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Literacy

THIRD EDITION



*Reading,
Writing and
Children's
Literature*

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CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND CRITICAL LITERACY

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Overview

Children need critical literacy not simply to analyse texts but as a life-skill. They need to be able to understand the power of the text and to determine where the language is positioning them as readers or as listeners; how it is making them feel; what it is making them feel, what it is trying to make them do and why. This is part of being a knowing reader. Children's books are in a unique position to develop knowing readers.

Critical literacy as a life-skill

Critical literacy can be described as:

- reading with a knowledge of language and how it works
- reading with a growing appreciation of the many possible contexts for text
- reading with an awareness of where the text positions a reader
- reading with a perception of the ideas and values and attitudes (and motivations) that constitute the implicit framework of the text and out of which texts are generated.

Critical literacy is a type of forensic science applied to literary text. We know that the word 'text' has come to mean any communicative graphical form from which meaning is derived. Critical literacy can also apply to visual texts, such as the illustrations of picturebooks and to moving image, such as film.

Critical literacy includes visual and cultural literacy

All texts breathe out, perceptibly or imperceptibly, a point of view, a worldview. A critically literate person examines texts for signs and clues about author intentions and about attitudes that the author may not even be aware of holding. These clues can include:

- choice of words
- choice of personal pronouns, especially those such as 'we', 'them', 'us', 'our'
- description of place: what the apparent 'here' of the text denotes: where the author is, where the protagonists are. Is this place inclusive or exclusive?
- if the text makes us want to do something: have a particular belief, like or dislike a certain group of people, even drive a particular car or wear a particular brand of t-shirt.

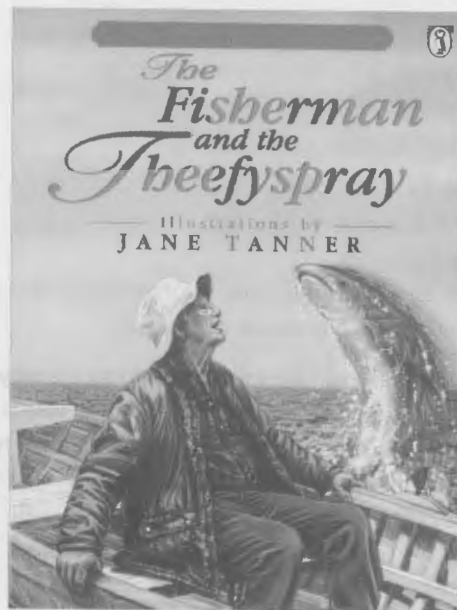
We can also examine any text through a lens that helps us to understand how we are reading it, what attitudes we are bringing to our reading, and how this may influence our reaction to characters and story.

One aspect of critical literacy is that identified by Nodelman as narrative literacy: knowledge that allows a reader/viewer to place the story in a literary and, as Nodelman (2002: 5) also argues, art world that provides contexts of understanding and recognition.

This conceptualisation of critical literacy includes **visual literacy**—reading and understanding the signs of an increasingly visual society (see also chapters 28 and 29)—and **cultural literacy**—knowledge of the world, and knowledge of diverse ways of being (see chapter 20). Books, and in particular picturebooks, provide arenas for the development of both these aspects of critical literacy, or both these critical literacies.

For example, the language of *The Fisherman and the Theefyspray* (Jennings & Tanner 1994) serves to encourage the reader into sympathy for the little fish, who is 'deep' in 'cold shadow', in a 'lonely lair'. The unusual syntax and slightly heroic feel of 'There was not one other like her now' is compounded by the alliterative description of the other fish:

Starfish swarmed. Garfish gathered.
There were twos. And threes.
And thousands.



The illustrations in the text operate as a system of signs. An obvious example is the several pictures with the shadow of the boat above the mother and her hungry baby: these signify (are signs of) an imminent danger, which the reader can readily perceive. More subtle is the beautiful illustration on the last double opening: this is a picture of two worlds portrayed as a section—on the top the surface world, and the fisherman going home with his empty basket, but beneath him a vibrant world of colour and life. We read this picture as the artist intended us to—as a testimony of the marine environment and of the generous spirit of the fisherman.

Visual and critical literacy skills help us as readers to interpret the basket (without the fish, which has been returned to the ocean), a key symbol in this text, not as a sign of failure or defeat but as a sign

of triumph. It is the emptiness of the basket that has contributed to the continuing vitality of the world beneath the surface. 'Truth' and 'meaning' depend on perspectives: the basket, symbol of the fishing trip, 'means' success, or lack of success, depending on your point of view. Which description is 'true' is equally problematical.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Read *The Fisherman and the Theefyspray* by Paul Jennings and Jane Tanner.

