. Rather than making them jaded or uninterested, their familiarity with the characters made them more enthusiastic about the book. Although the show and movie were both geared for younger children, there were no remarks that this was a baby book. Moreover George and his adventures enthralled all twenty five students to varying degrees. I had not realized how suspenseful Curious George could be with cliffhangers in both words and pictures stretching over several pages. Just when George is out of trouble he quickly falls back in.

The girls’ reactions to George were two-fold; a certain protectiveness, a fear for his safety—the “oh no!” factor, alongside a delight in his mischief

and a laughter at the outsized consequences. To me both reactions spring from an identification with George—the little monkey who does not mean to find trouble but never fails to do so. There was something of an “I told you so factor”, as George gets into trouble a seven year old would know to avoid (diving off a boat, dialing the fire department). Yet most children also identify with accidentally getting into trouble. “I didn’t mean too!” and “I just wanted to see!” are common statements in my classroom. Some of George’s most enthusiastic fans during my reading were children who have burned their fingers investigating irons, fell climbing bookshelves, and cut their own hair to see what would happen.

Reading *Curious George* with my girls affirmed why I wanted to start this project to begin with. What is it about classic children’s books that resonates, even decades after the author’s death? I don’t think I discovered anything new. My students responded to George’s childlike innocence and curiosity, his never ending adventures and the bright engaging pictures and clear language that convey them. Yet it was something of a miracle to watch that magic work, for the first time, all over again.

Millions of Cats

Millions of Cats by Wanda Gag was published in 1928. Although it is less well known than other classic texts, it remains a popular book, often appearing on lists of best children's book. One of the few picture books to have won a Newbury award, it is the oldest American children's book continuously in print (Silvey, 2004).

I chose *Millions of Cats* for the girls based on simpler reasons; it was one of my favorite books as a child. The simple narrative with repetitive structure, the black and white illustrations and especially the hand lettered texts charmed me to no end. Moreover, I was sure none of my students were familiar with *Millions of Cats* in any form, an interesting contrast to books like *Curious George* and *Madeline* that have saturated the pop culture imagination.

I read *Millions of Cats* on a difficult day in our classroom. My co-teacher was home sick and the students were restless and cranky. A break for a read aloud seemed the order of the day. Unlike other readings, I started off with a reminder for students to raise their hand rather than calling out, not feeling that we were in a good place to handle a more open discussion. I also reminded children that I was recording their observations and why. They are always eager to help me with "teacher school" and I wanted to direct their attention to our goal: to both enjoy and seriously consider a text together.

Even before I begin to read there are soft murmurs in the audience. I give a warning “That’s one,” to Keisha who is looking for some attention, making nasty faces to the crowd at large. I announce the author’s name, Wanda Gag, and hear a few mutters, repeating the name, trying it on for size. She is not in their repertoire of familiar author illustrators. Or perhaps, like I did when I was seven, they simply enjoy the sound of the name. “This is another old book,” I say. “It was published in 1928 which makes it almost...” I do quick mental math, hear Ami say “Oh I know” before I conclude “ninety five years old. Almost one hundred years old. And it won a medal, the Newbury medal for being an excellent children’s book.”

Jackie’s hands shoots up before I can say another word. She is in a sullen mood looking at her feet but says “There’s a thing I want to tell you about cats.” She visibly brightens as she says “I like cats with fluffy fur, and I also got a cat named Jack at home who is black and white.” Hands shoot up, eager to share about their own cats but I call on Yasmin sitting at my feet with a thoughtful expression. I know for a fact that she has no cat. “I thought they only give medals to books that have the best illustrations.” We have had several class discussions about the Caldecott and I explain that this is a different award. Before my sentence is even finished Fatima raises her hand to say “I thought cats used to spit out cotton.” At my confusion the class erupts into a chorus of explanations and gestures. “Oh, hairballs,” I say and remind the group that this is a fiction book, not an informational text.

Once upon a time there was a very old man and a very old woman. They lived in a nice clean house which had flowers all around it, except where the door was. But they couldn't be happy because they were so very lonely.

A few sighs of interest, one yawn and a general shifting of seats. *If we only had a cat said the very old woman.* The old man sets out to get her one and finally comes to a hill that is “*quite covered with cats*” Out of the corner of my eye I see Jada make a face, as though disgusted by a hill covered in cats. “Black cats?” Keisha asks with real interest. *Cats here, cats there, cats and kittens everywhere. Hundreds of cats, thousands of cats, millions and billions and trillions of cats.* A few students are already mouthing along with me, sensing that this is the chorus. “It rhymes.” Kaylyn informs us and Ami echoes “it’s a rhyming book.” “Well that part rhymes” I can’t resist pointing out, “but does the whole book rhyme?” Everyone but Ami shakes their head vigorously. Ami looks wounded. “If you’re not sure, let’s listen and find out.”

The old man struggles to decide which cat to take home. He takes home a white cat, a black and white cat (“I have a black and white cat!” from Jackie), a “*fuzzy gray kitten,*” (“Oh my god”), then yet another. Gasps from the rug as the girls begin to catch onto the pattern. “He took four?” questions a voice from the back. The old man grabs another kitten and Ami counts five out loud. When the man finally chooses all the cats, there is a startled squawk from Faith. “I think that’s why it’s called millions of cats,” says Jada with confidence. “Because he took them all home with him.” “He

did?” Ami is surprised, only now grasping that key detail. Luz feels the need to reiterate Jada’s point “It’s called millions because it’s about people who got millions of cats, because they’ve got millions of cats right now.” There are several other hands waving but I chose to press on not wanting to hear the same point repeated another three or four times.

The man and the cats begin to trek home. We pause after one sentence to regain focus and, sure enough, both Serenity and Tianna raise their hands to explain why they think the book is called millions of cats (“He got millions of cats, so it’s millions of cats”) Tianna suggests that the cats may have been abandoned by previous owners and that is why there are so many cats on the hill. *It was funny to see those hundreds and thousands of cats, millions and billions and trillions of cats following him. They came to a pond. “Mew, mew we are thirsty!” cried the hundreds of cats, thousands of cats, millions and billions and trillions of cats.* The children are shocked when the cats manage to drink the whole pond. “Cause there are millions of cats,” Yasmin reminds the class.

The cats devour a hill full of grass. (No one wonders, as I did when I first read the book, why grass is considered an appropriate food for cats). Sia raises her hand to tell us “I noticed every time he’s walking the cats are thinking something like Oh, I’m hungry or oh I’m thirsty.” “So we have exposure to the cats point of view” I say. Fatima adds sagely “I don’t think this is a non-fiction book.”

We chant together as the *hundreds of cats, thousands of cats, millions and billions and trillions of cats* arrive back at the cottage. “They are not gonna fit in.” Ami tells me. “They’re gonna break the house,” someone else echoes.

Taylor tells us that she notices repeating words in the story. Luz says “when they eat and drink at the house everything will be gone at the house.” The old woman in the story seems to agree and suggests that they keep just one cat. Luz smiles in triumph.

The cats argue over who is the prettiest, who deserves a home. I remember being annoyed by these superficial criteria as a child but the girls seem to have no problem with it. I see Faith mouthing the words and acting out “I am the prettiest,” tossing her hair and displaying her nails (or are they claws?). *And so they begin to quarrel.* Multiple students yell out “What’s quarrel?” “Quarrel means to what, Fatima?” I ask since her hand is waving wildly. “Fight.” She confirms and Jada adds “like a war.”

After the “war” the old man and woman can only recover one “*thin and scraggly*” kitten. The kitten explains that it refused to take part in the fight over who was the prettiest because it was so homely. *They took the kitten in the house where the old woman gave it a warm bath and brushed its fur until it was soft and ...* “Comfy,” Ami fills in and frowns when I conclude “*shiny.*” *Every day they gave it plenty of milk and soon it grew nice and plump.* Sighs of contentment at the kitten’s good fortune, along with restless poking in the

front row. “What does plump mean?” calls a small voice. “Fat,” answers Jackie, before I can say a word.

The End is greeted with “awes” and a round of applause. Keisha pops up on her knees. “When you read this book, I thought like you was trying to make it a good time, but I was a little frightened, I thought it was frightening when the cats started scratching and scratching and he had too many cuts, but then at the end he had anything... I want to know when you are watching TV and something happens dangerous...and then they switch. They’re not really hurting them, how do they do it really fast?” Keisha is prone to long speeches, which despite her stutter and articulation problems reveal her sharp mind at work. I’m confused though, as to why she is asking about TV special effects and editing. “That’s kind of like television magic,” I answer “But what in the book made you think of that?” “Because remember when they scratched the man and the cat, when he went home he didn’t have those scratches so I think that is a book magic!” Mystery solved.

Yasmin taps my leg. “When you were reading that book, I made pictures in my head but there is no color, which made me think it was back in the old days.” “I guess that is just a choice the author made, to be black and white,” I respond. Serenity shares “I have a connection... like I want a puppy and my aunt she wanted a lot.” Taylor adds “I think I understand why it’s called Millions of Cats. The little old woman wants one cat but the little old man picks up at first four and then all of them.” She proceeds to retell the entire

story, a signal to me that it's time to end this conversation. Sia shares that "the old man disobeyed his wife." Yasmin points out that she didn't specifically say she wanted only one. The two of them seem ready to debate the point, but the crowd is growing restless. As a compromise for the few students with their hands still in the air I offer the option of writing about the book.

