

The Mystery in the Old Schoolhouse: Why Children's Book Series Have Been Wrongly Excluded from the Classroom

Author: Jennifer Lyn Sczerbinski

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**Boston College
Department of English**

**The Mystery in the Old Schoolhouse:
Why Children's Series Have Been Wrongly Excluded from the
Classroom**

By

Jennifer Sczerbinski

Honors Thesis

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**Advisers: Prof. Susan Michalczyk
&
Prof. Aimee Seiler**

INTRODUCTION	2
CHAPTER 1: THE FIRST SERIES, THE FIRST CRITICISMS	5
CHAPTER 2: OPPONENTS OF CHILDREN’S SERIES	15
THE SCHOLARS	18
THE LIBRARIANS	24
THE PARENTS	32
THE TEACHERS	34
CHAPTER 3: BENEFITS OF THE SERIES AND THEIR EDUCATIONAL USES	38
CHAPTER 4: CASE STUDY OF <i>NANCY DREW</i>—THE STRATEMEYER EMPIRE AND SERIES EMBODIED	57
NANCY AND HER CRITICS: HOW SHE FIGHTS BACK	60
NANCY GOES TO SCHOOL	66
CHAPTER 5: CASE STUDY OF <i>HARRY POTTER</i>—THE NEWEST EMPIRE	70
LITERARY STRONG POINTS OF HARRY POTTER	77
EDUCATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION OF HARRY POTTER	86
CONCLUSION	92
WORKS CITED	95

Introduction

Unpopular popularity. It seems an impossible paradox, but it exists nonetheless. Somehow, popularity demands more—in the form of sequels, prequels, and seconds—while at the same time generating suspicion and dislike. It is irrelevant which medium you consider because the point is true in all. Within recent memory, popularity of movies such as the *Matrix*, *Men in Black* and even *Toy Story* virtually required sequels; these follow-ups were simultaneously dismissed as inferior and regarded as suspect by all who find popularity, and thus popular culture, dubious. The same phenomenon occurs with television spin-offs, video games and perhaps most frequently with children's books. Why is serialization so circumspect? Where has the disapproval come from and is it even warranted? It almost seems that the 'popular' position is one that is apprehensive of popularity and goes even as far as attempting to suppress it in schools, libraries and on the Internet. It may well be impossible to completely discern where these ideas come from and how they have taken hold in the United States of America, where freedom of speech is the most fundamental right. However, in the realm of children's book series at least, disproving the disapproval and establishing the books' inherent educational value is achievable.

To do this, careful consideration of the history of children's series, their critics and their few champions, must be made. What should first be clarified is the indelible importance of series in American culture. One recent figure estimates that over 50% of material that is currently being published for children is in the form of series books (Hammill 24). Without facts and figures, however, it is obvious how important a cultural phenomenon these books are. Who can't remember reading *Nancy Drew* mysteries,

Hardy Boys adventures, the mishaps of the *Bobbsey Twins*, *Cherry Ames*, *Tom Swift*, or in recent years the *Babysitter's Club*, *Sweet Valley High*, or any other combination of these well-known and loved tales? Accessibly priced and repetitively entertaining, these books form at least part of many adults' childhood memories. These adults include doctors, teachers, professors, and factory workers, none of whom seem irrevocably harmed for all of their reading of 'popular rubbish.' This is a point that cannot be ignored and must be taken into account when making a final ruling on the appropriateness and value of the books. Despite all of the hostility they receive, series books are continuously favorites among children and are often the only children's books on waiting lists in public libraries. The problem arises when children's advocates, family groups, religious organizations and others attempt to censor these books because of a perceived but unrealistic danger that they believe to be inherent in every popular serialized book.

The truth of the matter is that series books are more valuable to children than we have perhaps yet realized. Judy Blume, in a *New York Times* piece about *Harry Potter*, points out that the reading of L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* series, "subversive tales" full of "wizards and witches," did not harm her, but instead *taught* her that she loved to read (A27). Children are often inundated with reading materials in the form of textbooks, basal readers, even cereal boxes, but none of these literary forms truly teach children the pleasure of reading; reading for fun, reading for escape, reading for adventure. In more fundamental ways, series are important with respect to the needs of emergent and newly independent readers. They provide a sense of comfort and predictability necessary for readers to build confidence. Series also promote practice in reading because they lead young readers to picking up another book that promises more of what they enjoyed in the

first, while at the same time encouraging reading above television and video games. The educational values of series are numerous and deserve more credit than they currently receive in schools, libraries, and mainstream society. Instead of condemning the books and trying to remove them from children's hands for whatever reason, we should be seeing the inherent value, no matter what the subject matter or publisher's profit motives, and putting these series to use in the classroom where convincing children to read will no longer be the teacher's biggest obstacle.

The following research unpacks series historically, critically, and educationally. It concludes by placing two popular series, from different eras and with varied readership, under the critical microscope to prove their value as educational tools in the classroom.

Chapter 1: The First Series, The First Criticisms

The field of children's book series may seem as clear cut as the condemnation that the books face. However, just as it has been difficult to find a place for series in the classroom, it has been equally challenging to define and discuss the books. Critics and scholars alike have trouble pinning down the elusive and ever changing series books for many reasons. The term series can be used to describe many different groupings of books, including those with just one or two sequels, such as Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*, to those with hundreds of volumes, such as *The Babysitter's Club*. Another ambiguity in the definition is which qualities define a series. Is it a continuation of characters? A chronological sequence of events? What if the series is centered on a town, or historical time period, or just a certain style, such as today's *American Girls* series? The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of series allows for some of these differences:

A set of literary compositions having certain features in common, published successively or intended to be read in sequence; a succession of volumes or fascicules (of a periodical, the publications of a society, etc.) forming a set by itself (distinguished as *first*, *second*, etc. *series*). Also, in recent use, a succession of books issued by one publisher in a common form and having some similarity of subject or purpose; usually with a general title, as 'the Clarendon Press Series,' 'the Men of Letters Series.'

However, the many varieties of series are barely covered by this somewhat inadequate definition. Oftentimes, a series is constituted by a collection of characters, one or another of which is the protagonist in each volume. An old convention was to consider books by one author a "series," especially if one of the stories had a sequel. In this case, publishers would create the series by selling the books in a set that included "brief series plus single

volumes, all by one author” (Kensinger 18). Publishers were also the architects of series such as the “Six to Sixteen series” and “The Young in Heart series,” which were books grouped together not because they had the same characters, or even the same author, but because they appealed to the same group (18). In many of these cases, books were designated “series” for marketing and profit-making purposes. In more recent times, with the *Goosebumps* series, the *Harry Potter* series, and others, we have seen series become more commercialized through marketing that includes spin-off television shows, movies, and even figurines.

In actuality, juvenile series are a relatively new concept in the field of writing. The first children’s series did not appear until the late 1830’s, and it was not until a few decades later that they became mainstream with publishers and writers. It has been said by librarian and critic Alice M. Jordan, that Jacob Abbott was the “father of story series” (qtd. in Kensinger 36) with his *Rollo* books. Though others, including Samuel Goodrich who was know as Peter Parley, were beginning to write for children in periodicals and dime novels (36), Abbott was the first to refer to the books as a group. This idea did not come with the first *Rollo* book; rather, the books were linked only after four volumes had been written. The first two *Rollo* books, *The Little Scholar Learning to Talk: A Picture Book for Rollo* and *Rollo Learning to Read*, were published in 1835, and the third and forth, which mentioned the previous two, were published in 1837. It was not until 1839 that the books were mentioned as a group in another book by Abbott, who was referred to as “the author of ‘the Rollo books’” (Johnson 148). This marked the very first series and, for various reasons, was to be the basis of many children’s series for well over a century.

Abbott, it turns out, was masterful at linking his stories once the idea became solidified. He began listing the titles of all books in the series inside each new book. Modern readers will recognize this as a tactic still used in advertising today's series. Abbott also put into practice many other strategies that continue to be used. One idea he initiated was that of basing new series around minor characters in the old one. The first of these were the *Jonas* series, whose first volume was named *Jonas's Stories: Related to Rollo and Lucy*. Later, Abbot also created the first series intended for girl readers, based on Rollo's cousin Lucy, who had often appeared in the original series. The very concept of creating a girl's series distinct, but based on a popular boy's series was another that continued for decades with works such as the *Motor Boys*, then the *Motor Girls*, and the *Moving Picture Boys*, followed by the *Moving Picture Girls*. Finally, Abbott also invented the use of aged characters in new series. An example of this can be seen in the 1853 resurrection of the *Rollo* books, which he had stopped writing in 1843 after publishing fourteen volumes, that centered on an older Rollo traveling through Europe with his uncle (Johnson 147-9). Repeatedly, other authors have followed this example with much success, most notably in the *Tom Swift* series, which has been "reborn" in four sets of series spanning nearly eighty years (Dizer, *Tom Swift* 1), and even Nancy Drew, who can be found in modern settings such as co-ed colleges in Simon & Schuster's *Nancy Drew Files*, and surfing the Internet in her newest series, *Nancy Drew: girl detective*, which is new on bookshelves this year.

Abbott's early series practices were not the only ones that continued to modern day. Other writers, such as Joanna Mathews, writing in 1863, helped promote their books by including "teasers," sentences or paragraphs describing the next story in the series

meant to entice readers to buy the following volume (Johnson 150). Great examples of this can be found throughout history in the *Nancy Drew*, *Sweet Valley High*, and *Babysitter's Club* series. Once the idea of writing books in series caught on, another technique used by publishers was to predetermine the length and often the titles of series books and publish them in the first and all subsequent volumes (150). This provided necessary advertisement, especially to the children who kept the books popular. The technique is so effective that in the new 2004 *Nancy Drew* series the first four volumes arrive in bookstores at the same time, in order to be displayed together. In addition to this publicity, publishers would frequently issue or re-issue series with a uniform cover, so that people buying them could easily find stories they were guaranteed to like because they had already enjoyed another with the same characters and premise (150). A look at today's children's section of almost any bookstore will reveal that this practice is one that is still widely used.

