

Literature Is *Back!*

**Using the
Best Books for
Teaching Readers
and Writers
Across Genres**

CAROL J. FUHLER • MARIA P. WALTHER



New York • Toronto • London • Auckland • Sydney
Mexico City • New Delhi • Hong Kong • Buenos Aires

Dedication

To Dick, for your continued quiet support, and to our sons and their wives, who have planted and nurtured the love of reading in our grandchildren. *C. J. F.*

To Lenny, because we make a great team, and to our daughter, Katie—you are the best! *M. P. W.*

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Foreword

Reading *Literature Is Back!* brought back two memories. First, the book transported me to my childhood visits to the library. Two blocks from our apartment building in the Bronx, the public library was the high point in my life. As I read about different genres in Fuhler and Walther's text, I found myself back in that small room in the basement of a New York City project, sitting on the tile floor, surrounded by piles of fairy tales, realistic novels, or picture books. I can still hear Mrs. Schwartz, the children's librarian, reading to me and a small group of friends from *Mary Poppins* and *The Secret Garden*. And then, after browsing through every book I pulled from the shelves, I'd choose the stack to check out and carry home to read by myself or have my mom or dad read to me. Through elementary and junior high school, I'd walk to the library twice a week, anticipating leafing through books and, once there, savoring the time I had to decide which books I wanted most. I can still smell the mustiness of that library, feel the chill of the steel shelves, and hear Mrs. Schwartz's warm, raspy voice reading to us.

Now, leap forward to my first year of teaching in Gainsboro, Virginia, a small, rural town surrounded by rolling hills and mountains. For my class of 30 sixth graders, I had one set of grade-level basal readers, even though only five could read the basal. *Literature Is Back!* could have spared me the struggles that year as I scoured area libraries for materials! The good news is that this book, filled with riches about different literary genres and teaching ideas for each genre, can save teachers' lives today and give children memories about reading and listening to stories similar to mine.

Recently I was at a state reading conference at which teacher after teacher expressed frustration over being required to use a grade-level basal with the entire class. When I suggested that teachers use the basal with grade-level readers but find texts on similar genres at instructional reading levels that met the needs of other students, again and again, I heard, "But I don't have the time." Every classroom teacher can relate to that comment, and that's why I believe that every classroom teacher and school librarian will find this book invaluable. That's why I recommend that every teacher and librarian own a copy of *Literature Is Back!*

At this point, I'm sure that you're wondering why I staunchly believe this is a must-have professional resource. First, *Literature Is Back!* does so much more than offer annotated lists of books. Fuhler and Walther, both teachers, fully understand what teachers need and want, and they've packed their book with teaching ideas for reading and writing that address the needs of primary and intermediate teachers. As I read the first chapter, the authors hooked me with their passion for literature and reading. This chapter grounds readers in the world of children's books by reviewing literary elements

and providing a structure for student book talks, then moves to discussing the power of reading aloud to primary and intermediate grade students.

The chapters that discuss literary genres contain two parts. The first part is a refresher course on the structure of picture books, traditional literature, fantasy and science fiction, realistic fiction, historical fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Here, Fuhler and Walther share an annotated list of their favorite titles and reproducibles with guidelines that will enable you to evaluate books in a specific genre and choose the finest for your students. In the second part of each chapter, you'll explore a sampling of books neatly organized in a chart—books for teaching the genre, along with thumbnail summaries of teaching ideas. Next, both authors steep you in outstanding and easy-to-implement mini-lessons for reading and writing in the genre in primary and intermediate grades.

The closing chapter discusses, in depth, the role of children's literature in the classroom. Some of the beneficial ideas you'll find here are a reading conference form to use with students; an excellent explanation of "gradual release of responsibility"; a strategy that helps learners integrate reading, writing, thinking, and discussing; a list of professional books for further study; and a chart of the characteristics of proficient readers and writers.

What makes *Literature Is Back!* such a treasure is that you, like me, will return to chapters and sections of the book to ground yourself in a specific genre. Then, with Fuhler and Walther as your guides, you can find the best books to reach every reader and writer in your classroom where they are and gently move them forward with joyful and successful reading and writing experiences.

