



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2004 Volume II: Children's Literature in the Classroom

---

## Introduction

In preparing to write this introduction I knew that my colleague Traugott Lawler had taught a seminar seven years ago on "American Children's Literature," and I read his introduction accordingly. The first thing that struck me was that he had four units written on "war," but I have only one, on the Civil War. This may be because Professor Lawler focused on topical books for older children. We too read the well known Ann Petry and Mildred Taylor titles, together with Sandra Cisneros and Tony Johnston; but for the most part we read a sampling of British (and French) as well as American "classics" for all ages, including the very young.

Despite the eclectic range of the seminar, however, the Fellows were ever mindful of their classrooms, and the ten wonderfully teachable units here assembled reflect that focus. Teachers browsing for ideas will find here an incredible wealth of plot summaries and lesson suggestions with obvious immediate applications. Many of these Fellows are extremely well versed in the theory of reading development, while others have a sophisticated interest in such ethical topics in the education field as self-regulated learning and the influence of teaching on social development. There is also a strong interest in multicultural issues. Four of the units emphasize the value of working with just one author, usually in conjunction with the idea that reading a "series" of one sort or another is a kind of happy addiction that can lead to an addiction to reading itself.

We start with two units on multicultural fairy tales. Christine Elmore presents stories from a variety of cultures, together with a clear taxonomy of what a fairy tale is and how it can vary--ideas for teachers that children can also learn and benefit from. Yolanda Trapp offers a unit on Cinderella stories from many cultures (hundreds exist, as she found), featuring the chance to learn from variations on a theme, together with social studies applications.

Next come the two units chiefly interested in the use of children's literature for teaching behavior and development. Elisabeth Johnson chooses an array of books that enhance her well-informed pedagogical goal of "self-regulated learning," whereby children come to understand the value of teaching themselves and learn how to motivate themselves. Dyanne D'Angelo uses a variety of "problem" books for young children in order to model problems in behavior and socialization, with strategies the books suggest for solving these problems.

Then comes our main cluster: four Fellows have written units implicitly or directly extolling the virtues of working with a single author, or a series by a sequence of authors, to improve reading skills and further the love of reading. Diane Huot has expressly addressed the question of why children (and adults) prefer to read serial books. Her unit includes a very helpful ranking of many series, according to mandated guidelines, from easiest to hardest. Jean Sutherland stresses the potential of detective fiction for training many parts of the mind (logic, reading, social understanding, and sometimes scientific understanding), while usefully describing detective chapter book series that feature multicultural teams of child-sleuths. Geraldine Martin adds the color

of her legendary skills with puppetry and ventriloquism to the project of teaching very young children across the curriculum with Else Minarik's "Little Bear" series. Martha Cavalieri develops the very interesting concept of teaching interpretation skills to below-grade-level 7th-grade readers by creating a "critics" roundtable discussion of the Dr. Seuss books--allowing students to use their advancing ability to think while unimpeded by their slow progress in reading.

The two remaining units are *sui generis*. Lisa Omark has written *our* unit on war, the Civil War, emphasizing works of fiction and non-fiction featuring individual actors on both sides and in all stations, that can supplement the textbooks, with useful plot summaries of an impressive variety of titles. And finally, Yel Hannon Brayton, who teaches creative writing to high school students, has put together an imaginative roller-coaster of a unit on the human place in the eco-system that features a sequence of bovine characters (cows, bulls, oxen, bison) viewed through a variety of literary perspectives, with special emphasis on Native American folkways.

Paul H. Fry

---

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>