Years K-2

- Find all the signs of the fisherman in the story (the boat, the line, the basket).
- What is the underwater world like? Ask children to think of as many words as they can to describe it (bright, colourful, full of life, active etc.).
- Tell me: would you have put the theefyspray back?
- Draw a picture and write a sentence telling a story about saving something.

Years 3-4

Organise the class into small groups. Ask them to discuss the following, sharing the recording of their responses:

- Tell the story in one sentence.
- Why didn't Jennings tell the story as simply as that?
- What words make you feel sorry for the theefyspray?
- What sort of words are most of these? (adjectives) What work do these words do? (describe)
- What do these words mean?

... a pain grew and flowered,
deep inside her.
- Why do you think Jennings chose the word 'flowered'? What other words could he have used? Have you ever heard that word used in relation to pain before? What does it make the reader feel?

Years 5-6

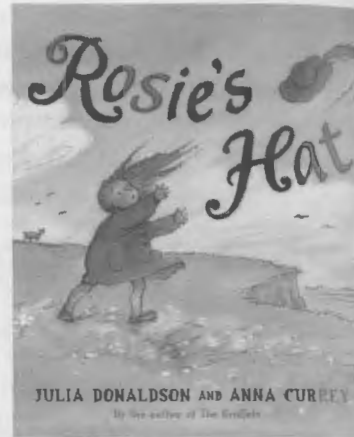
Add the following:

- *Alliteration* is the name for when several words near each other start with the same letter, thus giving a similar sound, e.g. 'shrill shriek'. Find as many examples as you can.
- *Assonance* is the name for when several words near to each other have the same vowel sound but don't actually rhyme, e.g. 'deep', 'theefyspray', 'green'. Can you find any other examples of assonance?
- The class reports its findings. Discuss the poetic nature of the language and the idea that the language of poetry tries to make you see ordinary things in a new way (see also 'Picturebooks and poetry' in chapter 28).
- Individual task: write a short poem about something you have seen today or know you will see today. Try to describe it in such a way as to make your readers see the thing in a new way. The class may like to use the computer to help them set out text in innovative ways. (Show some examples of poems that do this.)

- If you were told that the fisherman was very poor and had a hungry family at home waiting for him to provide food for them, would you see the story in a different light? Discuss.

Two other deceptively 'simple' texts that can be approached in this way are *Rosie's Hat* (Julia Donaldson and Anna Currey 2005), and *Diary of a Wombat* (Jackie French and Bruce Whatley 2002). *Rosie's Hat* tells the story of a hat blowing away, and being found years later by the grown Rosie. Rosie is portrayed as a chubby figure, even on her wedding day, and she grows up to be a fireman (person!). So the author who writes in Rosie's occupation as fireman, and the illustrator who depicts in a diet-conscious age a slightly round grown woman, have collaborated in expressing or transgressing particular codes of appearance and gender expectations.

In a different way, the text of *Diary of a Wombat* is layered to encode questioning ideas about territory, perspectives, learning about difference, tolerating difference, and sharing and getting on with others—with a 'them' that is not 'me' or 'us.' (See further discussion in chapter on Visual Literacy).



Critical thinking and study exercises

Critical focus: Critical and cultural literacy

Consider:

- 1 Critical literacy alerts us to the assumptions and attitudes often hiding in places where we don't expect them. Read *Robinson Crusoe* (Daniel Defoe), *The Wind in the Willows* (Kenneth Grahame), and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Roald Dahl).
- 2 Comment on these texts and any others you consider appropriate in terms of the following ideas about an Imperialist worldview:
 - cultural assumptions that indigenous people need to be 'civilised'
 - cultural assumptions that the wilderness needs to be tamed and frontiers of civilisation extended
 - the historical context of patriotic conquest
 - the importance of power and empire
 - class structure.

- 3 Then read some or all of the following: *Window* (Baker 1992), *Island in My Garden* (Howes &

Harvey 1998), *The Paddock* (Norman 1992), *The Story of Rosy Dock* (Baker 1995), *The Hidden Forest* (Baker 2000), *As I Grew Older* (Abdullah 1992), *Enora and the Black Crane* (Meeks 1991), *The Burnt Stick* (Hill 1994).

- 4 Discuss these texts in relation to a 21st-century environmental worldview:

- cultural assumptions that the wilderness must be protected against the creep of civilisation
- the significance of the natural environment in sustainable futures
- equal rights of indigenous peoples to maintain their culture.

Teachers' reading

The Testament by John Grisham (1999) is an example of an international bestseller that has a strong environmental theme underlying its story. A book you may like to share with older classes is *The Whale's Child* by Gillian Rubinstein (2002), which expresses environmental issues and moral dilemmas.

