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Perry Nodelman

Teaching Children's Literature: An Intellectual Snob Confronts Some Generalizers

"What are the worst things about this course?" The answers to this question on the course evaluation form we use at my university are always pretty much the same: there are too many assignments, and the marking is too hard. But last year, one student in my children's literature course gave a different answer; according to her, "The professor's attitude was one of an 'intellectual snob.'"

Those are hard words. I told myself the student was just upset about getting lower grades than she wanted. I tried to console myself with comments by other students about how interesting the course was and how terrific the professor was. It didn't work. I had to admit the ugly truth: I AM an intellectual snob.

And, I bet, so are you, if you have the need or the desire to read this journal. What that student considered snobbish had less to do with my personality than with assumptions I share with most teachers of literature, assumptions that are the underpinnings of literary study – indeed, of education in the humanities. These are decidedly nonegalitarian, and might well seem snobbish.

In recent years, theorists of literature have been pointing out exactly how snobbish; the work of deconstructionists and feminists has had the salutary affect of revealing the extent to which *all* ideas

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about literature have political implications. As Terry Eagleton suggests, literature is less an objective category than a variety of ways of thinking about writing: he concludes not only that "the value-judgments by which it is constituted are historically variable, but that these value-judgments themselves have a close relation to social ideologies. They refer in the end not only to private taste, but to the assumptions by which certain social groups exercise and maintain power over others."

Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p. 16

One of the ways in which professors of English maintain power is by blithely expecting our students to share our own assumptions about literature, and then expressing our horror and penalizing them when they reveal different assumptions. We do so, of course, in the profound faith that our own assumptions are the right ones, and that our students ought to share them; most of us are quite unconscious of the less appetizing political implications of our ideas about literature.

Yet those ideas are political, for they are undeniably snobbish; we don't notice how much they depend on unspoken judgments of value simply because we tend to share those judgments with each other. Despite our theoretical acceptance of the new critical ideas, most professors of English believe that some works of literature are better than others – richer and more interesting – and that one of the main pleasures of the literary experience is the attempt to understand which ones, and why. We also believe that some ways of responding to and understanding literature are richer, more rewarding, better than others; and we assume that our own ways of responding and understanding are superior to those of at least some of our students – for if they weren't, what right would we have to be teaching them?

I once took all that for granted; but when I began to teach children's literature, I discovered I could do so no longer. My students quite clearly did not share my assumptions. While a few of the people who enrol in children's literature are English majors who enjoy reading and studying literature, most have more immediately practical reasons for taking my courses. Some are working librarians or parents with young children; many are preparing to be teachers or day care workers. Some have not previously studied literature in university, and most will take no other courses in literature. Many of them do not themselves enjoy reading all that much; they often cheerfully tell me that they hate literature and love children.

But their unfamiliarity with my assumptions does not mean they have none of their own. They are not without ideas about children or children's literature. As graduates of courses in education and in the social sciences, or even just as readers of articles in popular magazines, many of my students see themselves as experts in areas about which they are convinced I know nothing; and they much resent it when I tell them that the ideas about children and education they present to me as facts are matters of opinion, and that I don't share the opinions.

That was the source of my student's discontent with my snobbishness – she thought I had no respect for her opinions. In fact, what I did not respect and had tried to challenge were her basic educational assumptions – assumptions shared by many of my students.

Because of these assumptions, my children's literature classroom – like many others, I suspect – is the site of a classic political confrontation between two conflicting ideologies. When I first realized that, my immediate democratic impulse was to stop it from being so; but I quickly understood how naive it would be to think that such a confrontation could be avoided. If I tried to avoid it by democratically allowing my students to keep operating on assumptions about literature and education that I do not myself share, I would be resigning my responsibility as a teacher to teach them something they do not already know; and in any case, I would still be expressing political power by imposing a set of values upon them. If that is inevitable, and I now believe it is, I have decided to do it the best way I know how; by thinking hard about the implications of my own literary and educational assumptions, by consciously maintaining only those assumptions whose political implications I understand and can accept, and by imposing these values on my students in the conscious knowledge that I am wielding power over them, and the humble faith that it will enrich them for me to do so.

