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ABSTRACT

Intended to serve an instrumental purpose for middle-grade teachers, this paper presents brief annotations of eight novels of interest to middle grade students and more elaborate comments and teaching activities for two well-known novels. The eight novels are "How to Eat Fried Worms" (Thomas Rockwell); "Number the Stars" (Lois Lowry); "Cousins" (Virginia Hamilton); "Summer Witches" (Theresa Tomlinson); "The Ghost in the Monday Sun" (Sid Fleischman); "One-Eyed Cat" (Paula Fox); "The Missing May" (Cynthia Rylant); and "Maniac Magee" (Jerry Spinelli). The paper then presents detailed descriptions and teaching methods associated with the novels "Shabanu" (Suzanne Fisher Staples) and "Shiloh" (Phyllis Reynolds Naylor). (RS)

THE EIGHT BEST NOVELS FOR MIDDLE-GRADE TEACHERS

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Busy teachers know that it is always useful to talk to other professional colleagues about things related to their professional practice: what methods of teaching work for which students, what stories hook most students to books, and other similar stories of little success and/or failure. This kind of professional exchange co ntributes to teachers not only a sense of colleagiality but also intellectual resources which could help promote effectiveness and efficiency in their day-to-day working performance.

Intended to serve such an intrumental purpose for middle-grade teachers, this article consists of two sections. The first section presents a brief annotation to each of eight books which I found interesting and will very likely be of interest to middkle graders. The second section presents more elaborate comments from classroom perspectives on two very well-known novels: Shabanu and Siloh.

A. SELECTED MIDDLE-GRADE NOVELS: SOME ANNOTATION

How to eat fried worms, by Thomas Rockwell (1973, 127 pp.). New York: Dell Publishing Group, Inc.

This is a story about Bill's struggle to earn US $50.00 to secure a used minibike that he has been dreaming of by taking a bet proposed by his friends: eating fifteen worms spread out in fifteen days. Told from a third-person viewpoint, the story has a very engaging plot, fast-paced narrative flow and very funny tone.

Number the stars, by Lois Lowry (1989, 137 pp.). New York: Dell Publishing Group, Inc.

This story is about Annemary's friendship with Ellen, a daughter of a Jewish family who were in trouble as the Jews of Denmark were chased away by the Nazi soldiers. Told vividly from a third-person viewpoint, the story has very strong characterization and interesting plot as Annemary, the central character, got involved in a dangerous mission to save her best friend Ellen.

Cousins, by Virginia Hamilton (1990, 125 pp.). New York: Philomel Books.

This is a story about the bitterness of envy as experienced by Cammy, an eleven-year old girl, who is very loving towards her grandmother, her mother and brother but at the same time is full of hatred and jealousy for Patty Ann, one of her cousins, who is "good at everything"-- in school, at home, at her piano... Told in humorous tone from a third-person viewpoint, this story is fast-paced and gives an interesting "resolution"-- Cammy knows one thing that makes her feel not-so-bad about herself: that her enviable cousin, Patty Ann, has eating disorder!

Summer witches, by Theresa Tomlinson (1989, 83 pp.). New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

This story is about two young girls, Sarah and Susanna, and their friendship with an elderly lady from different "race"-- a witch. Told from a first person's (i.e. Sarah's) viewpoint, this inter-racial friendship story graciously shows how the two young girls are able to overcome the prejudice and fear they feel about someone who is different both in terms of racial background as well as chronological age.

The ghost in the noonday sun, by Sid Fleischman (1986, 130 pp.). New York: Scholastic Inc.

This is a story about an adventure on the high seas with two central characters-- Oliver Finch, who is turning twelve at midnight tonight, and Captain Scratch of the Sweet Molly, who believes that people born at midnight can spot ghosts. This adventure story has a very powerful plot as the villainous Captain Scratch kidnapped Oliver and used the young boy as "a talisman" on the pirate vessel in search of treasure.

One-eyed cat, by Paula Fox (1984, 216 pp.) New York: Dell Publishing Group, Inc.

This story is about a tender-hearted young boy Ned Willis and his friendship with his neighbor. The novel has a fast-flowing story line and a troubling plot as one dark night, Ned was tempted to play with a gun in the attic-- the very thing that his father has forbidden Ned to do-- and shot "a dark shadow" that later haunted him with feelings of guilt and fear because it turned out

that the shadow was... a cat, a living cat that now has only one eye!

