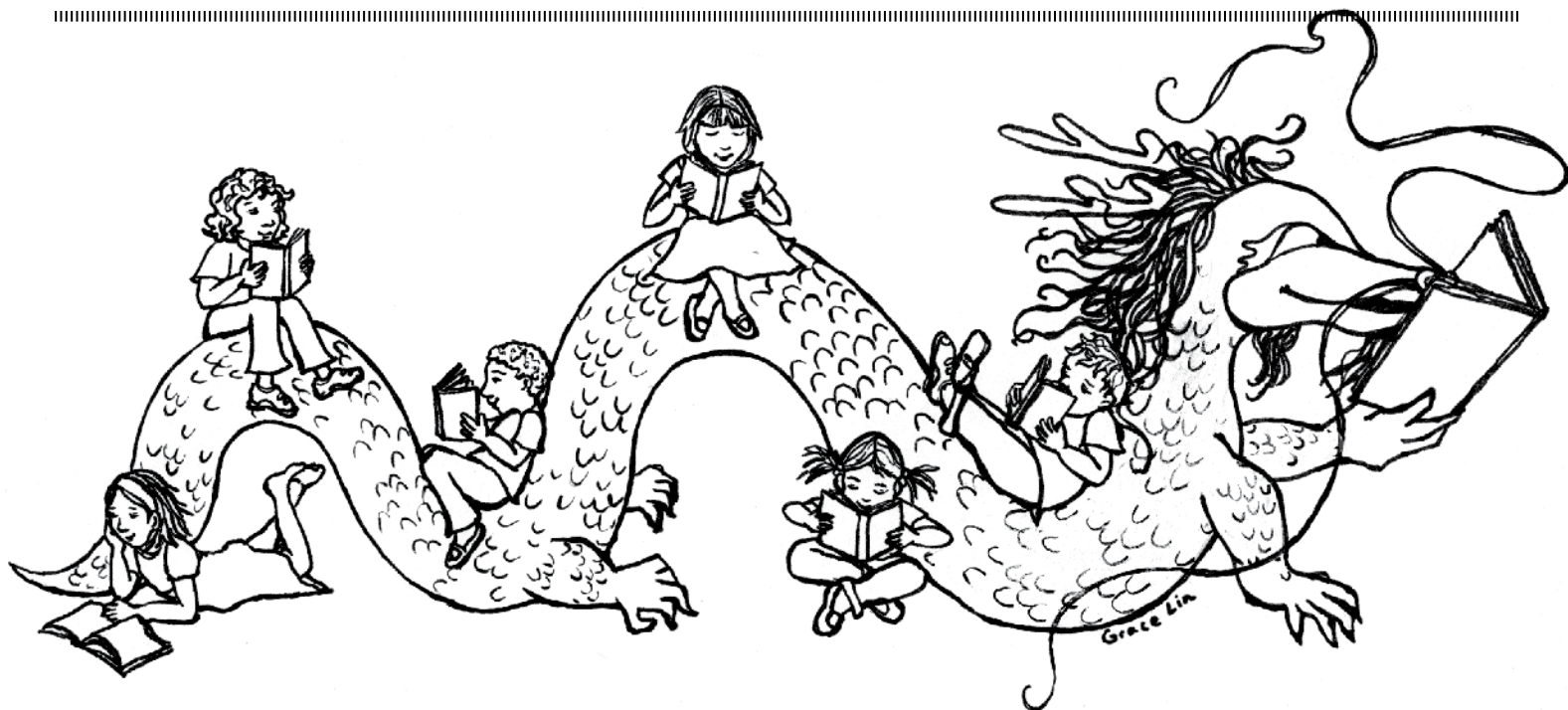




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Teaching History through Literature: *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and Australia's Stolen Generations

BY MELINDA SMITH

"The truth about stories is that that's all we are" —Thomas King (2)

In his narrative *The Truth About Stories*, Thomas King claims that stories are crucial elements to understanding people's values and constructing their identities. With this in mind, Doris Pilkington's *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (known as *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* in its first iteration) informs the reader about the way particular government decisions affected generations of aboriginal children who were taken from their families to be assimilated into western ways of living. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is a mixed genre book, chronicling a story of survival and resistance in a way that is straightforward and approachable for young adult and

adult readers alike. This text interweaves documented history, a familial memoir, and aboriginal folklore into a captivating counter-history that illuminates a vital part of Australia's past and the resilience that country is known for.

On a national level, "the term Stolen Generations describes the many Aboriginal—and some Torres Strait Islander—people who were forcibly removed from their families as children by past Australian Federal, State and Territory government agencies, and church missions, from the late 1800s to the 1970s" (National Sorry Day Committee). In Western Australia where the story takes place, the Department of Native Affairs Aborigines Act of 1905

legally sanctioned the forced removal of half-caste children (up to 16 years old) from their families. The government's decision was theoretically based on its belief that removal would lead to better lives for the children, as it was deemed "wrong, unjust and a disgrace to the State to leave children to be cared for by their mothers" (Drew, Australian Human Rights Commission). As a result, these removed children became part of Australia's stolen generations. While the government claimed to have the children's best interests in mind, "the reality was that Aboriginal children were being removed in order to be exposed to 'Anglo values' and 'work habits' with a view to them being employed by colonial settlers, and to stop their parents, families and communities from passing on their culture, language and identity to them" (National Sorry Day Committee). *Rabbit-Proof Fence* speaks back to the government's arrogance, as the story demonstrates that, even though they were children, those being removed did not agree with or benefit from the government's decisions.