In order to explain why I have that faith, I need to explain how many of my student's assumptions do differ from my own. I believe that knowledge consists of the opinions one has arrived at by gathering information and thinking about it. These students are so convinced of the absolute rightness of the conclusions reached by investigators in the social sciences that they believe knowledge and opinions to be quite separate from each other. For them, knowledge is that which is scientifically quantifiable – objective and impersonal. Meanwhile, opinions are merely personal; one believes what

one believes, and feels what one feels, and there's no point in discussing it, especially not in a university classroom.

So the student who called me a snob had wanted me to provide her with objective, definitive, *true* facts about children and about literature – facts based on scientific investigation and therefore incontrovertible. I had refused to do so; instead I asked her to think about her own responses to the books we were reading. I wanted her to try to determine for herself the characteristics of good children's books; and she wanted me to give her a list of those characteristics.

Furthermore, she wanted that list to be true rather than personal – based not on her own or my own reading, but on statistical scientific studies of the responses of actual children to literature. Not that this student was a scientist; she and many others like her are believers, not explorers, and, I firmly believe, dangerously gullible. For her, it was a *fact* that children have short attention spans and so need short books; she had read somewhere, or been told by somebody, that studies showed that to be true, so it must be true. It was this sort of "fact" she wanted from me; she didn't want to hear the evidence that supported such ideas, she simply wanted me to *tell* her they were true. Then she would memorize them, for knowledge, she knew for a fact, consists of facts you can recall.

I wasn't giving her anything to memorize; I insisted that the "facts" she expressed in class and in written assignments were just generalizations. Surely, I said, *some* children can pay attention to the same thing for a long time, and some adults can't. We can't use generalizations about children as the basis for our judgments of children's books if the generalizations are untrue. No, I told her, when it came to judging children's books, her personal opinions of them were more important than her supposed facts.

And after all that, after forcing her to ignore objective, scientific, true facts and tell me her private, personal opinions, I wouldn't even accept her opinions. She couldn't just tell me she liked a book. She had to tell me why. And she couldn't just tell me she liked it because it was cute. She had to tell me what she meant by "cute," and why cuteness might be a strength in a children's book, and how exactly this particular book was cute. If she was unable to explain her opinions, I said, they weren't opinions at all, but merely prejudices.

But it was her opinion that if she liked a story, then it was a good

story. At least it was a good story for her; everyone's a different person, and different people like different stories, and if she liked a story she liked it, and if she thought it was cute then it *was* cute, for her. How dare I call a nice person like her prejudiced? I was clearly a snob. An intellectual snob.

The student I've just described probably doesn't exist; she is an exaggeration of the tendencies of many students who find the study of children's literature difficult because they see knowledge and opinion as opposites. Convinced that knowledge is "scientific," they are astonished by the idea that different academic disciplines are actually different sorts of thinking, and that thinking about literature is not like thinking about psychology or physics. Until they accept the possibility that their own opinions of children's books might be a source of knowledge both for themselves and for others, they cannot get past their need to approach children's literature in terms of generalizations about children.

Furthermore, there is a peculiar arrogance in our social attitude to children that prevents even students who are conscious of the personal engagement that literary study demands from reading children's books with the same passionate involvement they freely give to other books; confronted by children's literature, even literary scholars become amateur child psychologists. But as a humanist, as a literary scholar, and as an admirer of much writing for children, I want to teach children's literature as I would teach other literature; and as an educator and a parent, I certainly want to encourage my students to choose books for children in terms of their real potential to offer literary pleasures to individual young people rather than their supposed effect on that generalization called "children." Since I must wield power over them, I chose to wield it to these ends. As a result, I spend much of my time as a teacher of children's literature trying to get my students past their generalizations about children and into a real engagement with the literature we study. What follows is a brief history of my attempts to do that.

