Finally, as McGann notes, "scholarly research and interpretive writings leave almost entirely unengaged the kinds of basic questions" that the experiment takes up (146). These are practical, philosophical-pedagogical, and literary questions having to do with "textualities ... and ... sublime imaginary constructions" (145), and with "the reader's readiness to experience" such matters (146) and to experience himself or herself as a reader, to enter the theater of uncertainty, or what McGann calls "this sense of reflection" (153). There are many reasons why scholarship and professional activity generally have been disengaged from such questions, as McGann notes as well, but not good enough reasons. If what we teach, above all, is a method of learning—more old hat—it behooves us to continue learning how to teach. It's only fair, after all, and an essential way of demonstrating the particular way in which literary inquiry is ever unfinished.

When McGann asks the undergraduates to select the passages for recitation, and to identify questions in those passages worth pursuing, he observes that "one can . . . count on the students' raising issues that will be relevant to the reading of the novel" (148). In other words, you don't have to know what the most important thing is to begin with; you can (and must, in any case) begin anywhere and everywhere at once. This is something we would do well to teach our students, and something we must learn to relearn ourselves, if our subjects and our methods are to reflect one another.

Works Cited

Fish Stories: Teaching Children's Literature in a Postmodern World

Karen Coats

Teaching children's literature in a university English department is an enterprise fraught with personal and professional risk. No matter how sophisticated your theoretical commitments, no matter how learned you are in and beyond your subject area, you suffer the bemused and patronizing smiles of peers who find the aesthetic virtues of Dr. Seuss less worthy of study than those of, say, Thomas Hardy or Emily Dickinson. Undergraduates, as well, are not generally predisposed to see the study of children's literature as a rigorous mental exercise. Children's literature courses have notoriously large enrollments because students perceive the content as simple, intellectually undemanding.

But in a children's literature course students can learn more about ideology and how the aesthetic practices of literary representation transform culture than in any other course they may take. The myths of their culture and, more important, the myths of their own past are what they analyze; they take apart the very stories that they used, that cultures use, to put themselves together. They see how ideas of capitalism and imperialism get wedded to moral narratives in turn-of-the-century boys' adventure fiction, creating an ideal imperial subject itching for travel and conquest in the service of God and country. Likewise they trace how piety and domesticity as values for girls are undercut by tomboy figures, like Laura Ingalls and Jo March, who have inspired countless feminists. As students and subjects of postmodernity, they learn to think both developmentally and paralogically, to figure out why texts like *The Giving Tree* and *Love You Forever,* which they find ideologically repugnant, nevertheless make them cry and why these texts might be impor-
tant stories for children for the same reasons that they are repulsive to adults. And my students have to use that kind of thinking to engage difficult problems: if texts like Curious George and The Story of Babar do have the racist and colonialist implications that they seem to have, should we continue to hold them up as cultural icons worth keeping? How do we engender genuine tolerance for diverse lifestyles when every fairy tale ends with a heterosexual marriage presented as a prerequisite for living happily ever after? Must Little Red Riding Hood be forever responsible for her own rape and murder, in the interest of passing on a tradition? How do we reconcile the preservation of a kind of cultural literacy with the continual reinscription of values that are offensive and harmful? All of the consciousness-raising in the world does precious little if the very stuff of our childhood fantasy remains mired in the recalcitrant ideologies of dominance and oppression.

But when I explain the intellectual insights that are available to my students precisely because of the "simplicity" of the texts we study, my colleagues often look at me as if I were telling fish stories—mildly interesting but not especially credible. So, I invite you into my classroom as we read three fish stories to demonstrate the methodological pluralism and literacy challenges one might explore through children's texts.

The first story is one I use to conduct an experiment in censorship. We discuss academic freedom and censorship, and my students are all convinced of their ability to tolerate all sorts of ideas and worldviews in the spirit of intellectual inquiry. Enter Arlene Sardine, by Christopher Raschka. Arlene is a sardine who wants to be a sardine. So, early in the book, she is caught in a net with about ten thousand of her friends and dies on the deck of the fishing boat. Using rather lovely poetic language, Raschka (1998: n.p.) describes the process of becoming a sardine: "Then she was smoked, delicately. She was delicately smoked. Delicately smoked was she," and so on, as Arlene is packed in oil and hermetically sealed in a can with the other sardines. The final scene depicts a smiling Arlene curled up on a plate, about to be eaten.

Immediately my shocked students are brought face-to-face with the limits of their liberalism. "This book," they shout, "is NOT for children!" It would seem that the free exchange of ideas and intellectual inquiry do not extend to children. Children's literature cannot evade its mandate to protect and shelter children from certain things while educating them about others. My students agree that, although we may teach children about the processes of fishing and packing fish, we may not do so by introducing one of the fish in question by name. I then ask them if they would censor this book. If they truly believe that children could be damaged by it, wouldn't it make sense to keep it from them?

At the word censor my students begin to rethink and nuance their arguments. We imagine, for instance, audiences that might find this book helpful: vegetarians, for instance, or farmers, or fishermen, whose children need to see their parents' work as cooperative and not cruel. We think of religious or patriotic persons, who see death as less awful if it comes in pursuit of a higher goal. "Ah," one student once said, his eyes catching fire, "Arlene is a hero!" He contended that her death was only metaphoric and that we always had to die to certain possibilities in order to achieve others. On the other hand, to read the story theoretically we might see it as an example of the consequences of our "passionate attachment to subjection" (Butler 1997: 6).

