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**“My Teacher is an Alien” and Other Stories:  
Images of Teachers in Children’s Literature**

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### Origin and Background

Though I have very few memories from elementary school, one of the most prominent memories that stands out is my third grade teacher reading to us after recess. She often chose entertaining books, such as Louis Sachar’s *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*, that appealed to our interests, concerns, and sense of humor. I remember sitting among my classmates, enthralled by this ludicrous story of a school that was thirty stories tall with a classroom on each story—the book painted a picture of the unique and unusual students and teachers who populated the school. I laughed along with my classmates at the antics of the students on the thirtieth floor, while secretly hoping I did not ever have a teacher like the novel’s Mrs. Gorf, a teacher who wiggled her ears, stuck out her tongue, and turned her students into apples.

Images of teachers abound in popular culture, and children are exposed to thinking about what constitutes a “good teacher” through various media forms. We might conjure images of *Dead Poets Society* or *The Freedom Writers*, portrayals of teachers who gained a reputation based on their creative ability to reach students at their level and inspire them. However, children are indoctrinated into learning about education long before they are old enough to watch these films and understand their implications—this type of indoctrination occurs through children’s books. Many times, the teachers in literature who they are exposed to differ greatly from the “good teacher” mold, instead putting forth the image of the terrible teacher.

Education is an indispensable part of children’s lives, one that every child experiences, so it makes sense that many children’s books tackle issues and experiences of education, often told from the perspective of the child. In addition, many children’s books revolve around education and depict children’s experiences in the classroom. Thus arises an interesting context: through literature, children learn about education ...in the classroom *while* they are being educated. This unique environment brings with it inevitable questions of context and, more importantly, implications. For instance, how might a child who learns *from his or her teacher* about what defines a “good teacher” change his or her views of teachers based on these descriptions in literature?

A major part of elementary and secondary curriculum is literature. In fact, many children’s literature courses at the college level are offered not in English departments, but rather, in Education departments, where future educators learn about what kinds of books children are reading and want to be reading. Currently, there are not any courses at Denison that address children’s literature nor are there any courses that are cross-listed between the Departments of English and Educational Studies. Because studying children’s literature from an academic perspective is a passion of mine, I looked to the Young Scholars program last summer to pursue this passion and received the opportunity to complete a summer research project on education in the *Harry Potter* novels, which sparked my interest in this topic. Because one aspect of my project last summer was about how teachers are portrayed in the novels, I discovered several resources on images of teachers in children’s literature, which divided these fictional educators into categories such as “teacher as witch,” “teacher as friend,” and “teacher as incompetent.” However, though I did not incorporate it into my final paper because it was not as relevant as I initially believed, I set the groundwork for my research in this area. I hope to use this groundwork to base my project this summer and my future scholarly pursuits in children’s literature.

Weber, Mitchell, Joseph, and Burnaford, while simultaneously adding analysis of many works of literature to this area of research. Because many investigations of teacher images focus on only one text or on particular kinds of images, my research will add extensively to this growing field and wrestle with new questions and new texts. Furthermore, as children’s literature is still a comparatively understudied genre in academia, there are several theoretical approaches, such as images of teachers in literature, to children’s literature that have not been applied to many texts. Consequently, many critical studies on children’s literature have yet to be written, and it is precisely this gap in literary criticism and children’s literature studies that I hope to fill. In particular, because of my chronological approach, one of the questions I seek to answer by the end of the summer is how and in what ways do images of teachers differ within literature for particular grade levels and across literature for different grade levels. Lastly, I plan to consider the implications of how teachers are portrayed in literature and how they work in conjunction with hidden curriculum or affect children’s mental schemas regarding what it means to be a teacher. Collectively, I want to ask, what do these texts suggest about how students should think of their teachers, their teachers’ roles, schooling, and the function of schooling? What lessons do they offer regarding children’s preferences for pedagogy? How are these texts in dialogue with the discussions of education in which they are situated? While it may seem like there are too many questions I would like to answer, most of these questions—and their answers—are interrelated.

Children’s literature can not only inform young readers about educational matters, but it can also be a catalyst for them to incite educational change. The children’s books I have selected are part of larger cultural discourses on what constitutes effective schooling that have occurred throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in America and elsewhere in the world. Analyzing these books, especially their discussions about education, is aptly timed in America and Britain with the ongoing debate regarding the No Child Left Behind Act in America and the standardized testing reforms in Britain, as educators, parents, and government officials are rethinking schooling and its purposes.

My goal for the project is to complete a critical paper of at least 80 pages in length, and I plan to divide my paper into chapters, each discussing one of the three major topics outlined in my work plan. Upon completion of this project, I intend to submit it to an undergraduate research journal and am very interested in presenting my findings at one of the annual Children’s Literature Association or National Council of Teachers of English conferences. My summer research will contribute a fresh perspective to the increasing canon of literary criticism on children’s literature by analyzing a large group of varied texts and portrayals of teachers and education.

### **Work Plan**

Please see the attached bibliography for more information on the books I will be using for this portion of my research. Dr. Porcheddu and I will meet twice weekly, on Tuesdays and Thursday mornings, and will meet daily during the final two weeks of my research.