After I first understood the problem, I decided to give assignments in the first week of classes that I knew would surface my students' assumptions about children. For instance, I would ask them to write a brief discussion of the qualities of good children's literature. They would inevitably define good children's books as those which were short for children's short attention spans, simple for children's undeveloped minds, filled with bright, colorful pictures to suit children's

bright, colorful personalities, and capable of teaching important cognitive and social skills that children need to learn. Having surfaced these generalizations, I would be scathingly ironic about their danger.

My nasty comments had the effect I desired: these students no longer expressed such generalizations. In fact, they didn't express much of anything. While they could see the danger of the attitudes they began with—or at least the danger of admitting such ideas to me—they had nothing to replace them with; if they couldn't judge children's books in terms of generalizations about children, then they didn't know what to do at all. I did try to teach them that, of course; but in the meantime, they had been stopped dead. Since I'd made them afraid to express their opinions, they clammed up entirely, and I had no choice but to lecture at them. I had created a situation directly antithetical to the one I'd hoped for: my opinions had become unchallenged facts—information that they pretended to accept, that they wrote down and memorized.

So I decided to be more honest. I made a public avowal of my political position. I began to devote the first class of each new section to a lecture about what students might expect if they chose to remain in the course; I urged anyone who felt uncomfortable with what I said to drop out immediately.

In that lecture, I told them that while some of them might be experts in children, I was not; so I could not offer the course many of them wanted in using literature with children. Instead, I would try to help them develop an understanding of children's literature as a particular sort of literature, and to learn enough about its general characteristics so that they might themselves make fair judgments of individual children's books, and themselves figure out ways to introduce these books to children. My approach would be the one usually taken to literature by literary scholars; we would be reading these books not in terms of our guesses about how children might respond to them, but in terms of our own enjoyment and understanding of them—with, of course, the knowledge that what we read was indeed *children's* literature, a specific sort of literature that demands our attention in quite specific ways. It was those specific ways that we would concentrate on. Although we would explore how generalizations about children influence children's literature, I simply would not allow evaluations of books based on such generalizations.

Above all, I said, you must not continue in this course if you're not prepared to offer a genuine involvement with the material you read; you cannot hope to understand a work of literature until you allow yourself to respond to it and then explore that response. Certainly, the literature was written for children, and you are yourselves no longer children; but you can still best understand a children's book by trying to become the child reader it works to turn you into, and then by standing outside your response and exploring the qualities of the reader you became. I told them I understood how frightening my demand for involvement might be; but that I nevertheless did demand it, for I understood it to be the basis of literary study.

My speech rid me of some unrepentant antiliterary generalizers – people who really did not like literature and who sincerely believed that they loved children. More important, it left me free to concentrate on what I most needed to teach: to make students willing to attempt objective evaluations of literature based on their own subjective responses, and to show them how to make them.

So there would be no body of literature that either myself or an anthology editor had guaranteed to be worthwhile, I assigned no set text. Instead, I brought both good and bad stories and poems to class, and encouraged students to discuss them and then to comment on their worth. I frequently divided classes into smaller groups, in which students would be required, not just to discuss a specific work with each other, but also, to agree about the conclusions they wished to present to the class as a whole. Only after the students themselves had moved through this process of reading, thinking, and discussion would I myself comment on the theoretical implications of their principles of evaluation.

Indeed, I insisted always that any generalizations used in this course be conclusions we arrived at, not ideas we just took for granted. When we discussed fairy tales, I made them actually *tell* me the tales they remembered, and then discussed these in an attempt to discover why they were memorable. When we discussed picture books, I read them stories without the accompanying pictures, and then showed them pictures without the accompanying stories, and had them comment on these experiences before we generalized about the relationships of words and pictures. When we studied poetry I asked each student to bring to class five worthwhile poems for children; then I had various students read some of

their choices aloud and defend them to the class. The names of those a majority agreed to be worthwhile I wrote on the board, and we then tried to determine what they had in common with each other. Finally we chose the best five of these. Throughout I insisted that students offer reasons both for their choices and for their disagreements with each other's choices.