—Laura Robb

Introduction

We simply cannot resist a good book. Whether it is a picture book, a novel, or nonfiction, we savor every delectable title. In thinking back over our years of teaching to life in our classrooms today, neither of us can remember being able to teach without a book nearby. In her first-grade classroom and in her work with teachers across the country, Maria is continually searching for the best titles to teach reading and writing strategies. Her classroom brims with a multitude of books. In Carol's middle-school classroom, regardless of students' abilities, pertinent picture books, novels, and nonfiction titles were at the tips of her fingers. That didn't stop at the university level, where she still carries a stack of irresistible titles to undergraduate and graduate classes.

What do we do with all of these books? Both of us use wonderful children's literature to read aloud, regardless of the ages of our listeners. We reach for exemplary titles to teach, model, and practice research-based reading strategies across the grades and age levels. When it comes to writing instruction, we count on many an author to help us unlock the craft and illuminate techniques. Who better to model character development, the impact of style, or the use of figurative language? Beyond the classroom, you will still find us getting lost in the enticing world of books, which never grows old.

This kind of book-generated excitement is what we want to share with you. The chapters in this book will help you to use the rich body of children's literature to its fullest potential. Join us as we look at how children's literature is essential for literacy instruction, highlighting the different genres and underscoring what makes them unique. Each genre chapter includes background information and practical ideas for teaching key literacy skills and strategies. Found in the sections titled *The Reading Connection* and *The Writing Connection*, primary or intermediate lesson ideas can be used as is or adapted to dovetail with your district standards. If you are teaching the genre of fantasy and are searching for a reading lesson idea, simply turn to *The Reading Connection* in Chapter 4. If poetry is an area of focus, Chapter 8 is the place to begin your search. These suggestions are not intended to be add-ons to a bursting curriculum. Instead, they are meant to energize lessons you currently teach to truly invite learning.

Together we will sample some of the best titles available. Some are old favorites and some are exciting new ones that you will surely want to consider. When you're ready, refer to the numerous collections of irresistible titles to match all readers with just the right books so that they read, and then read even more.

Whether you are savoring or searching, we invite you to join us on our journey through the genres of children's literature. We hope that our enthusiasm will inspire you, that our suggestions will help guide you, and that you, too, will pass the joys of reading and writing on to your students, your colleagues, and your administrators. Share the message: *Literature Is Back!*

Why Children's Literature Is Essential

FOR LITERACY INSTRUCTION



Children's literature—it can brighten a day, add breathing space to a hectic schedule, broaden one's knowledge about a topic of interest, and offer solace in times of need. No matter what our age, it pleases us, humors us, teaches us, and validates us as human beings. Life inside and outside the classroom takes on an added richness through reading great books, one title after another. Whether fiction, nonfiction, poetry, or prose, books

“Literature is a kind of golden string that can place us in contact with the best minds in every period of history, the wisest, the tenderest, the bravest of all who have ever lived. And it can do this for children, if only we can help them to grasp hold of it. We recognize that children’s literature is a part of the mainstream of all literature, that one literature experience builds on the last one, provided children can see the connections and are helped to wind them into a ball.”

(Charlotte Huck, 1982, p. 315)

(presented through a variety of artistic media and meticulously chosen words) are an integral part of the literacy curriculum. Books are meant to be savored, whether as read-alouds or during independent reading. They are perfect vehicles for teaching primary, elementary, and even middle-school students the essential skills and strategies that successful readers and writers employ. Filled with potential, children’s literature can invigorate your teaching and inspire your learners, and ought to be common classroom fare for every child. It is tragic that it is not. Those children who relish books and have ready access to them are fortunate indeed.

As teachers, it is our responsibility and our joy to share the wonderful world of children’s literature with all of our students. We wish you well as you infuse your days with fine books.

A Quick Look Back at Children’s Literature

Over time, the field of books for children has expanded from initial offerings of nursery rhymes, folk and fairy tales, and moralistic stories to include a myriad of fiction and nonfiction selections. With over 389,000 children’s titles currently in print, it is essential for teachers to be able to select the best and most appropriate for their use (Bogart, 2007). Because there continue to be more books published each year, it becomes a dizzying prospect to determine which of those should become an integral part of classroom life. In order for you to make judicious decisions, it will help to review what children’s literature is and then to learn what distinguishes a good book from those that are not as noteworthy.

