Primary Lessons

As students flock to her children's literature class, English Professor Jan Hill uses their beloved books from childhood to teach what it means to be human.

By Marla Hill Holt '88 · photos by Tom Roster

DO YOU EVER USE A blanket for a cape and leap off the couch, pretending you can fly? Are you afraid to turn off the light because of the three-eyed, scaly purple monster that lives under your bed? Do your stuffed animals join hands and dance a jig?

Now pretend you're a child and answer the questions again.

In his book, *Feeling Like a Kid: Childhood and Children's Literature*, Jerry Griswold identifies five themes that recur in children's literature: snugness, smallness, scariness, aliveness and lightness. According to Griswold, these same qualities are prevalent in childhood and help explain why stories that contain these themes resonate with children. Think back to *The Wind in the Willows* and Badger's cozy underground home or the umbrella that carries aloft the title character in *Mary Poppins*. Children's books are populated with talking elephants, crocodiles that live in New York City apartments, and miniature people and animals in stories such as *The Littles, The Borrowers,* and *The Witches*. Not to mention all the things that make you go boo.

Once you begin to think of children's literature in this way, your favorite childhood books almost sort themselves according to the themes. This spring, the

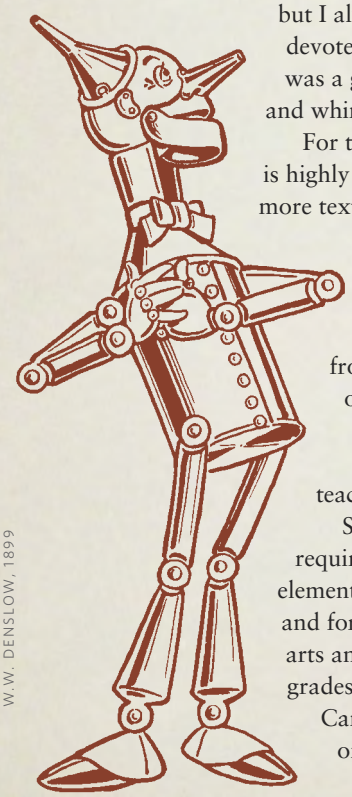
29 students in English Professor Jan Hill's children's literature course have been doing just that at the beginning of each class period. Recently they oohed and aahed like they were watching a fireworks display as Hill pulled titles from two large boxes containing hundreds of picture books that illustrated Griswold's point about lightness, a theme Griswold says refers to both lack of weight and the difference between light and dark. As Hill held up books such as *Tar Beach*, *The Trouble with Trolls*, and *The Napping House*, murmurs of "Oh, I loved that one," could be heard around the room.

BUT THIS CLASS IS NOT STORY HOUR at your local library. Beloved books from childhood are receiving a deeper, more intense reading the second time around in this rigorous, 200-level English class, in which students are expected to read a lengthy novel before each Thursday evening class period. Their reading list, which covers everything from fairy tales to young adult fiction, includes a range of fantasy and realism, with such titles as *The House at Pooh Corner*, *The Secret Garden*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *A Farewell to Manzanar, I Hadn't Meant To Tell You This*, and *Confessions of a Closet Catholic*.

For Hill, the study of children's literature fits perfectly into St. Olaf's liberal arts mission. "When we read these stories as adults, we get back into questions about what really forms us, what makes us who we are, and what creates our value systems," Hill says. "The main overarching goal of the liberal arts, to me, is to explore what it means to be human and what it means to be part of a community. Certainly at a place like St. Olaf, that exploration intersects with spiritual questions, but really what we're doing is studying humanity."

A guiding hand like so many of the allies and friends in children's literature, particularly in fantasies, who impart partial wisdom along the journey to help the hero discover his or her inner strength, Hill guides her students to their own interpretations of the books they read, without prescribing one specific theory or insisting they all agree with her understanding of the text.