Rabbit-Proof Fence incorporates historical documents to aid in the development of the reader's understanding of these events. Regarding the removal of the girls from their home in Jigalong, Pilkington includes official correspondence from Constable Riggs, the legal Protector of Aborigines in this particular region of Western Australia (Pilkington 46); these documents illustrate the matter of fact manner in which these removals occurred. While Riggs claims to be concerned about the "safe[ty]" of his charges, he also admits that they "seemed to be very scared of the other children" at the Moore River Settlement where they are taken, yet firmly believes that the girls will "soon accept the inevitable and fall in with the usage of the place" (Pilkington 61). This kind of information makes the plight of the girls even more appealing, as the cold approach to the removals signifies the insensitivity of the government's employees in performing their job duties. In addition to these accounts, Pilkington includes news reports of the girls' journey home after escaping the settlement to demonstrate that the entire state was informed and perhaps riveted by the fate of the three runaways. In an article from the *West Australian*, the state's Chief Protector of Aborigines, Mr. A. O. Neville, claims that "we are very anxious that no harm may come to them in the bush," signifying that he doesn't believe that the girls have the knowledge of the land to sustain their lives on the 1500 mile journey (Pilkington 102). However, this concern doesn't take into account the indigenous knowledge that the girls held, information that helped them hunt, create temporary housing, and remain safe in unfamiliar lands.

Contrasting these official opinions are the fictionalized voices of the girls themselves (Molly, Gracie,

and Daisy; Molly is the author's mother). Pilkington recreates the faith that Gracie and Daisy had in Molly's ability to lead and keep them safe, as Molly's suggestion of running away is met with confidence: "The two youngsters trusted their big sister because she was not only the eldest but she had always been the bossy one who made the decisions at home. So they did the normal thing and said 'Alright, Dgudu, we'll run away with you'" (78). Their actions confirmed their belief in Molly's abilities to navigate the bush and find the way north to Jigalong, even though none of the girls had firsthand experience of these environments. One of the greatest impacts of this text is the way Pilkington valorizes the strength of her mother, Molly, the instigator of the journey back to the girls' home. Molly repeatedly proves to be deeply knowledgeable about surviving on foreign land, as she provides water and food, in addition to navigating environmental hazards such as river crossings and dangerous animals (including humans). Molly comes up with the idea of following the rabbit-proof fence home, a plan that eventually brings two of the sisters back to their families.

In addition to capturing the lived impact of a crucial part of Australian history, this text includes aboriginal folklore and language to show Pilkington's respect for and pride in her heritage. The younger sisters call their elder sister "Dgudu" and trust her knowledge (Pilkington 85; "Dgudu" is translated as "older sister" in Pilkington's glossary [134]). When they encounter the strange and frightening marbu ("flesh eating spirit" [135]), they confirm their suspicions with Molly in a mixed-tongue: "'that was a marbu, indi Dgudu?'" (Pilkington 85). As the relative elder, she is not only addressed by a respectful title, but also provides security through knowledge. The inclusion of folklore and language are complemented by accounts of pre-colonial aboriginal life, commencing with Kundilla's mob (Pilkington 1). Cultural elements such as birthing rituals and mourning ceremonies elucidate the nuances of this society, nullifying the idea that aboriginal cultures are not sophisticated (Pilkington 37, 44). These accounts of the lives of the Nyungar people make them a sympathetic, well-rounded, and caring community that was ill-treated by the government edicts, to say the least.

Ben Okri argues that "we live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives" (Okri in King 153). From the world Pilkington constructs in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Australia's history is told not just by the dominant population, but by those who overcame overwhelming adversity with dignity. The story of Molly, Gracie, and Daisy rewrites the Australian government's edict of forced removal that contributed to the creation of the stolen generations, illustrating the significant human impact of such dictatorial measures used to control a part of the aboriginal population. The story of these girls exemplifies the great impact that a piece of fictionalized history can have on its readers, as this courageous tale personalizes the effects of such detrimental edicts in a way that urges readers to condemn the government's decision. The text provides both young adults and adults with the opportunity to look deeper into a shameful part of Australia's history to find the heroines who resisted confinement and separation from their homes and families. Molly, Gracie, and Daisy

represent the underdog spirit of the Australian nation; telling this story affirms the power of resistance and sheer strength that emerged from some of the youngest members of the community.

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At first, young adult literature remained primarily instructional, much like the majority of children's literature being produced. Because the vast majority of children's literature (including the young adult subgenre) was being written and published by adults, the themes of these works generally aimed for social education. Children's literature was written to entertain, yes, but also to teach children (and now, young adults) values, lessons, and how to exist harmoniously in their society as future adults.

It's because adults are discovering one of publishing's best-kept secrets: that young adult authors are doing some of the most daring work out there. Authors who write for young adults are taking creative risks—with narrative structure, voice and social commentary—that you just don't see as often in the more rarefied world of adult fiction.

Somewhat conversely, critic Lev Grossman attributed the appeal of young adult literature to adults as due in part to the fact that

the writing is different: young adult novels tend to emphasize strong voices and clear, clean descriptive prose, whereas a lot of literary fiction is very focused on style: dense, lyrical, descriptive prose, larded with tons of carefully observed detail.

If adult interest in young adult literature has historically come from a position of caretaking and concern, the subgenre is now being examined and read by adults for their own pleasure, regardless of one's particular stance on the subgenre's merit.

The intention of this article is not to discover exactly why adults are so fascinated with young adult literature, but rather to explore how adult interest in young adult literature—as creators, content instructors, readers, and so on—has affected the genre's development. In *Critical Approaches to Young Adult Literature*, Latrobe and Drury define the subgenre as, "whatever young adults are reading—from classic literature to poems to graphic novels" (xi). But what implications could an extremely large adult readership have on a subgenre that is defined by its young adult readership?

