

Children's Literature: Very Good News and Very Bad News

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This is a very strange time for children's literature, with powerful positive and powerful negative forces at work. A strong positive force is the obvious fact that we are living in a Golden Age of children's and adolescent literature. Despite claims to the contrary, children and teenagers still like to read, and are reading a lot (Krashen, 2001; Krashen and Von Sprecken, 2002), which is undoubtedly due to the phenomenally high quality of literature available.

In fact, the books are so good that they cross-over; adults read them too. I agree with most people and think that the Harry Potter series is wonderful. It has provided me with a genuine role model, a person after whom I have decided to model my entire career, Gildaroy Lockheart. And in *The Order of the Phoenix*, Rowling has demonstrated her keen understanding of the field of education with her character Dolores Umbridge. Ms. Umbridge, I am told, is a leading candidate to be appointed to the next vacancy on the California Board of Education.

I have lots of evidence that adults like current children's and adolescent literature. I was visiting my son a few years ago when he was a graduate student at the University of Texas. He reads Kant and Shakespeare for pleasure. I was reading *Animorphs*. I left my copy of *Animorphs* number one in his apartment. He not only read it, he read the next five, and bought extra copies of number one to give to friends who had children who might enjoy it.

Here is more good news: It appears to be very easy to get children interested in reading, and the best way is the most obvious: Exposure to good books. Jim Trelease has done a heroic job in informing the public about reading aloud to children (Trelease, 2001). Trelease also has suggested that one very positive reading experience can create a reader, one "home run" book experience (Trelease, 2001). My colleagues and I confirmed that Trelease's idea was right: We found that more than half of the middle school children we interviewed agreed that there was one book that started them off reading (Von Sprecken and Krashen, 2000; Von Sprecken, Kim, and Krashen, 2000; Ujiie and Krashen, 2002).

And finally, the rest of the good news: We know that the more children read, the better their literacy development. There is now overwhelming research showing that free voluntary reading is the primary source of our reading ability, our writing style, much of our vocabulary and spelling knowledge, and our ability to handle complex grammatical constructions. It has also been confirmed that those who read more know more: They

know more about history, literature, and even have more “practical knowledge” (research reviewed in Krashen, 2004).

But there are negative forces. One is the fact that this excellent literature is not available to everybody. Several studies show that children of poverty have little access to books at home, in their community and at school (e.g. De Loreto and Tse, 1999; Neuman and Celano, 2001). School libraries and public libraries in wealthier areas are far better than those in low-income areas, and Worthy’s research (Worthy, Moorman, and Turner, 1999) shows that libraries tend not to carry much in the areas that are really of interest to children.

California is the worst offender, with the worst and most understaffed school libraries in the country. I have documented this in my books and papers, and California librarians such as Richard Moore and Sandy Schuckett have tried very hard to inform the public about this sad situation. Unfortunately I have more statistics that tell the same story: Data released by the National Center for Library Statistics (Holton, Bae, Baldrige, Brown and Heffron, 2004) shows that only 79% of schools in California have libraries, compared to the national average of 92% (CA is last in the US), and only 24% of California schools have a library with a certified library media specialist, compared to the national average of 75% (again, CA is last in the country.) Research tells us that better libraries mean higher reading scores (see McQuillan, 1998 and studies reviewed in Krashen, 2004) and Keith Curry Lance has provided evidence confirming the positive impact of library staffing on reading achievement (Lance, 1994).

And it looks like things are going to get worse: California spends \$1.53 per child on school libraries, compared to the national average of about \$20 per student.

The low quality of California’s public libraries has been documented (McQuillan, 1998; Krashen, 2002) and again the most recent data confirms this. According to the recent “America’s Most Literate Cities” report from the University of Wisconsin (Miller, 2004), California has the worst public libraries in the country: Out of 79 cities, Los Angeles public libraries ranked 73rd, Sacramento’s were 76th, Anaheim’s 78th and Santa Ana’s public libraries were dead last at 79th. No wonder California’s reading scores are so low.

My hope, of course, is that the positive force of excellent literature is stronger than the negative forces, and that we will find a way of making these wonderful books available to more children.

*Acceptance speech: The Dorothy C. McKenzie Award for Distinguished Contribution to the Field of Children’s Literature

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