

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Fall, 2019

LIT 4331: 13FF

Turlington 2318

T 4 (10:40- 11:30), R 4-5 (10:40-12:35)

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Office Hours: Tuesdays, 11:30-12:30, and by appointment

Course Overview

The term “children’s literature” might well be considered an oxymoron: after all, any text explicitly produced for a pre- or semi-literate audience may be suspected of not satisfying certain conventional or otherwise institutionalized expectations of literature. The purpose of this course, then, is to examine how “children’s literature” has been defined as both a literary form and a scholarly field of study. We will discuss, for example, how the emergence of this specific literary form in the late eighteenth century coincided with the rise of new culturally-, materially-, and historically-informed notions of childhood – and how, in turn, books for young people have since marked significant shifts in ways of thinking about childhood and child readers. Additionally, we will discuss the aesthetics of children’s books (e.g., what makes them “literature” – or should that question even matter?) as well as their cultural and political implications (e.g., how does children’s literature, as a form traditionally produced by older generations for a new and rising one, at once reaffirm and contest dominant social norms and values?)

In order to meet these objectives, we will read a variety of books written for and about children: biographies, fantasies, picture books, historical novels, verse novels, pop culture sensations, and long-regarded classics. As we analyze these texts, we will consider how our discussions contribute to, and work in dialogue with, major interventions in the scholarly field of children’s literature studies, as demonstrated within Philip Nel’s and Lissa Paul’s landmark text, *Keywords for Children’s Literature*.

Required Texts

Two exam booklets – “blue books” or “green books” readily available at the UF bookstore or Target Copy on W. University Ave.

Keywords for Children’s Literature, ed. Philip Nel and Lissa Paul

Roald Dahl, *Boy*

Roald Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*

Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*

David Wiesner, *Tuesday*

Jessica Love, *Julián is a Mermaid*

Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*

Louise Erdich, *The Birchbark House*

Jacqueline Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming*

Vera Brosgol, *Anyá's Ghost*

A.A. Milne, *Winnie the Pooh*

J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone [Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone]*

Course Requirements

Attendance/Participation: 10%

Quizzes/Short Assignments: 20%

Midterm Exam: 25%

Keywords Research Project: 35%

Final Exam: 10%

Attendance/Participation

Although I will occasionally give brief lectures, most class sessions will be devoted to large- and small-group conversation. For this reason, it is important that you not only be physically present in class, but that you also actively participate in each session. I expect you to come to each class having read the assigned materials and prepared to offer the questions and insights you formed during your independent reading. Additionally, I expect you to respond attentively and respectfully to the questions and insights offered by your classmates.

If you are absent because of an illness, please consult me as soon as you can, so that we can discuss how you may make up for your missed work. If you anticipate being absent for a legitimate reason – e.g., a religious holiday or an academic or athletic event – please consult me in advance so that we might make arrangements for your missed work.

Texting policy: *Each instance of texting will be counted as an unexcused absence.* After all, when you text, your body may be present in class, but your mind is not.

Laptop/phone policy: If you bring a laptop to class, please sit in the first row(s), and please only use your laptop to access the assigned text(s) and/or to record notes. The same policy stands if you are accessing an assigned text on your phone.

A note on reading: This course is as reading-intensive as any other upper-division literature course. On average, you will be expected to read one primary text as well as three critical essays (from the *Keywords* textbook) per week. Since the lengths of the primary texts will vary – sometimes, they will be 20-page picture books, and at other times, they will be 200-page full length novels – you will be responsible for pacing your reading throughout the semester. In any case, you will be required to speak to and write about the assigned readings on the days they are marked due on the course schedule below.

Quizzes/Short Assignments

During the course of the semester, I will give brief (and often unannounced) quizzes that assess your reading of the assigned (literary) materials as well as your comprehension of previous lecture/discussion sessions. These quizzes will give me an indication of how attentively you have responded to the assigned materials and previous sessions. Additionally, the questions I ask in these quizzes will be designed so as to offer a segue to key themes in upcoming lectures and discussions, and thus will provide us all with a greater opportunity for focus.

Examples of Quiz Questions

- *In Brown Girl Dreaming*, Jacqueline is nearly named “Jack.” Who insisted that she be named “Jack” – and why?
- Give one example of how David Weisner’s *Tuesday* uses visual cues to convey the passage of time.
- ***You do not have to respond to quiz questions in complete sentences!*** A few words or fragments will do, so long as you sufficiently respond to the question at hand.

Occasionally, I may ask you to compose a brief (paragraph-long) written response to a larger, more critical, question. I may ask you to respond to this question during the class session, or I might ask you to email your response after class hours via Canvas. So long as you offer a response that demonstrates your ability to offer well-supported insights, your written response will earn a 100% quiz grade. If you offer a barely-developed response or one that suggests that you haven’t adequately read the assigned text(s) that informs the question, you will receive a 50% quiz grade. If you don’t respond at all, you will receive a “0” for one quiz grade.