Everyone enthusiastically sets to work on this task, which I leave deliberately open ended. I invite students to draw pictures, share their favorite parts, ask questions or respond in any way they see fit. Most of what I receive is lavish drawings of cats, some using the orange, black and yellow color scheme of the cover, many containing cats with little resemblance to the book, cats wearing crowns, dancing, leaping. Nearly every piece takes the time to lovingly repeat the signature phrase "*Hundreds of cats, thousands of cats, millions and billions and trillions of cats.*"

What struck me about this reading, in contrast to our discussion of *Curious George* was the children's focus on the form rather than the content of the story. They were less concerned with the thoughts and feelings of the old man and his wife, not to mention the kittens, than the features of the book. The illustrations, the unfamiliar language, the simple structure and most of all the delightful repetition of the title were the features that invoked the most questions and conversation. Whereas with *George* the girls were eager to know "what happened next," here they were happy to delight in the

details from the color of the cat's fur to the rhyme and rhythm of a language. It seemed there was more than one way for a picture book to delight and charm my second graders. "More than one way to skin a cat," I thought posting Lila's elegantly crowned kitten above my desk.

The Story of Ferdinand

Published in 1936, Munro Leaf's simple book about a bull that will not fight has special meaning for many adults. Adults on both sides of the Spanish Civil War found the book a compelling allegory of peaceful resistance. Since its publication, it has been both hailed and derided as an example of radical pacifism, individuality and resistance to oppression, even banned in many countries (Paul, 2011). *Ferdinand* has always been a personal favorite. As a child I was drawn to the character of Ferdinand, serene, confident and utterly innocent in the face of violence. I was charmed by Robert Lawson's pencil drawings featuring both realistic details and a lack of color, which to my five year old self gave the story an air of newsprint and truth.

None of my students recognized Ferdinand or recalled reading the book before. I introduced it with my standard speech, explaining that the book was over eighty five years old and that I wanted to hear their ideas for my project, but I was quickly cut off by Jackie waving her hand in the air wildly. "I have two questions: Why is there a buffalo on the cover and also I think that that book is about Spain." "What makes you think this book is about Spain?" I'm curious where this perception came from especially since she

seems convinced that the animal on front it a buffalo. “Because I saw the picture and I thought it was a buffalo, and buffaloes are from Spain,” So we are dealing with a vocabulary issue. “This is a book about Spain but that’s not a buffalo, does anyone recognize what that is on the cover?” Zoe is eager to chime in, more eager than is typical for her. “It’s a bull.”

I start to talk about what a bull is, but am quickly cut off by Jackie again. “Also, once, I know in Spain some people wave a red flag so the bull can go get it.” There is a round of nods and “Oh yeah’s.” I’m about to eagerly build some background knowledge about bullfighting but others beat me to it. “In Spain, they have a tradition of bullfighting...” I begin and Fatima quickly takes over “because all they can see is red.” “Well actually that’s a myth but people thought that, they actually like it because it’s waving and moving in the air.” “So to understand this book,” I continue you need to know that in Spain they have bullfighting and it’s...” Zoe says “I know about bullfighting, it’s when people ride on the bull,” “Well actually,” I say. “It’s called rodeo,” Lila pipes up. Zoe frowns and wrings her hand. I try and wrest back control of the discussion. “It’s good that you brought it up Zoe so we can look at the difference between them. Rodeo is an American tradition, but in Spain they have bullfighting, where there are people called matadors, who try and get the bull to attack them by waving their capes...”

I pause here. I’m not one to sugar coat things for my students, but the reality of bullfighting is ugly. Still the story makes almost no sense if you

don't understand what is at stake for Ferdinand in the ring. I take the plunge. "And they try and fight the bull with swords. It's sad actually. Traditionally they kill it." Gasps and whimpers, especially from Jackie, a sensitive soul who likes her read alouds conflict free. "So a lot of people think that that is not okay, that it's not fair to the animal, but it is something they've been doing there for a long time, so that..." I hesitate. Many hands are up, Jackie's fingers are in her mouth, and several students appear to be about to picket the Spanish embassy. Where do I want to go with this?

"That's the way that sport usually works," I finish somewhat lamely. "But in this story we are going to find out that it doesn't quite work that way." This mainly for Jackie, who is looking both anxious and mutinous. I call on Taylor, who apparently has been ruminating on the rodeo, "So they use the red clothes for when the person falls off the bull when they are riding it." I ignore this because Jackie needs to be acknowledged now, her hands waving frantically, rocking on her knees. "Two things... Why do they have to kill those bulls and also I watched this video about the guy who did that red cape thing" ("the matador" I interject) and the horns from the bull went through his body." I'm a professional so I don't skip a beat. "It can be very dangerous bullfighting both for the bull and for the bullfighters." Everyone has comments on this, and despite my better instincts, I'm curious. A few people bring up the rodeo and I drop the questioning and yank us back to the book at hand.

Before I even finish the title Yasmin asks “But why did they fight the bull?” “It’s a tradition, “I say. “Maybe it seems kind of silly to us but it was just something in Spain they’ve been doing for a long time.” This satisfies no one, but I continue.

Once Upon a time in Spain there was a little bull and his name was Ferdinand. I point out how much I love the illustrations and in response to Samantha’s snickers that “butt” means the bulls bonked their heads together, not a body part. Ferdinand sits in the shade of a cork tree, and Jackie raises her hand to tell us that this is a kind of tree in Spain. Ferdinand’s mother worries about him and Sia raises her hand. “I think this is non-fiction,” she says with confidence. This both surprises and worries me since we’ve just spent an extensive unit learning about informational text. “Why?” I ask “because it doesn’t have any dialogue, it just says what the mother might be thinking.” Time to re-teach those units, I think, as Zoe agrees. “There are like real things in this book like the cork tree.” Suzette, one of my strongest readers says “Maybe there’s no dialogue because it was a long time ago and writers didn’t know what dialogue was.”

I resist correcting everything that is wrong with the last five minutes partly because I want to move forward in the book and partly because Jackie’s hand is in the air again. “Why do people have to kill animals?” This has clearly been on her mind since we began. “You know, that’s a big life question,” I say but her classmates are more than ready to respond, all

speaking at once. I know why, “Samantha confides in me as Lila says “because they eat them for food.” I decide not to add that bulls from bull fights are no longer eaten because of health regulations. Jackie does not appear satisfied with this either, even as several other students restate that people need to kill animals for food. “They didn’t really do it for food,” I finally say, “for bullfighting people did it because it was part of the sport.” Luz has been sitting thoughtfully, head in hands. She adds “I think they do it because for food, but also sometimes it’s tradition.”

Jackie begins to get agitated, crying “But I want people to protect animals!” “Let’s finish the story and see what happens,” I suggest. I remove a lip gloss from the front row and continue. *Ferdinand would shake his head and say “I like it better here where I can just sit quietly and smell the flowers.”*

Samantha provides a running commentary of “Oh my god’s” and “Wows” as Ferdinand grows, culminating in “Oh my God, he’s an adult now.”

Ferdinand’s potential selection to fight in the bull fights provokes worry and gasps. “The mans are gonna kill the bull.” Jada says gravely. “It looks like a cow,” Janeya mutters. Half the girls are shocked at my explanation that bulls are male cows, while the other half shakes their heads at their classmates in disgust.

Ferdinand is stung by the bee and hilarity ensues. Despite our long discussion and pauses, everyone is on the edge of their seat. Jackie clutches her knees in fear. Faith admires detailed illustrations of Madrid, asking “Is

that really Spain?” “The way it looked 87 years ago,” I respond, wanting to keep the momentum of the story alive. We reach my favorite part as Leaf introduces the banderillos, the picadors and finally the matador. Giggles at the strange costumes are mixed with what sounds like whispered prayer for Ferdinand’s safety. “I’m scared,” says a voice in the front. .. *Everyone shouted and clapped because they thought he was going to fight fiercely and butt and snort and stick his horns around.* “He’s not going to do that at all,” Samantha says in her gleeful stage whisper.

And at last we are at the heart of the story. *But not Ferdinand. When he got to the middle of the ring he saw the flowers in all the lovely ladies’ hair and he just sat down quietly and smelled.* You can hear a pin drop. Then they all sigh. *So they had to take Ferdinand home.* “Yay,” yells the crowd with a smattering of applause. I hurry to the ending, eager to close the book and return to our regular day. *And for all I know he is sitting there still, under his favorite cork tree, smelling the flowers just, quietly. He is very happy.*

I’ve always loved this ending, Ferdinand in silhouette, peaceful under his cork tree. The girls are not satisfied. “How can he still be sitting there, if it’s 87 years?” Lila is a bit of a literalist but I see many heads nodding and hands making our “I agree” sign. I start to respond but they beat me to it again “Maybe he is like a grandpa cow now,” Fatima suggests. “With gray whiskers!” Faith giggles. “I think he’s not really still there,” says Zoe, while another voice up front adds “but if it’s non-fiction.” “Okay but this is

actually..." I start while Lila says "I'm pretty sure he's dead." Dissent in the ranks follows. Some students agree with Lila, Ferdinand might have been sitting there when the story was first written but is definitely dead now. "The author might not have known that he died," Luz says sadly. Others hold to the grandpa cow theory, and add that Ferdinand's mom is probably still with him, although herself extremely old.

Finally I say "Would you like to know what I think?" Most do. (A nice feature of second graders is they still care what their teacher has to say.) "When I read this book as a little girl, I always felt like Ferdinand was still sitting there. This is a story book and since Ferdinand is an imaginary character in our minds, well he's real in our minds and our hearts whenever we open the book. I think that even though the book is eighty seven years old whenever children or adults read it, it is just like Ferdinand is still sitting there." I'm not sure what the girls think. Too abstract? Too didactic? Faith flashes me her hundred watt smile and makes our "connection" symbol. "I agree with Ms. Martin," she says. A chorus of voices and hands echo her. "I don't," says Fatima "I'm pretty sure he's a grandpa cow."

The girls reading was radically different than what I had imagined, radically different from my own understandings of the text. Whereas most adults saw the story as a tale of non-violent resistance in the face of violence, they were more concerned with the cruelty of the humans in the story to animals.