And though it did take a little while for series to 'catch-on,' once they did, there has been virtually no stopping the books. At first, it was only Abbott in the series field, and he sold 1,250,000 copies of *Rollo*, *Lucy* and *Jonas* books in twenty-five years when the entire United States population was only 20,000,000, a significant accomplishment (150). Deidre Johnson, a scholar who has studied the beginning of series in the US, has estimated that "the only two series that began in the 1840's were both by Abbott, as were three of the twelve series that started in the 1850's. The situation changed in the next decade when approximately fifty new series emerged, and a similar number originated in the 1870's" (150). Though some studies have shown a decline in juvenile series publications in the 1930's, due to the Great Depression and later World War II

(Kensinger 176), especially in aviation series which had at one point dominated the domain (Vaughan 144), there seems to be a resurgence in new series, with many of the old ones never having gone out of style or out of print.

Many of these ageless and still well-loved series began as far back as the 1860's and 70's, almost to the beginning of series themselves, though their designation as 'series' may be questionable. Noteworthy American authors set the foundation for series as we know them today, which in reality is not much different than when these writers penned their versions of childhood adventure and drama. One of the first well-known series writers was Horatio Alger (1832-1899), who wrote, in a heavily didactic manner, many classic "rags-to-riches" stories (Nye 63-65). In fact, the moral of his stories could sometimes be seen in the titles of the books and series, such as *Work and Win*, *Risen from the Ranks* (Nye 63) and the '*Luck and Pluck*' series (Kensinger 21). Others include Oliver Optic, pseudonym for William Taylor Adams (1822-1897), whose prototypical series "did not always carry characters from one volume to the next" (19). There were also authors such as Martha Finley (1828-1909), writer of the popular but educationally controversial *Elsie Dinsmore* books, and Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888), who is considered a series writer for her sequels to the widely-popular *Little Women* (46-49). Children of the late nineteenth century would have also been familiar with the *Katie Did* series by Sarah Chauncey Woolsey (1835-1905), written under the pseudonym Susan Coolidge, and the *Dotty Dimple* and *Prudy* series by Rebecca Sophia Clarke (1833-1906), written under the pseudonym Sophie May (48-49). And Edward Stratemeyer (1862-1930), perhaps the most prolific series creator, was also a contemporary of these authors (56). Stratemeyer, who began his career as a dime novelist, completed some of Alger's

unfinished tales, wrote some of his own series, including many of the *Nick Carter Detective Stories*, and later started the Stratemeyer Syndicate, which was responsible for such favorites as *Tom Swift*, *Nancy Drew*, *Hardy Boys*, and the *Bobbsey Twins* (Dizer, *Tom Swift* 200). With the advent of the Syndicate, series not only grew in popularity, but also in accessibility, with the books coming out cheaply and often (5).

It is interesting, especially in light of the criticism that many children's series received at the hands of librarians, to consider how these books became, and remained, so popular. The path these books took to popularity began with the publishers who caused series books to be affordable, widely printed, and broadly distributed (Dizer, "Authors" 75). In addition to the marketing strategy used in the books themselves, another key to their success was the adventurous, and even sensational, nature of the plots, which appealed to children and kept them seeking more. The only thing standing in the way of widespread recognition and popularity of the various children's series after the introduction of all of these strategies was access to the books, especially for rural children. The solution to this problem was found in the Sunday School libraries that were popular in England and eventually made their way to the United States (Kensinger 12), and it was here that series got their first public forum (10). Though there were sometimes public libraries in existence in the early nineteenth century, they were often very small and community supported, and it was not until 1876 that there were enough of them for the creation of the America Library Association. Public schools sometimes had libraries based on the New York system that was created in 1838 where the state would allocate money for a library if the school itself could match the funds, but by no means were they widespread (12).

However, both of these types of libraries were often too small to include many books, especially the numerous volumes of children's series. Sunday School libraries, then, provided the outlet for children's series to reach the greater population. Because these book lending groups for children were organized through churches, the need for moral and religious themes in the books was obvious to publishers and writers. Thus, there were often strong religious overtones in series books and many dealt with repenting children, "the doleful consequences of wrongdoing, or with children who were already practically perfect and thus served as pious exemplars" (Johnson 151). In fact, many of these religious series books were even written by preachers or their wives under friendly pseudonyms, such as "Aunt Hattie" (151). At the same time, however, other, more secular series also appeared in Sunday School libraries and as prizes given by these institutions. Though not totally devoid of religious morals, books such as Abbott's *Rollo* series were equally concerned with interest and excitement as with ethical instruction for its readers (Kensinger 13). A later development in the accessibility of children's books was the creation of children's sections in libraries, followed by the eventual creation of masters programs for training specialized children's librarians. This, however, did not happen until the early 1900's at the Carnegie Library School and then later at other institutions (Sutherland 6). Prior to this point, series books were relatively neutral forms of children's reading, free from the stigma they now carry. It was with this creation of professional children's librarians that much of the criticism of series books became codified.

With the introduction of children's librarians, as well as the professionalization of teaching, a new set of 'experts' were born. These experts soon began working against

series and other popular literature in favor of ‘good’ or ‘quality’ literature. The reasons for this attack were varied. M. Paul Holsinger, in a study of World War II series, enumerates problems experts found in these series especially, but many other series as well:

Though a few received plaudits, the great majority, nearly all parts of multivolume series designed specifically for either boys or girls, got little more than scorn and derision from critics in such professional journals as the American Library Association’s *Booklist*, *The Horn Book Reader*, or even *Publisher’s Weekly*. The volumes’ clichéd storytelling, their hackneyed writing, their unrealistic or repetitive plots, the frequent mind-numbing violence, the constant bloodletting—especially in books written primarily for male readers—and even the comic-book quality of some of the books were cited as reasons for young readers, and their parents, to avoid them. (69)

Although Holsinger’s comments refer to series that came well after the beginning of the professional attack on these books, many of his comments regarding the quality of the writing and plotlines encompass the first criticisms of all series books. Other criticisms aimed at series during this time, and even today, include reduced vocabulary, cookie-cutter designs, and invincible children heroes. To a certain extent, some of these critiques are true; however, it is debatable if all series are guilty of the accusations, and if children can actually suffer educationally from them. Those who did believe that series would irrevocably damage children took up the attack against them with such vehemence in the late nineteenth century that it still holds sway with many today. Librarians and educators wrote books and articles about the detriment of series books, story papers, and dime novels, especially for tender children’s minds. They removed the books from public and school libraries, which by this point were more plentiful than they had been in the mid 1850’s, and also performed ‘scientific’ studies proving the injurious effects of reading series books. One of the writers who was most harshly criticized was

Stratemeyer for his Syndicate that produced hundreds of series books, and perhaps more insidiously, hundreds of *popular* series books. For critics, Stratemeyer embodied all that was evil in the realm of popular series fiction, by being the inventor of cheaply produced, rapidly written adventure and mystery stories that many children could not put down.

This very phenomenon is one that proponents of series fiction have latched onto as the greatest value of these books. Children love them. Even adults love them, remembering them fondly as the books they took to bed with them and hid under the covers reading with a flashlight after bedtime. And many of these adults who grew up reading series books, often whether or not their parents, librarians and teachers wanted them to, became intelligent and well-read, despite their interlude with ‘inferior literature.’ If series are so damaging, then how are these results even possible? Many theories exist, but it is clear, particularly in today’s society of television, video games, and computers, that any type of reading is worthwhile for children. The act of reading, in whatever form, is important because to become a good reader, one needs practice with words, sentence structures, setting, plot and the concept of sitting still and concentrating on a book. The fact is that series books get children reading, and keep them reading, better than other many other books, even those which teach them better language and more complex structures, because the books “hook” children by promising more of what they already loved in one book. Whatever the debates of quality and commercialism, there can be no denying that a child is at least getting substantial practice reading when they sit down with the over 2,000 pages of the *Harry Potter* fantasies.

The questions of the debate, which comes down to popular fiction versus canonized literature, are ones that have been at odds for years. It remains a fact, though,

that children still love these series, and will manage to read them no matter what teachers and parents say about them. Some studies even indicate that series are empowering for children because, knowing that the books are frowned upon, the act of reading them is rebellious (Romalov, “Unearthing” 90). Because of this factor, series may be even more appealing to children than anyone has even realized. If children are going to continue being drawn to these stories, it is left to adults and educators to figure out how to incorporate these well-loved tales in a beneficial way for students. Whether it be through the creation of higher quality series books still appealing to youth, a conscious disapproval of them designed to keep children reading for the sake of rebellion, or the integration of series books into education to students’ advantage, series books can no longer be criticized and ignored, but rather must be employed in a constructive way to everyone’s benefit.

Chapter 2: Opponents of Children's Series

Ironically, it can be said that the criticism against series books started long before the genre was created. This is the case because of the connection of series books to an earlier style, story papers and dime novels, forms originally written for adults that later gained a youthful audience as well. Story papers came first and were large in size and directed at the family, containing romances for women and adventures and westerns for men. Oftentimes, the stories in these newspaper-sized publications were printed as serials, and later reprinted in dime novel format (LeBlanc 19). Dime novels consisted of similar stories, of adventure, war, and history, and were created to fulfill the demand for affordable and entertaining reading material once compulsory school laws forced more of the population into school, thus increasing the number of literate Americans (14). Eventually, pulp magazines, which had even taken over some of the popular dime novel characters, took many of the adult readers as well. Series books by Alger, Stratemeyer and others, decimated the young audience and dime novels declined. During their heyday, however, they attracted much criticism for sensationalism and for attracting children to a sinful and violent lifestyle by romanticizing crime. One of the biggest critics of these books, and perhaps the reason why they became so hated was Anthony Comstock, author of *Traps for the Young*, and head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice in the 1870's. He was the instigator of the Comstock Act, a law Congress passed at his persistence, which made it illegal to send obscenity through the mail. His book contained a chapter delineating the evils of "half-dime novels and story papers," which he believed were direct works of Satan that led children into lives of crime (Comstock 20-26). When these novels and papers disappeared, the criticism of

Comstock and others was transferred to their supposed descendents, children's series books.