"I don't want to be prescriptive, ever. I don't want the students to lay any particular theory over the top of the text, because once you fall into a certain way of interpreting the text, you're stuck," she says. "I want students to read the books first for enjoyment. We do get into serious analysis, but I always want part of the class to be devoted to talking about why a book was a great read. What was silly, fun and whimsical about it?"



W.W. DENSLOW, 1899

For the students, reading these books is highly enjoyable, providing balance to more textbook-style reading in their other classes and indulging their timeless love of stories for and about children. Brandon Button, a senior English major from Rochester, Minnesota, is one of a handful of education students in the course, which he is taking because it's required for his teaching licensure.

Since 2006, the course has been a requirement for students earning a K–6 elementary education teaching license and for those seeking a communication arts and literature teaching license in grades 5–12, according to Heather Campbell '90, an assistant professor of education. "A good grasp of children's literature and reading in general is becoming more and more important across the education fields," Campbell says. The class also counts as an elective toward the English major.

Button says he would have taken the class even if it wasn't required. "It's fun to discuss books you read as a kid," he says. "I'm beginning to realize the deeper meanings in the text, now that I've read them again as an adult."

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Making it Real

TO ENCOURAGE BUTTON AND HIS CLASSmates to give voice to their opinions and to make the class interactive and fun, Hill uses a variety of teaching techniques. To help students learn about fairy tale motifs and to gain an appreciation for oral storytelling, she has small groups study a tale for about 30 minutes. Then the students must recite the tale from memory to their classmates, passing it from person to person as details are remembered or altered.

"I tell them they can change the details if they want because they're now the storyteller and they own the tale," Hill says.

To set the mood, she recreates an early 19th-century German inn in the classroom (Library 525, one of the seminar rooms so beloved by generations of St. Olaf English majors) to invoke the Grimms and their time.

"She's a bit kooky, but in a good way," Button says about Hill's teaching style. Others agree that her passion for children's stories is contagious. "She's amazing, warm, light and bubbly," says Anna Rudser, a senior biology major. "She is so passionate and enthusiastic about what we're reading. She's like a grown-up kid." Hill's passion for the literature derives from her own childhood and her experience as the mother of five children, to whom she read aloud up through high school.

English Professor Jan Hill (left, center), with seniors Brandon Button and Anna Rudser. Hill's Thursday evening discussion focused on two young adult books about child abuse, *What Jamie Saw* and *I Hadn't Meant To Tell You This.* "Each novel is beautifully written, sensitive and realistic without being in any way gratuitous or sensationalized in its approach," says Hill. Senior Katie Nelson (below right) gave a thorough presentation on the topic.

The classroom storytelling exercise segues into a discussion of recurring motifs in fairy tales, such as the use of things in threes and why there are so many abandoned children, cruel mothers and weak fathers in these stories.

"Throughout the semester, we look for these motifs to show up again and again in children's literature," Hill says. "Fairy tales come out of the common desires and fears of the people. We are still the people; we are still humanity. Fairy tales are just an ancient story of being human."

Lighting the way, Hill devotes one entire three-hour class period to small-group dramatizations, what she calls "Innovations," of five fantasy books (this semester, *The Dark Is Rising, Peter Pan, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, The Golden Compass*, or *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*), but perhaps her most effective technique is individual presentations she calls "Illuminations." For these, students research a specific element or aspect of the book, digging deeper into the text to enrich everyone's reading of the story. They present their findings, often through interactive games or demonstrations, to the class. For example, after reading *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, one student did an Illumination about alchemy and another discussed friend and family relationships in the text. Each student presents two Illuminations of his or her choosing, both topic and book.

Often, a student's Illumination will reflect his or her own background or educational focus, says Hill. After reading *A Wrinkle in Time*, senior Katie Nelson, an American racial and multicultural studies (ARMS) major and education student from St. Paul, led an Illumination about constructivism and its use as a teaching method that advocates using hands-on experiences to guide students to knowledge. She then asked her classmates to identify those characters in the book who are teachers and those who are students.