The missing May, by Cynthia Rylant (1992, 89 pp.). New York: Orchard Books.

This is a supernatural story about May, who died six years ago but now is felt round, visiting her sorrowing husband Ob. Told from a point of view of a twelve-year old girl Summer, who lives with Ob, this story has an interesting plot delivered in reflective as well as humorous ways.

Maniac Magee, by Jerry Spinelli (1990, 184 pp.). New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

This story is about a super boy in the name of Jeffrey Lionel Magee (popular with "Maniac Magee"), who is lovable because of his sociable, self-determined, smart and skillful personal-qualities, but is also eccentric because of his unique hobby-- running from place to place covering countless miles. Told in a very casual style and creatively packaged in a folktale narrative tone, Maniac Magee represents a prejudice-free character who is able to break the hidden yet obviously operating racial and social class division in the contemporary American society-- The Blacks and Whites.

B. REVIEW ON SHABANU & SHILOH: INSTRUCTIONAL STANDPOINT

Shabanu, by Suzanne Fisher Staples (1989, 240 pp.) New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

This is a story about a young girl Shabanu and her mutually-loving friendship with one of her camels, Guluband, and Shabanu's "journey" towards her arranged marriage to Murad, a handsome young man whom she gradually loves, and then to Rahim, a middle-aged wealthy and powerful man of the desert in Pakistan. Told from Shabanu's viewpoint, this novel has a very powerful plot and convincing characterizations. The events in the story are unpredictable and full of surprises; and the characters involved in the story are very natural and consistent along the way-- they are vividly alive in the fabric of the narrative, and are distinct from each other.

This novel would likely be of great interest to pre-adolescent students in the American classrooms considering the good aspects that it has as outlined below.

o Theme. Love for animals and self-development (through Shabanu's strong will and perceptive reflections on cultural values and life in general). This type of theme would likely carry young readers away in the smooth flow of the narrative because it is generally compatible to their concerns (Huck et al 1993).

o Plot. The plot of the story is very powerful with lots of surprises, packaged in vividly flowing story lines. Engaging as it is, this novel would likely make American young readers unable to put it down until they know, in the end of the story, what Shabanu ends up doing in reaction to the marriage that is forcefully arranged for her.

o Characterization. Characters that are involved in the story are very distinctive, consistent and different from each other. It is very likely that American pre-adolescent readers get emotionally involved and participate in the story, voluntarily identifying themselves with outstanding characters such as Shabanu, who is very smart and has very strong will; Phulan, who is cute, obedient and "spoiled;" Sharma, who is "liberated" and "tough," etc.

With those quality features contained in the novel, it is relatively easy for classroom teachers to find ways to help students extend and deepen their literary experience (Eeds & Peterson, 1991). For instance, these are some possibilities:

(a) developing a web, a visual configuration to help generate ideas and think them to a central theme or focus (Huck et al, 1993);

(b) using the web to develop thematic units (Crook & Lehman, 1991); and

(c) using a literary text-set-- any group of books: folktale variants, books on similar

themes or common topic, books by the same author or illustrator, books with the same story structure or the same character, or books about the same culture.

Translating one of the possible approaches, classroom teachers might want to consider the following classroom procedures. First, the classroom activities might start with a personal reader-response session, in which each member of the class (or "interpretive community") writes their literary response (that might include personal feelings, life association, intertextuality and retelling [Bleich, 1975]), exchange the responses among the members, and talk about the difference as well as commonalities of the responses.

Second, as extension and enrichment activities, the teachers might assign or encourage students to read informational books on desert, with a special assignment of finding out information relevant to the setting of the novel Shabanu such as

(a) what animals typically live in the desert?

(b) what plants grow there? what fruits are produced?

(c) what do people of desert usually do to make a living?

(d) what type of housing they typically live in?

While the process of the exploration itself is very much educational, the result of this exploration can be further developed into a group writing project. One possibility is to have the learning individuals collaboratively write a brief all-about-desert informational booklet to keep in the classroom as a reference.