How was it that disapproval transferred so easily to the series novels? Despite the fact that series books often did not contain the elements of crime, drinking, smoking and violence that the censored story papers and dime novels had, they did contain elements that educators, librarians and parents disapproved of strongly. For instance, series such as the "War Adventure Series" by R. Sidney Brown were full of the violence of war. One scholar's estimate is that in each volume of the series, the main characters, Dave Dawson and Freddy Farmer, "kill, on average, at least 250 enemy soldiers or sailors" (Holsinger 74). Since this series was published during World War II, it also contained many racist comments about the Japanese enemy which are criticized today. The patriotism and quick moving adventure aspects of the stories made them quite popular with young boys, causing the critics to become even more concerned. Other series came under fire for having heroes who were too unrealistic. This complaint was a long-lasting one, starting perhaps with the *Abbott Jonas* series, which was one of his *Rollo* spin-offs, because Jonas was near perfect in every aspect (Johnson 149). Another victim was the Horatio Alger series, whose heroes were always the "rags-to-riches" type that through some personal strength and remarkable luck became millionaires by the end of the story. Later, even series like Caroline Keene's *Nancy Drew* fell under the same criticism. In an article speaking out against series fiction called "For It Was Indeed He," published in the April 1934 edition of *Fortune*, the writer christens this type of character the "adolescent übermenschen," which Deidre Johnson explains as the "ultracapable child, wise beyond his years" (149). This type of hero was upsetting to adults because they felt that children

needed fiction that was realistic so that they would not dream falsely about a life they could never lead (Parker 52, 200). Some series, like Martha Finley's *Elsie Dinsmore* were highly criticized for being overly sentimental and thus giving young girls a false sense of real life. Finally, series were also condemned for containing too much magic or mystery. This disapproval relates to the critics' need for reality, which is often disregarded in these supernatural genres. Originally, the worst offender in the eyes of the critics were books like the *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* series, which contained many mysterious happenings, and even, in some cases, ghosts and other supernatural events. In fact, this criticism is perhaps the most enduring as it is still used against many series. Connected to a fear of paganism and Satanism, some parents, teachers and librarians today use these complaints to discredit series like R.L. Stein's *Goosebumps* and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*.

In reality, regardless of what is most often heard about the marginalization and scorn of children's series books, dime novels and story papers, this criticism can be attributed to the extremist minority. Most people, educators included, take the middle ground in the debate about the appropriateness of series books for children. The standard view of critics, according to Kathleen Chamberlain in "'Wise Censorship': Cultural Authority and the Scorning of Juvenile Series Books, 1890-1940," is that while "[q]uite a few critics acknowledged literary deficiencies in many series...they did not always believe that children should therefore be kept from reading them" (189). The reasons for this were varied, but included the idea that children get something from these books, enjoyment in addition to a sort of stepping stone to better literature. Also, some reviewers felt the books were honest and wholesome, especially in comparison to the

criminal elements found in many other literary choices of the time. Another aspect of this limited approval was the fact that debates are rarely black and white, with this being no exception. Many critics saw the question as more encompassing: which books were good and which were bad for children? Within this question, series books as an entirety were rarely considered. Instead, educators and librarians would often look at individual books or series, but not the genre as a whole. Thus, one series might be a good one and another bad; the condemnation was not always universal. Finally, when critics did agree on the general mediocrity of series writing, they could not easily assemble a united front against any in particular because they could not come to a conclusion on which series were the worst and why (188-190).

The Scholars

How, then, did the hatred gain momentum and dominance? In part, the answer to this question has to do with the professionalization of teachers and librarians which was gaining momentum in the 1870's and 1880's. Though librarians never really gained the status they were looking for as professionals with specialized training and expertise, they did commandeer certain "turfs," including children's literature and reading habits (Parker 75; Chamberlain 192). With their credentials, librarians were in prime position to make their opinions supreme, and though not all librarians attempted this, a few of the more radical ones did. In fact, how a "relatively small group of mostly wage-earning middle-class people [the librarians] effectively censor[ed] a popular and profitable mass-market *genre*" is the question Chamberlain addresses in "Wise Censorship." The conclusions she comes to involve the idea that at this time in American history and culture, parents

and professionals were concerned with what children were reading because of the belief that books should be good for them, particularly educationally (Chamberlain 191). Because librarians often saw themselves in a moral light as guardians of children, those that felt strongly about the danger series books presented felt a higher calling to do something about it, including publishing articles and campaigning against them. In fact, a magazine of 1922, *The Independent*, even called librarians “enlightened women” and commended the fact that they were “conscious of their opportunity of catching the child young and giving him a taste for good books” (qtd. in Chamberlain 193). This is just one example of the press getting involved; others printed librarian’s and teacher’s opinions, in addition to columns agreeing with their viewpoints against children reading series books (194). With all of the forces working for the critics, even if their positions were often extreme and even paranoid about the possible effects of series on children, parents and other librarians were either obliged to yield to the ‘expert’ opinions being expressed so widely, or were actually convinced by the arguments. This led to the pervasive idea—one that is still with us—that even series at their highest quality are at best only mediocre reading choices for our children.

In considering these debates and assertions about series books, it is important to take a look at criticism of children’s literature in general. One of the main goals of children’s series writers of today and yesterday seems to be attracting children from a perspective with which they can identify. Because of this attempt to appeal to children, series writers are often criticized from a literary standpoint stemming from the fact that what children like is often far from what experts believe to be good for them. These critics are concerned with the quality of writing, the degree to which a book stretches the

imagination, its creativity and its overall sense of realism, in addition to feeling an obligation to better the minds of youthful readers. In 1953, Lillian Smith, an early writer of children's literature criticism, encapsulated this idea in her book *The Unreluctant Years: A Critical Approach to Children's Literature*:

“...we should instinctively reject the mediocre, the unrewarding. We should put into their hands only the books worthy of them, the books of honesty, integrity, and vision—the books on which they can grow. For it is in the very nature of children to grow. They cannot stand still. They must have change and activity of both mind and body. Reading which does not stir their imaginations, which does not stretch their minds, not only wastes their time but will not hold children permanently. If they find no satisfaction in one medium they will immediately turn to another.” (4)

This remark also points out another concern of children's literary critics: the loss of children readers. Though Smith was writing in the 1950's, educators, librarians and critics already foresaw the competition reading had for children's attention with the advent of movies and television. As technology has advanced, this concern is even more imperative now in light of electronic games, DVD's, computers and the Internet. Interestingly, it is often exactly the kind of writing found in series books that *does* hold children's attention, frequently much more so than the type of books of which critics would approve.

There are numerous “principals of good writing” that Smith and others use to assess children's books, and careful study of them will shed light on the fundamental complaints against series books. Smith calls these principles “basic,” meaning that there are not separate rules for various genres, instead they apply to all types of books. The underlying tenet of this theory is that the quality of a book lies in not what is written but how it is written (25). Immediately, this causes a problem in reference to series books because many of these are plot-driven and written relatively quickly in order to satisfy

demand and foster popularity. Examples of this can be seen in wartime series that were written in a few weeks to include current battles and later in modern series that often appear monthly. Critics can argue, then, that series many times are the epitome of poor quality in literature simply because their writers and publishers are not concerned with the writing so much as the speed of production and profitability of the books. Another principle that Smith advises critics to judge by is originality in theme. She defines an original idea as “one that has its origin in the truth as one person sees it, which is never quite the same as anyone else’s truth, and so is ‘original;’ a word that is not to be confused with mere novelty” (26). Continuing, Smith points out that it should be unproblematic to identify a writer “who has nothing of his own to say and imitates what he thinks is a successful formula, ignorant of the truth that a secondhand idea is sure to result in a second-rate book; that is, it will lack originality” (26-27). Again, it is not hard to see how series books diverge from this standard of quality literature. As the word “series” suggests, these books are written one after the other, usually based on a storyline initiated in the first volume. Subsequent volumes very often follow the formula of the first and for this reason can be seen as lacking originality according to Smith’s guidelines. In fact, in her book *From Rollo to Tom Sawyer and Other Papers*, Alice M. Jordan, though tacitly approving of Margaret Sidney’s *Pepper* series from the 1880’s, condemns the fact that the books were written in series form due to the lack of originality this produces:

“Probably the most warmly cherished books growing out of *Wide Awake* are Margaret Sidney’s *Pepper* books, beginning with *Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*. Unfortunately the series was continued too long and suffered after the first three volumes from declining vigor.” (143)

It seems that if series books were limited to just a few volumes, they would fare better in the eyes of critics. However, as mentioned earlier, especially with the early series in which all of the volumes titles were printed in the first as an advertising tactic, many series are planned in advance, further following the formulaic process that critics censure.

Though there are many other aspects critics consider in determining the quality of a children's book, two are especially important in understanding how and why series books are so widely disregarded as worthy books for children. These are style, or lack thereof, in writing and reliance on plot to entice and suspend the reader. Smith describes the process of writing as a time "[w]hen a writer forms his sentences so that the order and choice of words is distinguished" (27). At this time, she says, "he attains literary style" (27). Series writers appear not to take the time needed to slowly construct sentences and paragraphs that would generate the style Smith and other critics look for in children's books. Obviously, this point is a debatable one and it cannot be said definitively how long it takes to write 'with style,' or if there is any way to prove a book does or does not have this quality. However, because critics generally see series books as written purely for profit instead of literary merit, it is customarily assumed that style must be lacking. The reason for this assumption stems from series books' reputation as plot-driven works. Smith distinguishes this type of work as objective, and compares it to "subjective" children's books "in which we hear overtones and which has values other than those of the events of the story" (31). She admits that children are most interested in the action, or plot, of a story but argues that they will not be engrossed by stories that do not contain more than that. Whether or not series books are this type of objective, valueless books is far from certain, but it is clear that many critics have put them into this category. One

reason for this is that series books frequently rely on “quick-moving action” and “suspense” (31). Though this description does not necessarily denounce series, it is used to justify the view that the books are centrally plot driven. Critics use this idea to fault series because “there is little pleasure in rereading it since the suspense disappears in a second reading” (31) and because, much to the chagrin of adults, this style of book is read even more quickly than it is written, with little time taken to savor words or images in the way educators would like children to read.