Children’s Literature Defined

Children’s literature includes a collection of books—fiction, nonfiction, and poetry—written particularly for readers from infancy to age 14 (Mikkelsen, 2000; Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2002). This collection contains a variety of genres, formats, and styles, including picture books, traditional literature, fantasy, science fiction, poetry,

The best children's books carefully define characters, represent fine examples of diverse writing styles, include exemplary interpretations of the theme, and present information in a clearly organized manner.

(Galda & Cullinan, 2006)

contemporary realistic fiction, historical fiction, and informational books. As a classroom teacher, you have the exciting opportunity to introduce readers to a sampling from each of these categories.

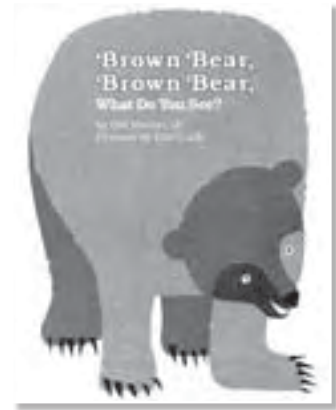
The following pages will look more closely at children's literature, examining the characteristics of a good book and discussing how those characteristics tie in to what readers like. We will highlight the value of children's literature and underscore why it should be at the heart of your literacy program. In addition, we

will reinforce and endorse the absolute necessity of setting aside ample time every single day to read aloud to your students. There is much to celebrate in the world of children's books and the promise they hold for your literacy curriculum. We begin that celebration with this chapter.

What Makes a Good Book?

If you ask a young child to tell you what a good book is, she probably cannot tell you, but she will eagerly show you. Off in a flash and back as quickly, she might hand you *Goodnight Moon* (Brown, 1947) or *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Martin Jr., 1992). If you look at her closely, you will see a hopeful look in her eyes: Perhaps you'll read to her? Pose the same question to a kindergartner or first grader, and he may tell you it is the book his teacher is currently reading. It might also be *The Waterfall's Gift* (Ryder, 2001) or *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (Martin Jr. & Archambault, 1989). Grabbing the first book, he will proudly show you where a tiny insect is cleverly hidden on each page. If you stand still long enough, he and a few classmates may even recite the finger-snapping refrain from *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*. This enjoyment of literature is infectious, isn't it? Certainly we can say that a good book is well loved by its readers. But there is more to it than that.

An intermediate-grade reader might tell you a good book is a classic. From her desk, one seasoned reader pulls out *The Secret Garden* (Burnett, 1962). She remembers having



Young children enjoy hearing books read again and again.

it read to her when she was younger. Her classmate recommends *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 1987). Without a doubt, survival stories are the best. Another friend chimes in that she likes Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* because she loves to be just a little bit frightened. A classmate scoffs at the quality of those books. His top-ranking choice is Wilson Rawls' (1996) *Where the Red Fern Grows*. He admits that it's a little sad, though. Now the definition of a good book includes classics, adventure, and mass-market popular series books. What would we, as teachers, usually say?

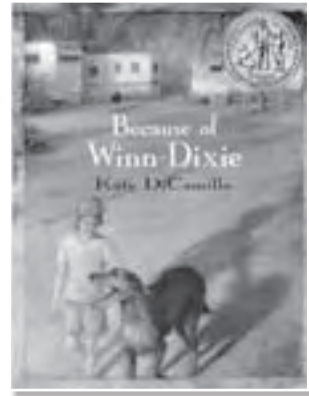
When asked about good books, we look for fine writing along with believable characters to whom our students can relate. We often pick a powerful or compelling story that gives readers something to talk about when the book is finished (Leu & Kinzer, 2003). Sometimes we want a title that is lighter but still written by a knowledgeable and skilled author. We suggest *Dear Mrs. LaRue: Letters From Obedience School* (Teague, 2002) or the rhythmic *Seven Spunky Monkeys* (Koller, 2005) for younger children. For books that give intermediate-grade readers something to discuss, we think *Because of Winn-Dixie* (DiCamillo, 2000) or Louise Erdrich's (1999) *The Birchbark House* are titles that exemplify that criterion. Is everyone right?