Above all, I made every assignment an attempt at evaluation, a discussion of a book's value based on personal response and literary analysis. I had students write analytical reviews of children's books of their own choice; all tests and even the final examination were confrontations with stories and poems they'd not seem before rather than discussions of works we'd dealt with already, and all had the same instructions: "Present an analysis and evaluation of this work in terms of your general understanding of children's literature."

All of this had some effect, on some students; indeed, the course I now teach isn't much different from the one I've just described, with the difference that I've come to understand how much even very young children can learn of the process I try to teach my students, so I now encourage students to think of what they learn in my course about literary response and analysis as an important part of what they can themselves teach children. Also, I've made an even deeper commitment to focusing the course around my student's own reading and response by replacing most of the tests and written assignments with a "workbook"—a record of their engagements with children's books and the way their thoughts about children's literature develop. (I discuss those workbooks in an interview with Murray Evans published in *Inkshed*.)

Murray Evans and Perry Nodelman, "Iser Fish in the text? An interview on using journals in literature classes," *Inkshed*, Dec. 1985, *4*, 6–10

But, in spite of these efforts—that I made my approach so clear and tried so hard to teach it merely convinced some students of what they'd previously only suspected: I was weird—too weird to be believed. Not having studied literature before, or else not having considered the possibility of reading *children's* books seriously before, they couldn't know that what they took to be weird is actually conventional—at least for literary scholars. A few years ago, a student enrolled in education put up her hand and angrily announced, "Everything you say is the exact opposite of what they tell us in all our other courses." She was right. I needed a way of letting my students know that the community I was inviting them to join had more people in it than just me.

Children and Their Literature: A Readings Book

I found it by adopting as a text *Children and Their Literature: A Readings Book*, a collection of critical essays edited by Jill P. May. My intention was to give students access to ways of thinking about children's literature that might be new to them; but my students were able to join the community of scholars represented in this book, not so much because those scholars convinced them of their opinions as because they did *not* convince them. In fact, my students were often intensely hostile to the essays I had them read; and their hostility was surprisingly productive.

These essays have what appears to be a serious flaw as readings for beginners like most of my students: they were written by experts for other experts – by intellectual snobs for other intellectual snobs. For many of my students, what these experts take for granted is astonishing. Rebecca Lukens's conviction that literature should please as well as teach? A startling new idea. The Oedipal complexes that Jack Zipes discusses in an article about Bruno Bettelheim and fairy tales? The filthy thoughts of a dirty old man. "Aesthetics" and "implied readers" and so on in Peggy Whalen-Levitt's article on reader-response criticism? Academic mumbo-jumbo. My students' first response to this alien and confusing world was sheer horror.

But they couldn't just dismiss it – they had to understand it well enough to pass tests based on it. My assignment was always the same: read one of the articles, come to terms with its conclusions (that is, decide on the extent of their agreement with it, and why), and then, come to class, hear me read a specific work of children's literature, and discuss to what extent the article illuminates and helps in the evaluation of that work.

I made this as real an experience of critical thinking as I could. While I encouraged students to discuss the articles with each other, and even, on occasion, divided them into groups in class for just that purpose, I refused to discuss the articles in class before students wrote their tests; they had to do without my expert assistance.

The results astonished me; students with no literary background were suddenly desperate to find out what the New Criticism was, and how it related to Northrop Frye; they had to know in order to pass the test. And find out they did. One student who asked about a word she didn't understand showed me her copy of the text; just about every word was highlighted in yellow marker, underlined in

pencil, and circled in red ink. She had never taken a course in literature before, and she was indignant about the difficulty of the assignment; but the question she asked me was intelligent.