This article began with a briefing on how many popular young adult novels have been adapted for the screen in the past several years, and I'd like to return to this point in order to demonstrate how the relationship between adults and young adult literature is perhaps stronger than the subgenre's prevalent themes—theoretically geared toward young adults—might suggest. As visual media continues to rival print media (even overtake, in certain arenas), how might adult interest in young adult literature translate to the screen, and beyond?

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However, during the last third of the twentieth century, the aforementioned rise in leisure time for young adults, as well as the increasing demand for literature that was written *for* young adults—as opposed to literature written *to* young adults, as life instruction—led to a marked increase in young adult literature that addressed the way young adults realistically interacted with the world. Let's consider, for example, one of the seminal young adult novels that serves to define the genre—J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. In *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, Nilsen and Donelson point out that "it is the style of the writing that makes Salinger's book so memorable, indeed such a milestone, and has inspired other authors to imitate the colloquial speech, the candid revelations of feelings, the short snappy dialogues, the instant judgments, and the emotional extremes ranging from hostility to great tenderness" (68). Salinger's book resonated with young adults because it sounded like them, because it reflected the situations that they faced from their own perspective (or at least an approximation). Although, like Salinger, most authors of young adult literature were adults (a statistic still in place today), at least these adult authors were catering to what young adults wanted to read.

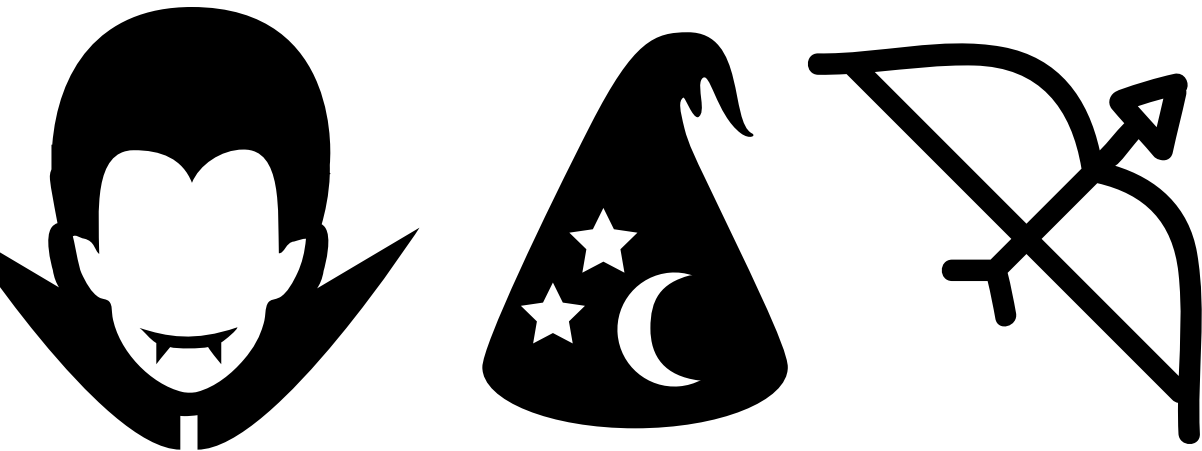
The shift toward young adult-driven young adult literature necessarily meant that the subject matter of the subgenre's works shifted as well. Young adults exist in a transitional state, being afforded some of the freedoms and responsibilities of adulthood (circumstances which are almost unimaginable to a child), while simultaneously being limited in terms of personal agency, certain representational freedoms, and so on. Consequently, as young adult literature has become more geared toward young adult interests, it has increasingly reflected, even magnified, this duality of existence—presenting the more controversial, problematic, and transgressive aspects of young adulthood, while also often staging these circumstances in fantastical or unrealistic settings. How better to reflect the transitional uncertainty of young adulthood?

Given the historical setup outlined above, we must then return to the question posited at the beginning of this article: if young adult literature has increasingly catered to what young adults want to read and what reflects their experience, why has this same literature captured the attention of a large adult readership, creating cultural phenomena such as the rabid adult fan bases surrounding *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and *The Hunger Games*?

Discussion of this question has been extensive. In the spring of 2012, for example, *The New York Times Online* featured an editorial debate examining the appeal of young adult fiction to an adult readership. Author Patricia McCormick posited that,

- But why was the *Twilight* Saga, for example, so popular with adults? More generally, why are increasing numbers of adults turning to young adult literature for their own reading material? The answers to these questions could be found in a consideration of three particular trends:
- a. The historical roots of young adult literature as a distinct genre.
 - b. The rise of "transgressive" young adult literature in conjunction with a prolonged period of young adult subjectivity.
 - c. The personal attention to young adult literature paid by the post-millennial adult readership.

According to surveys of the subgenre such as Michael Cart's *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, young adult literature first became definable as a literary category in the years after World War II, when the widening gap between children and working-age adults gave rise to a particular age range that could actually be defined as "young adult." Previously, the transition from childhood to adulthood had been temporally brief; children were expected to attend school until a point in their teens, and then move directly into the workforce. Consequently, the distinction between children's literature and adult literature was quite stark, with little perceived genre overlap. After the war, however, circumstances aligned to allow for an extended period of study and leisure time during an adolescent's teen years, creating a demand for literature that catered specifically to young adult readers.



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Beyond the Horizon, Looking Back: How Adult Interest Affects Young Adult Literature

BY RACHEL WOLF

Over the past several years, the American media and literary arenas have collaborated to produce a noticeably increased number of blockbuster films based on popular young adult novels. Examples include 2012's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*; 2012's *The Hunger Games* (followed by 2013's *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*); 2014's *Divergent*; and the upcoming *The Fault in Our Stars*, due out in June, 2014. While children's literature (including the young adult subgenre) has always been a field well-mined for media adaptations, the recent rise in cinematic interest seems indicative of an increased focus on how young adult literature serves adult interests.

