Examining the Representation of Slavery within Children’s Literature

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Abstract
Middle level teachers, at times, link historical content with relevant English literature in interdisciplinary units. Elementary teachers periodically employ history-themed literature during reading time. Interconnections between language arts and history are formed with developmentally appropriate literature for students. Historical misrepresentations, however, proliferate in children’s literature and are concealed behind engaging narratives. Since literacy and historical thinking are essential skills, children’s literature should be balanced within, not banished from, the classroom. Using America’s peculiar institution of slavery as a reference point, this article examines children’s literature, identifies almost a dozen areas of historical misrepresentation, and proffers rich primary source material to balance the various misrepresentations. We provide teachers with reason for caution when including such literature; but also model how to locate, use, and, at times, abridge primary source material within an elementary or middle level classroom. Such curricular supplements provide balance to engaging but historically-blemished children’s literature and enable educators to attain the rigorous prescriptions of Common Core.

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The course focuses on representations of childhood in texts, and examines what is meant by the contested term 'children's literature'. Participants will engage with some of the key debates in the field and consider a range of theoretical perspectives – from Romanticism to reader-response theory; from gender to postmodernism; from historical studies and sociocultural viewpoints to semiotics – in addition to examining critically the views of young readers and their reading choices. Close textual study and the history of children's literature are embedded within the course, as is reflection upon texts produced by ever-changing new technologies. The course also offers an opportunity to conduct an empirical study of children making meaning of texts. Connolly, Paula T. Slavery in American Children's Literature, 1790–2010. University of Iowa Press, 2013. Cruz, Jon. Wood, Marcus. The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010. Yarborough, Richard.