After exploring some of the reasoning behind librarians’, educators’ and critics’ complaints against series, it is important also to look at the major players who were to set the stage for continued disapproval of series books. As late as 1885, the American Library Association’s “Yearly Report on the Reading of the Young” showed that children were not allowed into most libraries (Parker 197), and it was not until the 1890’s that most libraries were even admitting children (90). The debate over permitting children to use libraries revolved mostly around the idea that children were not responsible or mature enough to handle the privileges of using the library. In addition to the fact that children were more likely to dirty, tear or lose library books, librarians were also largely concerned with the selection of books available to children. Though many librarians seemed to agree that getting children in the habit of using a library at an early age was beneficial for future attendance and use of the institutions, the idea that children could possibly read what these professionals saw as harmful and inappropriate adult fiction was enough to keep restrictions on children’s use of the library. As this view began to be challenged by library reformers, especially with the advent of children’s rooms that

contained appropriate literature for young readers, libraries became more involved in the debate over reading material for children (197).

The Librarians

The ALA and the librarians, especially once they became specialized in children's readings, saw themselves as guardians of literature and children, as well as educators and custodians of public funds. Though mostly self-appointed standpoints, the ALA took its role in society very seriously and, in the beginning, effectively worked toward censorship of books it found impure or inappropriate. One researcher describes its early efforts as "[promoting] librarians' authoritative role as arbiters of culture through a discourse about the positive nature and effects of censorship" (Parker 14). Librarians used the ideas of reviewers and critics to support their removal and banning of books from public libraries, as well as their own professional expertise in the matter of appropriate quality literature. Caroline M. Hewins, a well-know Hartford area librarian, frequently published a list of books called "Literature for the Young" in the ALA's official magazine, the *Library Journal*. In this list, she included quotes from critic's book reviews found in reputable publications of the day. This was done in accordance with the ALA's recommendation that librarians include quotes from "respected literary critics" in publications on censorship decisions in order that these decisions had other expert's backings and would look more credible to the public (Parker 81). In addition to publishing reading lists in the *Library Journal*, she also published one of the first handbooks to aid in the selection of children's books called *Books for the Young: A Guide for Parents and Children*. This book was extremely influential in the field of reading lists for children because of its

format, “a section that explains the need for and goals of such a list and that provides some standards for judgment, followed by a categorized bibliography of titles,” which is still a common one used today (Chamberlain 193). The book also contains twelve pages of a “Symposium on Books for Children,” which is the name Hewins gives to a section consisting of only other critic’s views on children’s books, lending credence to her recommendations that follow (Hewins 23-34). And though it was published in 1882, it was still being cited in books about children’s literature over sixty-five years later (Jordan 144). Hewins used her authority to speak out against many series and this could be seen in her publications as well as her actions. She called Horatio Alger, Oliver Optic, Harry Castlemon and Martha Finley, all series writers, the “Immortal Four” and worked to remove them from her library (193). Though she was not against series universally, as proven by the fact that she included three series of Elijah Kellogg’s books, and many of Jacob Abbott’s as well, in *Books for the Young*, these seem to be an exception to the librarians’ rule against series (Jordan 107; Hewins 35-40).

Outcry against series became so pervasive that by 1929 Mary Root, another librarian, could professionally publish the “Not to be Circulated” list in the *Wilson Bulletin*. This list contained almost 100 series books and rationalizations as to why they should not be circulated in public libraries (Chamberlain 193). Interestingly, though, this is one of few lists that actually stated which books should not be read by children or put on library shelves. Although librarians often published articles about which books they had censored in their own libraries, there was a lack of concrete lists of “bad” books. A few reasons for this exist, not the least of which is the fact that professionals could not agree on universally bad books. What was the lowest quality literature to one librarian,

say a book in one of the Oliver Optic series, was the harmless way another librarian attracted youthful business. Another possibility for avoiding naming books that were “bad” for children is the phenomenon that banned books often become more popular simply because they are forbidden. By describing these books, pointing out their authors, and enumerating complaints against certain genres, educators and librarians were able to disapprove of books they found to be lacking in quality without increasing the demand for those very books. The ALA also enjoyed having the exclusive professional privilege to determine unworthy books and thus felt that “regulation could be done effectively and efficiently *without* public discussion or legislation” (Parker 80). The reason for this stance was that librarians valued and protected their training and professionalism and did not want newspapers or journals to question their choices about book selection. By denying access to book titles and reasons for denying them space on library shelves, librarians thought they would limit “negative publicity [of] their regulation efforts” (80).

In addition to the professional obligation librarians felt to publish books and articles about reading selections for children, there is also evidence that they felt a responsibility to conservatively protect the public funds they were allocated for purchasing books for their libraries. One example of this can be found in an exchange from the *Wilson Bulletin* detailed in Chamberlain’s “Wise Censorship.” This published debate began with a bookstore owner’s response to Root’s “Not to Be Circulated” list. This man, Ernest Ayres, uses the argument that as a taxpayer, who pays the librarian’s salaries as well as provides funds for purchasing the public libraries’ books, he has the right to borrow whatever he would like to read or have his children read, including books he read as a child. Taking up the librarians’ cause in the next *Wilson Bulletin* was Lillian

Herron Mitchell, who points out, to Ayers and others reading the journal, that the public is paying for the expertise of the librarians and this includes their professional opinions on worthy books on which to spend public funds. Mitchell argues that it is not “the place of any librarian,” as a keeper of public funds, “to squander them on books which are worthless when there are so many good ones available” (qtd. in Chamberlain 196). This idea was also found in the ALA’s *Library Journal*, whose December 1899 edition contained “Fiction in Public Libraries” which said, in relation to librarian’s selection of library books, “The librarian’s duty, it seems to me, is to come in and say, ‘We cannot advise you to read this book. We do not say it is a bad book. We simply say we do not think it is a book which should be purchased by public money and used by the people of the city as part of the equipment furnished them at government expense’” (qtd. in Parker 80). This theory goes hand-in-hand with the view that spending money on “sensational” and popular books of the day, which would include many series books, is an inappropriate expenditure for libraries because there were too many ‘quality’ books worth buying for the edification of the public.

Librarians from the ALA were not the only ones who became involved in discrediting series books. In fact, those from the ALA were probably the tamest in their criticisms, as they tried to protect their professional identity and knowledge by avoiding outright attacks. The chief librarian for the Boy Scouts of America, Franklin K. Mathews, however, did take this more direct approach, especially in relation to perhaps the most prolific series creator, Edward Stratemeyer. In fact, even with all of the objections of literary critics and librarians to series books, one researcher claims that “[t]he only real opposition Stratemeyer met came from Franklin K. Mathews, chief

librarian for the Boy Scouts of America, who claimed with some justification that the life of a Boy Scout in the popular books was nothing at all like what it really was in the Eagle Patrol of Ottumwa, Iowa” (Nye 78-79). As the librarian for the BSA, Mathiews was concerned with the many series that contained adventures of boy scouts as the basis of the books. Oddly, Mathiews’s campaign against Stratemeyer seems misplaced, if indeed misuse of scouting was his concern, because at most only one series about scouting can be attributed to the Stratemeyer Syndicate. This series, the Banner Boy Scouts, by George A. Warren, published in 1912 by Cupples and Leon, has been “suggested as a Syndicate series but not yet proven” (Dizer, *Tom Swift* 356-358). In addition to this series, there were only three other books produced by Stratemeyer about scouting, *Tommy Tiptop and His Boy Scouts*, *Tommy Tiptop and His Great Show*, and *The Boy Scouts of Lenox* (360-362). Either way, it seems that scouting was only a secondary concern of this librarian who, for unknown reason, despised all series books. It can be inferred from the fact that he and the BSA employed Percy Keese Fitzhugh to write scouting series books that were endorsed by the organization as more true-to-life that it was not series in general, but rather the debatably unrealistic and sensational aspects of popular series books that he found offensive (Dizer, *Tom Swift* 350).

It is interesting to examine why the BSA decided to get in the business of book selection to begin with. Part of the reasoning behind this move seems to lie within the history of scouting in America. Originally, there were many different scouting groups and according to Stratemeyer researcher, John T. Dizer, Jr., there “was a bitter battle for leadership in Scouting among a number of different Scout organizations. The BSA won out as a result of luck, some very capable leaders, some opportune legal action and a

brilliant and ruthless Chief Scout Executive” (365). The issue of who was going to be *the* scouting agency in the United States was in question for a number of years and is essential in the question of Mathiew’s censure of series books because it can be argued that the campaign was only appropriated by the BSA to aid in this quest. Dizer maintains that the “‘good reading’ emphasis, from the available evidence, seems to be more the personal campaign of the Chief Scout Librarian and Chief Scout Executive, a campaign which was accepted by the BSA leadership because it enhanced, in the eyes of educators, librarians and civic leaders, the high moral nature of the BSA” (365).

Once the idea was sanctioned, Mathiew took his job in earnest and began publishing articles against series books, in addition to working on new plans to detract sales of “poor quality” series and working on the creation of the more realistic scouting series with Fitzhugh. He wrote an article called “Blowing Out the Boy’s Brains” that was published in the November 18, 1914 edition of *Outlook*. This article begins by praising the fact that reading is one of the most time consuming activities for children outside of school and the fact that the hated dime novels were becoming a thing of the past. He continues, though, by warning parents not to let their guard down because “the modern ‘penny dreadful’ has not been banished quite so completely as at first appears. Its latest appearance is in the disguise of the bound book, and sometimes so attractively bound that it takes its place on the retail book-store shelf alongside the best juvenile publications” (Mathiew 652). The Chief Librarian goes on to deride the Frank Merriwell “nickel novel series” and other series are produced by writing syndicates that he considers “‘mile-a-minute fiction’” (652). Mathiew goes so far as to say he wishes he “could label each one of these books: ‘Explosives! Guaranteed to Blow Your Boy’s Brains Out’”

(653). The main reason for this warning is that he believes popular series books are too unrealistic and sensational, causing an overstimulation of the imagination that is one of a boy's most valuable assets, according to Mathiews. Importantly, the magazine that this article was published in was a mainstream publication, and unlike many of the other debates and criticisms against series that were published in professional journals, many more people, including parents, had easy access to this article. In fact, the 1934 article "For It Was Indeed He," claims that the article "became a tract that swept the country. Women in Portland, Oregon, stood beside the counters of bookstores discouraging would-be-buyers of fifty-centers. Disgusted booksellers packed up their Tom Swifts and shipped them back to the publishers" ("For It Was"). Despite this claim, it seems that the article did not in fact have such an effect, especially considering that one of the biggest series, *Nancy Drew*, was still to come from the Syndicate, but the article is forever a part of the series attack because of its canonization in *Fortune* and subsequent works (Dizer, *Tom Swift* 389).