Ferdinand is alright at the end but I sensed a lingering discontent about the

fate of other bulls, and unwillingness to buy into Leaf and Lawson's happy ending. How could Ferdinand be sitting there still? Is he really safe for the future? What about the other bulls who lack Ferdinand's character and luck? "Do people still bullfight now?" several children asked me later in the day. What do the traditions of the past mean for the stories of the future?

Although my student's perceptions of the story were different from mine as both an adult and a child, one theme was the same. Like me, my students struggled with whether or not *The Story of Ferdinand* was real. Their debate over whether the story was fiction or non-fiction alerted me not only to the nuances of teaching these genres but also to the precarious balance real and not real holds in young children's life. At seven and eight my students are still separating reality and fantasy in their own daily lives. (Witness the ferocious debates about Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy and Bigfoot that rumble through my classroom each year). *The Story of Ferdinand's* matter of fact style and realistically rendered illustrations threw them. As Zoe confidentially pointed out, cork trees are real, Spain is real, bullfights are real. Why shouldn't the whole story be "real"?

As urban children my student's do not have many models of realistic bovine behavior to compare with Ferdinand. More than that, I think they felt that Ferdinand and his story were real because they feel real. Ferdinand is a compelling character, his peril real, his happy ending well earned. Despite its abstract nature, my explanation of the way that Ferdinand is "real" was

easily accepted. Writers have a saying, “just because something never happened does not mean it is not true.” One of the pleasures of teaching children literature is opening them to the many truths a good book can bring. I believe with all my heart that Ferdinand is still sitting under his cork tree. I hope that my students do too.

The Story about Ping

The Story About Ping (or as I used to call it, just Ping) has always been one of my very favorite books. I adored it as a child. My mother loved it as a child. I cherish a fragile copy that belonged to my grandmother, a first grade teacher. Published in 1933, Ping is old enough for her to have enjoyed both as a child and as an educator. It’s such a simple story, common in children’s books- naughty protagonist has a brief scary adventure. As five year old I poured over its beautiful watercolor pictures of the Yangtze River and recited its lyrical repeated phrases, the wise-eyed boat, the yellow Yangtze.

Initially, though, I did not plan on including Ping as part of this project. I have a copy in my classroom but have never used it as a read-aloud with any class. In a way I loved it too much, was not eager to hear what children had to say about a book that felt like such a deep part of me. I worried that its depictions of 1933 China would be misunderstood by my students, who have little concept of Asian culture and virtually no exposure to Asian

Americans at all. I felt that Ping was yet another “animal” story, like Ferdinand, and Curious George and was eager to try another type of text.

Still I found myself picking up Ping and bringing it carefully over to our carpet, where twenty five small faces gathered. Looking at the cover, with the same illustration I’ve always known, I found myself comforted and excited. Reading Ping simply felt good.

At this point the girls know the drill. I introduce the book adding that it is one of my very favorites. Right away Jackie raises her hand, “Is this story a fable, or fairytale?” “What makes you think that?” I ask. Ever since we completed a unit on fairy tales and fables this is a common question, with surprising answers. “Because I think it is because there is no such thing as a duck named Ping.” I think about this. Truthfully Ping is a fairly realistic story, albeit one told from the duck’s point of view. “I mean someone could give a duck a name. Why don’t you think about it as we read?” I suggest.

Once upon a time there lived a beautiful duck named Ping. Ping lived with his mother and his father and two sisters and three brothers and eleven aunts and seven uncles and forty two cousins. This elicits an “Oh wow,” from Ami. *Their home was a boat with two wise eyes on the Yangtze River.* I pause to explain that the Yangtze River is in China. “What the..?” comes from a dramatic individual somewhere in the second row. “Remember,” I add, “This book is eighty years old so this book takes place in China about eighty years ago.”

We see Ping and his family go through their daily routine of fishing in the river and returning to the boat at night. Ping was always careful, very, very careful not to be last because the last duck to cross the bridge always got spanked on the back. “Ooooooh.” The children are impressed by this punishment. With the speedy logic of a good children’s book, Ping misses the call to return. And Ping did not want to be spanked. “Why didn’t he just walk?” Zoe asks, “I think no matter how much he hurried...” I trail off. “How come the guy spanks the yellow duck but not the white duck,” Yasmin points to the pictures. “Well he spanks whichever one is last and Ping is the yellow duck, that’s how we know which one is Ping.” This occurs to me in the moment, that illustrator Kurt Weiss chose to make Ping a yellow duckling distinct from the generic white ducks around him.

Jackie has been meditating on the book’s genre and veracity. “I know that China is a real place, a real place, so is it true that whenever you are last you get spanked on the back?” “If you are thinking about fiction or non-fiction it’s not really about whether there are true details but whether the book is giving us information or telling a story to entertain us.” I do not want an extensive debate about the genre to erupt so early in our reading. “And also,” Jackie continues undeterred, “the boats’ eyes are really freaky.” I tell her they use to freak me out when I was little. Serenity raises her hand to ask “I wonder why the author wanted to put all the other ducks as white and the one duck yellow.” Tianna wants to know “Why the last duck has to be spanked?” I shrug. Keisha decides to answer Serenity’s question by

saying “I think he might start as a little baby and then he is gonna turn into a swan.” “You might be right,” I tell her “because little baby ducks have softer yellow feathers and when they grow up they have white feathers.”

Yasmin returns to this idea, “I think the answer to Serenity’s question he kept all the ducks white and the one duck yellow for us to know which one is Ping.”

Ping did not want to be spanked so he hid behind the grasses and as the dark came and the pale moon shone in the sky, Ping watched the wise eyed boat slowly sail away down the Yangtze River. “He’s getting taller,” whispers Ami. Ping is in fact craning his neck to watch the boat disappear, but no one corrects her observation. When he wakes the next morning Ping is all alone, a turn of events that terrified me as a young reader. My class seems unconcerned. Serenity says “I think he’s all alone because when he was hiding he went too far and didn’t notice because he was running away.” Taylor adds “I think this book tells a story about the little duck named Ping but if the boat left him on purpose the title should be *The Adventures of Ping*.” Zoe states confidently that this book is similar to the fable “The Ugly Duckling.” When asked why, she says “The duck might turn into a swan.” I see some other students shaking their heads no, but no one else comments.

Ping looks for his home but none of the boats are his, the “wise eyed boat”. “What does the wise eyed boat look like?” asks Nathalie. “It has eyes,”

Janeya tells her. “Actually I think all the boats had eyes” I say. “Maybe it was a tradition in China.” “It’s creepy.” “Is it real?” “Yuck.” “I think that it was real, a tradition but I don’t know for sure,” I respond. We flip back to the beginning to get a good look at the wise eyed boat before going on.

Then came a boat full of strange dark fishing birds. Ping saw them diving for fish for their masters. Ping dodges the fishing birds and comes up close to the houseboats.

“Does anyone know what a houseboat is?” I ask. Many hands shoot up. I realize I may have underestimated my audience with this question but I let Faith answer anyway. “It’s a boat and you live in it.” Kaylynn gestures eagerly, “There’s a little, like a little on top.” “Like a little house,” I finish for her, and she grins. Samantha points out the “house” part of the houseboat in the picture. Several more definitions of houseboat tumble forth. Everyone seems to need to state their own definition before feeling clear, or perhaps they just like hearing their own voices.

As Ping ate the crumbs he came nearer and nearer to the houseboat then.

Splash! There was a boy in the water. The floating boy with the barrel always seemed impossibly exotic to me as a child. “Do you know why he has a barrel?” I ask. “No,” “Yes” “No,” “So he can float.” “So he can swim.”

“Apparently that was another custom,” I add and there are a few “ohhs” as the idea sinks in.

Quickly the boy grabbed Ping and held him tight. "QUACK, Quack, Quack!" cried Ping. "Ooooh!" yelled the little boy. My sound effects get big laughs from the audience. Ping and his capturer/rescuer are hauled into the boat. "Oh my god," says Samantha, her customary refrain every time the action picks up. *"Ahh, a duck dinner has come to us," said the boy's father.* Many squeaks and gasps ensue. "They're gonna eat him?" Ami asks worriedly. I shrug but the girls are not ready to let this go. More squeaks, gasps and murmurs accompany the next page. *"I will cook him with rice at sunset tonight," said the boy's mother. "No, no, my nice duck is too beautiful to eat," cried the boy. But down came a basket all over Ping.* The wave of protest crests as Ping is jailed in the basket. Kaylynn is on her knees hand over her mouth in shock. "That's not fair," Samantha says calmly but sadly. "It's kind of not fair," I say and then add "It kind of relates to our conversation about Ferdinand, about the way people treat animals."

I have opened the floodgates. At first there are some low murmurs and Jada says darkly, "They tried to kidnap him." Serenity raises her hand. She is a thoughtful reader and seems particularly engaged by this story. "I think they want to eat the duck 'cause they always, cause in China, they didn't have food so they have to eat the duck." Luz is shaking her head. "This wouldn't have happened if he would just go home." "If he had just listened," I laugh. "Except he would have gotten hit," Reina acts this out, smacking her own arm. Luz has an elaborate scheme where Ping can jump to avoid the spanking. Samantha brings us back to our original point. "Why?" She

demands “Are they doing this to the poor duck?” “They want to eat,” I answer, “That’s what Serenity said, they need food.” Yasmin chimes in “Maybe they haven’t eaten in months or years.”

Jackie has been oddly quiet. Typically in a discussion about animals her hand is the first to go up. “Ohh,” she bursts, “I think that the main idea of the story is that it’s in China.” “It is set in China,” I respond. At least she’s not crying. Reina has an “aha” moment, “I think they want to eat the duck because in China they eat different stuff from New York, they eat like mostly ducks and duck sauce.” For some reason this gets a lot of giggles. I remind the girls that people in many countries can eat ducks. Taylor gestures empathetically as she speaks. “I think they ate the duck that night because they are in the ocean and they must have not had **no** food, except what they catch from the water or the sea.”