Example of a Short (Paragraph-long) Assignment

- Last week, during our discussion of Roald Dahl’s *Boy*, we considered how Dahl’s own historically- and culturally-contingent experience of childhood might be different from our own (early twenty-first century) notion of childhood. In preparation for our upcoming discussion of Dahl’s *James and the Giant Peach*, identify one (1) way in which Dahl’s understanding of childhood in *Boy* is expressed and/or critiqued in *James* – and briefly account for how you perceive this correspondence.

- Choose one panel or brief sequence of panels (no more than one page) in *Anya's Ghost* and explain how it places into relief – or literally, illustrates – the novel's themes of alienation and immigration.

I reserve the right to give a quiz or short writing assignment at any time during the class period (for example, at the very beginning, the very end, or any point in between). For this reason, it is additionally important that you be present during the entire class session.

Midterm

On Thursday, 10 October, you will complete an in-class exam that tests your ability to synthesize and analyze the material we have covered in class thus far. The midterm will consist of short answer questions (e.g., definitions, historical context questions, text identifications) that will require merely phrase-long responses. It will also involve a set of analytical questions that will require paragraph-long responses. You will have the entire 2-hour class period to complete this exam.

As we approach the exam date, I will give you more detailed information about the exam and also offer you a study guide.

Keywords Project

Over the course of the semester, we will draw on essays anthologized in Philip Nel's and Lissa Paul's first edition of *Keywords for Children's Literature* in order to contextualize and analyze the assigned primary texts. This assignment, then, is designed to extend our critical practice of placing literary texts into conversation with significant theoretical categories.

You will be responsible for producing an 8-10 page paper in response to one of the prompts below:

- a. Although I've done my best to include as many entries as possible from the *Keywords* textbook in our reading list, there are many that I couldn't include – even though their inclusion in discussions of specific texts might have further enriched our discussion. For this assignment, then, choose one (1) "keyword" essay that *isn't* included in our reading schedule and pair it with any one (1) primary literary text that *is* on our reading schedule. For example, you could pair Dahl's *Boy* with Elizabeth Bullen's keyword essay on "Class" – or J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* with June Cummins' keyword essay on "Marketing." In your essay, draw on the major arguments the author of your chosen *Keywords* entry advances in order to demonstrate how and why your chosen primary text is deserving of further literary and cultural inquiry.

- b) Alternately, there are so many primary literary texts I could have assigned alongside the *Keywords* essays I ultimately selected. For example, I could have paired "Graphic Novel" with M.T. Anderson's and Eugene Yelchin's *The Assassination of Brangwain Spurge*, or "Identity" with Celia C. Pérez's *The First Rule of Punk*. For this assignment, then, pair one (1) keyword essay that

is on our reading list with one (1) literary text that *isn't* on our schedule. As per the preceding prompt, draw on the major arguments the author of your chosen *Keywords* entry advances in order to demonstrate how and why your chosen primary text is deserving of further literary and cultural inquiry.

- c) Are there any keywords that you believe are missing from this first edition of Nel's and Paul's anthology? If so, write an essay on a keyword of your own that could be included in a new, expanded edition. (Previous responses to this assignment have included, for example, essays on "Audiobooks," "Religion," and "Transgender"). Your proposed addition should follow the general rubric observed by the present contributors to *Keywords For Children's Literature*: that is, it should give an establishing (OED) definition of your term, a genealogy of its usage in literary studies, at least three (3) examples of works of children's literature that demonstrate its various nuances, and a discussion of its overall significance to scholars of children's literature

Your 8-10 page (double-spaced) paper should be paginated, produced in 12-point font (Times New Roman or Calibri font preferred) with 1-inch margins, and submitted according to MLA formatting standards (<http://www.easybib.com/guides/citation-guides/mla-format/>) As per MLA format, it must include a list of works cited – even if you're only citing one primary text and one essay from the *Keywords* textbook. **I will not accept a paper that does not include proper in-text citation and a final list of works cited.**

Your completed paper will be **due on Thursday, 7 November**. On – or before – this date, you should upload an **electronic copy of your paper to Canvas** *and also* submit a **hard copy to me at the beginning of class on 7 November**.

Although I will often reference and give tips about this assignment during class sessions, you will be ultimately responsible for completing it on your own. If you have questions or concerns about the production process, **TAKE ADVANTAGE OF OFFICE HOURS AND/OR APPOINTMENT TIMES**. And don't, for the love of all that is good, postpone your paper to the last minute: I know a hastily written paper when I see one, and I will grade it accordingly.