Though Mathiews may not have had an effect as great as he wanted with the article, he did implement other plans that affected the children's book market more significantly, even if they did not rid the field of series books altogether. His first plan was to create a series of books, in conjunction with Grosset & Dunlap, called Every Boy's Library, which consisted of reprints of what Mathiews thought to be acceptable children's books sold at a comparable price to the popular series books of the day. Significantly, Grosset & Dunlap was the largest Stratemeyer publisher at the time. The set of books they created were endorsed by the BSA in its handbooks, and each included an introduction written by James E. West, the Scouts Chief Executive. In the

introduction, he moralizes that “the boy’s taste is being constantly vitiated and exploited by the great mass of cheap juvenile literature. To help anxiously concerned parents and educators meet this grave peril, the Library Commission of the Boy Scouts of America has been organized” (qtd. in Dizer, *Tom Swift* 383). Importantly, this quote shows that not only was the BSA advocating the Every Boy’s Library, but using the Library to promote itself and defend Mathiews’s supremacy in the field. Records are not clear about exactly how high sales were, but one researcher in 1937 claimed that over 2,000,000 were sold in twenty-two years, which is significant, but would certainly not have ruined the market for other books of similar price (Dizer, *Tom Swift* 384).

Mathiews further cut into the market, however, by devising National Children’s Book Week. The history of this creation is a bit unclear, but it seems that after a speech in 1912 by publisher E.W. Mumford at the American Booksellers Association Convention about the dangers of bad books for children which was reported on by the New York Times, Mathiews was asked by West to come up with a way to aid in bettering boy’s reading. Mumford’s address, “Juvenile Readers as an Asset,” pointed out that much juvenile fiction that was being sold was inappropriate for children because facts were distorted and the books did “not teach young readers to think straight; in others the children are invariably right while their elders are invariably wrong...in some bad English occurs; in others cruel and thoughtless mischief is encouraged” (“Children Reading” 10). These criticism had all been used against series books such as those written by Sophie May, Oliver Optic and Martha Finley and thus it was with vigor that Mathiews took up the challenge against them. He began by touring the country and speaking to encourage a higher standard of writing in children’s books. In 1915 he spoke

at the ABA Conference and placed responsibility for the change on booksellers and publishers. He also recommended a Children's Book Week which could be promoted by the BSA, as well as librarians, booksellers, teachers and publishers. According to the history delineated by the Children's Book Council, Mathiews worked with the ABA and the ALA, creating Good Book Week, touting the slogan "The Best Books for Your Child." Dizer suggests that the week started with Mathiews' creation of "Safety First Juvenile Book Week" in 1915, which was eventually cultivated into "Good Book Week," then "Children's Book Week," and lastly "National Book Week" (*Tom Swift* 391). The Children's Book Council points out that the enlargement of the week was interrupted by World War I ("History of"), and is probably why some sources claim that the first week was in 1919, which is the year of the first "Children's Book Week" (Chamberlain 204). The effect of this dedicated week was perhaps more than most people assume, especially considering the fact that the week still exists as a forum for encouraging good children's reading and rarely, if ever, promote series books. The week gained momentum as well as esteem because of the groups involved, which in addition to the ALA and ABA included the Parent Teacher Association, basically covering every group that was concerned with and had expertise in reading for children.

The Parents

The Children's Book Week was not the only way parents got involved in the fight against series. With the Puritan and Victorian influences, groups had become organized under causes such as temperance, religion, voting rights and clean living throughout the late 1800's and early 1900's, just as series were becoming the most popular children's

books. One example of this is the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. Despite its name, it was involved in many projects; indeed, one of its early moves was to create the Department for the Suppression of Impure Literature, that later became the Department for the Promotion of Purity in Literature and Art. Seeing dime novels and sensational literature, which eventually included series books, as bad influences that harmed society and, in particular, put children in danger, the Department's original undertaking was to "try to protect children from crime-story papers" (Parker 7). And while Anthony Comstock was fighting obscene and pornographic literature, these women, under editor Mary Allen West, who supervised the group's magazine, the *Union Signal*, fought against "trashy reading" because it was seen as more harmful to children due to its easy accessibility. West dislikes this type of reading, which surely included dime novels and series along with crime-story papers, because "it engenders a dreamy sentimentalism which makes real work distasteful, thus leading to discontent with one's surroundings" (qtd. in Parker 52). This was one of the most frequent issues critics had with series such as Horatio Alger's, whose rags-to-riches stories were often accused of giving poorer children false hope and encouraging laziness and dissatisfaction. Early in the twentieth century, the WCTU began reprimanding mothers who were doing little to improve their children's reading habits (65), in part because they believed that the ALA was not strict enough in banning impure and inappropriate books. The WCTU questioned library choices so strongly that it even encouraged its local divisions to create committees that would examine local book selections at public libraries. Though "the tone of its campaigns for pure books in libraries was not hostile," the professional "turf" of the

librarians was challenged by this move, dividing the front against series and popular, “trashy” reading (71).

The Teachers

One other important group became involved in the debate of children’s reading, though perhaps in a less accusatory way. Logically, this group was one that dealt with children and reading on a daily basis—teachers. Interestingly, there are few instances of teachers speaking out against certain books, or at least many less than accounts of parents or librarians doing so. However, teachers became just as biased against series books as did the rest of the population because of the campaigns brought by the others. By 1926, scorn for series books was essentially implanted in the minds of many, including educators, parents, and librarians. Once the *Winnetka Graded Book List* was made available, the idea that series books were not appropriate for children became even more solidified. The list was a direct result of an experimental study headed by Carleton W. Washburne and Mabel Vogel and funded through the ALA by the Carnegie Corporation, to help determine the “right book for the right child” (Washburne 50). Using a system of ballots that allowed children in 500 cities to comment about each book they read during the study, including how much they enjoyed it and how difficult it was for them. The participating students had been given a standardized reading test through which their reading level was determined. Narrowing the books to only those that were mentioned enough times (by twenty-five different children, according to Chamberlain) to be deemed significant and using the scores on the ballots and the reading scores, Washburne and Vogel came up with graphs and charts determining which books seemed appropriate for

which reading levels. The list of 1,000 books was then sent to committee of “expert children’s librarians” who scored the books based on literary merit (51-53). The scores were:

1. of unquestionable literary merit
2. valuable for the list although not of high literary quality
3. not recommended—because of low literary value
4. not recommended—because of subject content (53)

Though no guidelines for determining the ratings were supplied, examples were given of each category to aid the librarians in scoring the books. Categories one and two included books like *Tom Sawyer* and *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, respectively. Meanwhile, category three included the *Bobbsey Twins* and the *Honey Bunch* series, among others. Category four consisted of books such as *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. As could be expected from the examples, any series books that appeared on the final list were rated a three and thus, because the researchers wanted only to supply a list of quality books, they were left out of the published list (Chamberlain 199). The study was deemed very scientific and gained respect automatically because of the reputation the Winnetka school system and Washburne, as its superintendent, had for being “progressive” and “innovative” in education (200). The list, along with the study guidelines, theories, graphs and charts, was published in hardcover and purchased by many libraries. Meanwhile, the 110 to 200 unworthy titles¹ that included *Honey Bunch*, the *Bobbsey Twins*, the *Tom Swift* series, the *Elsie Dinsmore* series, and even one of L. Frank Baum’s *Oz* books (199), was printed in a mimeographed paperback, the *Supplement to the Winnetka Graded Book List*, only available by request for those interested from a “scientific standpoint” (Washburne 53). Though the *Supplement* was eventually published in the *Elementary English Review* of

¹ Numbers vary according to source.

1927, it certainly never gained the attention that the original list did. Even if it had, the consideration would have been exceedingly negative toward a newly codified class of extremely popular, ‘low-quality’ books. The published list was essentially commended by most reviewers and was seen as a great tool for teachers to help choose appropriate reading for their students (Chamberlain 201). Of course, series books were dealt a blow here because series were excluded from the official list; children were steered away from them in classrooms and libraries in favor of other books with more “literary merit,” regardless of the interest these series generated with students. The misfortune of this can be seen by looking at the educational benefits of series books, further discussed in the following chapter.

Regardless of the impression one may have that all of the criticism against series is a thing of the past, this is not actually the case. Though the establishment of series as inferior books for children was initiated and was solidified in the publications and actions of the turn of the twentieth century, the complaints against the books continue today. Well-respected literary critic Harold Bloom has recently spoken out against the *Harry Potter* series for many of the same reasons given by critics of Alger and Optic one-hundred years before—unrealism, inferior writing and a limited vocabulary. Parental groups such as PABBIS—Parents Against Bad Books In Schools—provide information through the mail and online about inappropriate books, of course including links to information about series writers such as Judy Blume and J.K. Rowling. Other groups have spoken out against the supernatural elements, which have in many ways replaced the mysterious elements of older series, in many of today’s series, including R.L. Stein’s *Goosebumps* series and K.A. Applegate’s *Animorphs* series. Today’s concerns may be

slightly altered, for example criticism of gender treatments in old series books like *Nancy Drew*, but still the underlying principle seems largely the same: series books are inferior reading materials for children and should be banned or at least avoided when possible.