In a sense, they are. What could be regarded as the qualities of a good book will vary between critical and not so critical readers. Some authorities stick by the quality of writing as displayed in Katherine Paterson's (1978) *The Great Gilly Hopkins* or Jerry Spinelli's (1990) *Maniac Magee*. Students often endorse general appeal and reach for books in popular series like Junie B. Jones, The Magic Tree House, or Captain Underpants. Let's consider the qualities that experts look for in an outstanding book and balance those with a reader's possible choices. The experts look to literary elements, the fundamentals of distinctive writing. As we review the elements, we will highlight exemplary, illustrative titles and offer teaching ideas galore.

The Literary Elements

Plot

Rebecca Lukens (2007) explains that plot is tied to the element of possibility that exists in a story. It involves a sequence of actions and reactions that are carefully chosen to tell the tale best. A well-conceived, original plot holds everything together as the story moves through its conflicts, suspense, excitement, and the tension in action that reaches



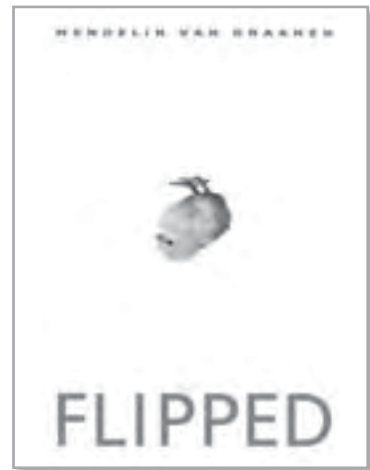
This compelling story gives readers much to discuss.

a climax, and then settles down with an eventual resolution. Even in quieter stories, there must be some tension. The test of a well-written, believable plot is that you get caught in the just-one-more-chapter mode. The book is simply too irresistible to put down.

In addition, when setting the pace of the story, writers decide upon the *narrative order*, the order in which events of the plot will unfold. The most common choice is a *chronological* or *linear order*, where one event naturally follows another. A second option writers use is an *episodic* plot. In this case, each chapter is a different story or episode in a character's life. The chapters may also be linked by a common theme. Appealing examples of stories with episodic plots are Arnold Lobel's Frog and Toad series or *Wind in the Willows* (Grahame, 1961). For young readers just beginning to transition to chapter books, these are especially comfortable books to read.

When writing for older readers, authors may interrupt the chronological sequence of events by using *flashbacks*. This is a way to inform the reader of events that occurred before the first chapter of the book. Flashbacks enable the writer to fill in additional background to shed light on what is currently happening. For instance, in Cynthia Rylant's (1992) *Missing May*, 12-year-old Summer's memories of her Aunt May interrupt the ordered events, providing additional information about this special aunt. Readers in the primary grades have trouble following such jumping back and forth in time and events, which is why flashbacks are more commonly found in books for older readers.

One final choice that writers may employ is *alternating plots*. In this case, there is more than one main character. Each character tells his or her part of the story in alternating chapters. For instance, in Chapter 1 of *Flipped* (Van Draanen, 2001), Bryce explains the early days of his relationship with Juli Baker by stating, "All I've ever wanted is for Juli Baker to leave me alone. For her to back off—you know, just give me some space" (p. 1). Chapter 2 begins with an ecstatic Juli, "The first day I met Bryce Loski, I flipped. Honestly, one look at him and I became a lunatic. It's his eyes. Something in his eyes. They're blue, and framed in the blackness of his lashes, they're dazzling. Absolutely breathtaking" (p. 11). You can already see trouble coming from the opening lines! Switching back and forth between characters, each voice rings true as they tell their own interwoven tales in a memorable book appropriate for mature upper-grade readers. See the chart that follows for ideas to help you model, discuss, and teach different plot structures.



Alternating plots are used in this memorable book.

Introducing Plot in the Primary Grades

Type of Plot/ Suggested Books	Teaching Ideas
<p>Chronological Plot Structure</p> <p><i>Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day</i> (Viorst, 1972)</p> <p><i>Rattletrap Car</i> (Root, 2001)</p>	<p>Work together to create a "Map of the Characters' Day" (see figure below). After reading, draw or write about the main events in sequence. Once you've modeled this activity, provide children with opportunities to do it on their own.</p>
<p>Episodic Plot Structure</p> <p>Henry and Mudge, Mr. Putter and Tabby, and Poppleton series by Cynthia Rylant</p> <p>George and Martha series by James Marshall</p>	<p>Play Episode Charades. Read aloud one of these popular series books. Divide students into small groups, one for each chapter/episode in the book. Each group prepares a quick dramatization of their episode and presents it to the class. The class then tries to guess which episode they are dramatizing.</p>
<p>Alternating Plot Structure</p> <p><i>Once Upon a Cool Motorcycle Dude</i> (O'Malley, 2005)</p>	<p>To demonstrate the different voices and plots in this book, find an enthusiastic male and female reader to read it aloud to your students.</p>