I will evaluate your paper according to the following criteria:

- Originality of argument, voice, and narrative approach
 - What insights might this essay offer me that I haven't considered before?
- Convincing argumentation
 - Does this essay offer an overarching argument?
 - Does it offer supporting arguments that advance its larger claims?
 - Does it draw on concrete examples from key literary and critical texts and analyze these examples in order to support both its immediate claims and its overarching argument?
- Strong organization

- Can I – or indeed, any other reader – follow the logical progression of this essay?
- Is the author of this essay thinking like a good storyteller: that is, are they ensuring that their audience follows them every step of the way, even when (and especially when) they introduce new and surprising insights that significantly complicate their argument?
- Use of lucid scholarly prose
 - Does this essay’s use of proper grammar, mechanics, sentence construction, and voice contribute to the advancement of a complex and well-wrought argument (and supporting arguments)?
 - Does the author’s use of language suggest that they are speaking to an audience of peers (here, fellow scholars in the academic discipline of children’s literature studies)?
 - Is the author over-compensating by using jargon or unnecessary passive voice?
 - Is the author under-compensating by neglecting to define/contextualize terms that warrant further explication?
 - If the author is using first-person voice or personal anecdotes – ***and these are very welcome strategies*** – do they maintain this tone throughout this essay, and do they do so in order to most effectively support their overarching claims?
- Adherence to MLA formatting guidelines
 - (See above)

Final Exam

During our final session, you will write an in-class essay that demonstrates your ability to synthesize and think analytically about the concepts we’ve discussed throughout the semester. I will be sure to prepare you for the final exam before its scheduled date.

Disabilities

If you have a disability, please contact me as soon as possible and I will be sure to accommodate your specific needs. I will need a letter from the university disabilities office so that I might make arrangements. <https://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc>

Academic Honesty

Plagiarism is strictly forbidden and punishable by failure. Please be sure to sign the honor code on each exam booklet you use.

Tentative Schedule

(Texts will be discussed in class on the day they are listed, so be sure to read them in advance)

UNIT ONE: CHILDHOOD AND ITS BOOKS

- Tuesday, 20 August:** Class Introduction
- Thursday, 22 August:** *Keywords, "Childhood" and "Children's Literature"*
- Tuesday, 27 August:** Dahl, *Boy* (read at least the first 50 pages)
Keywords, "Culture"
- Thursday, 29 August:** Dahl, *Boy* (read to completion)
- Tuesday, 3 September:** Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach* (*from this point on, unless otherwise specified, you'll be responsible for reading the entire book by the day it first appears on the schedule)
Keywords, "Intention"
- Thursday, 5 September:** Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*
Keywords, "Fantasy" and "Image"

UNIT TWO: THE CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOK

- Tuesday, 10 September:** *Keywords, "Picture Book"*
- Thursday, 12 September:** McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (chapters 1-5) and Weisner, *Tuesday*
- Tuesday, 17 September:** McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (chapters 6-9) and Weisner, *Tuesday*
- Thursday, 19 September:** Weisner, *Tuesday*
- Tuesday, 24 September:** Love, *Julián is a Mermaid*
- Thursday, 26 September:** Love, *Julián is a Mermaid*
Keywords, "Gender," "Queer," and "Latino/a"

UNIT THREE: THE ILLUSTRATED CHILDREN'S NOVEL

Tuesday, 1 October: Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*

Keywords, "Ideology"

Thursday, 3 October: Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*

Keywords, "Domestic," "Race," "Tomboy"

Tuesday, 8 October: Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* and continued discussion of keywords

Thursday, 10 October: **IN-CLASS MID-TERM EXAM**

UNIT FOUR: THE PROSE NOVEL, THE VERSE NOVEL, AND THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

Tuesday, 15 October: Erdich, *The Birchbark House*

Thursday, 17 October: Erdich, *The Birchbark House*

Keywords, "Girlhood," "Nature," "Postcolonial"

Tuesday, 22 October: Erdich, *The Birchbark House* and continued discussion of keywords

Thursday, 24 October: Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming*

Keywords, "Aesthetics" and "African American"

Tuesday, 29 October: Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming*

Keywords, "Voice"

Thursday, 31 October: Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming*

Keywords, "Home," "Identity"

Tuesday, 5 November: Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*

Thursday, 7 November: Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*

Keywords, "Graphic Novel"

KEYWORDS PROJECT DUE

UNIT FIVE: THE CHILDREN'S CLASSIC

Tuesday, 12 November: Milne, *Winnie the Pooh*
Keywords, "Classic," "Golden Age"

Thursday, 14 November: Milne, *Winnie the Pooh*

Tuesday, 19 November: Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

Thursday, 21 November: Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

Keywords, "Popular"

Preparatory instructions for final exam

Tuesday, 26 November: **NO CLASSES – STUDENT CONFERENCES**

Thursday, 28 November: **NO CLASSES – HAPPY THANKSGIVING!**

Tuesday, 3 December: **IN-CLASS FINAL EXAM**

(I will announce office hours during finals week so that you may pick up your exam and discuss your final grade)