Chapter 3: Benefits of the Series and Their Educational Uses

With all of the criticism directed at series, it may seem hard to understand the inherent value in these books. Those who do approve of series, even if only marginally, often qualify their praise with comments pointing out that any type of reading can seldom be considered harmful to a child. While this may be true, limited support of series for such a vague reason does not do justice to the more technically beneficial aspects of the books. It is very difficult for adults to grasp the reality for children of reading series books, or any books, for that matter. Though it can be said about any person, adult or child, it is difficult to understand how another perceives reading, and adults have an added obstacle: distance from the process of learning to read. Despite not being able to remember this progression specifically, it is possible to deduce some of the multitudes of tasks children are dealing with when they are beginning readers. Children are not born learning how to read; this is obvious. However, the further removed an adult is from the confusion of learning how to read, the less clear this appears (Ross 228). It can seem, and often does seem, that we have been reading our entire lives and the fact that becoming literate was an intricate and detailed procedure that was many times frustrating and confusing is rarely recalled. No matter how easily the essentials of reading come to a child, he or she must learn the specifics of what is fundamentally a whole new world.

Reading consists of recognizing letters and their sounds, knowing or construing the meaning of words, sentence structure and syntax, as well as familiarity with the grammatical differences of nouns, verbs and adjectives. And these details are the more advanced ones: beginning readers must first learn that orientation of letters matter, that words and sentences move from left to right, and that pages always turn in the same

direction, front to back. When working with small children, one of the first things an adult may notice is the tough time they have with the letters ‘b,’ ‘d,’ ‘p,’ and ‘q’ because the shape is exactly the same, just rotated in four different directions. In a three-year-old’s world of basic shapes and physical objects, orientation does not matter—a truck is a truck upside down and from behind, and it makes the same ‘vrooom’ sound either way. Once a child begins the process of reading, new rules need to be learned about the aspects of reading that adults find very basic.

Catherine Sheldrick Ross, author of an award-winning article called “‘If They Read Nancy Drew, So What?’ Series Book Readers Talk Back” has concluded that series books play an integral role in aiding children in the process of learning to read through her research and interviews of one-hundred-and-forty-two “enthusiastic reader[s] for pleasure” (216). She contends that the predictable and repetitive nature of series books, exactly the aspects for which they are regularly criticized, teaches new readers important conventions in the world of literature. Ross bases her analysis, in part, on Peter Rabinowitz’s “rules of reading,” which argues that readers and authors mutually “agree to concentrate their attention on certain textual features”² (229). Children’s series, especially the in the popular mystery genre, force children to notice what is significant by titling chapters explicitly, labeling important details as clues, “threats” or “warnings,” and sometimes repeating crucial information or displaying it in italics. These practices occur not just in one book, but over and over again throughout the volumes of the series to teach children the context of significance that they will find in many traditional pieces of writing. Margaret Mackey also connects Rabinowitz’s rules to children’s series books, pointing out that:

² Quotes from Ross’s summary of Rabinowitz’s theory in “If They Read Nancy Drew, So What?”

“in the *Baby-sitters* books, the elements that could be classified under rules of notice are repeated rigidly and can therefore be assimilated and taken for granted. Thus, even a reader inexperienced in an absolute sense has the opportunity to behave like an experienced reader in this one regard at least. Temporarily, the reader is master of the conventions.” (489)

Ross, as Mackey does with the *Babysitter's Club* books, extends this theory to say that not only do readers learn from “highly patterned” series books, but also from those such as “Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys, [who,] in discerning and piecing together clues, are modeling the process of reading itself” (230). Her answer to critics who claim that despite any of these benefits series are harmful to children because they are read too often and for too long a period of time is that the “simplified formula that makes series book reading so appropriate for beginners also limits its continued appeal[;]...once readers have become thoroughly familiar with the formula and can predict the ending in advance, closure is reached too easily” (231). In effect, once a new reader has gained the useful knowledge about reading from the series books, he or she will move on willingly, possibly to the next level of series, but eventually to other types of books as well. Truth to this theory can be seen in reality: no adult is still addicted to *Nancy Drew* books, however avidly he or she read them as a child.

Another way series books facilitate reading in children is by providing a familiar set of characters, which entice a reader to come back for a sequel that promises to be as exciting as the first. Though critics despise the way series create such an exceedingly commercialized impetus to children's literature, where profits are a driving force behind writing many books with the same characters and similar plots that will draw children in, the end result is still that children read more books. In response, critics also say that a large quantity of low-quality books does not help the child reader because, among other

things, literary taste is diminished if the ‘right’ books are not being read. The truth is that, in addition to the educative value of the ‘how’ of book reading that children receive in its simplest form in series books, they also acquire hours worth of practice with reading itself. New readers must have an engaging plot to keep them reading; but more than this, they need the security, and even the very predictability that detractors hate, to keep them reading and encouraged about their new-found literary abilities. Anyone who has ever helped a child learn to read will have witnessed the happiness, and some could even say relief, that he or she expressed when told that there were more books in which they could continue the adventures with characters like Henry and Mudge, Curious George, the Babysitter’s Club, or Bert, Nan, Flossie and Freddie. Regardless of any differences series books have between each other, this familiarity is the one way in which they are all the same to children, and one of the major ways in which the books help students to become stronger readers.

Moreover, as Ross points out, a baby does not learn to speak words and form sentences into complete thoughts by “direct grammar instruction,” but instead by experiencing verbal language through “meaningful and personally rewarding” interaction with adults (232). There is no reason that the learning of reading should be a process opposite to this. Children need pleasurable associations with books and the written word in order to soak up all of the intricacies of language. With all of the complexities of English, which even graduate students and professors of English can struggle with, there is no better way to learn how to read than to begin encountering the many ways words can be arranged and written in books themselves. Of course, new readers must start at the simplest level and work up the chain to more complicated literature.

Series become important at this point for two reasons, both of which are highly maligned by critics who cannot see past literary quality to instructional significance. First, the simplicity of many series books makes them obvious candidates to help young readers. In this aspect, it is notable that series books oftentimes contain multiple chapters and usually many pages in which the child is adequately introduced to the language as well as to the characters, allowing a teacher's goal of reading instruction and a child's goals of making new acquaintances and finding new adventures to be achieved simultaneously.

Secondly, the predictability of nearly all series books is the 'safest' way for a child to jump into reading without becoming discouraged. As far from learning to read as we stand, it is difficult, if not near impossible to see the terror reading a book can cause in some children. Much is riding on the ability to read, and no child is unaware of this. Reading books is something adults do, and something teachers intertwine with every subject. Not being able to understand what is being read in a book is a scary thing for a child who does not know if they will ever be able to overcome the obstacle of learning how to read. In fact, R.L. Stine, author of hundreds of scary series books, including the *Goosebumps* series (for younger children) and the *Fear Street* series (for adolescents), summarizes the experience children have with all series, scary or not, which he describes as "like a roller coaster ride...they're very fast, exciting. They change directions rapidly, they tease and fool you...[but] let you off safe and sound at the end. No matter how scary it is, or how thrilling, or how exciting, you know that you're safe the whole time" (qtd. in Reid and Cline 70). The predictability of series books is what allows this safety and is a large part of the reason that children return to them again and again. What adult

critics see as repetitive stories, descriptions, and situations, children see as a predictably happy ending. To them, plot and sentence structure cannot be too repetitive or predictable because they do not have enough experience in the field of reading to notice general similarities; they can only see different settings, different words, and different adventures. Once a child has read enough to grasp the “sameness” of series, they usually move on without encouragement from adults. Critics and researchers never seem to point out how or why children stop reading series; it is most likely because a child will never say, “This series of books has become too repetitive and predictable to mentally challenge me,” but will eventually, without suffering any harm in the meantime, just grow out of reading only books in series.

One concern critics might have, even after assessing the benefits of simplicity and predictability in series, is that higher quality literature may be able to do the same things without the commercialism, the media “hype” surrounding many of today’s series, or without even the serialized format itself, that often includes hundreds of books instead of the two or three that would most likely be necessary to accomplish the same growth in young readers. An answer to this is a benefit that only series that are great in number can give children: cognitive development in “filling in the gaps.” In her article by that name, Mackey alludes to the idea that because certain series have so many books, children rarely begin reading at the initial volume and instead start somewhere in the middle or even the end, with whatever book comes into their possession first. Especially in series where the characters grow over time, get older and have experiences that change them, reading books out of sequence forces children to infer events that have happened in the past and develop a hypothesis as to why things are the way they are in that particular

volume. Mackey describes the process a child goes through in reading a series book out of order:

“He or she meets a character with a past, referred to with varying degrees of skill according to the heavy-handedness of the author. The child is driven to make inferences, to compensate for gaps. Usually, when a title which fills in a missing element in the chronology becomes available, there is great excitement, and the reader pounces. Inferences can now be checked; the cross-weaving adds texture to the baldest narrative. How many of us have read a series out of order and then later settled down to re-read every book in the correct sequence, savoring references which once baffled us and setting events in place...Even very simple books thus presented now offer pleasures of foreshadowing which might seem sophisticated in a different format.” (487)

One idea that Mackey alludes to here is a sort of primitive or early form of intertextuality, a part of a complicated theory of semiotics that is studied in upper-level English journals and discussions. The main idea of intertextuality, which is itself an outgrowth of structuralism, is understanding literature in its relationship to the larger body of the already written word—and most often the canonized word—though it also includes an idea of a relationship between author and reader. Some may find it a stretch to compare series books to the way the themes and style of *Robinson Crusoe* have been incorporated into many other books since the classic was written; however, like all things, to understand something complex, such as intertextuality, one must begin in a simple way, and series books are one way children begin to grasp this.