The boy releases Ping to gasps of relief from all. Even more excited gasps and waving of hands as Ping hears his master’s call. “He’s still gonna be last,” a voice mutters. *But up marched Ping over the little bridge and spank came the spank of Ping’s back. Then at last Ping was back with his mother and father and two brothers and three sisters and eleven aunts and seven uncles and forty two cousins.* After I finish I make my customary requests for comments and thoughts, although before I even open my mouth hands are waving wildly.

Ami wants to know how many ducks there are. “That would be a great math problem.” I say and re-read the list of Ping’s family. “We could add them,” Samantha squeals with delight. She is an accomplished mathematician and is thrilled at the prospect. “We can’t do it right now,” I say “But maybe on Monday we can make that our math meeting challenge to add all the different ducks.” Jackie asks about the illustrator, “His name starts with a K? Why is that his name? And also did he write it and draw it?” I answer her questions. Yasmin says “I agree with Taylor, it should be the adventures. He goes on the water and another boat.”

Suzette returns us to an earlier idea. She is a thoughtful child and often spends a long time mulling concepts over before responding. “Maybe they spank the ducks because it is a tradition in China.” “Could be,” I answer, “Or maybe it’s the man’s way of telling the ducks to hurry up.” This sparks something for Reina who adds “Sometimes on TV I saw with animals they have like a rope around their necks and they pull it to tell them to go faster.” A few other children bring up whips and cowboys. I’m amazed at the connections they make. Tianna sums up our arguments “It’s either a tradition or a consequence.” Jada begins to retell the story starting with “Ping gets whapped because he got lost.” Precious says, “They spank the duck to say hurry up before you get lost or somebody kidnaps you.” “Like what happened to Ping,” Samantha sighs.”

I'm ready to conclude our discussion and move on, but the children are decidedly not. Despite a lot of restless movement it's clear Ping still holds their attention. Many hands are up with ideas to share, and all eyes follow Taylor as she thinks out loud in her deliberate way. "The way the story goes that if you're last you get hit on the back, I think it's not fair that the animals get hit. If they're being silly and then they get hit that might be okay. If I wanted to do something about that I would write a letter to China." I blink, surprised at her quick move from emotion to advocacy. "Well not everybody in China probably does that but you want to let people know how you feel about the way they treat animals." Kaylynn is Taylor's close friend and she takes a moment to express her support and then introduce an interesting thought. "I agree with Taylor but..." she shakes her head, "not everyone, not all the people are mean to animals. I mean some people are nice and they treat animals nice and don't eat them or hit them." There are more murmurs of assent. I see an opportunity for both life lessons and closure, something no elementary school teacher can resist. "I guess we need to decide how we want to treat animals then," I say. "We can choose how we want to be." We end on that note. Several children approach me and beg to put *The Story About Ping* in their book baggies.

Reflecting on this read aloud a number of things jump out. The girls were as enchanted by Ping and his adventures (and stubbornly insistent that they should be deemed adventures, not just a story) as I was at their age. They had some of the same thoughts, "How many ducks is that?" "Why do the

boats have eyes?” as I did as a child and I have no doubt as thousands of children through the ages have had as well.

What was surprising to me was their return to the theme of animal rights. How people treat animals and how they should treat animals was a big part of our discussion with Ferdinand. It also was a trend, albeit a subtler one, in our conversations about Millions of Cats and Curious George as well. (During our later discussion of Babar, this concept would again dominate) Was this just my class? Did I simply have a collection of justice minded individuals on my hands? Or is there something inherent about these books? They are old texts and an increased concern for animal welfare and rights is a major societal development over the last fifty or so years. I wonder if Depression era children were as concerned about Ping being eaten. Maybe they were. After all Ping (and Ferdinand and George) are the protagonists of the story. We are supposed to fear for them, to worry about their fates. Perhaps the conversations about animal rights are a natural result of the fact that many children’s books have animal heroes with animal problems. Or perhaps having opened that door with our conversation about Ferdinand, the way people treat and live with animals is simply on my student’s minds.

In the end why this theme reoccurs is of less interest to me than the fact that it does. It confirms my belief that these texts are rich grounds for children and adults to explore. It reminds me that children approach books

in their own ways and those ways are not necessarily that of their parents and teachers. Certainly they may not be what an author has intended. Our collective experiences reading these books together brings new life and new ideas to our classroom community. Sometimes these ideas are uncomfortable ones. Sometimes they spill over into math or art or social studies. We shape these texts as they shape us. This is how it should be.

Madeline

I was not planning on reading *Madeline* with the girls. I was sure that nearly all of them had read it before and I was most interested in hearing their first impressions of classic texts. Like *Curious George* *Madeline* is a classic among classics, one of the books that first springs to mind when thinking about 20th century children's literature (Silvey, 2004). Like *Curious George*, *Madeline* has been merchandised, spawning movies and TV series, sequels (both by its original author and ghost writers, and products galore. Like George (and her soul sister Eloise), *Madeline* has been reclaimed by adults, appearing on t-shirts and calendars, New Yorker cartoons, blogs, and counterculture paraphernalia.

Because the girls and I had explored George, I shied away from *Madeline*. Still one Friday when I had some extra time for a luxurious read aloud, the original *Madeline* found its way into my hands. I decided to share it, not with the whole group but with the small collection of girls in my reading group. These six students are all children who struggle with reading, with

decoding, understanding, focusing on any text. Despite their difficulties with books, they are still fresh and un-jaded enough to love a good read aloud and to have thoughtful and passionate opinions about books. I decided that their voices, often drowned out or absent in our reading workshop would be interesting to hear.

We huddled together on the purple rug. “*Madeline* was published in 1939,” I begin. Tianna lets out a low “Oooh” although I am not sure if it is in reference to what I have just said or the mischief Keisha is getting into with her shoe. “That’s a lot of days,” Jada informs us all. “It was about seventy years ago.” “And there was two lines,” Ami says slowly, “And one of them got sick.”

When I show them the cover all six girls claim to have read *Madeline* before, although a few of them seemed to be confused between this book and *Madeline’s Rescue*. “It has a dog,” Keisha, kept repeating, while the others yell that she is wrong. “There are a few *Madeline* books, like a series,” I explain. “Oh I’ve read the one where she got sick and she was crying,” says Jada and Tianna shakes her head in annoyance. “That’s this one,” I say. Several students say they have seen the movie. Sierra decisively says that she has never heard of any of it, contradicting her earlier statement that this book was her favorite. I decide it would be a mistake to argue this point.

Some grumbling and we settle down. *In an old house in Paris that was covered with vines, lived twelve little girls in two straight ...* “lines!” all six

squeal and Ami giggles. *In two straight lines they broke their bread.* “That means they were eating,” I explain to bewildered faces. “Twelve children,” Ami traces one line with her finger. “Six here and six there, two lines,” I add. “That’s a doubles fact!” exclaims Keisha, looking up from her shoe for the first time.

And brushed their teeth and went to bed. “One is going to get lost,” Ami whispers. Sierra starts laughing wildly. “It can’t be true that they live in a big house with twelve beds.” “Why not?” “No one has twelve kids,” Sierra cracks up, shaking her head incredulously. I explain that this is a school for the children, a school where they sleep. “It could be a college,” Sierra reasons, while Tianna says “I don’t think there is really twelve girls, actually. Because these two are holding hands.” She gestures to the page where Madeline clutches Miss Clavel's hand. We count the children by twos and determine that there are indeed twelve.

I address Sierra who is still muttering about college. “I’m pretty sure that when this was published, this was meant to be a school. Some places, even now, have kids stay and sleep at their schools.” “A going away school,” says Faith sagely. I suddenly remember something. “When I was little I used to think it was an orphanage, but there is a line later in the book when Madeline gets a present from her dad. So she must have parents. I think it’s a school.” The idea of sleep away schools seems both thrilling and disturbing, but we press on.

They smiled at the good and frowned at the bad. And sometimes they were very sad. “In the other *Madeline* they have a dog,” Keisha says again, “and Madeline fell in the water, and in this book I think they still have the dog.” Elbows reach out to nudge Keisha to shush her into letting me continue. *They left the house at half past nine, in two straight lines in rain or shine.* Ami gestures to the page, “So like that’s the afternoon and that’s the dark.” “Maybe” I answer “or that’s a rainy day and a ...” “sunny day,” Sierra finishes while Keisha states “Rainy day, bad, sunny day good.” *The smallest of all was Madeline. She was not afraid of ...* (“Anything!” yells Ami. Her faces falls as I finish the sentence) *...mice. She loved winter, snow and ice* (“I don’t like winter no more,” mutters Sierra.) *To the tiger in the zoo Madeline just said “pooh, pooh.”* Loud giggles. *And nobody knew so well how to frighten Ms.Clavel.* Sierra is beside herself with laughter for some reason.

In the middle of the night Ms. Clavel turned on the light and said “Something is not right.” Small voices echo “right” with me. “I know what’s not right,” Ami states with confidence as Jada coos “she’s crying,” and Sierra continues her inexplicable hysterics. “Cause Madeline is crying,” Ami explains, which sobers Sierra up momentarily. Madeline is taken to the hospital. I ask if anyone knows what an appendix is and I am told that a first grader had hers out last year. Tianna points to the doctor and says “That’s her dad.” “It’s the doctor,” I correct.

Rustling and annoyance at not being able to see the pictures,” Penguins, “pipes a small voice as I display a page with a nun in full habit. “Oh the ambulance,” says Keisha and Faith points “It’s the hospital.” “On the ambulance they have a lot of things to get better..” “Why is her stomach hurting?” “And now she is sick...” Several voices overlap, stirred by the drama that is reaching its climax. “Her stomach was hurting because she had an infection, that’s why she went to the hospital,” I clarify for my anxious audience. “Why does she have an infection?!!” “It just happens,” I soothe. The rabbit shaped crack on the ceiling produces a few giggles. Sierra points out that since Madeline is gone there are now only twelve children. Visions of math problems dance through my head. “There were twelve before now there is only eleven. Her partner doesn’t have a partner.” “She holds Ms.Clavel’s hand,” Ami tells me.