**Week 1:** During the first week of my research, I will research categories of teacher images already proposed by other scholars to help frame my project. This week I will explore the educational theories that I plan to incorporate in my analysis of the implications of how teachers have been portrayed in literature. Some of the theories I plan to use include passive learning,

### **Selected Bibliography**

\*While it may seem like my project is overly ambitious due to the amount of primary sources I have included, many of the books for young and middle readers are relatively short, so I will be able to read them all during the times I have allotted, and I believe such an approach is necessary to complete a representative discussion of this literature. In addition, please note that when I indicate a series, I plan on selecting only a few titles from that series to examine closely.

#### **Books for Young Readers**

- Allard, Harry. Miss Nelson is Missing! Torrence: Frank Schaffer, 1992.
- Bemelmans, Ludwig. Madeline. New York: Puffin, 1989.
- Berestein, Stan, and Jan Berestein. The Berestein Bears Go to School. New York: Random House, 1978.
- Brown, Marc. Arthur’s Teacher Trouble. New York: Trumpet, 1989.
- Cole, Joanna. The Magic School Bus series. New York: Scholastic, 1986-present.
- Danziger, Paula. The Amber Brown series. New York: Puffin, 1994-present. [Follows Amber through her adventures in school as she gets older.]
- Jones, Marcia T. and Debbie Dadley. The Adventures of the Bailey School Kids series. New York: Scholastic, 1991-present. [Follows the school days of students at Bailey School as they suspect those teaching in the school around them might be mythical creatures (vampires, werewolves, etc.).]
- Park, Barbara. The Junie B. Jones series. New York: Random House, 1992-present. [Follows the experiences of Junie B. in kindergarten and first grade.]
- Thaler, Mike. The Teacher from the Black Lagoon series. New York: Scholastic, 1989-present.

#### **Books for Middle Readers** *[Each of these novels addresses the experience of elementary school students.]*

- Blume, Judy. Freckle Juice. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996.
- . Forever. New York: Pocket Books, 1976.
- . Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972.
- Cleary, Beverly. Dear Mr. Henshaw. New York: HarperTrophy, 1983.
- . Ramona Quimby series.
- Coville, Bruce. My Teacher is an Alien series. New York: Aladdin, 1989-present.
- Dahl, Roald. Matilda. New York: Puffin, 1988.
- DeClements, Barthe. Nothing’s Fair in Fifth Grade. New York: Scholastic, 1981.
- Gutman, Dan. My Weird School series. New York: HarperCollins, 2004-present. [Contains titles such as Miss Cooney is Looney! and Mr. Klutz is Nuts!]
- Kinney, Jeff. The Diary of a Wimpy Kid series. New York: Amulet, 2007-present.
- Sachar, Louis. Sideways Stories from Wayside School. New York: Knopf, 1978.
- . Wayside School is Falling Down. New York: Avon, 1989.
- . Wayside Schools Gets a Little Stranger. New York: Avon, 1995.
- Spinelli, Jerry. Loser. New York: Scholastic, 2002.
- . Maniac Magee. New York: Scholastic, 1990.
- Taylor, Mildred D. Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. New York: Scholastic, 1976.

#### **Books for Older Readers**

- Anderson, Laurie Halse. Speak. New York: Penguin, 2006.

- Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter. Ed. Elizabeth E. Heilman. New York: Routledge, 2009. 103-120.
- Blume, Judy. Letters to Judy: What Kids Wish They Could Tell You. New York: Pocket Books, 1987.
- Helfenbein, Robert J. “Conjuring Curriculum, Conjuring Control: A Reading of Resistance in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*.” Curriculum Inquiry 38 (2008): 500-513.
- Jackson, Matt. “The Troubling Lessons of Arthur’s Teacher Trouble: Old Stereotypes in a New Community.” Children’s Literature Association Quarterly 22.1 (2009): 30-36.
- Pinsent, Pat. “The Education of Harry Potter and His Predecessors.” The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter: A Literary Phenomenon. Ed. Lana A. Whited. Columbia: Missouri UP, 2002. 27-50.
- Zarrillo, James. “Beverly Cleary, Ramona Quimby, and the Teaching of Reading.” Children’s Literature Association Quarterly 12.3 (2009): 131-135.

### **Education and Miscellaneous Resources**

- Deane, Paul. Mirrors of American Culture: Children’s Fiction Series in the Twentieth Century. Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1991.
- Fass, Paula S. and Mary Ann Mason. Childhood in America. New York: New York UP, 2000.
- Freire, Paulo. The Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos New York: Continuum, 1995.
- Gatto, John Taylor. Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling. Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society, 2005.
- Giroux, Henry A. Ideology, Culture, and the Process of Schooling. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1981.
- Joseph, Pamela Bolotin and Gail Burnaford, eds. Images of Schoolteachers in Twentieth Century America. New York: St. Martin’s, 1994.
- Kolb, Alice Y. and David A. Kolb. “Learning Styles and Learning Spaces: Enhancing Experiential Learning in Higher Education.” Academy of Management Learning and Education 4 (2005): 193-212.
- Robbins, Christopher G. Expelling Hope: The Assault on Youth and The Militarization of Schooling. Albany: SUNY P, 2008.
- Weber, Sandra, and Claudia Mitchell, eds. That’s Funny, You Don’t Look Like a Teacher!: Interrogating Images and Identity in Popular Culture. London: Falmer, 1995.
- Zimmerman, Barry J., and Dale H. Schunk, eds. Educational Psychology: A Century of Contributions. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003.