Taking Mackey’s ideas further, even series in which the characters do not grow or seem to experience the passing of time still provide readers with interesting changes to contemplate. For example, *Nancy Drew* and *Tom Swift* have been re-written into modern series many times over. There are currently four sets of *Tom Swift* series, which he changes in and eventually becomes a ‘junior,’ implying possibly that the original had a son who is now having similar adventures in the modern day. Nancy has undergone

some modern makeovers as well, in one of her series, the *Nancy Drew Files*, she becomes a college student and, though never inappropriate, becomes a woman of the 1990's, even dating a boy (who is not Ned!) in at least one of the stories. Children reading combinations of these series out of order will have to infer what is going on and perhaps concurrently learn a bit about how American society and gender roles have changed over the last century. Children are able to place the series in the appropriate decades by references to types of cars, radio, television, video games and computers, and through these fictional tales learn a bit of cultural history as well.

Up to this point, evidence for the true value of series books has only been given in relation to children who we can assume to be fully functioning early readers. Series, however, can also be shown to be an integral part of helping teach children who have a more difficult time learning how to read. Use of series in this way can be accomplished by a few different methods, but before being able to understand why it works, one must know something about the most common impediments children have in reading. A major problem found in children who do not read well occurs with the fluency of their reading. Fluency is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “a smooth and easy flow; readiness, smoothness; [especially] with regard to speech.” This definition hints at what is meant when someone talks of reading fluency, but does not adequately point out that fluent readers also read quickly with correct pausing and grouping of words. Conversely, disfluent readers are very slow and usually do not have the right expression when, for example, reading questions or exclamations. The problem with reading so slowly is that any ability to understand and comprehend the whole, be it sentence, paragraph or chapter, is greatly impeded. Children who get ‘hung up’ on individual words are unable to figure

out what is being communicated, the same way that listening to disjointed speech would leave the hearer incapable of receiving the message (Rasinski and Padak 69). One way to help children who are challenged in their fluency is series books. In the books *Holistic Reading Strategies: Teaching Children Who Find Reading Difficult*, Rasinski and Padak claim that “Predictable and patterned text is particularly well suited to helping students develop fluent reading” (79). To begin, series of books like *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* and *Polar Bear, Polar Bear, What Do You Hear?* are good for small children who need highly patterned sentence structures (79). As children get older, and are socially more ready for longer, chapter-style books, it may be more appropriate to move on to the equally predictable series books like *Nancy Drew* and the *Hardy Boys*, whose quick moving plots encourage quicker reading and repetitive sentence structures aid in the creation of fluency.

Another problem poor readers often have is not in the physical act of reading, but instead in their base of knowledge with which to understand the text they are reading. A concise discussion of this difficulty is put forth by Rasinski and Padak:

“One of the earliest findings in reading research was the association between vocabulary knowledge and reading proficiency (Davis, 1944). Good readers tend to know many words and understand many concepts...To understand what you encounter in print, you need some understanding of the words that make up the text. Moreover, as you read, you encounter new ideas, concepts, and words...As a result, your knowledge of words grows...If reading frustrates you or gives you little enjoyment, you may choose to minimize the amount of reading you do. This decision leads to fewer encounters with new and interesting words; and as a result, your growth in reading is slowed, and the process of reading becomes even more difficult and frustrating.” (87)

Reading series books can be used to aid in vocabulary building by increasing the number of words, pages and chapters read. As can be easily demonstrated, children have a much greater tendency to pick up another book if they have already read and enjoyed one with

the same group of characters. Thus, a child reading one series book will often continue with the other volumes and many times read all that the particular author has written, even outside the series, greatly increasing the amount of reading the child has accomplished in what is usually a relatively short time. And despite their predictable plots, each new book contains new objects, new goals, new clues, and countless other new aspects, which must be introduced and described with at least a few new words. In addition to these benefits, reading series books also gives practice and additional contexts for 'old' words that are still a little unfamiliar. For example, if a child did not know exactly what a clue was after one *Nancy Drew* book, he or she surely would after three of these books. If a young reader today did not quite understand the meaning of the word 'marauder,' after reading a few of the *Harry Potter* books, which contain a "Marauder's Map" to aid in sneaking around the school, he or she would at least be able to guess that the word meant a person who was mischievously prowling around where he should not.

The strategy of using series books to aid children with reading difficulties has actually been written about and given the name of the "Curious George" Strategy by Margaret Ann Richeck and Becky K. McTague in the December 1988 edition of *The Reading Teacher*. The idea behind the approach is that series books are "authentic" literature to children and are much more enjoyable for them to read than basal readers and other types of textbooks, a point which has been made over and over again and can be thanked for the current practice of using many trade books in the classroom. The notion that comes into play with this teaching plan is that series books create for children a background that stays much the same throughout each book. In other words, the characters have the same names, and for the most part, the same personality traits, the

setting is often the same or similar, the plot line is based on a similar theme, such as mystery, adventure, or travel, and the author's writing style, because it is usually the same author, is identical. All of these aspects of a story needed to be attended to by a reader in order to make sense of the story. If the elements are the same as those in the first book, the struggling reader is given more freedom to explore other facets of the later volumes. Thus, the reader can think more about strange vocabulary, descriptive adjectives, dialect, or any other part of the story that is secondary to the basics. Rasinski and Padak point out that while being immersed in this system of learning, "[f]luency and comprehension continue to improve as students' familiarity with the author, plot, character, and words increase" (168).

Though this strategy is designed for younger children, and thus more picture book style series, clearly, the concepts can be applied to all children learning to read, and therefore to every manner of series book. The strategy works well with picture books, such as the *Curious George* and *Arthur* books, because they are short enough to read aloud in class; however, older children who still have a hard time reading often dismiss such series as 'baby' books that are too childish to read. In a case like this, the strategy could be used with longer chapter series books that have the same characteristics, including *Nancy Drew*, *Harry Potter* and others.

The basic structure of the program involves an introduction to the series, followed by teacher and students reading, in cooperation, a part of the first book aloud in class. The students next complete an activity that relates to the story, such as choosing favorite words from the section read. Homework that night involves independently reading the story, or re-reading the section they had listened to during the day. Each day, more of the

book is read aloud, and homework involves work with the vocabulary words and re-reading of the book independently. Eventually, the children can engage in more meaningful discussions of the story, participate in related writing activities, and “engage in other group and individual literacy-expansion activities” (Rasinski and Padak 167). In the following weeks, depending on how long the books are and how many are in the series, the children follow a similar pattern with other books of the series, which they will eventually be able to read independently, gaining the fluency and comprehension mentioned above.

There are many other means by which series books can be incorporated into the classroom in a valuable educational way, both in reading intervention situations like the “Curious George Strategy” and in average school settings. One popular program today is the Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) program, which has many different variations, including Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) and Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), but is generally seen as a block of time set aside on a regular basis for independent quiet reading by students (Pilgreen 1). Important aspects of this program, according to Janice L. Pilgreen in her teachers’ handbook for organizing and maintaining an SSR program, include “access,” “appeal,” and “non-accountability” (6). These, along with a few others, are essential to further the goal of SSR, which is to teach children to love reading and to give them practice with it on their own terms. ‘Access’ refers to the need for young readers to have contact with all types of reading material, from novels and comic books to magazines and newspapers, and the right to choose between them during the SSR time (8). ‘Appeal’ points out the fact that pleasure in reading is rarely obtained when certain books or types of books are forced upon a child, and therefore self-selection of books that

a child finds interesting during SSR is essential (9). Finally, the objective of the ‘non-accountability’ element is allowing children freedom to read whatever intrigues them without the stress of an impending test or book report, and without even the formality of a record of the number of books read. Such ‘non-accountability’ allows for complete reading freedom during the SSR time, thus enhancing the pleasure found in reading that is necessary for fluency and comprehension (13). In Pilgreen’s handbook, series books including *Nancy Drew*, *Sweet Valley High* and the *Fear Street* series are listed as resources for the classroom during the SSR program, presumably because they are well-suited to appeal to the child, as well as being valuable additions to the classroom library.

Another inventive schoolroom use of series books has come in the field of foreign languages. Especially since teachers today are more receptive to engaging students in educational matter through popular culture, some educators have begun using series books that are favorites of students to teach lessons in foreign languages. Their simplicity and range of situations makes them ideal candidates for practice and translation. For the past five years, the biggest name in children’s series books, indeed in children’s books in general, has been Harry Potter, and now that five books of the series have been released, educators are beginning to bring the wizard into the classroom for the purpose of learning foreign languages.

An article in BBC News recently interviewed Andrew Wilson, a classics teacher in Bedford, England, who was commissioned to translate *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (the English title of the first volume) into classical Greek. According to the BBC, this is the “longest text to have been translated into the ancient language in 1,500 years.” The book has also been translated into countless different

languages, including Romanian and Japanese. Later this year, the classical Greek translation will come out, along with an Irish Gaelic version of the story. The intention of the translation, which was paid for by the publishers of the English version, was to create a text that “can be used in schools to encourage people to learn Greek,” according to Wilson (“It’s All”). Similarly, students in the United States and Europe have used the Spanish translation to practice language skills before traveling or once back in their native lands to keep the vocabulary fresh when it is not being used on a daily basis. The website of the International House in Barcelona contains an excerpt from a student who came to Barcelona to practice her Spanish for a European Studies major she is completing in her Swedish university. The student, Sara Theleskog, stays fluent in the language by speaking it with her roommates, going to Spanish cinemas, and reading many Spanish books, including *Harry Potter* in Spanish because “it’s a great story and not difficult” (“Learning Spanish”).

Using the series books directly in the classroom, an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, Jesse Nash, implemented a reading program with his adult English language learners that involved *Harry Potter* because the books were ones everyone in the class, whose ages ranged from twenty-three to forty, recognized. The introduction of the book was accidental, as Nash was only carrying the book with him to read before class, not to teach it to the class; however, the students recognized the book and asked him to read from it. The interest was so great that Nash employed the book in the following weeks to improve auditory skills, oral discussion of the story and as a basis for homework assignments. Nash describes his work with the *Harry Potter* books to teach English to adults in this way:

“It wasn’t difficult connecting the novel to skills work. The Harry Potter stories afford the opportunity to practice vocabulary related to the home, family, work, the neighborhood, the community, friendships, food, and, perhaps most important, human emotions. Retelling the story orally and in written form is a good way for students to practice using verbs and tenses.” (Nash)

The aspects of the story that Nash found to be exceptionally important for teaching English are the same that make the *Harry Potter* series, and other series as well, so valuable for students to begin reading with in settings other than ESL classrooms.

