The Quiet Voices of Children's Literature Amidst the Roar of New Literacies

by Shelley Stagg Peterson

Editor's Note: New literacies have provoked debate among reading professionals. This opinion piece is excerpted from a presentation given by Canadian Shelley Stagg Peterson at the 2007 IRA Annual Convention. Join the conversation on new literacies — what are your experiences with children's literature and new literacies in the classroom? What are your thoughts about the constantly evolving concept of literacy?

From many directions teachers hear the cry to use new literacies; that in the world outside classrooms, "traditional texts" (in other words, books) are losing their prominence in favor of digital texts. The Media Awareness Network explains that "to young people, the Net has become wallpaper, seamlessly blending with the social spaces they inhabit in the real world" (Steeves, 2005, p. 4). The National Council of Teachers of English (2003) assert in a resolution:

> Today our students are living in a world that is increasingly non-printcentric. New media such as the Internet, MP3 files, and video are transforming the communication experiences of young people outside of school. Young people are composing in nonprint media that can include any combination of visual art, motion (video and film), graphics, text, and sound — all of which are frequently written and read in nonlinear fashion.

These new ways to work with texts are the "technical stuff" of new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Using this technical stuff involves, in addition to reading and writing, listening to sound animation, scanning, uploading and downloading images and text, cropping them, dragging them, linking them, and clicking on them. Teachers are urged to move forward with the digital times and reduce the time devoted to children's literature in favor of electronic and visually-oriented texts. According to proponents of new literacies, traditional texts that have been the rich source of information and ideas for centuries are not as important to today's young people as are electronic texts.

In this paper, I take the quiet voice of children's literature, speaking out for the use of children's literature in classrooms at a time when loud voices are advocating for new literacies. I go beyond the more conventional arguments for the use of literature (e.g., that of being able to cradle a book in one's arms while lounging in a favorite chair or listening to the cadences of a beloved adult reading a text while enjoying the illustrator's creative artwork) and address the criticisms of books put forward by new literacies advocates.

Honoring Traditional Texts

New literacies proponents take a derisive tone when using the words, "traditional" and "conventional" to refer to primarily print-based texts such as children's literature. In place of a view of tradition as something that connects us to the roots of our humanity and gives us inspiration for living in today's world, new literacies advocates perceive children's literature as passé. The new literacies are viewed as more exciting and more in tune with the communication needs and demands of contemporary society. Great numbers of academics and teacher educators are jumping aboard the new literacies electronic and visual highway, leaving children's literature on the shelves (Gee, 2000; Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Leu, Leu & Coiro, 2004).

Donald Leu, in his keynote address to delegates at the May 12, 2007 IRA Research Institute, forecast the obsolescence of printed books after informing us that Internet use has increased 200% worldwide since 2000. Yet, at the same time that Internet use was growing exponentially, sales of children's literature were also increasing, indicating that we should not dismiss children's literature out of hand.

Traditional texts can be new and exciting, especially if they keep up with the times, which I believe children's literature has done. Books published today have a

modern look because designers have taken advantage of what technology has to offer. Students in my undergraduate children's literature class look at award–winning books across the decades in Canada and the US and identify trends. They have found that technology has changed the look and vibrancy of the covers. Choice of fonts, color palettes, media, shapes, format, and designs has expanded tremendously. Compare the pencil shading of American Robert McCloskey's beloved *Make Way for Ducklings*, published in 1941 with the brilliantly-colored and textured illustrations of Canadian Leo Yerxa's handmade watercolor paper treated to give it the appearance of leather in Ancient Thunder, published in 2006, for example.

Children's literature is taking on more hybrid forms. Consider American Joyce Sidman's *Song of the Water Boatman and Other Pond Poems* (2005), which combines poetry and nonfiction in one book. Canadian Shelley Tanaka's *On Board the Titanic* (1996) contains a narrative of two young survivors of the sinking of the Titanic, along with captioned photographs, information pockets, timelines of the collision with the iceberg, and a chilling pictograph showing those who survived and those who died among the three classes of passengers and the crew. Children's literature of today is still recognizable as books, but there is nothing fusty about the books and they certainly capture the interest of today's young people.

New Literacies and Children's Literature: Notion of Co-creation

Another point that new literacies proponents make is that those who use digital texts co-create the texts, rather than simply "consuming" the texts. Lankshear and Knobel (2006) call this the "new ethos stuff" of new literacies – how individuals take up new roles and perspectives when engaging in new literacies. This new ethos stuff includes being more collaborative and participative when engaged with or creating texts. It also involves being less author/individual-oriented, in favor of distributing texts widely.

This might involve contributing to a Wiki – Web pages that can be accessed and altered by anyone (a widely-known example is *Wikipedia*). Or it might involve writing reviews of books on *Amazon.com* or explaining whether a particular review was useful. Individuals can even win a prize for writing the first review of a new book or other product sold by the Web site. *Amazon.com* also supplies a rating of the book based on customer reviews and sales of the book, recommends books based on what individuals' buying patterns are, and provides alerts about new products that come on the market. When using *Amazon.com*, individuals co-create reviews--and in the process help the Web site market products that buyers might not have been aware of or might be uncertain about buying.