Of course, the current spate of cinematic adaptations of young adult literary works is often attributed to the recent success of the *Twilight* series (or, going just a bit farther back, the *Harry Potter* series), as both the original novels and the movie adaptations had tremendous success in print and cinematically. *Twilight* was remarkable in its appeal to a wide age range, bringing in a seemingly unprecedented adult readership (and, later, viewership). But the popularity of the *Twilight* series was not unique in this regard—in 2012, *Publisher's Weekly* published the results of a study conducted by *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer in the Digital Age*, which found that fully 55 percent of young adult books are purchased by adults, most of which are intended for the adults' own readership.

Modernizing Chinese Tales

BY SUZANNE KOSANKE

When comparing the act of reading to walking in the woods, literary critic and author Umberto Eco suggests that readers should “cultivate the art of lingering” (50). Some readers, he says, just want to hurry through the “woods” to have the satisfaction of reaching the end, or perhaps they are eager to reach a particular destination (Grandmother’s house?). But another kind of reader will be willing to “walk [through the book/forest] . . . to discover what the wood is like” (27).

Grace Lin encourages this kind of thoughtful lingering in *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* (2009) and *Starry River of the Sky* (2012) by interspersing short tales—either traditional Chinese stories or fictionalized vignettes—within her main narrative: Sixteen in her earlier book and fourteen in *Starry River*. This certainly slows a reader down, since the narrative stops completely and a tangentially related tale takes over. Will readers experience these tales as alluring flowers strewn in their path, stories they should appreciate and linger over? Or will these narrative interruptions be experienced as annoying rocks that clutter the road readers are travelling?



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If you’re rushing down the narrative road, eager to discover the true identity of *Starry River’s* protagonist, Rendi, to find out why he’s on the run, and what role a smiling toad, the enigmatic Madame Chang, and the seemingly witless Mr. Shan are playing, these little detours will be frustrating. Readers may become impatient with inserted stories that do not seem to advance the plot. Sometimes these tales do help answer a question like Rendi’s about the origin of a large, flat field in front of the Inn of Clear Sky where he’s just been hired as chore boy (14-17). Sometimes, they are legends explaining why we only have one sun or why the rooster crows at sunrise. When Madame Chang asks if Rendi wants to hear an old tale, he only says “I guess so” (43). Readers may feel just as unenthusiastic.

Others, though, will recognize that these inserted stories are helpful, revealing necessary cultural and psychological aspects of characters and settings. Lin certainly intends these stories to be more than simple fictional vignettes made up by their tellers to entertain characters (or readers). When Madame Chang tells “The Story of the Old Sage” (64-70), the usually unsmiling Rendi is involved enough that he laughs, showing he is letting down his guard and becoming a member of this little community. His eventual willingness to tell his own tales shows Rendi’s development as a character. As Madame Chang explains, “When people tell stories, they share things about themselves” (264), and these 14 inserted tales do reveal significant details about characters’ feelings, values, and personal history.

In *Starry River*, Lin uses the terms “folktales” and “myths” to describe these little stories, though many of them are really legends. Not concerned about definitions, Lin worries that because she is “an Americanized-Asian, some [readers] might think I had no right to reinterpret these Chinese folktales with my own modern sensibilities . . . Many might be offended that the myths were changed or altered” (291-92).

For example, Madame Chang’s “Story of the Six Suns” and “The Story of WanYi’s Wife” are re-tellings of the Houyi/Chang’e myth. Traditional versions feature Houyi (or Yi), god of archery sent by the Lord of Heaven to frighten his ten sons (who are also suns) out of the sky because their brightness is scorching the earth. But Houyi kills nine of the suns with his arrows. For this, he and his wife Chang’e (or Zang E) are demoted to human status. Chang’e is unhappy as a mortal and (due to boredom, curiosity, loneliness, or treachery—versions differ) drinks an elixir of immortality intended for Houyi, and ascends to the moon. Because she’s left him, Houyi becomes a tyrant (or grows weak from grief). Some versions have Houyi joining Chang’e on the moon once a month; others leave him behind on earth (*Chang’e*; “Chinese”; Chinn).

In Lin’s version, however, WangYi is not a god but “the strongest, bravest, and quickest of all men” (27), who, due to anger, shoots the five (not ten) suns. Because his wife, Chang’e, steals his sixth arrow and hides it in her sleeve, “this is why there is now one sun” (29). He gets a pill (not elixir) of immortality from a goddess but soon grows “cruel and selfish” (98). So Chang’e swallows the pill herself to save the people from an eternal reign by WangYi.

Lin’s version features a stronger Chang’e whose decisions and actions direct the plot, and this hints that Chang’e and Madame Chang are related. Excessive anger is Houyi’s tragic flaw in Lin’s version, and this sends a warning to Rendi whose own anger at his “Tiger” father is eating away at him.

“My intent has never been to replace the traditional retellings of Chinese folklore,” says Lin. Her goal differs from other illustrators like Ed Young, who is careful to explain that his *Yeh-Shen: A Cinderella Story from China* first appeared in *The Miscellaneous*



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Record of Yu Yang (T’ang dynasty, 618-907 AD), noting that it is therefore much older than the 1634 Italian version Westerners consider the “original” Cinderella story. Young even includes the Ch’ing dynasty text in the Chinese characters. Authenticity accompanied by evocative original illustrations is Young’s primary goal. This is not Lin’s purpose in *Starry River*. She revises traditional tales to show characters that they need to reconcile, resolve, and even forgive by returning home—just as the classic Hero does in countless stories. Lin’s little tales reveal the human need for balance, showing that being selfish and harboring anger are harmful to self and community. And because the readers will relate to these modernized versions, they will linger longer over them and perhaps even learn the secret to finding peace. (According to one of Madame Chang’s stories, it’s forgiveness.)

