

## **“But what can I learn?”: Facing the Complexities of Social Issues in Books Written for a Youthful Audience**

*Jill P. May*

As adults who face the world of the child, we wonder what they are learning from the books they read, and we are apt to presume that we can determine what is appropriate for them. At the same time, we are forced to acknowledge that we often know very little about the topics covered in stories labeled as “children’s” or “adolescent” literature. At times, we cannot separate the fiction from the truth in these re-tellings of events. We are hampered by not having studied the earlier publications on the topic, so we cannot be sure when we are reading revisionist history or when our beliefs are being shaped about the events that led this author to tell this particular story. We seek discussions of the books by experts in the field, but they, too, have ideals that are reflected in their readings of books.

Two of our children’s and adolescent book reviewers in this issue give us very different perspectives on what can or cannot be trusted in books published for children. In his review of the picture book *You’ve Never Heard of Willie Mays?! Peter Carino alludes to the mythology the author and the illustrator have used to bring Mays to life, concluding, “in focusing on the years when Mays burst onto the American scene, when nearly every American ‘heard of Willie Mays’ (unpaged), the book fulfills the purpose implied in its title.” As an expert in literature, Carino has carefully explained the historical aspects of the presentation and evaluated its literary merits. I am left with the assumption that this is a perfect book for the young child, but I am also aware that the story is evocative as well as truthful. We didn’t get a second reaction from a teacher or parent who shared this book, but a parent and a grandparent left a comment on Amazon.com, and both reported the book’s success with their children. In addition, they both commented—as adults looking at the picture book—on the book’s artistic format, and one felt that the book just didn’t fare well as a Kindle presentation.*

Kathryn Obenchain tells us that Bill O’Reilly’s historical retelling of the Kennedy assassination in *Kennedy’s Last Days: The Assassination That Defined a Generation* contains numerous maps and photographs, along with a strong portrayal of Kennedy and the U.S. government as morally right while the assassin Oswald, who had lived in the Soviet Union and espoused Communist ideals, is immoral. As a professor in social studies, Obenchain explains that historians should not retell historical events with simplicity and concludes, “the one-dimensional portrait that O’Reilly creates of each character in his nationalistic narrative

underestimates the intellectual abilities of young readers to explore and understand both of these men as complex human beings living in turbulent times and in complex places." On the other hand, high school teacher Shannon White discovered that her students knew little about the Kennedy assassination other than the recent television and media presentations, and she felt the book contained useful information in a style that was "interesting and captivating for a broader audience of students." She found that they wanted to know more about conspiracy theory, something being covered in the press and on television during this fifty-year anniversary of the shooting but not really in the O'Reilly book. Furthermore, her students seemed perfectly willing to evaluate the author's narrative approach. One wrote, "the book did a lot of praising Kennedy and their family. It spoke of them as if they were kings, when in reality they were just a family of politicians. I'm not sure how he got to his level of fame but the book definitely played on it."

Complexity of the author's story seems to be a focal point when we look at social issues in children's and adolescent literature. In reality, we face another complexity when we evaluate children's literature. How can we interpret what is best for a youthful audience without first understanding the story that is being told? Our vision of the material is childlike in its ignorance; we are newly introduced to times in the past or to situations in our society that we have never encountered. In order to understand what is presented, we must seek professional advice. Perhaps we will turn to the studies of literary historians for a scholarly interpretation of past events and the rationale for publishing particular books for children at certain times. Then, books such as Paula T. Connolly's *Slavery in American Children's Literature, 1790–2010* can guide us toward a more solid understanding of what America has published about slavery in materials designed for a youthful contemporary audience. Yet, if we simply read "her story" without a deconstruction of her premises, we are naively accepting her evaluation of the times, topics, and materials about which we know little. For that reason, *FOSR* asks other professionals to read and critique new research for us. In this issue, Robert E. May, a southern historian who has studied literary attempts to explain slavery in America's past, tells us that Connolly's scholarly presentation is exceptional because she gives her adult readers "a subtle understanding of how ideology infiltrates writing for children." At the same time, he warns us, "I found *Slavery in American Children's Literature* a dense read at times, especially in the later chapters where it is easy to get lost in Connolly's classifications." And he admits to his biases, confessing, "Occasionally, I craved more information about authors' intentions and readers' responses, information that might be out there in letters, diaries, and newspapers, but which would require a different kind of research and authorial objective." In the end, May calls *Slavery in American Children's Literature* "an excellently contextualized masterpiece," suggesting that one should read it if he or she hopes to fully understand the published children's literature depicting slavery. Additionally, May has acknowledged their professional differences: his reading is as a scholar of history, while Connolly is first and foremost a scholar of children's literature.

*First Opinions, Second Reactions*' first editorial declared, "we want to provide a space not only for the publication of quality reviews, but also for the 'reactions' of teachers and scholars to these reviews after the materials have been introduced to students at various instructional levels. In this way, we are striving to create a dialogue between all who are interested in the study and classroom teaching of children's and adolescent literature" (1). That is still our goal. Our biggest problem has come from the current testing demands in schools. No longer can we find teachers who feel comfortable sharing new books in their classrooms. And so, our dialogue has shut down, and we are often left with books that seem like "lost children." Written for a youthful reader—perhaps because the author hoped to inform a naive audience—the books are rarely shared and discussed in a respectful way. The dialogue about the book's complexities is left unheard. We are beginning with this issue to call those books who failed to find children or young adults as readers "lost children." Our hope is that you will share them with a youthful audience and listen to their conversations about the books. Then, we hope, you will be inspired to sit at your computer and write a final reaction for our readers to see. Once you're finished, all you need to do is go to *FOSR*'s homepage and click on "Submit Article" on the left-hand side.

### Works Cited

- Editors. "A Note from the Editors." *First Opinions, Second Reactions* 1.1 (2008): Article 2. Web. Retrieved from <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/fosr/vol1/iss1/2>.
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