As the learners are engaged in literary experience and the extension and enrichment activities as outlined above, we can expect that they will gain new knowledge that would constitute their development both as readers as well as writers. More specifically, to mention just a few, the students would learn-- just through exposure to the story-- new vocabularies about desert plants or fruits, and other cultural facts and acts (such as kharin, toba, dowry, mahendi, etc.) Through this literary experience, the readers might learn a new narrative style of telling a story in present tense-- all the way through out the novel like in Shabanu.

No less important than the acquisition of new vocabulary words and narrative style is the possibility of the development in the learners a sociolinguistic awareness: that people act the way they do because they are using options the society allows for satisfying basic physical and psychological needs. This awareness is crucial if we expect the students to be prejudice-free and open-minded towards multiculturalism.

Another important possible "by product" of the engagement in the classroom activities (i.e. exploring informational sources and write a brief description of all-about-desert) proposed above is the awareness about the strong connections between reading and writing activities as constructive processes.

To promote the expected linguistic growth, classroom teachers might want to explicitly bring to students' attention those valuable teachable points: vocabulary words on desert plant and fruits, and Pakistani cultural facts and acts; the present-tense narrative style; and sociolinguistic aspects of the literary experience. The following are some possible ways to promote students (socio)linguistic growth using Shabanu:

(a) have the students identify vocabulary words that are new to them,and have them write the words or phrases in their respective learning log;

(b) have the students discuss in groups all the issues of concern, and further reflect on the burning issues on their reading-writing journal.

Shiloh, by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor (1991, 144 pp.). New York: Dell Publishing Group, Inc.

This is a story about Marty Preston, an eleven-year old boy, and his struggle to save a beagle (a young dog that he later calls Shiloh,whom Marty loves very dearly) from its abusive owner Judd Travers. Told from a third-person viewpoint in "non-standard" English (or "Black English Vernacular" to use William Labov's term), this novel has a very powerful plot and interesting characterizations as the events in the story are full of unexpected incidents and pleasant surprises. The main characters in this novel make a very interesting contrast-- the young boy Marty is a very tender-hearted and reflective person with a strong will and great sense of humor, confronted with a harsh, hot-tempered, and pragmatic big guy who will do anything to get what he wants.

Shiloh would likely be of a great interest to middle-grade students considering some qualities that the novel has.

First, the theme of love for animals (and its opposite: the abuse and ill-treatment of innocent animals) is just right at the developmental stage of the target readership. As Huck et al (1993) suggest, this type of theme would grab middle-graders because at this stage, the learning individuals have "highly developed sense of justice and

concern for others" and are "willing to discuss many aspects of right and wrong...[and] show sympathy for victims of suffering and injustice." (p.82)

Second, the plot of the story is very rich in tensions and pleasant surprises that appear very natural as a result of dialectic processes in the story. As it is very likely that the students would relate themselves to and sympathize with Marty, what this central character does, says, and thinks (and as noted earlier, this young man is very reflective) would make very "nutritious food of thoughts" for the readers. This would enrich their spiritual experience and, at the same time, give them feelings of psychological relief as the novel gives a very smart and natural resolution in the end of the story.

With those interesting underlying values that this novel has (e.g. loving vs. abusing; justice vs. injustice; altruistic vs. egoistic, etc.), classroom teachers will not find it difficult to assist students in extending and deepening their literary experience. For instance, similar to exploitative activities proposed for the novel Shabanu, classroom teachers might want to, first of all, have students personally respond to the novel Shiloh, both in writing and then sharing it orally. After having the student exchange their literary responses and discuss their commonalities and differences among the class members, the teachers might then want to encourage the students to think of different ways of ending the story of Shiloh.

In trying to stretch students' imagination, the teachers should make sure that the students have the freedom-- as "authors"-- to end the story as they wish. It might be a happy-ending. It can also be a tragic one. Or, anything else.

When the students are finished with their reconstruction of Shiloh, with their own version of endings, the teachers should give the students the opportunities to share their composition to the rest of the class, and give the necessary explanation about the underlying values behind the choice.

This sharing and explanation session can lead to a productive as well as empowering student-students and students-teacher discussion. The teacher might want to make use of the opportunity to also share his/her literary understanding (of literary concepts and literary elements) as the "teachable moments" arise.

With multiple activities like those proposed in this paper, we might expect that the literary experience would promote achievement in reading and writing, positive attitudes toward reading and writing, social understanding, and content-area learning (Smith & Bowers 1989).

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