“My small adaptations [are] at worst harmless and at best a new fresh sprout—and neither could injure the original stalk,” Lin concludes (292). Her revisions won’t please all readers, but most will understand and forgive Lin for modernizing traditional Chinese tales.

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Into the Woods: Classic Fairy Tales Retold as WWII Survivors’ Stories

BY KIRSTEN MØLLEGAARD

In western culture, we tend to think of the imaginary and the real as two separate realms of experience that do not overlap, one governed by fantasy and the other by reason and fact. If you want to teach children about World War II, for example, would you tell them a fairy tale? In fact, is it not true that some events in the real world are so horrific and traumatic that it would seem like an insult to historical authenticity and to the survivors, not to mention their descendants, if gruesome events like the Holocaust, the Nazis’ medical experiments, and Gestapo’s

mass executions in Poland’s Bialowieza Forest were retold as magical and set up with fairy-tale formulas like “once upon a time” and peopled with witches, brave princes, and beautiful princesses?

As if anticipating such an argument, Jane Yolen introduces her young-adult novel *Briar Rose* (1992) with a quotation from fairy-tale scholar Jack Zipes, who claims that fairy tales have historical origins in the sense that they reflect human experience with adversity and survival. Zipes writes, “Oral and literary fairy tales are grounded in history. They emanate from specific struggles to humanize bestial and barbaric forces, which have terrorized our minds and communities in concrete ways, threatening to destroy free will and human compassion. The fairy tale sets out to conquer this concrete terror through metaphors” (1-2). But how can we trust that the fairy tale does not distort or make pretty what are in fact ugly historical truths? As with so many other things in life, we need to rely on our own critical thinking, whether we read history books or fairy tales. The two young-adult novels discussed here encourage readers to do exactly that: think for themselves, while leaving room for magic and beauty in the protagonists’ journeys through war and remembrance.

Louise Murphy begins her novel *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* (2003) by asking readers to suspend their disbelief. There may be both truths and lies in a fairy tale. She cautions,

the story has been told over and over by liars and it must be retold. Do not struggle when the hook of a word pulls you into the air of truth and you cannot breathe. For a little while, I ask this of you. Come with me. (1)

Murphy’s clever introduction juxtaposes truths and lies, but challenges the reader to figure out which is which, and to ponder to what degree they can be separated. Like Yolen, she melds the classic fairy tale’s distantly located settings of places far, far away and long, long ago with contemporary concerns about the mysteries of places haunted by war trauma. Similarly, Yolen’s and Murphy’s novels revolve thematically around questions of how contemporary identities are intrinsically interwoven with the past. The symbolism of fairy-tale characters’ names and the metaphoric meaning of their enemies invite readers to make connections between the imaginary and history.

Both Yolen and Murphy take their readers on journeys of discovery into the past, blending the imaginary with the real, to show—and thus to (re)tell—the haunting presence of the past in the present. They tell stories of survival against a canvas of World War II death camps and mass murder. But, as Zipes argues, they use the fairy-tale frame to cope with terror and to acknowledge that what happened during World War II is part of our contemporary world, perhaps only as a memory in Europe today, but as lived experience in many other countries around the world where children grow up with war. In Murphy’s and Yolen’s novels, the fairy tale’s form and conventions offer the child protagonists hope and a sense of stability in a war-torn, chaotic world. The classic fairy-tale frame allows the protagonists to transcend the horrific realities of war and to understand their historical moment within a realm of fantasy and beauty. Fairy-tale style, they must go on dangerous, but exciting journeys into the woods, battle monsters, and overcome formidable obstacles in the age-old process of leaving childhood behind in order to embrace life as adults.

Briar Rose’s protagonist Rebecca is in fact quite grown up at the beginning of the novel, when her grandmother Gemma, deathly ill, tells her, “I was the princess in the castle in the sleeping woods. And there came a great dark mist and we all fell asleep. But the prince kissed me awake” (16). As Maria Tatar explains, the Brothers Grimm’s “*Briar Rose*” is known as “The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood” in Charles Perrault’s version (95). Calling herself “*Briar Rose*,” Gemma wrests a promise from Rebecca to find the castle, the prince, and the maker of spells. Confused, but determined, Rebecca embarks on a journey into her grandmother’s mysterious past. Rebecca and her family discover that they actually have no clue who Gemma really is, not even what her real name is. All they know is that she was pregnant with Rebecca’s mother when she emigrated from Poland to the United States in 1944 and that “she never spoke of any husband” (30). As Rebecca ponders the meaning of the Brothers Grimm fairy tale of “*Briar Rose*,” she realizes that the story holds the clues to unlock the mystery of who Gemma really is and what happened to her in Poland during World War II. Consequently, Rebecca travels to Poland, a journey not only into a place unknown to Rebecca, but also into her grandmother’s past, and hence into Rebecca’s own Jewish identity and heritage.

Murphy’s dark novel *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* also takes place in Poland during World War II. Like *Briar Rose*, it is a fictitious novel inspired by historical events. Two Jewish siblings are abandoned in a big forest to fend for themselves, while their father and stepmother take off to distract the pursuing Nazis. Upon departing, the stepmother yells at them, “You are Hansel and Gretel. Remember” (5). They understand that they must assume a German identity under the guise of the fairy-tale names in order to survive. Deep in the woods, they come across a hut with bread hanging outside for the birds. Soon they find themselves at the mercy of the eccentric old woman who lives in the hut. The nearby villagers call her a witch. Sinister forces of evil lurk both in the woods and the village, but the wild beasts of the Bialowieza Forest—European bison, feral ponies, and wild boars—are almost magical compared to the scenes of abuse and torture unfolding in the village. Resistance fighters, Jewish refugees, and opportunistic drifters hide in the dense forest, while an SS officer, the devilishly cruel Oberführer, conducts medical experiments on women and children in the village. Hansel and Gretel learn to forget their Jewish origin in order to survive, but, like Yolen’s protagonist, Rebecca, they discover that the need to remember contains the urge to know the truth, not only about the past, but also about who they are in the present.