Arlene, rather than resist being essentialized and suffering the normative fate for brislings, embraces and celebrates the normative fate for sardines. Unlike Wilbur in Charlotte's Web and Babe in Babe: The Gallant Pig, Arlene cheerfully accepts the role that the power structure has assigned her, even at the cost of her own annihilation. Certainly, Curious George and Babar embrace the conditions of their subjection as well, but while their stories turn out happy and triumphant, postmodernist Raschka refuses such a disingenuous closure; the wages of giving in to your oppressors is death. The book begins with a challenge to the reader: "So you want to be a sardine?" Then it traces the consequences of choosing an identity defined by homeostasis, conformity, and oppression. It is a powerful message to children and adults alike.

My students begin to see that one way to fight censorship is to improve our literacy, to expand our reading skills and practices. If we only read the words on the page, this truly is a cruel story. But if we read it ironically, we can see it as a fable speaking out against the eating of animals. Add intertextual reference to irony, and we see a profound parody of the happily-ever-after genre. If we think about multiple subject positions in a text, we can see the story from the fisherman's point of view, as a fantasy of reconciliation with the necessary victim of the fishing trade. If we think in terms of ideology, we have to question the meaning of death in the text and in our culture. We generally agree that the unthinkable pairing of death and childhood is at the root of my students' initial impulse to censor. But certain worldviews mitigate the fear of death with the promise of immortality; certainly, death has its horrors, especially when thought of together with childhood, but there are worse things. Finally, if we read metaphorically, a whole new realm of interpretations opens to us, and the question of censorship goes away, at least with this text.

Not all fish stories bear up as well under scrutiny. The Rainbow Fish, by Marcus Pfister (1992), is almost universally loved by my students. It's one of those publishing phenomena as well, spawning bookmarks and plush
figures, puppets and backpacks, et cetera, et cetera. Why? Because its visual presentation is especially appealing. Deeply saturated blues and purples are complemented by glowing foil scales that cover the rainbow fish's body. And therein lies the problem. This beautiful book hides an ugly social ideology. The rainbow fish is the most beautiful fish in the ocean because of its special scales. The other fish want to share them, but the rainbow fish refuses, so it is accused of being selfish and is ostracized. Soon it becomes so lonely that it relents and begins to give away the scales. Everyone gets one, they all look alike, and the rainbow fish now has many "friends," purchased with his most prized possessions.

My students initially contend that *The Rainbow Fish* is a beautiful book about sharing. I ask them to look again. There is no textual evidence that the rainbow fish is selfish; when asked to pull a scale off its body and give it to another fish, it simply refuses. The rebuffed fish then spreads the vicious rumor that the rainbow fish is vain and selfish. Because the rainbow fish is beautiful and enjoys its body, the other fish believe the rumors and act on them, rather than take the trouble to find out if they are true. Why, I ask, should the fish mutilate itself to satisfy this presumptive little plain fish who likes to put down those who are more beautiful or have something it does not? By the end of the book the message of conformity is pretty clear: to have friends, you must give up what is distinctive or special about yourself, even if it means self-mutilation. Not until full conformity is achieved can there be anything like community.

My students are initially saddened by the "loss" of this text. But their sadness is quickly replaced by a sense of responsibility for and pride in unmasking its damaging ideology. There are several unhappy truths in this text. We are vulnerable to attractive packaging. We are often willing to overlook substance for style. The majority of us are dissatisfied with our bodies. Hence we distrust and support the destruction of anything more beautiful or gifted than ourselves. Furthermore, our response to this text, like our response to *Arlene Sardine*, reconfirms our tendency to make snap evaluative decisions based on a limited application of literacy skills. Reading critically is challenging. But both texts prove that doing so changes our response to texts, and therefore it is our responsibility to read all texts critically and at multiple levels. Like *Arlene Sardine*, *The Rainbow Fish* operates in different ways, depending on how it is read. At some level it is a book about the importance of sharing when it comes to having friends. But at the level of artistic expression, homogeneity—in tone, in color, and finally in subject—is the dominant theme, making the book problematic from a multicultural, multi-anything stand-

point. From a cultural-materialist view, its self-mutilation aspect is especially disturbing. Most important, I think, a book like this one promotes an ethic of sameness, rather than a respect for differences, as an aesthetic prerequisite for community.

I suppose that one could argue, from a democratic-socialist perspective, that the evening out of assets such as *The Rainbow Fish* prescribes would promote cooperation and equality. Those who have should share with those who have not. But at what cost? To make this argument, I much prefer our third fish story, *Swimmy*, by Leo Lionni (1963). *Swimmy* is the only black fish in a school of red ones. Although there are many fish in the school, they are small, and hence they are all attacked and eaten by a larger fish—all except Swimmy, who happens to have wandered off during the attack. He roams the ocean, sad and alone but alert to the lessons taught by the other sea creatures. Soon he finds a school of his own kind. Again, he stands out as the only black fish among the red. But his difference is an asset, not a liability. When a larger fish attacks his new family, Swimmy gets them to cluster together so they look like one big red fish, of which he is the black eye. They fool the larger fish and survive the attack. At first reading, *Swimmy* is a hero story with a happy ending. But by rereading it metaphorically, one sees the value of collective action in the face of stronger forces. In addition, difference is understood as a valuable, indeed necessary, part of community life; differences complement and preserve rather than threaten community.

The riskiness of teaching children's literature at the university level is more than compensated for by the gains that students achieve in intellectual and personal insight. In fact, the pleasurable affective engagement and intellectual energy that are generated by such texts make the other pedagogical aims easy. Children's literature is about fun and pleasure, but reading it as an adult also gives one a sense of responsibility toward its intended audience, making critical response a mandatory and self-motivating task. Ultimately, the risks of not paying critical attention to children's literature are much greater than those of working in what sometimes seems a professional ghetto. If we do not pay careful attention to the artifacts of child culture, we risk blithely passing on damaging, static traditions that inhibit social growth. And that's no fish story.