

Children's Literature
Linfield College
Dr. Mary Bartholemy

ENG 303, Children's Literature, 3 credits, Images and Arts (IA).

Class meetings: Wednesday, 2/20/08 – 5/28/08, Peterson 108, 6:00pm – 9:30pm

“When the Bough Breaks”

Often dismissed because it is ‘just for kids,’ **children's literature** includes texts which treat important, in fact, critical human issues in what is often the most beautiful, and carefully crafted of figurative language. In this class, we will work our way through the tradition of children's literature, studying texts in the order in which they are received by the **child subject**. We will begin with the gorgeous and primitive language of **nursery rhymes**, moving on through the perplexing and often mystical logic of folk and fairy tales, and, finally, we will finish by studying the layers of fully realized, that is to say, deeply textual **novels for children**. We will note, in particular, how the literary tradition develops out of the emergence of **the nursery** in the Victorian period, and how this development corresponds to a new regard for childhood, itself. We will also note how children's literature constitutes a unique literary microcosm that is close to all-inclusive – among its genres are romance, adventure, poetry, mystery, horror, and history.

Our class goals:

To understand how texts for children prepare **the child receiver** (for a child is at first an impassive receiver of poems and stories) for **serious, life threatening contingencies**: getting lost, being devoured or cannibalized – everything one would want to protect a child from worrying about (especially at bedtime when children's stories are required). We will discuss **the role of narrators** within tales, talking about the extent to which this body of literature is by and for children, or, rather, co-opted by adult narrators trying to manipulate their young readers, or return to childhood, themselves. **Surrogacy and its relation to narrative** will be an important theme throughout the class.

We will talk about the system of rewards, **sweets**, by which children are inducted into a world of language. Beginning with “patty cake,” we will see how the path to adulthood is sweetened with treats, how treats can lead children to the more nutritional world of books.

We will talk about how this literature often features **child protagonists** who, if not orphaned, if not the youngest in a family, are in some way disadvantaged, and must rely on wits to prevail against looming and certain disasters. We will examine the character of these protagonists, asking to what extent child heroes put themselves at greater risks than others, how they form bonds with animals or other children, how they draw upon

deep reserves of bravery and self confidence in order to prevail in life and death situations. We will also talk about how children's lit privileges and preserves the **wildness** in its child heroes.

We will consider the degree to which our texts create a **pure, representational space** for childhood -- underground worlds, gardens, islands – that allow children to grow outside of the repressive cultures or institutions they are born into.

Required Texts: **Classics of Children's Literature**, Griffeth and Frey 6th ed., **Little House in the Big Woods**, Laura Ingalls Wilder, **The Watsons Go to Birminham**, Christopher Paul Curtis

Assignments: Three short papers (3-4 pages), one comprehensive, take-home final (6-8 pages)

A Note from Mary Bartholemy, about the journey through Children's Literature:

English 303 is for people who want to take a sweeping view of world literature, as if flying through the sky on a very fine gander (a handsome, male bird). It's for people who want to develop sophisticated critical thinking skills by reading the most relevant literary texts, chosen by a reliable female goose. It's for people who can remember reading before book clubs or Oprah or your friends told you what was good. It's for people have no idea that the best of literature exists in a miniaturized form. It's for people who have that idea and want to steal their childhood back from Disney and all of the purveyors of culture who spoon fed them their culture. I'm not saying it's going to be a piece of cake – but I will venture to say that it is a piece of patty cake, apple pie, and a stolen shingle from a candy house. It's not for lightweights. This is gruesome stuff. But if you missed out on it in the first go-around, this is your chance to go back and reacquaint yourself with the inner adult in child readers, with the bravest and most daring parts of who we once all were.