In defense of the power of imagination, Carl Jung argues, “all the works of man have their origins in creative fantasy” (67). Yolen’s and Murphy’s novels are among the many powerful retellings of classic fairy tales that establish a dialogue between the real and the imaginary, and the present and the past. Fairy tales may be grounded in history, as Zipes argues,

Question Authority: Control and Resistance in Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*

BY PIPER SELDEN

We see the sticker slapped on a rainbow-colored VW bus or as a clever t-shirt design: “Question Authority!” A slogan sometimes attributed to Timothy Leary (writer, psychologist, and psychedelic drug guru), this simple, declarative statement evokes images of the 1960s and 70s, of bell bottom jeans, Vietnam War protests, and folk musicians who asked us to get on a peace train. Question Authority? Sure, but how does this relate to children’s literature? The answer is coming soon to a theater near you!

The Giver, Lois Lowry’s critically acclaimed young adult novel and soon to be major motion picture, has received much attention since its publication in 1993. Winner of the prestigious Newbery Medal in 1994, the book continues to garner positive and negative reactions from a wide audience of young readers, teaching professionals, and literary critics. In 2008, the American Library Association selected *The Giver* for its published list of frequently banned books (“Banned”). In addition, the book finds itself a frequent flier for Banned Books

but they also function “as repositories of a collective cultural consciousness and unconscious” (Tatar xiii)—and hence as magic carpets for journeys of discovery through time and space.

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RECOMMENDED READING

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Under Fire: Childhood in the Shadow of War. Andrea Immel and Elizabet Goodenough, eds. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008. Print.

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Week, an annual celebration that honors reading freedom in the United States and educates the public on the dangers of censorship (“100 Most”). What is it about this “dangerous” book that it should be banned? Perhaps it encourages too much free thinking, which in turn could lead to new ideas and a challenge to adult status quo. In two words: power struggle.

Few would disagree that some young adult books stir controversy, but why ban them? Judy Blume, another critically acclaimed and controversial young adult author, writes:

It’s not just the books under fire now that worry me. It is the books that will never be written. The books that will never be read. And all due to the fear of censorship. As always, young readers will be the real losers. (“The 100”)

The Giver is a prime example of firestorm controversy in children’s literature. The book presents a perfect world in which there seems to be no crime or war, no pain or poverty. Society members appear productive and content because everything is seamlessly

controlled. When Elders in the community select twelve-year-old Jonas for a special job, he discovers the cost of his perfected society: personal freedom (Lowry 97). On his journey toward an independent life, Jonas eventually bucks the system, resulting in a final, stunning act of disobedience (166). The story illustrates a rite of passage from a controlled world of childhood to a more liberated state of being in the world. And too much free thinking, even in fiction, might be a dangerous thing for the real people in power.

Literary criticism of children’s literature doesn’t go far enough to examine the relationships among censorship, childhood resistance, and independence. Restrictions and prohibitions of books like *The Giver* are merely an attempt by a confronted authority—parental or societal—to maintain control over young readers. Drawing on the work of Antonio Gramsci, Carl Jung, and Joseph Campbell, I suggest that the young protagonist in *The Giver* poses a threat to authority, established societal norms, and the status quo. The stakes are high: if controlled and conditioned to obey from an early age, young people learn to be passive and are left more susceptible to coercion and manipulation later in life. Alternatively, exposure to a text like *The Giver* can spark youthful curiosity and intellectual development, thereby fostering the critical thinking skills needed to become well-informed citizens of the future.

In “Childhood Under Siege,” critic Don Latham points to tensions in contested children’s literature. Latham asserts that, in general, a false division exists between childhood and adulthood. Like adults, he argues, children are capable of complexity and depth and should not be discounted. Latham suggests that authors should encourage readers—children and adults alike—to question “grown-up fantasies” of childhood as a time of innocence and simplicity and to recognize instead that many children are able to solve complex problems and act responsibly if given the opportunity (13-14). How else will they learn to navigate the world around them?

To support his claim of a false split between childhood and adulthood, Latham explores examples of what he calls “blurred divisions” (4). In *The Giver*, Community expectations force role reversals; people act like adults but are treated as children and vice versa (Lowry 9). Although Community members exude politeness and are excessively apologetic, tongue-in-cheek remarks come from both young and old in the story—sarcasm being a more mature response. Latham also demonstrates that adults also seem to be treated as children in the story, having no voice or authority:

Adults are no different from the children in that they blindly accept the roles prescribed for them. (Latham 9)

In Lowry’s carefully constructed Community, age-related roles are blurred beyond recognition and difference is erased.

Real world distinctions between childhood and adulthood are similarly blurred. In many cases children and adults now dress alike, listen to the same music, eat the same foods (often fast food), and read the same books. Children and adults alike enjoy a wide variety of books intended for young adult

readers, such as the popular *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling. The 2005 *Norton Anthology of Children’s Literature* makes the case that boundaries are becoming harder to define:

The problematic nature of children’s literature is underscored not just by the concerns about defining childhood or children’s literature, but also by the increasing tendency of distinctions between child and adult cultures to dissolve. (Zipes xxxi)

The Giver and books like it have an important place in children’s literature. When children read and are exposed to new ideas, including those acquired by reading, they become increasingly more capable of recognizing and analyzing complex concepts for practical application in their own lives. In effect, kids are forced to “grow up faster” if exposed to things of a more adult nature. They move from Jung’s innocent Child archetype to one of a thinking Adult (Jung 60). New ideas transform the collective unconscious through life experience and critical thinking. And this may raise a concern: emulating the defiant, independent thinker, children reading *The Giver* might use the fictional experience of Jonas to enact real change in their own lives. The ability to change empowers individuals, regardless of age, and children eventually grow up. Or do they? Any child can grow older physically, but maturing psychologically is another matter. If children are not allowed to grow, inquire, and question, how can we expect them to learn? They cannot. Instead, they become adults with Child archetype mentalities, trapped and stifled. Forever-kids are much easier to control; they may grow older, but they never develop into true, thinking adults.