As Madeline’s classmates visit, the girls observe a relatively hushed silence. Madeline’s scar provokes questions, namely “What’s a scar?” “I know a scar,” says Keisha, “Like mine.” She gestures to a birthmark. “When you get hurt, sometimes it leaves mark on your body and that’s a scar.” I explain. “Awwws.”

In the middle of the night Ms. Clavel turned on the light and said “Something is not right,” they all shout. And afraid of a disaster Ms. Clavel ran fast and faster. And she said “Please children do, tell me what is troubling you. Ami bursts out “Oh, I know. They miss Madeline.” “No, No,” Tianna insists “They

want their appendix out too.” “Why do you think they want that?” I ask and am surprised by her answer. “They miss Madeline.” “They don’t want Madeline to be alone,” Sierra theorizes. “And they miss her,” Faith suggests. I was not anticipating this; the big twist that the other children are jealous of Madeline’s attention, toys and scar is lost for these readers. Maybe they are just too good natured, assuming best intentions for Madeline’s classmates. They do attend a close knit girls’ school. Sierra, Faith and Tianna reiterate that they do not want Madeline to be alone, because they visited her. Keisha chews her collar thoughtfully. “They want their appendix out too,” says Tianna “because they saw her scar.” “They thought her scar was cool?” I ask and there are a few nods.

“Let’s re-read those pages,” I suggest. *In they walked and all went “aah,” when they saw the toys and candy and the dollhouse from Papa.* Gasps. “Dollhouse,” Faith grins knowingly. “I know, because they crying because they miss Madeline and they wanna play with the toys.” Sierra is pleased with this conclusion while others look doubtful. “She got a lot of presents when she was sick,” I add. “No, I think they don’t wanna play with the toys, it’s...” Tianna gestures drawing a scar in the air. “It’s the toys,” says Faith. “Maybe it’s both,” I throw out and there is quick discussion of the plausibility of this statement. Ami asks “Why do Madeline has candy?” “Sometimes when people are sick other people want them to feel better so they give them flowers or candy or...” I am interrupted by Sierra who adds “video games.” I decide to hammer my teaching point home. “Maybe their

point of view is Madeline got a lot of attention when she was sick, we want attention and toys and a scar too.”

“I got ‘nother reason.” Sierra sits up on her knees and waves her hand as she talks. “Another reasons they wants their, I forgot what it’s called – appendix, out. Since Madeline shows a scar...” (“I said that already,” Tianna interjects, annoyed) “... they are pretty worried.” “Oh they want their appendix!” Ami declares. It always takes her a few minutes longer to reach the same conclusions as the rest of the group. “They have their appendix so they want it out.” *All the little girls cried “Boo-hoo, we want to have our appendix out too.”* “I knew it!” “I was right” “Tianna was right and me too.” “*Goodnight little girls, thank the Lord you are well. And now go to sleep,*” said Ms. Clavel. Since I began teaching I have identified strongly with the put upon Ms. Clavel. I look around tenderly at my little girls who sprawl on the carpet in various states of enthrallment or restlessness.

She turned out the light and closed the door. And that’s all there is, there isn’t any more. On the last page Bemelmans chose to show just Ms. Clavel in a square of light, the words gradually getting smaller. It’s a wonderfully suggestive view of the door closing, filled with both movement and a sense of peace. “Where are they?” Sierra demands. “Where are they,” “I think the author chose just to show Ms. Clavel turning off the light.” Sierra shakes her head and peers into my lap to inspect the illustration closely. “How come Madeline didn’t come back?” Tianna sounds genuinely distressed.

“She will come back, we just don’t see it in the story.” I assure her “So she did come back at the end of the story,” Sierra says comfortingly. “Keisha,” Tianna hisses. Keisha is rocking happily back and forth, eating her collar and apparently irritating Tianna to no end. Sierra continues oblivious to tension around her. “I notice it says something, that this one (she points to the Eiffel Tower) on the cover is bigger than this one (the Eiffel tower on the back.)”

Jada has been very quiet and now she has her hand up. “I notice that they were sad on rainy days and smile on a shiny days and Ms. Clavel say something is not right and Madeline was crying cause she had an infection in her stomach and then the doctor take her to the hospital and take the infection out of her and Madeline saw the sky and played with the toys and candy and the dollhouse from papa.” Generally when someone decides to retell the entire story it is time to stop. It signals that we are out of new things to say. A few hands still wave, along with a few whimpers of “I notice something.” Tianna seizes the book and hijacks the conversation, retelling the story page by page. Faith says “I have a wondering. Why did the author chose not to have the family and dad in it?” “I don’t know,” I say and am met with a number of shrugs. Our conversation ends with a whimper, not a bang as Sierra tries to retell the story again only to be met with irritation and jeers from the rest of the girls.

We clean up for snack and I am left with Faith's wondering and many others. One of the most salient features of *Madeline*, the spunk and bravery of its heroine, left little impression on my students. Then again these are twenty first century children. That Madeline is not afraid of mice, tigers or cold may not be particularly impressive to them. After all they regularly handle worms in science class, ride the subway and are all experts in frightening their Ms. Clavel (me). If they did not go to an all-girls school would Madeline's independence and individuality be more striking? What fascinated my student's most was not their connection to Madeline but her differences. Her strange sleep away school with only twelve girls, her beautiful Parisian landscapes and the children's daily strolls. The charming "twist" of essentially sibling rivalry among the students held no appeal, no understanding for them, at first. Even with coaching this aspect of the story was not immediately accessible or compelling. Maybe this would have been different if I had chosen to present the story to the entire class. Maybe not. I've seen that my students' readings of classic books are not my readings, and not those of other adults. Like Madeline they enter these other worlds on their own terms.

The Story of Babar

The Story of Babar was the book that originally inspired this project. In Should We Burn Babar? Essays of Children's Literature, Herbert Kohl examines sexism, racism, condescension and bias of all forms in a wide variety of children's texts. The title essay offers a reading of Babar as a colonialist allegory, a narrative where the African elephant is civilized by the adoption of European culture and language. Reading Kohl's work as an undergraduate I found his argument compelling, even disturbing, but was left with an important unanswered question; what do the children think? Would modern children respond to Babar? Would they pick up on the themes Kohl identifies? Be affected by them overtly or subtly? How would one know? And perhaps most importantly, would most modern children *like The Story of Babar*? Is their enjoyment of this text enough to excuse the biases that it may present?

I have always liked Babar, or I did up until my reading of Kohl's essays. As a child I read not just the original adventures but several of the later books published by Jean de Brunhoff and continued by his son Laurent. I vividly remember being particularly fond of the elephant's clothes and treasuring a doll version of Babar's young cousin, Arthur, in a red and white sailor suit with matching hat.

Like Curious George and Madeline, Babar and his kin have spun off into merchandise, sequels, cartoons and television. Unlike George and Madeline they have also generated considerable literary and culture criticism, Kohl's

essay being only one of several decrying the elephant's colonialism.² My students, of course, are familiar with the stuffed animals and cartoons but not the literary analysis. Nor were they familiar with the original book, or even any of the sequels. When I produced my copy of *The Story of Babar*, the first in de Brunhoff's series, published in 1931 (1933 in English), several students claimed that it was a show on Nick Jr. They expressed surprise at seeing Babar in book form. "Oh Babar!" says Ami as though surprised to see him outside of a television set. "He says 'tusktastic!'" Jackie informs me.

Like all the books I've read to them for this project, I take the time to introduce *The Story of Babar* by telling the girls the year it was published and some background information, in this case that the book was originally written in French. After some "ewwing" and "awwing" and a few questions, (How did it end up in English then? So wait, the elephant is French?) We settle in to read.

In the great forest a little elephant is born. His name is Babar. His mother loves him very much. She rocks him to sleep with her trunk while singing softly to him. I have not read this book in years but I am immediately reminded that the Babar's mother will shortly be shot by a wicked hunter. Memories of crying over this surface and I cringe. I'm not looking forward to reading this out loud.

² See Adam Gopnik "Freeing the Elephants," *The New Yorker*, September 22, 2008.

De Brunhoff talks to his readers. *Babar is a good little elephant. See him digging in the sand with his shell?* “I see him!” Sierra squeaks with pleasure. Taylor raises her hand “Remember when we read Ferdinand? We have a difference here because Ferdinand didn’t want to play with the other bulls but Babar plays with the other elephants.” *Babar is riding happily on his mother’s back when a wicked hunter hidden behind some bushes shoots at them. The hunter has killed Babar’s mother.* They are stunned into silence. The hunter captures Babar and Jackie bursts into tears. A few hands reach over to rub her back, but no one takes their eyes off of me, or Babar for a second.

“But why did he kill his mother, and why does he want Babar?” Samantha demands. “We’ve had discussions about the way people treat animals before...” I begin. Zoe interjects with a fact about elephants, that they can live a long time. Samantha shouts “I know why! I saw on channel 158 that people want to kill some of the animals that have horns because the horns are...” “To make jewelry,” adds Zoe. “They want the tusks,” I say and Samantha nods “they want the tusks to be rich.” Jackie is in utter hysterics now. Kaylyn chews her nails furiously. I remind the class that this is an old book and yes people did hunt elephants for their tusks, for ivory.” I give a little lecture on the ivory trade and its current illegality and reassure Jackie that Babar will be fine. “I know sometimes you have strong feelings when scary things happen to characters in books, but remember that it’s a fiction story.” Impatient voices cluck for me to continue reading. Reina says “Well

why don't people just cut the tusks off, it's better than killing." I have no good answer for this. "The baby doesn't have tusks," Samantha reminds her. "Maybe it was just easier to kill them." Now I have more than one crying. I feel guilty but also determined to have my teachable moment. I forge ahead. "Look, sometimes in the real world there are things that are upsetting and authors chose to write about them, especially it turns out we've been talking a lot about how people treat animals."