How texts work

We have already noted that in some ways a literary text is an artefact—something created by the author, turned into book form by editors and publishers, and re-created by the reader. If we consider it in a scientific way, and cut a section (i.e. the representation of a solid object as it looks when cut by an intersecting plane, so that you can see what's inside it), we would see that the text consists of a number of different levels:

- the level of story
- the level of the telling of the story
- the level of themes and significance (understory).

The level of story

There is obviously a level of story or narrative. The *story* is what is narrated. It is what you see at a glance. It emerges out of the events that take place, the actions its characters engage in, and the time and the place of the setting.

Story is events, actions, time and place

The irony of story, however, is that although it is what is seen at a glance, it is not actually what appears in the black marks on the surface of the page. For example, the story of *theefyspray* could be told in one sentence:

The last theefyspray had a baby who was hungry and was caught by a fisherman who put it back in the water because he had seen the mother's beautiful colours.

Or the story of *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak 1963) could be something like this:

A little boy was naughty and was sent to his room but he had a fantastic (probably imaginary) adventure with some wild animals and when he came back his hot supper was waiting for him.

The telling of the story (the telling of the text)

Neither Jennings nor Sendak have chosen to tell their stories with these words. So 'story' is a curiously insufficient term and only a superficial way of describing what happens in a text. It does not adequately describe the process of the telling of the story, a process that we need to understand if we are to be critically literate.

This *telling of the story* refers to all those choices that the author has made about the words used:

- the arrangement of the words (syntax)
- the meanings of the words (semantics)
- the sound and look of the words (graphophonics).

Syntax, semantics, graphophonics

It refers to what is actually on the page, the order in which events and characters appear, the mode or register of the narrative, and the point of view and focalisation of events, characters, and

setting. For example, Jennings describes the birth of the baby fish with the words 'a pain grew and flowered, deep inside her'. The unusual use of 'flowered' in relation to 'pain' jolts readers into a new awareness of the nature of pain and into a new emphasis on pain's outcome (it is an example of what Shklovsky calls the 'roughened' language of poetry).

So, in our scientific sectioning of the text there is a paradox—what we see at a glance, the story, is not what actually appears on the surface, although readers usually think it is.

Discourse

This distinction between the story and the telling of the story, the *process of the telling* if you like, is given different names by different theorists (see e.g. Martin 1986: 107–8), but one of the most common terms, and that used by, among others, Gerard Genette (1980), Seymour Chatman (1978), Perry Nodelman (1992: 61–3), and John Stephens (1992: 17–18) is discourse.

Discourse is a term with various applications, but it commonly refers to the process of narrating, how story is told on the surface of the text. **Narrative** includes both the *story* (what is narrated) and the discourse (how it is narrated).

Readers make, create, negotiate, construct, interpret story from how they read the discourse.

Readers help to make story

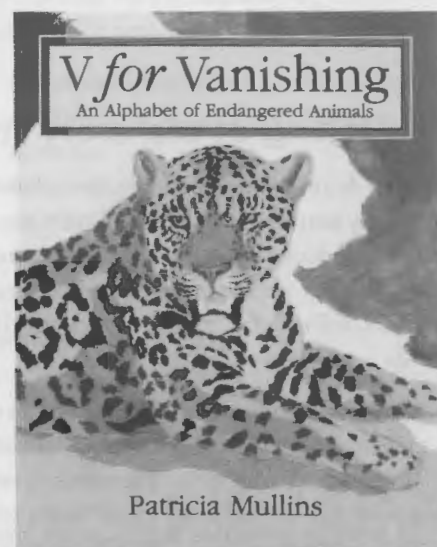
Discourse is the language of the text, the actual words on the page. Story appears to fly free from the page, but in reality of course it is very much dependent on it.

Understory

Underneath the discourse is a rich pool of personal and collective resources that is the reservoir out of which the author has made his or her selections in the telling of the story. Each word on the surface—the discourse—still smells and tastes of where it has come from and where it has been, and it is this smell and this taste that helps to give narrative its significance and to express its themes.

The simple term **understory** relates to this under-layer of themes and significance. It helps to explain narrative and thematic cohesion, as well as the points of connection to other texts. Narrative cohesion refers to how the elements of story (characters, actions and events, time and place) are stuck together and ordered in such a way as to make some sort of whole. Thematic cohesion is like an undercurrent, pulling together words, concepts, and pictures into a coherent and significant idea or theme that goes beyond story.