In the context of growth and development, one might wonder why some people see books like *The Giver* as dangerous or controversial, enough to consider censorship. Could it be that some books represent a real or perceived challenge to authority? Here, Lowry depicts Gramsci’s hegemony—the control or dictating of one individual or group over others—through the eyes of a child. Whereas thinking adults can choose to consent or rebel, children *must* obey. The state or controlling power sees to it. This is the real threat posed by Lowry’s book and others like it. Banning books like *The Giver* isn’t about protection; ultimately, it’s about power and control. Think about it. Control is the endgame of most heated parent/child disagreements: *Why not? I’ll tell you why not . . . because I’m the parent and I say so!* If one capable child rebels within the pages of a book, questions authority, why not other children off the page?

Society holds a vested interest in the literature of children to socialize them as future members of that same society. Granted, real danger does exist in the world and children should be protected, but it is my firm belief that challenged books like *The Giver* should not be banned as a measure to “protect” children. This type of censorship is a faulty logic that simply removes the option for a deeper conversation with children. Greater understanding through discussion and fostered development of self eventually leads to maturity. Censorship nurtures ignorance; and ignorant populations (child or adult) are easier to influence. Instead,

children should have the information they need to make what Joseph Campbell calls the hero’s journey into a fully realized adulthood. In the face of liberties protected by the U.S. Constitution, heavy censorship conditions young people to be passive. In turn, they become more vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation. The aim to protect children from potentially dangerous or controversial influences is understandable. Censorship, however, is not the answer for any United States citizen, regardless of age.

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Kids’ Pics: Fostering Inquiry through Children’s Books

BY JILL DAHLMAN

When I was in sixth grade, I read *From the Mixed Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankenweiler* by E. L. Konigsburg. This award-winning novel is about two children who run away from home and run to a museum, only to encounter a mystery about a statue the museum acquires. From that point forward, I read everything I could on museums, and I took a particular interest in art history and Michelangelo, a fascination I still hold on to today. I begged my parents to take me to museums, imagining myself as the heroine, Claudia, as we would tour the hallowed halls. I read more books, particularly about Michelangelo: biographies, books about Michelangelo’s work—anything to learn more. My curiosity in not only art history but also in Michelangelo was fostered by that one book. Unbeknownst to me, my sense of what John Dewey terms “Inquiry” was sparked. One book ignited my interest and changed my worldview forever.

Recently, my hanai nephew Theo and I were talking about books. He is 15 and autistic. With my more-than-passing interest in children’s literature, if Theo says he loves a book, I stand up and take notice. The book Theo loves? *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan. On the spot, I pulled out my trusty Kindle and downloaded the book. Theo was impressed. I went home after that outing and promptly read the book, a story about the son of a Greek god father and human mother and an Odysseyan-like quest, so that Theo and I could talk about the book, but something magical happened

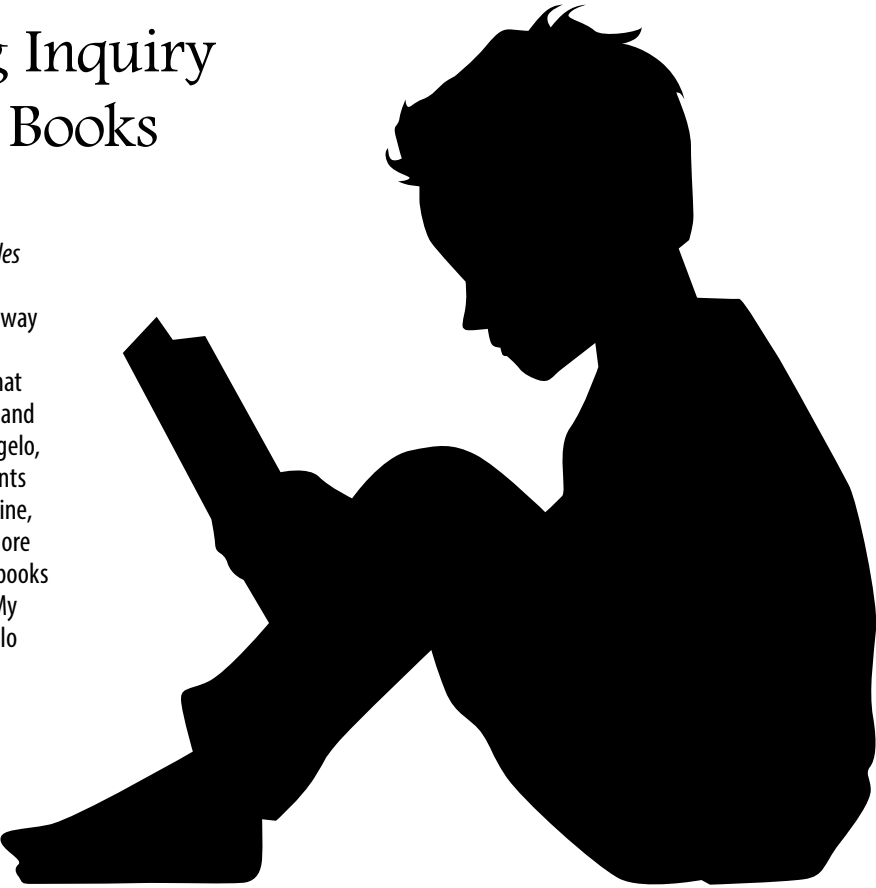
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as it often does when I read a book: my “inquiry” was sparked yet again—this time for a brushup on my Greek mythology.