Low mutters. "It's scary," says a voice in the back. "Sometimes there are scary things but it's part of our job as a community to talk about these things and think about these things together." I continue to reassure the girls that the ivory trade is currently illegal, since worry for non-fictional elephants appears to be the biggest concern right now. Zoe adds that elephants have a great sense of smell and would probably be able to sense if someone was hunting them. (Where did she learn all of this stuff about elephants?) Samantha quotes educational television and reminds us all that some people want to save the animals and make it so "they won't do that." We decide to keep reading.

Babar runs away and comes to a town. As Babar explores civilization for the first time, Kohl's essay comes back to me. What are the implications of this, the naked elephant discovering the city, diving into its luxuries, becoming for all intents and purposes a man about town? *He is especially interested in two gentlemen he sees on the street. He says to himself, "Really,*

they are very well dressed. I would like to have some fine clothes too.” Babar meets the little old lady who happily caters to his every whim, (a relationship I remember finding odd even as a child). As Babar thanks her politely Samantha exclaims “He can talk?!” “It’s a fiction book,” I answer.

Babar goes shopping at the “Big Store.” The girls laugh as Babar rides the elevator repeatedly. Like me as a young girl, they seem charmed by the sartorial details of the text (Babar’s suit of a becoming shade of green, his handsome derby hat and shoes with spats). But at the sight of Babar looking in the mirror Ami gasps, “He’s turning bigger.” I never realized before that in this illustration Babar appears as a fully grown adult elephant, whereas naked on the street he was a tusk-less juvenile. The symbolism of the clothes is not lost on the girls. “He’s grown up,” adds Ami. “He looks like he works at a job,” Reina says thoughtfully. “Like he’s a professor,” Zoe chuckles. “A professional...” Jaclyn has just learned this word but she is applying it quite accurately. The power of the clothing is that Babar is instantly grown, complete with tusks, and a professional looking elephant indeed.

Babar gets his photo taken, to many murmurs and calls from my audience. (“How does he know how to do all this stuff?” Reina wonders out loud). “I noticed something,” Keisha tells me, “Now I am making a picture in my head and a connection because on Disney Junior he looks like that, and his little

friend wears different clothes.” Now that he is wearing clothes, Babar is recognizable as his television self.

Babar dines with the old lady. And subsequently moves in with her. The children “eww” in disgust at Babar in the bath and Babar in his shorts doing exercises, typical second grade reactions to any suggestion of nudity. It’s funny to me though, that the naked elephant at the beginning of the book got no response, as unclothed animals seem typical. Now that Babar is civilized his lack of clothes is something silly. *[He] goes out for a drive every day. The old lady has given him the car. She gives him whatever he wants.* Again this relationship strikes my adult self as odd, but the students seem to see nothing wrong with the wish fulfillment fantasy of it all. “Oh my god he can drive?” Luz asks. “Whatever he wants?” asks Faith in awe.

Taylor raises her hands. ‘It seems like he’s starting to become like a person, and he’s growing bigger and getting more mature. Now he is doing bigger things. First he got clothes, and then he is doing exercises now he is learning to become a professor.’ Ami says “He’s growing tusks!” Sierra slowly thinks out loud, “I think every time he learns more stuff he gets smarter and he gets bigger and his tusks get bigger.” Fatima adds “And he’s standing up not on all fours anymore.” Is Fatima bothered by this? Is Kohl right? My students certainly understand the wilderness to civilization narrative at play here. What implications do that have for your average seven or eight year old? I have no good answers for this either.

Jackie is worried that now that Babar has tusks the hunter will be after here. I reassure her again. “Why do they have to grow tusks?” Yasmin mutters. Everyone is yelling at once, questions about tusks, how they use them, why people want them. I move forward. *Two years pass. One day during his walk Babar sees two little elephants coming towards him. They have no clothes on.* Why did de Brunhoff point that out, I wonder. “They have no clothes because they’re elephants,” I feel compelled to add. Babar immediately buys his small cousins clothes and good cakes. My class is delighted to see Babar’s family. Luz says “Now I notice that they both have clothes on.” Babar decides to return home to the forest. Luz continues, “Now that they start wearing clothes, maybe they will start getting bigger and bigger more fast.” (This is in fact what happens to Celeste, although young Arthur inexplicably remains child size and small tusked). The entire clothes subplot is really standing out to me. It strikes the girls too, although I am not sure exactly what they make of it. “In the movie Babar, they wear the same clothes.” Ami states. Sierra says “I think when he goes back he is gonna stay with his clothes, and everybody is gonna come at the end to the city and everyone is gonna buy clothes.” Others nod and agree with her.

Samantha giggles over the old lady helping Babar pack his trunk. (“Not that trunk,” I tell her). *Babar kisses the old lady goodbye.* Yasmin raises her hand “At the first part when he was little, he cried about his mom. Then he forgot about his mom. Then he met her (she points to the old lady) and cried about her.” “The old lady’s like his mom,” Sierra adds. This is an angle I’ve

literally never considered in twenty five plus years of reading the book.

“Huh.” I say.

Babar and company depart for the forest. The naked mothers must walk behind the car in the dust, because there is no room in the car. This is a detail that Kohl points out as solidifying the superiority of the “clothed, civilized” versus “naked, uncivilized” elephants. It bothers me but passes without comment from the kids. *Alas that very day the king of the elephants had eaten a bad mushroom. It poisoned him and he became ill, so ill that he died.* The illustration here, of the king crumpled and green from the poisonous mushroom terrified me as a child. It put me off mushrooms for years. The girls are equally horrified, gasping and shaking their heads. Jackie is on the verge of tears again, so I hurry onward. I’m beginning to want to be finished with Babar as soon as possible.

Babar is elected king, after all the elephants remark on his car and clothes. There is much arguing about if Cornelius, the old elephant is the king of the elephants or the king died, the role of the same character on the show and what we are having for lunch. They settle back down after some grumbling.

Babar announces that he and Celeste are engaged. “What’s engaged?” Faith asks. When I reply that it means they are going to get married the room erupts in “ewws” and “yucks.” Seven year olds are not romantic creatures. “It’s not nasty!” Ami yells indignantly over all of this, “My mom is getting married!” I wait until they finish the commentary which takes a few

moments. Babar plans a wedding and coronation including sending the dromedaries for wedding clothes. Ami carefully analyzes the picture. “He buys his crown, at the elephant store.” Tianna says, “I notice Babar tells the animals that have no clothes, to go to the store and get clothes.” Others nod; this is as it should be.

Zoe raises her hand with what proves to be an explosive point. “I notice that they were cousins and they were getting married.” She makes a face. “I guess with elephants it’s okay.” I tell her. This seems like a non-issue to me but it bothers the girls who are apparently okay with elephants driving and smoking pipes but not marrying their cousins. Fatima raises her hand, “But Celeste was his cousin.” “It’s okay for elephants.” I insist trying to finish the book. I read the last lines hastily because multiple hands are waving in the air, with accompanying “oohs” and calls of “me, me.” Precious says that she thinks that maybe the story takes place in France, since the author was French. Several others point out that it says it takes place in Africa, and anyhow elephants are from Africa. Precious shrugs, undeterred.

Taylor is annoyed, “I still don’t understand if they were cousins and they were kind of feeling like sister brother, I don’t understand how they can get married and I don’t understand, is it illegal now or was it illegal then.” I groan inwardly. This was not really the issue I was expecting. “It’s a fiction story,” I try lamely. Zoe turns to Taylor and tells her “It’s illegal for people.” There is a flurry of arguments. Ever the optimist, I try and explain. “It

actually depends, it's illegal in some places and not others." This is an instance where being truthful with children is the wrong choice because now they all want to know where marrying your cousin is legal or illegal. Luz asks me why it should be illegal. I don't know whether to giggle or sigh. "Because sometimes when two cousins have kids it's not healthy for the kids." This brings me more raised hands. "All I can tell you is that the author decided it was okay for elephants in the book," I finish desperately. "But is it legal in New York?" Samantha presses. "I don't know."

Ami is frantically tapping my leg but I ignore her in favor of Jackie who as always is concerned with animal rights. "But in New York it is illegal to kill elephants?" Leaving aside the fact that there are really no elephants to kill here I assure Jackie that it is illegal to kill or hunt elephants anywhere in the world. "They're an endangered species," I say and Zoe nods wisely. "They call them endangered because they can kill you." I explain that a species is endangered when they might go extinct, not because they are actually dangerous. Luz raises her hand again "It's not good to marry your sister or your cousin." Before I can say anything Keisha adds "But in New York you can marry a girl right?" Much as I would like to keep discussing marriage legislation and endangered species with these children I decide it is time for math. Continued conversation about cousin marriage, ivory and the time Fatima's dad maybe saw a lion takes us into our next activity.

I was surprised at how Babar felt to read. It felt musty or old in a way that the other books we've read together have not. Perhaps it was the aspect of translation since this is the first book we have read that did not originate in English. Maybe it was the quaint details that used to charm me as a child, the spats and the pipe and the hunter in the pith helmet that made Babar seem dated. Perhaps it was my reading of Kohl that I could not shake. The narrative's obsession with clothes, with the difference between the jungle and the city, the plain matter of fact way with which characters die and Babar assumes power rubbed me the wrong way. Maybe my unease with the story leaked into my reading of it, although I tried not to editorialize. The girls did seem to enjoy it and participated with their usual thoughtfulness and enthusiasm. I did notice many restless bodies during our reading, although it's always hard to pin down the cause of that kind of behavior. No one asked for Babar later, although I did put it out into our basket of shared read alouds.