A map of Alexander's day

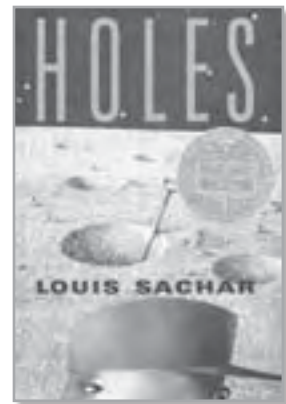
Teaching About Plot in the Intermediate Grades

Type of Plot/ Suggested Books	Teaching Ideas
<p>Chronological Plot Structure</p> <p><i>Hill Hawk Hattie</i> (Clark, 2003)</p> <p><i>Hattie on Her Way</i> (Clark, 2005)</p>	<p>Chronological order reveals more than the order of events. It is an effective way to show how a main character grows or matures from the beginning to the end of a story. Have students use a character map to plot the changes in Hattie as the story evolves. Discuss the findings with an eye to the role that chronology plays in quality character development.</p>
<p>Episodic Plot Structure</p> <p><i>Sideways Stories From Wayside School</i> (Sachar, 1978)</p>	<p>After reading about each of the unique teachers and children, have students work in pairs to create a “new kid” for Wayside School. At the same time, teachers may choose to write about an unusual teacher. Both teachers and students will be writing a short episode for a sequel. Polish and place episodes in a class book.</p>
<p>Alternating Plot Structure</p> <p><i>The Wanderer</i> (Creech, 2000)</p>	<p>Students pick a character to follow throughout the book, then write journal entries as if they were that character. Ask students to reflect periodically on the events that have occurred as if they were writing at the end of the day.</p>

Conflict

There are as many as four different kinds of conflict involved in a well-developed story. Sometimes two or more of these conflicts occur, especially in novels for intermediate- to upper-grade readers.

When the conflict is internal, a battle within the main character, it is an example of *character-against-self*. In the picture book *Ira Sleeps Over* (Waber, 1972), young Ira has an internal conflict when he can't decide whether to bring his beloved teddy bear to his first sleepover. A second type of conflict, *character-against-nature*, is common in survival tales. It is readily identified in *Brian's Winter* (Paulsen, 1996), in which Brian continues his struggles to survive in the Canadian wilderness after a plane crash. He faces the harsh



Holes contains character-against-character conflict.

Canadian winter with its intense cold, the need to winterize his home and his clothing, and the necessity of finding food. The third type of conflict is *character-against-character*. In this case, the main character may be at odds with an adult, a sibling, or a peer. For example, in the Harry Potter series, Harry is constantly on guard against his nemesis, evil Lord Voldemort. The final type of conflict is *character-against-society*. In the beautifully illustrated picture book, *The Trouble With Henry: A Tale of Walden Pond* (O’Neal & Westengard, 2005), Henry David Thoreau faces the ridicule of the townspeople who favor material wealth and the expansion of factories over preserving nature. They find Thoreau’s concerns for the environment and love of solitude in his cabin on Walden Pond to be laughable.



The Great Kapok Tree has a character-against-nature conflict.

Introducing Conflict (Problems) in the Primary Grades		
Type of Conflict	Suggested Books	Teaching Ideas
Character-Against-Self	<i>Ira Sleeps Over</i> (Waber, 1972)	<p>As you read these books aloud to your students, make a chart titled "Stories Have Different Kinds of Conflicts/Problems."</p> <p>Across the top of the chart list the four different types of conflicts/problems. After reading each book, discuss which type(s) of conflict occurred in the story. List the title of the book under the appropriate heading. Refer to this chart during writing workshop to remind students of the different types of conflicts they may choose to include in their own stories.</p>
Character-Against-Nature	<i>The Great Kapok Tree</i> (Cherry, 1990)	
Character-Against-Character	<i>Beany and the Meany</i> (Wojciechowski, 2005)	
Character-Against-Society	<i>Old Henry</i> (Blos, 1990)	