I often wonder: in today’s day of electronics, what is there to sponsor a child’s sense of inquiry? I remember fondly my mother’s taking my siblings and me to the library every other Saturday. I practically lived in my school library. Anything for a book. But,

today, books are in short supply. O’ahu recently decreased the number of commercial or chain bookstores available to purchase books: only one remains, and very few independent book retailers remain. On the outer islands, the situation is worse. Portable games, iPods, iPads, and Kindles are everywhere you look. I watch babies in strollers playing with a parent’s phone instead of holding a book. Yet, Dewey assures us that the key to lifelong learning is to foster a sense of inquiry. What is that? A natural curiosity that encourages learning. Learning is fostered from inspiration gleaned from an artifact—a book, a cartoon, a song. And while it seems that fostering inquiry is difficult, it really isn’t. The key is to find that one spark to foster the inquiry—to be motivated to guide the self into learning more about a subject:

Dewey argued for [this] view: the organism [person] interacts with the world through self-guided activity [. . .]. The implication for the theory of knowledge was clear: the world is not passively perceived and thereby known; active manipulation of the environment is involved integrally in the process of learning from the start. (Field)

What this suggests is that once an individual has been motivated to learn more, the individual then is actively engaged with the learning process.

Not coincidentally, inquiry begins with questioning and curiosity. If a child is curious and begins to question something, he or she will no doubt gravitate toward learning more about an issue and attempt to grasp a greater understanding of that issue. Much like my experience with *The Lightning Thief*, where I began to realize that if I brushed up on my Greek mythology I would be able to have a greater understanding of the novel (and even figure out some things ahead of time), children, too, can have that same experience: if they have the curiosity to question something, they will have a greater interest in finding out more about that subject.

Today’s child is faced with an overwhelming amount of learning—particularly about how to take tests to satisfy all sorts of agencies. What this amount of testing does is to absorb all of the joy out of learning. There is so much emphasis on the test that inquiry has all but disappeared because, let’s face it, if learning isn’t interesting, there is nothing that fosters that inquiry; yet, as Dewey’s theory suggests, the “self” needs to be motivated to learn. Testing is not a great motivator, but reading is. As much as we may bemoan certain children’s book series, if it gets children to read more and to ask more questions, then the book is developing the student’s sense of inquiry. Furthermore, this asking of questions leads from a passive form of learning to an active form of learning because the child is self-directed.

Many children’s books provide such an inspiration—a motivation—to learn more about a subject. As noted earlier, Riordan’s *The Lightning Thief* is a wonderful motivation for children to learn more about Greek mythology and could tie in to a classroom unit on that subject. Reading *The Lightning Thief* after the teaching of a Greek mythology unit would mean that children may figure out key mysteries before the answers are revealed in the book; and,

for information that cannot be covered in a classroom lesson, the story (and the series) would encourage the student to explore new information on his or her own, much in the same way that I wanted to learn more about Michelangelo from *The Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankenweiler*. It simply sets a child on the path.

Children’s books can also be an avenue to learn more about a particular subject that may not be covered in a textbook. For example, Linda Sue Park’s book *When My Name Was Keoko* presents a view of what life was like for a child in Japanese-occupied Korea, a subject that is not well covered in history books. This story that Park tells is based upon extensive amounts of research. She was not around during the Japanese occupation of Korea, but other Koreans were. It is those lived experiences that come together to create the story of Keoko, and it is Keoko’s story that fosters the curiosity necessary to promote inquiry or questioning of a certain time or event in history.

Whether a novel is based upon reality (as Park’s are) or fanciful whims (as Riordan’s are) or even upon possibilities (as Konigsburg’s is), children’s literature has the power to spark a child’s curiosity and to foster the sense of “inquiry” that Dewey was famous for advocating. Knowledge is based upon lived experiences, and part of lived experience includes the reading and deeper understanding of a novel. The curiosity a child gains from a novel can lead to a greater understanding of a subject through the questioning that goes on in the process of investigating a subject that has sparked an interest. It is that inquiry, that spark, that then can lead a child into learning more about a subject than ever thought possible, and encourage him or her to develop a lifelong love for learning.

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Contributors to the *Humanities Guide*

Melinda Smith is a doctoral candidate in English (emphasis in Pacific Literature) at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. She teaches composition and literature at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. She is the Conference Director for the Seventeenth Biennial Conference on Literature and Hawai'i's Children.

Rachel Wolf is a doctoral candidate in English (emphasis in Creative Writing) at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. She teaches composition, literature, and creative writing at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, and was the Editor-in-Chief of the literary journal *Hawai'i Review*. She was also the Conference Director for the Sixteenth Biennial Conference on Literature and Hawai'i's Children.

Suzanne Kosanke is a retired Instructor in English at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and a past Conference Director.

Kirsten Møllegaard, Ph.D., received her doctoral degree from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. She is an Associate Professor at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo, where she teaches literature and rhetoric.

Piper Selden is a doctoral candidate in English at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa with academic areas of interest in creative writing, rhetoric, and composition. She lives and teaches college English in Hilo, on the Big Island of Hawai'i. When not gardening or dodging lava flows, Piper reads, writes, and teaches on topics relating to life writing and the environment. She teaches composition at Hawai'i Community College on the Big Island.

Jill Dahlman, Ph.D., received her doctoral degree (emphasis in composition and rhetoric) from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. She teaches composition and literature at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Windward Community College, and Chaminade University. She is the Associate Conference Director for the Seventeenth Biennial Conference on Literature and Hawai'i's Children and the Editor for the *Humanities Guide*.