Flickr.com is cited as another example of this digital mindset that is purported to be leading civilization forward into new ways of interacting. Here, individuals can post photographs after signing up for an account, adding tags (words that describe the photo and serve as key words for others who might want to view the posted photos). The site is viewed as democratic because anyone, not just a professional photographer, can classify their pictures and determine what is salient about the photographs. With *Flickr.com*, it is possible to co-create a database of photographs that consumers can view and use to create their own photograph essays.

Now co-creation always sounds like more fun than consumption. Creating something new with someone else spurs new ideas. Individuals do not feel isolated—there are others who are interested in the same things they are. When working with another, one does not have to come up with all the good ideas. Yet, far from being passive consumers, as some new literacies proponents advocate, readers of children's literature *are recreating* the stories, characters and ideas through reading. Readers make them their own through creating images of what characters or settings look like and imagine themselves in characters' shoes. In addition, readers connect the events, characters and actions to their own lives.

I must confess that when I read from Canadian Jo Ellen Bogart's *Gifts* (1994), a book that I first bought to read to my nieces, who were four-years old and one-year old at the time, I was sure that the book was about an auntie who brought gifts from all her travels to Australia, India and Switzerland. I had not been traveling to such exotic places (unless you count Vancouver, Fredericton and Toronto as such), but I had wholeheartedly placed myself inside that book. What a shock to read the book a few years later in my children's literature class and discover that it is actually the girl's grandma bringing the gifts! I wondered who had changed the words!

Just because readers are not clicking, dragging, uploading, and linking with a mouse does not mean that they are not actively participating when reading children's literature. The action is going on in their heads and hearts: the clicking is all the "aha" moments as readers learn new information and expand their knowledge and experiences. The dragging is bringing

the new information together with what is already known to see if it makes sense. And there is no question about linking – literacy educators have been talking about making text-to-self, text-to-text and text-to-world connections for ages when it comes to reading.

Listen to all the clicking and dragging going on in this excerpt from a literature discussion in an eight-grade classroom as four students talk about Canadian Eric Walters' *Hydrofoil Mystery* (2000). The students' names have been shortened to initials to maintain their anonymity. "Sh" and "K" are boys and "N" and "Sa" are girls.

> Sh: I think Billy learned his gambling problem from his father. Billy's problem is hereditary; it runs in the genes.
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> Sa: I really don't think so because first of all I think the way his father is never around or whenever he's around it's only for days or weeks, right? I mean, like, for a young boy you need your father mostly all the time. Your mother can't really control you. And you can just go all wild and crazy.
>
> N: And your mom can't relate to you.
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> Sh: He's growing up to be a teenager so he needs his father.
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> K: I thought, like, it didn't have anything to do with his father gambling. It's just a young boy from a poor family wants some quick money, you know, especially when his friends are making tons of cash gambling. He learns from his friends, you know, he hangs out with his friends. That's why. Because he didn't really look forward to meeting his dad or he didn't really look up to his dad. I don't think the fact that his dad gambled made him, you know, gamble.
>
> Sa: No, but although his father's always gambling and he's usually never around and he always makes excuses on why he didn't get enough money for the family, right? I guess in a way that habit also went into the son. Even though he hated his dad on what he was doing to the family why did he still gamble?
>
> K: Well there's only one reason, money.

These students reveal a lot about their values and views of parents' roles through the connections they make between the book and their lives in this excerpt. It is

clear that they were interacting with the book and not passively consuming it.

Indeed, the whole notion of co-creation of Internet texts needs to be examined. In 2003, the Media Awareness Network surveyed 5252 grades 4-11 students in all of Canada's 10 provinces (Steeves, 2005). Its purpose was to get a snapshot of what Canadian youth are doing with Internet technologies. They found that young peoples' favorite online spaces are overwhelmingly commercially oriented. Of the top 50 sites that the youth said they visited regularly, 94% included marketing materials. Of the youth who played product-centered online games, 19% of fourth-graders did not see these games as advertisements and only 31% of 11th-graders saw them as advertisements. If young people do not see the commercial aspects of the Web sites, are they truly co-creators?

Making the Most of What Each Text Has to Offer

Teachers need to take advantage of what new literacies have to offer, but not take them up just because they are exciting and new, or available and convenient. The texts that children read in classrooms should make the universe of ideas, from the marvelous to the mundane, accessible to children. These texts might take electronic or multimedia forms, or they might take print forms in children's literature. What is needed is to assess how well each type of text serves the purpose readers want it to achieve.

In classrooms, online asynchronous discussion forums are marvelous for extending discussions about books and related topics from class. Students could use digital cameras to create their responses and the connections they make to books, using commercial software to alter and enhance images already available in a database. Or they could contribute solutions to a problem in a Wiki format with anonymous monikers that only their teacher knows, so that they feel comfortable in voicing their true responses to the texts or topics. That is just a start—the virtual world is limitless, as are the possible ways to respond to children's literature.

In closing, I believe that teachers should embrace the new literacies alongside children's literature. Electronic texts have much to offer, but they cannot replace the rich experience of reading children's literature. Children gain a deeper understanding of the world, of humanity and of themselves through children's literature, whether it is through listening to adults reading and bringing the literature to life, or through reading independently. Literature gives shape and coherence to children's experiences. Through reading books, children encounter new ideas and enter worlds that stretch the outermost bounds of their imaginations. It is time for children's literature to have its roar alongside new literacies.

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