"I always come at my Illuminations from a teaching standpoint," Nelson says. She says the class has been helpful, particularly learning about Griswold's ideas of recurring themes, as she thinks about her future teaching career. "Knowing kids relate to these themes and experience these emotions will be helpful in choosing books to include in my own teaching," Nelson says.

In addition to recognizing Griswold's five qualities, looking for fairy tale motifs, and reading the textbook, *Children's Literature, Briefly*, students also have learned about Joseph Campbell's concept of the hero's journey — the common structure shared by myths around the world that have survived for thousands of years — as put forth in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

For Hill, reading a children's book that contains a hero's journey often can be inspiring, as it usually is about an ordinary, flawed character overcoming adversity. In fantasy books, it's often good overcoming evil, and in realism, it may be hope over despair.

"In every children's book I've taught, there is a moment when the often reluctant hero — usually a child — is heralded to action, when he or she discovers no one else can do the hard thing that is required," she says. "It's a moment of

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RECOMMENDED Reading

For her course on children's literature, English Professor Jan Hill selects a wide range of titles in both the fantasy and realism genres for students to read. "I want to soften my students' hearts toward all kinds of characters who show up in good children's literature — misfits, eccentrics, characters from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds, poor people, gay people, old people — so I choose books that might shake students loose from their traditional worldviews," says Hill.

In class, students read picture books that reflect America's cultural diversity, including these books about Mexican American, Arab American, African American, and Asian American life:

- *Too Many Tamales* by Gary Soto and Ed Martinez
- *Sitti's Secrets* by Naomi Shihab Nye
- *Always My Dad* by Sharon Dennis Wyeth
- *The Bracelet* by Yoshiko Ucchida

In addition to the textbooks *Feeling Like a Kid: Childhood and Children's Literature* by Jerry Griswold and *Children's Literature, Briefly* (4th ed.) by James Jacobs and Michael Tunnell, this semester's course syllabus includes:

- *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* by Jacqueline Woodson
- *What Jamie Saw* by Carolyn Coman
- *Confessions of a Closet Catholic* by Sarah Darer Littman
- *A Farewell to Manzanar* by Jean Wakatsuki Houston
- *The Giver* by Lois Lowry
- *Roxie and the Hooligans* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor
- *The House at Pooh Corner* by A. A. Milne
- *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett
- *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J. K. Rowling
- *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle
- *Matilda* by Roald Dahl

Students also read one of the following fantasy classics:

- *The Dark Is Rising* by Susan Cooper
- *Peter Pan* by James Barrie
- *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum
- *The Golden Compass* by Philip Pullman
- *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis

truth: will they do it or will they run away? The act usually takes a lot of courage and demands that they walk through their fear to do something brave that changes them forever and takes them through childhood to the world of adulthood. This is as empowering for adults who read it as it is for kids. In the hands of a good writer, as you're reading it, you're thinking, 'If that kid can do it, so can I.'"

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ERNEST H. SHEPARD, 1928

Senior Karl Olson (above) reported in his Illumination that in a recent *School Library Journal* study, the number-one consideration by middle-schoolers for choosing a particular book is the cover.

Hill finds her students inspiring and delights in the fact that they often get so absorbed in the text they have no trouble simultaneously being 12 and 22 years of age. "Like the way that the characters enter a secondary world from a primary world through some portal in a fantasy, we go through that portal in every class, and we are in that world for the duration," she says. (Think of Harry Potter on train platform nine-and-three-quarters on his way to Hogwarts.)

And while the students haven't begun wearing robes to class (although some did wear costumes for the Innovations), they do admit that reading children's books while saying, "I'm doing my homework," often attracts raised eyebrows and doubting looks from friends and roommates. But they don't mind.

"I enjoy doing the homework for this class more than for any other class," says Button. "I can't think of a better way to end my day."

No doubt millions of children would agree.

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