If we look at Patricia Mullins' *V for Vanishing* (1993), particularly at the powerful opening 'Xx eXtinct', the discourse—what actually appears on the page—is a very simple statement (not technically accurate anyway: 'extinct' begins with *e* not *x*) and some short scientific labels. This is a book without a



conventional 'narrative'—no traditional verbal linkages—but ordered in a recognisable generic structure, the alphabet book. However, story and theme emerge loud and clear and reach beyond the brevity of its discourse (scientific labels). The *story*, told through the poignancy of its illustrations, is about animals and how the animals it names are becoming extinct; the *theme* is about a world environment under threat. The powerful advocacies of this book (its themes and significance) come from the taste, smell, and feel of the layers and layers of visual and verbal understory that still cling to what appears on the surface, that flavour that surface, and that provide textual and intertextual connections (see also chapter 24), contrast, and cohesion. Contemporary cultural ideas about the sanctity of the environment (cultural ideologies and societal agendas) are a significant part of that understory.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Year 3–4

- 1 Read as a class *Way Home* by Libby Hathorn and Greg Rogers (1994). If you can, darken the classroom.
- 2 Make an overhead of the thirteenth opening. After you have finished the story, turn this overhead on and let the class reflect on it for a few minutes.
- 3 Discuss the idea of visual perspective or point of view:
 - From what other perspectives could the artist have drawn this picture?
 - Why has he chosen this perspective?
 - Where are we looking from?

- 4 Now look at the words on this page. You might like to introduce children to the idea of the telling of the story.
- Whose eyes are we seeing through?
 - What is the advantage of direct speech as part of the telling of a text?
 - What is the effect of the three lines in third person? (You may need to explain these terms to your class. If so, reinforce them as often as possible in subsequent discussions.)
 - What ideas and attitudes in our society does a story like this show (concern about homeless children, the division between rich and poor, waste of resources, etc.)?

Years 5–6

Add the following:

- 1 Look at the pictures again. What signs in the pictures are about society?
- 2 Some of the above tasks can be open class discussion, or you may prefer it to be done in small groups. Divide the class into small groups now, if you have not already done so. Ask each group to think about how the story of this page could be told by a different person with a different point of view. Encourage them to give the person a name and explain their reasons for thinking the way they do. Each group writes a short script of what their person says. Then each group presents their script to the class, with one person in the group briefly explaining who the person is, another setting the scene, another presenting the script, and another describing how a point of view changes how you see things.
- 3 Give the class time to reflect and to take some notes.

This type of exercise can be adapted using many books. It may also be a helpful way to introduce secondary students to the literary analysis of such texts as Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (compare the different perspectives of Prospero, Caliban, Ariel), and Winton's *Cloudstreet*.

Teachers' reading

Highways to a War by Christopher Koch is an Australian story, rich in description and perspectives, about a news photographer in Vietnam. Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* is a psychological case study observed from differing perspectives. *The Republic of Love* by Carol Shields tells through shifting viewpoints a seductive story about love.

MULTILITERACIES

For Upper Primary, Middle School and Junior Secondary students

- 1 Plan a series of lessons around the novel *Feeling Sorry for Celia* by Jaclyn Moriarty (2001). This is set in the tradition of the *epistolary novel*: a novel in which the story is told in an exchange of letters between characters.
 - a Introduce the novel by a discussion of the many ways—multimodes—of communication. Discuss the idea of register and contexts for text (see chapter 20) and explore the ways in which language varies according to purpose and context.
 - b Read the novel, and list the different modes of communication (not all are conventional letters—there are journal entries and notes pinned on the refrigerator) and their characteristics. How does story emerge?



- 2 Exercise: Using the computer, write a short story employing as many different epistolary type modes as you can (for example, mobile phone text, email, letter to editor, MSN Messenger, reports, notes and post-its, formal letter to principal, greeting cards etc).
- 3 List the skills you need for each one. How are they the same? How are they different?

► Summary

- 1 Critical literacy is like a forensic skill. It seeks *clues* about the author's intentions, and *cues* about how the author (and illustrator if relevant) is positioning readers and viewers to react.
- 2 Critical literacy is: reading with a knowledge of language and how it works; reading with an awareness of where the text positions a reader; and reading with a perception of the ideas, values, and attitudes that constitute the implicit framework of the text and out of which texts are generated.
- 3 Critical literacy is a necessary life-skill. It includes visual literacy and cultural literacy. (Visual literacy is reading and understanding the signs of an increasingly visual society; see chapter 29.)
- 4 Different contexts for text and different modes of communicative text require different literacy skills and literate behaviours.
- 5 Exploring and discussing how texts work helps us to enhance all literacy skills, particularly critical literacy.
- 6 Texts consist of story (what happens) and discourse (the telling of the story). Texts also contain understory, which is a helpful term for the deep layers of theme and significance in texts. Understory includes the resources out of which textual and intertextual connections are made and which help to give cohesion.
- 7 Cultural ideas, assumptions, and attitudes are a part of understory; awareness, knowledge, and recognition and identification of these represent the development of critical literacy.

Further reading

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