More important, the test she wrote revealed a real understanding of how one's critical ideas can be applied to the actual reading of literature. What my students first learned from these readings was something about the world of ideas; what they next learned was far more important: how to be inhabitants of that world themselves.

They learned the hard way – through error. Most of their answers to the first test were awful, and not because they had not understood the article, but because they simply took it for granted that they were to treat the article's conclusions as truths – scientific facts. Their answers made clear what they admitted to me afterwards: that *of course* they thought the article was dumb, but they certainly weren't going to admit that on a test; after all, I'd made them read it, so surely I must think it was true.

In other words, this assignment surfaced the main problem students have with the course; and their clear statement of an unproductive attitude allowed me to confront it head-on. I told them they were hypocrites for pretending to agree with what they found so stupid, and insulting in their conviction that I was dumb enough to agree with it myself. I told them they had an obligation to themselves and to the articles they read to be honest in their responses, and that in order to be honest, they had to think through their *real* responses to the articles to the point where they would be able to understand, explain, and defend them.

One student expressed great indignation at my unfairness; "If you wanted us to *think*," he said, "you should have told us that before we wrote the test." But he did admit that in fact he *had* thought already; he simply had dismissed his thoughts as irrelevant to the test. Indeed, after this heated confrontation, he and many other students partook in a class discussion of their *real* opinions of the article, and came to a real understanding of its merits and its failings. And after that, he and many others did find it possible to engage themselves with the articles more intensely and to report the results of their engagement more honestly. They began to lose some of their professed trust in experts, and began to think of themselves as equal partners in a dialogue about children's literature.

Of course, I had had similar confrontations earlier when students had tried to treat *my* opinions as facts, and had fed them back to me on tests and such with no apparent understanding of the reasoning behind them. But those confrontations were much less productive, for the simple reason that the opinions I was asking students to consider so dispassionately and perhaps even to reject were those of someone with power over them. They could feel safe about disagreeing with the writers of these articles when they did not often feel safe about disagreeing with me, for these writers were not going to grade their assignments.

And as they admitted, once they realized they had to, they did often disagree, violently. Their supposed awe of experts and their loud claims to inadequacy ("But who am I to say whether or not the article's right? What do *I* know?") disguised a depth of intense conviction. And having admitted to such disagreements, they had no choice but to explore and attempt to explain and justify them.

Not all of them learned how to do so, of course; the student who thought me a snob obviously had not even wanted to. But far more did than ever had in previous versions of this course. I suspect they did so because of the respect for them implied by my assignment: they were being taken seriously, as people intelligent enough to understand and even to discern the flaws in the arguments of experts. Treated as capable, many of them found themselves to be capable indeed. Even better, some of them even discovered the joys of this particular capability; they told me they were thinking about literature more, and enjoying it much more in the process.

Where they had arrived was a lot more pleasant than the painful process of their getting there. Real learning is never anything but painful, for new ideas and new ways of thinking inevitably call into question the old convictions we felt comfortable with. I take my students' loudly expressed annoyance with these articles, with my assignments, and with me, as signs of real learning; but I wouldn't recommend the methods I outline here to teachers who need to feel they are liked by their students, for many of my students don't like me at all before the learning has actually occurred and the course is almost over.

That student of mine was right: I am an intellectual snob. I'd rather students feel pain as they stretch their minds than relax inside the sanctity of their established convictions, for I believe that people

who use their intellects to develop a deeper awareness of the world are better off than people who do not. That is snobbish; but I don't think it is elitist. For one thing, thoughtful people who try not to think in generalizations are less likely to inflict damage on others; and that means that people who are thoughtful about children and literature are less likely to inflict damage on children. I am a snob, then; but my country club is not exclusive, for I believe my job as a teacher of children's literature is to provide students with the means to join it.

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