

Our Reading Roots: Introduction

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The Pedagogical Context

This small volume emerges from a final-year undergraduate Children’s Literature course in an English department at a Canadian university. It was a seminar course offered remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the focus of the course was books we love to read and reread. We examined what makes us Readers (as opposed to those who are merely readers of electronic communications and Twitter feeds), how reading affects us as people, and our relationships with the books, manga, zines, fanfic, and other kinds of creative writing for and by young people we encounter. One of the writing assignments for the course was a personal essay, which I encouraged students to edit and revise for publication. Of the seventeen students in the class who completed the assignment, eight agreed to publish, and I also include the one I wrote as a sample/model for the assignment (authors in alphabetical order by family name). My comments about what we share as a group are based largely but not exclusively on the essays that appear here, though I drew on everyone’s work to put together the recommendation lists that follow this introduction.

Our Reading Roots: What Made us Readers

Similarities in our personal stories highlight four elements of Canadian settler culture that can strengthen literacy and love of reading: libraries, families reading together, social challenges, and the offer of comfort and excitement. In this section of the introduction I have summarized, collated, paraphrased, and quoted from the anonymized students in the course to show that “English majors become English majors because books helped them, and they either want to figure out how to use books to help others, or they want to expand on their personal relationship with books.”

Although we read Brandon Sanderson's *Alcatraz Versus the Evil Librarians* as part of our reading list for ENGL 487W, none of us has encountered evil librarians. On the contrary, both librarians and libraries have been important to our identities and our personal development as young Readers: in particular, we draw your attention to Lily's story and honour her special librarian. For many of us, libraries became less important during our teen years, whether because we read less or because we were avoiding YA romance novels or we began buying books instead of borrowing them. Nevertheless, we celebrate the children's library as an institution.

For many of us, reading together as a family, especially with a book-loving adult reading aloud, has been equally important to our development as people and as Readers. Like the library, this family reading time reduced in significance in our teen years, to be replaced by bookish friends or the solitary pleasure of having books **as** friends.

Those of us who become English majors and minors were often social misfits and/or lonely amongst our peers when young. We were often in a loop of using books to escape a world in which we were ignored or bullied and being bullied or ignored because we were the "weird kid" who liked to read. Those of us who identify as female looked for strong brave protagonists in our books in the middle grades and avoided "girly" books with pink covers (or read them secretly); in high school we couldn't relate to what were supposed to be the typical teen experiences of partying and experimenting with drugs...though we would still read about them, alongside books with rebellious demon-hunting protagonists.

Most of us read for excitement and adventure, often through the doorway of fantasy and science fiction, but also for comfort. As one of us remarks, "Some people drink after a break-up. I go to the library and max out my library card." Books are the place where we try out emotions, try out ideas, and try out life plans, a safe space to experience, play, and grow. Sometimes books are a legitimate escape from a drab or hostile personal world, a wonderful place to revisit and find solace.

Diversity and Inclusion in Fiction for Young Readers

But what happens when we realize our havens are filled with cis-het, able-bodied, neurotypical white people? Until very recently, children's literature in English has been that way, much of it unthinkingly participating in systemic prejudices. We are

a diverse group when it comes to race and sexuality, with some of us as children reading through mirrors and some windows, to use Rudine Sims Bishop's famous analogy ("Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books in the Classroom*, 6.3.1990). Sadly, we did not have mentors/guides willing to challenge the available books as to either their lack of racial and sexual/gender diversity or their inclusion of what we now see as glaring stereotypes. Sometimes as young readers we noticed the gaps and problems. As one student remarked in reading over the personal essays, "It upsets me that others also felt that they were not represented through the books they were reading, but it is comforting to know that I was not the only one who experienced this growing up." Sometimes as young readers we were ourselves oblivious, and we now must, as another student puts it, "catch up on diversity from a platform of privilege that's never been questioned." As Philip Nel urges us in *Was the Cat in the Hat Black? The Hidden Racism of Children's Literature and the Need for Diverse Books* (2017), we want to learn to "read uncomfortably" (67 & *passim*), to be angry but not to bowdlerize, and we want to be there for the next generation: being teachers, librarians, and parents who point out places of discomfort and encourage child readers to think about them, and possibly being part of the new wave of inclusion and diversity as writers, editors, and publishers.

Yet we find ourselves in different places when it comes to adjusting our expectations of our books and our willingness to acknowledge old book friends to be racist, ableist, or sexist. We are very differently placed, for example, when it comes to J.K. Rowling. I was in my late thirties when the first *Harry Potter* was published. I read it aloud with my mother, and we agreed it was fun but derivative, nothing special. The students in ENGL 487W, however, are with one exception of an age to have been caught up in Potter-mania and many of us have or had strong emotional attachments to the series. For some of us, Rowling's books are still a treasure, while for others her comments about trans women not being real women have led to painful disavowals.

A note on "white" versus "White" is in order here. As someone who learned to write mainly in the 1970s, I see "Black" and "White" as references to racialized groups of humans, while "black" and "white" are colour words. There is a current stylistic argument about whether using "White" is acceptable, now that for some readers it carries a taint from its use by White Supremacist groups (see, for example, [here](#) and [here](#) for defenses of "White" and "white"). Several of my students feel strongly that we should only use "white" to describe this racialized

group, so, although our use of the lower-case term was not universal, I have edited everyone's essays to create a consistent use of "white."

Where We are Now

The eighteen participants in the course (including myself) are all committed to literature as a complex, variegated, and valuable human achievement. We are Readers; we are or plan to become teachers, librarians, and/or parents who will encourage new readers to put down roots in books; we are on a long journey of discomfort as we wrestle with ways in which English settler storytelling in print has limited and often continues to limit our expressions of who we are. We are committed to the critical investigation as much as to the celebration of books and other texts for young readers. We want today's young readers to have both mirrors and windows and sliding glass doors, as well as caregivers and teachers who will read with them in ways that inspire critical thinking and cultural awareness. And we will act to help that happen. We hope these essays inspire you to think about your own relationships with books through your own identities and experiences, and that you share a love of reading and thinking with people younger than you are.

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