I cannot tell how much of the narrative of colonialism that Kohl and other critics outlined was relevant to my students. It stood out to me more this time, reading and watching their reactions even as I monitored my own. Kohl's point is that these things matter whether or not children are aware of them. I agree to a point, but I also question the view of children as relatively passive absorbers of literature. My students pushed back against Babar and interacted with the text in their own ways, had their own criticisms. They were not blind to the text's fixation with clothing and nakedness, with

clothing and its power, although they did not seem particularly disturbed by it either. Clothes do have power in their lives, as any student who has received a uniform infraction slip or not been able to afford a fancy pair of sneakers will tell you.

However the themes that interested my students the most were those that have continued to resonate with them with each reading we have done as a class. What is fair and unfair in how people treat animals and each other? What trials will the “good guys” need to undergo to triumph? Will they triumph at all? What is allowed in a book that is not allowed in my life? What is “real” and “not real” in our reading? To me this last question is the one that Kohl was trying to answer in “Should we burn Babar?” Literature is very real to children and adults. It’s how we make sense of it together that matters.

Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel

Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel was one of the last books I read to my class for this project but it was one of the first books that came to my mind when I set out to share classic children’s literature with my contemporary students. It was one of my favorites as a child. I remember being surprised that the author of this “boy book,” which features a heroic (and feminine) steam shovel and her loyal operator was a woman. Like *The Story About Ping*, *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* was named one of the top one hundred books for children by a National Education Association educator’s

poll (National Education Association 2007). "Teachers' Top 100 Books for Children". Retrieved March 20th, 2013.) And, like Ping, none of my students had ever heard of it. Published in 1939, *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* seemed like an excellent classic to test on my class of now experienced literature critics.

We do not get off to a great start. I begin my reading by imploring the students not to scream out as they share their ideas, in contrast to their behavior earlier in the day. After some sharp eyed glaring, I introduce the book and when it was published to the requisite "whoas." Jackie as, she frequently does, begins our discussion before I have read one page. "Is the truck actually alive," she asks pointing to the smiling face that graces Mary Anne the steam shovel. "No, this is a fiction book," I remind her and anyone else who might be confused on the issue. "It's a story book for children. In the book the truck is alive, but in real life the truck wouldn't be alive."

"Who's Mike?" Sierra mutters to the rug as I read the title out loud. *Mike Mulligan had a steam shovel, a beautiful red steam shovel. Her name was Mary Anne. A number of gasps. They do not seem to be gasping for any reason other than the chance to make noise without being reprimanded. Mike Mulligan was very proud of Mary Anne. He always said that he could dig as much in a day as a hundred men could dig in a week.*

The girls are silent, expect for snuffles and coughs. But they are attentive. Samantha squeaks, "I see some repetition, because they say it was Mike

and Mary Anne, they do that over and over again.” We have been looking at repetition as a writing technique during our Writing Workshop. It’s nice to know that they can generalize.

We watch Mike and Mary Anne work. *And it was Mike Mulligan and Mary Anne and some others who dug the deep holes for the cellars of the tall skyscrapers in the big cities where people used to stop and watch them. Mike Mulligan and Mary Anne used to dig a little faster and a little better. The more people stopped the faster and better they dug.* The girls have been so quiet that I try and stir up some response. “Do any of you ever stop and watch machines working?” Assorted yeses and nos. A few children recount lengthy stories of watching buildings being built. Fatima raises her hand eagerly “Every day when I pass by I see a Dunkin Donut truck.” “Does this have anything to do with the story?” I ask, knowing full well it does not. She shakes her head, not the least bit sheepish. Aida who rarely shares says “I have seen one, when I went to my dad’s work one time.”

Mike Mulligan and Mary Anne gradually lose work, replaced by more efficient technology. The sight of a weeping Mary Anne broke my heart as a kindergartner. “How come it looks like that’s really crying?” Yasmin gestures to the picture. “Well remember it’s like I said to Jackie, it’s a fiction book. The author made the steam shovel act like a person and have feelings.” I watch their faces as I respond. The children are much less ready to accept an anthropomorphized steam shovel than a duck or elephant.

Yasmin counters “I don’t think it’s a fiction, it doesn’t look like a fiction, it looks like a fairy tale.” I remind her that a fairy tale is a type of fiction. Luz has been reflecting deeply on something for awhile and now raises her hand. “So our tears are made out of water, and we drink water. If he drinks oil than maybe his tears are made out of oil.”

All the other steam shovels were being sold for junk or left out in old gravel pits to rust and fall apart. But Mike loved Mary Anne. He couldn’t do that to her. He had taken such good care of her that she could still dig as much in a day as a hundred men could in a week. Is it just me or are there troubling gender roles at play here? Am I reading too much into the tendency to assign femininity to ships and machines? Did I worry about these things when I was five? My students certainly don’t seem to care. Does that mean I shouldn’t either?

Mike Mulligan and Mary Anne search in vain for work, traveling to the town of Popperville to try and dig the cellar of the new town hall. Author-illustrator Virginia Lee Burton shows their journey in an intricate two page spread as they travel across fields and mountains to Popperville. Zoe raises her hand “that looks like a suburban community.” “It does,” Samantha nods. “It’s a lot far apart,” Yasmin adds respectfully. “That hill,” Fatima gestures “is like the rural community and the dark is the urban and that one is the suburban community.” We have been studying different communities in social studies, so it’s gratifying to see their ability to apply

the knowledge in new ways. It's puzzling to me that this is what sparks their interest, however.

Mike Mulligan offers to dig the cellar for the Popperville town hall in just one day. "Just one day," Zoe echoes with satisfaction. "What's a cellar?"

Samantha suddenly asks. "Like a basement," I explain. Now we come to the story's twist: if Mike Mulligan and Mary Anne cannot complete the job in just one day they will not be paid for their labor. Presenting this deal is the selectman Henry B. Swap (one of my favorite names in all of children's literature) *who smile[d] in a rather mean way as he shakes Mike Mulligan's hand*. "Why did he make a mean face?" Samantha immediately wants to know. I re-read the page and hear her go "ohhhh," in response. "It's kind of like an evil smile," Lila adds. "Like this." She offers her very best evil smile and all the classmates turn to look. "Or like this," adds Jackie treating us to her best evil smile. We spend a few minutes experimenting with wicked grins until I forcibly bring the girls back to the story.

They started in early the next morning just as the sun was coming up. Soon a little boy came along. "Do you think you will finish by sundown?" He asked Mike Mulligan. "Sure," said Mike. "We always work faster and better when someone is watching us."

More and more people gather to watch them dig. The girls' attention perks up as well. "Ooooh," Ami groans in satisfaction. They finished the first corner neat and square but the sun was getting higher. "Do you know what

that means?" I ask my captive audience. Some head shakes no, some yes. "Up and down," Ami says, moving her hand in the air to demonstrate. Does she think that the sun rises and sets all day long? That it moves around in the sky? Hard to tell. "It's becoming tomorrow," Faith explains eloquently. "Yes," I answer "It's getting later in the day." "They can't do it!" a voice from the back row exclaims. "They promised they do it ..." Several children finish my sentence "...in just one day!"

Clang! Clang! Clang! The fire department arrives. They had seen the smoke and thought there was a fire. The little boy said, "Why don't you stay and watch?" So the fire department of Popperville stayed to watch Mike Mulligan and Mary Anne. "This is bad for people," Yasmin points to the smoke billowing from the steam shovel. "Is it shooting out?" asks Fatima. I deliver a brief (almost certainly incorrect) explanation about the workings of steam shovels to my digital age listeners. *When they heard the fire engine the children in the school across the street couldn't keep their eyes on their lessons.* "Like you guys, sometimes," I can't resist teasing and am met with a resentful chorus of "hey!" The schoolchildren watch Mike Mulligan and Mary Anne. They finished the second corner neat and square but the sun was right in the top of the sky. "Uh, oh" sings out Ami, quickly joined by several others. "uh-oh, uh-oh."

More and more people join the audience. "They're almost done!" Samantha shrieks. "At eleven o'clock the day is over," adds Fatima. Her classmates

correct her before I say a word. The lack of enthusiasm I observed at the start of the book is entirely gone. Girls mutter to each other about whether or not Mike Mulligan and Mary Anne will make it. “It’s almost done!” Faith repeats. Bing! Bang ! Crash! Slam! Mike Mulligan and Mary Anne emerge from a crowd of smoke in a dramatic reveal. “They did it!” Samantha practically screams.

“Did what?” asks Ami. “The cellar, “I remind her. “But what about the guy who has to pay?” Samantha asks. “It was like a week?” Sierra seems confused about the time line. A number of children tap her shoulder, try and explain. “It was one day, that was the deal,” I add. “One day is so long,” says Luz. Some scattered muttering. “So he didn’t trick him,” adds Samantha. I like these times best, when we are all united in a purpose, all deep into a text. I don’t need to call on anyone to maintain order and engagement; we just are there, reading together.

One of the things that makes *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* special is its double climax, another problem to be overcome just when it seems that all is well. *Suddenly the little boy said, “How are they going to get out?”* Mike Mulligan and Mary Anne are inadvertently trapped in the cellar they have dug so well. This tapped a primal fear of mine as a young reader, a terrible sensation of being trapped. Not so my students. “They should just make a door,” says Samantha with a shrug. “Dig a tunnel,” Ami adds. “if they make a tunnel, where will they put the steam?” Sierra frets. *No one*

knew how to get Mike Mulligan and Mary Anne out of the cellar they had dug. Then Henry B. Swap said "The job isn't finished because Mary Anne isn't out of the cellar so Mike Mulligan won't get paid." And he smiled again in a rather mean way.

"Like a vicious way," Zoe explains baring her teeth. A few children experiment with villainous laughs. The little boy proposes that Mary Anne be the furnace and Mike Mulligan be the janitor. I expect this will be confusing for my students, even as I explain that furnace is a heater, and it is. "But how does she get out?" Sierra insists. "She doesn't," I answer and then re-read the passage. There are a few more nods of comprehension so I press on. *It was decided and everybody was happy.... Now when you go to Popperville be sure to go down in the cellar of the new town hall. There they'll be, Mike Mulligan and Mary Anne. Mike in his rocking chair, smoking his pipe and Mary Anne beside him , warming up the meetings in the new town hall.*

As a child I didn't understand that Mike, the human, was free to come and go as he pleased, and worried about him trapped forever with Mary Ann. Ami seems to share my concern. "So he never got out," she asks. "Mike can get out," I reinforce, "because he's a person, he can go up the stairs. But Mary Anne stays there, she's the furnace." "Mary can't out," Sierra explains to Ami, "cause she can't get up the stairs." I point to the picture, "look there's a door, so Mike can get out to do his grocery shopping or whatever. And they live there together and they're happy." It is possible I am

reassuring five year old me, as well as Ami. She shakes her head, “So is it a fiction book?” The rest of the peanut gallery begins to respond before I can say a word, but I want to clarify with Ami, who seems genuinely perplexed. “What do you think?” I ask and am met with a shrug. “Well would you read this book to learn about steam shovels or just to hear a fun story?” “A fun story!” The girls squeal. “Fiction,” Samantha concludes with grim satisfaction. Ami keeps shaking her head, “But it says if you go to Popperville.”

Oh. Like in our discussion of Ferdinand she is perplexed by the author’s treating this story as though it really happened, inviting the reader’s to think of the characters as still playing out their story. I see other children nodding and signaling their agreement and confusion. “Why do you think it says that?” I probe. “You could go anywhere,” Janeya says. “To see Mike Mulligan?” I ask. She nods and Sierra says “Popperville was made in the nineties and the eighties.” This makes no sense to me, but it seems to make excellent sense to Sierra and several other students. Others disagree vehemently, taking to themselves and their neighbors with furious intent. “I’m still confused,” a plaintive voice rings out from the back row. This may well be beyond the grasp of second graders but it’s fascinating to see them try and reconcile the ideas. “They want you to go to Popperville so you can see... the new basement and Mary Anne,” says Samantha. “But Ami says that she’s confused since she knows that it’s fiction and you can’t really do that.” I push her on this, “So why might it say that?”

Taylor raises her hand. “Maybe because of his language we don’t really understand it. Maybe he means the people who live in Popperville in the book.” It’s funny to think about the world of the book outside the reader. The town of Popperville and the neighboring cities continuing on without us. There’s an inherent maturity in that vision, of literature having a life of its own, one that is somehow true. It’s exciting to see Taylor begin to realize this, to struggle to put it into words. No one else seems to follow her there though. “It’s an element of author’s craft,” I finally say. We’ve been studying craft techniques throughout the year. “Sometimes author’s do that, refer to things in fiction like they were real. Like in Ferdinand remember when it says he is still sitting there? It makes a nice ending, including in the reader in the story.”

Keisha has been completely silent this whole time and now she raises her hand. “But is Popperville REAL?” So much for craft technique. “It’s in the eighties,” Sierra giggles hysterically. I call on Fatima, who is not only a mature reader but often capable of outside the box thinking. She has a thoughtful expression on her face. “It might be real. Because Popperville could be a city.” Suzette adds “I don’t think it’s still there, maybe a long time ago.” Her classmates seem to agree, especially the most capable readers. The consensus, the compromise is that Popperville could have been there once but is now no more. This seems to satisfy the need for both fiction and non-fiction, our inclusion in a text that plainly could not have actually occurred.

Analysis

Every time I sat down with my recordings and began to transcribe our reading experiences, something amazing happened. The twenty or thirty minutes of jumbled conversation came together into a cohesive whole, a snapshot of our classroom life, an ode to the book we were reading, a picture of second graders at work. As I worked through each of these readings, a bigger picture emerged, a story about the work the children were doing and the meaning we were creating together.

Children's Literature

What makes a good children's book? There is a great deal of writing on that question, and many answers. At the back of my mind when I began this experiment was an even simpler question: Would my students actually find "great" children's literature interesting? Relevant? Great? In our readings together I found that, for the most part, the classics were classics for a reason. They mattered to my children born generations after their initial publication. But what exactly was the source of that magic? The illustrations? Relatable characters? Writer's technique like craft and rhyme and repetition. I saw my children respond to all of these. Better teachers and writer's than I have spent many pages analyzing what makes great literature great. Beyond any one of these things I felt there was a magic in these texts that was greater than the sum of the parts. A magic that could

overtake even the most hectic, discombobulated indoor recess kind of day, a magic that could pull even the most fidgety listener in. A magic that could overcome archaic language and out of date technology and maybe even serious moral problems, like the ones we saw in Babar. A magic that served as a pipe line to the things that touch children's minds and hearts; the big issues that matter to children like justice and injustice, truth and fiction, and small issues like what color cat to take home.

Reading Together

In my classroom, like most early childhood classrooms we read a great deal. We read at math time, in writer's workshop, in social studies and science and of course at reading time. We do shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading. Most often our reading has a specific purpose, an objective to focus our work. Here the purpose was simply to read together, to engage as a communal audience with a text. It was an incredibly freeing experience to simply let the children talk about books as they happened. This experience, openly reading and talking together without an agenda is essential to the creation of good readers. It is an experience that many children, especially those with low socio-economic status often lack at home and in pre-school settings. With a greater drive towards standardized testing, to a more intense and rigorous curriculum we focus less and less on this kind of reading in school. Our read alouds always have to have an objective, concrete stopping points, specific questions to be answered. Our

time is short; the things children have to say are long and often seem pointless and unfocused. Doing this project freed me to hear the threads embedded in my student's conversations, to piece together their understandings in real time. Even more meaningfully it allowed me to step outside my role as a teacher and to act as a reader with my students. It was some of the most real, and meaningful comprehension work we have done together, not because it was focused not on a particular skill but rather on the experience of reading and making meaning of a text together. It was not didactic but interactive. The major question I held as I began this work was how contemporary children respond to classic works. But finishing this project I am left with a more important question; how can all reading experiences be as meaningful and open as those where we simply let the children read and see what comes of it?

Real vs. Unreal

One of the trends that surprised me throughout our readings was my students on going quest to determine whether a book was or was not "real." Some of this took the form of debates about whether a text was fiction or non-fiction, as the girls argued about animal behavior and realism in texts like Ferdinand and The Story about Ping. During the course of these readings our class had undertaken multiple studies of both fiction and non-fiction texts of various types, from magazine articles to narrative chapter books. Many of our discussions related to the student's growing

understandings of the distinctions between and within genres, from realistic fiction to narrative non-fiction. As Zoe and Jackie declare Ferdinand to be non-fiction because Spain is real, and their classmates disagree, one can sense the development of a more sophisticated reading of genre.

But beyond classifying texts by genre, the girls possessed a deep desire to understand the world of each book on its own terms. They wanted to know if a story was *true* in every sense of the word. Could Madeline live in a house with eleven siblings or a school with eleven classmates? Is Babar allowed to marry his cousin? What really happens to Ferdinand or to Mike Mulligan when we turn the page? These uncertainties, tensions between textual realities and day to day life were always at the forefront of our reading together.

Second grader is a transitional year for most children, both as readers and as individuals. In *On Their Way: Celebrating Second Graders as They Read and Write*, Jane Fraser and Donna Skolnick write about how students in second grade swing from the literal and concrete in their reading to deeper, more inferential thinking that allows them to step outside of their own point of view. (1994, p.21). They add:

“Book discussions can be like Rorschach tests, allowing teachers to see into the minds of children. The challenge is to accept that we cannot change thinking that is bound by development; moving from the concrete to the abstract occurs at a strictly individual pace.” (p.20)

These ideas were especially meaningful to me as I conducted this project against the backdrop of adapting our school literacy curriculum to the new

Common Core requirements. As we pushed children to read more complex texts, to analyze their reading and use text based evidence, my colleagues and I felt ourselves run into the limits of individual development. Readers and children grow at their own pace. Working through these texts with my students allowed me to consider how I could best support each child's on their reading journey while pushing them just a few steps further.

At times, like in our reading of Babar, the class's literalness was frustrating for me as a teacher. At other times, such as when we debated whether Ferdinand was still sitting under his cork tree, I could not resist imposing, or at least presenting my adult point of view. It was particularly strange, at times gratifying and aggravating in equal measure to watch my student's grapple with classic texts, ones I had read many times as both a child and adult. Sometimes their fears, misconceptions and joys reminded me of my own readings as a child. Sometimes I was baffled when they missed something that I have no recollection of misunderstanding. Still other times they brought new insights into my readings of old favorites, like when Yasmin proposed that the Old Women has replaced Babar's mother in his heart.

Opening myself up to these book talks allowed me to better appreciate the varied development of thinking on display in my classroom. It allowed children at a more concrete stage in their developmental journey exposure to more sophisticated ideas in a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. It

allowed us to share our understandings, misunderstandings, questions and concerns as a community of readers. Most importantly, it allowed us, individually and together, to take steps towards a greater understanding of our books and ourselves.

Conclusion

At the end of this project, I wanted to begin again. The experience of carefully choosing books to read with my students, of presenting them to the class with an open and attentive mind, of reflecting on our reading together was such a pure and joyous one. It felt like a kind of Zen reading teaching, the essence of working through literature with children. I learned a great deal about my students (how ferociously compassionate they are, how persistent in working through confusion), some important things about books (some age well, some don't) and more than a few things about myself. I hope that in my students' careers as readers they will continue to approach each book with the same spirit of joy, curiosity and commitment they brought to this project. As a teacher and a reader I can wish no more for myself.

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