Working with a younger group, another ESL teacher studied her utilization of *Harry Potter* with fifth- and sixth-grade Spanish-speaking students for whom the books were beyond an independent reading level. Despite being unable to read the book, many of Maria Sudduth’s students were struggling to do so because so many other children their age were enjoying the magical tale. Sudduth used Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) tactics, which include “visual representation of the book, charting information, instructional conversation, literature logs and paraphrasing” with the first of Rowling’s books (Coatney 16). Because learning a different language is sometimes difficult and frustrating for children, use of extremely popular literature makes it much easier to engage students in the material and give them a reason to put effort into their studies. Sudduth worked to create a safe classroom where students did not feel nervous about their English abilities or personal opinions. She helped them understand the story by assigning supplemental reading that was within their independent reading level, including *The Secrets of the Droon* series by Tony Abbott and *A Magic Crystal* by Louis Sachar. When she began working with the second volume of the series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, she could move past some of the focus on vocabulary words and instead work on comprehension with teaching tools such as instructional

conversations and literature circles, among others (17). The students made excellent progress in English skills and even independently generated a conversation about racism and discrimination, comparing Lord Voldemort, the series' arch-villain with Adolph Hitler because of the characters' similarities in plotting to eliminate certain groups from the world (18). One of the most beneficial outcomes of this project was the emotional effect of the series reading on the children, which is described as one of 'empowerment' (19). In relation to Sudduth's work with ESL students and the *Harry Potter* series, Jesus Cortez, professor and masters committee chair in the Department of Professional Studies in Education at California State University, said, "It was a good thing for them to realize that they could read this book and understand the story inside. Imagine the power a child gets when they know they've read a 400-page book" (19).

The concept that Cortez brings up is one that is essential to the value of series books in general. Many researchers have commented on the ability of series books to build confidence and create independence in the children who read them. In an article entitled "Is a Series Reader a Serious Reader?" Jenny Daniels interviews her daughter, Emma, about the reading of Enid Blyton books and finds that Emma:

"trusts the Blyton format in that her predictions about characters and events are always proved right. This leaves her free to experiment with new words and sentence constructions which she encounters in her reading. Blyton is never likely to confront a reader with anything radically different, so that a young reader gains confidence by essentially repeating the experience. When 'old friends' are incorporated into different narratives, it has the effect of strengthening that confidence." (49)

This unique relationship between children's series books and children's confidence is built on this idea of trust between child and series author, as well as the much maligned predictability of the books. Much like the English language learners who are proud after

completing a four hundred page *Harry Potter* book, any young reader feels accomplished after reading all of the books in a series, or even just a large number of the books in a series, and gains confidence and independence in his or her reading ability. Reading books that only children read, and that adults disapprove of, aids in creating an independent reader because the choice to read a series book is often uniquely within an individual's power, unlike many other reading situations children are placed in at school. The sense of autonomy created by series books is even greater in girl readers because females are somehow more passionate about their reading choices and often are more invested in them. Because adults dislike series, one scholar suggests that girls who read series can be seen as "engaging in a mild form of protest against those authorities who, believing the books not only inferior but dangerously habit forming, would keep the books from them" (Romalov, "Unearthing" 90). The independence that is created by defiance is one that can not readily be recreated by the act of reading other types of books. In addition to these confidence and independence building aspects of series book reading, children are also encouraged by knowledge of how many books they have read, how many chapter book pages they have read, and how many series they have completed, leading to a competition of sorts among peers.

This is as much a social aspect of reading as it is a technical one. Children share discussions and trade the books, a memory which many adults have mentioned in studies about series book reading, including at least five of the participants of Ross's "enthusiastic reader's" study. Females especially, according to Ross, describe series book reading "as a social activity embedded in the social relations of childhood" (226-227). The social aspects encourage reading, while at the same time fostering the earliest

form of literary discussion between peers, a skill that is a major goal in many classrooms into even high school and college. In the *English Journal*, Reid and Cline portray the “sharing” and “talking” about series books between children and adolescents as “social benefits” that are “important experiences” (70). One of the most interesting characteristics of this type of social interaction between children is how child-initiated it is—the series books are made popular by the children themselves, the low price of the books, which are nearly always in paperback, and the accessibility of the books to children from many different socio-economic backgrounds all contribute to this phenomenon. Charles Sarland considers this in the article “Revenge of the Teenage Horrors: Pleasure, Quality and Canonicity in (and out of) Popular Series Fiction.” He describes the social relationships between children and adolescents and series fiction as the creation of a canon of literature that is appropriate only for the young social group and describes the process as a “social negotiation” (69). Without a doubt, this social communion is beneficial to children in learning to relate to others, to think critically and to share insights.

The one common factor that stems from all of these facets of series books, from learning to navigate longer books, to filling in the chronological gaps, to gaining confidence and creating social contracts in literature, is the creation of pleasure in reading. One of the most consistent comments about series reading, from children and adults who read series when they were children, is the pleasure they received from reading the books. All of the reasons described above contribute to this satisfaction and serve to create lifelong readers. Studies of librarians and English teachers, the people modern American society often thinks of as being the most literate and having the most

literary appreciation, have shown that series books made up a significant part of their childhood reading (Mackey 489). Pleasure in reading is perhaps the most substantial factor in creating a person who loves reading and participates in it throughout his or her lifetime. Since this is an important goal of teaching children to read, so that they can escape through reading, learn through reading, and grow through reading at the age of ten and at the age of fifty-three, it is time for the enjoyment of reading to be encouraged and utilized in classrooms. Series books are not only the easiest way to do this, they are the clearly the most appropriate as well. Careful consideration of a few specific series, namely *Nancy Drew*, long-standing in American popularity, and today's favorite the world over, *Harry Potter*, can prove not only the worth of those series in and of themselves, but also suitable classroom uses that will promote education and enjoyment simultaneously.

Chapter 4: Case Study of *Nancy Drew*—The Stratemeyer Empire and Series Embodied

It can be said that Edward Stratemeyer is the father of children and adolescent series books. For many years, he was the bane of librarians and educators, though they did not always know it, who believed the hundreds of books he published were worthless time wasters. During the early 1900's, there were not many objects that could distract children in the way that series books, dime novels and story papers could, especially in comparison to the television sets, DVD players, video game systems and other fads that all compete for children's attention today. Consequently, the Stratemeyer series books, as can be seen in the *Outlook* article of 1914 and the *Fortune* article of 1934, bore the brunt of adult's criticisms about children's pastimes because there were so many of them, and so few other forms of entertainment.

It is first important to note exactly how enormous Stratemeyer was in the children's book business. Two scholars, John Dizer and Deidre Johnson, have done extensive research on the man and his legacy, and compiled lists of some of his works. Dizer estimates that by the time his Syndicate was created, which was likely in 1904 (*Tom Swift* 274), Stratemeyer had written no less than 65 dime novels for adults, 47 hardcover books, was publisher and editor of three magazines for boys, and "had about 80 juvenile books in print" (4-5). It is believed that at this point Stratemeyer realized that his creative potential surpassed the time he had for writing all of the stories he imagined, and thus he formed the Stratemeyer Syndicate, an agency designed to 'manufacture' his stories. Stratemeyer would create the ideas, characters, adventures and basic plot lines for a series in general, as well as for each individual book, give the outline to a writer that he employed, and would later edit and publish the completed book under a pen name.

Using the services of hired writers, Stratemeyer could produce many more books in a shorter amount of time, in addition to maintaining the supply of popular series he had created. He also wanted his books to command respect at the bookstore; therefore, he negotiated with publishers, in particular Grosset & Dunlap, to take a cut in his end of the profits in order that the books be nicely bound, good-looking, and affordable. In general, the books sold for about fifty cents a piece, an extremely low-price considering that they were hardcover (5). The Syndicate was in operation for a large majority of the twentieth century, until it was sold to Simon and Schuster in 1984. Throughout its history, the Syndicate was responsible for many series including, but certainly not limited to, the *Nancy Drew* series, the *Hardy Boys* series, the *Bobbsey Twins* tots series,³ the *Tom Swift* series, the *Moving Picture Boys* series, the *Moving Picture Girls* series, the *Rover Boys* series, and many more. Amazingly, some of the series, including *Nancy Drew* and the *Bobbsey Twins*, which Stratemeyer began in the early 1900's are still being printed, added to and sold. In addition to these two series, Simon and Schuster also issued a new set of *Tom Swift* books containing thirteen volumes between 1991 and 1993, as well as a combined *Hardy Boys/Tom Swift Ultra Thriller* series with two volumes in 1992 and 1993 (18). It was estimated in the early 1970's that since "1910 Stratemeyer Syndicate has originated over a hundred series, totaling more than 1,200 titles" (Mason 7).

Writers for Stratemeyer signed over their authorial rights to him in their contracts, and the identities of the real authors were closely guarded because he felt that the series would be less popular if children thought there was not one sole author. For this reason, and because of Stratemeyer's extremely private nature, it is very difficult to discern

³ Tot series refers to series written specifically for young children. The ages of the characters in this series are four and eight, and later become six and twelve, reflecting the usual ages of children who read them.

which books he wrote himself, which authors wrote the other books, and even if certain books are Syndicate books. Since the sale of the Syndicate, more has become known about who wrote the series, and some of the real authors have become well known for their efforts. One example is the Garis family, and in particular Howard Garis, who wrote many volumes for the Syndicate. Garis could write a complete book in three weeks while holding a full time job at a newspaper, and his wife and children wrote as well (Dizer 8). They were responsible for writing nearly all of the *Tom Swift* books, the *Motor Boys* series, some of the *Bobbsey Twins* books, and many others (6). The author of twenty-three of the original thirty *Nancy Drew* books has been discovered and acknowledged by newspapers such as the *New York Times* (Brown E7) and authors such as Bobbie Ann Mason (Mason x). Mildred Wirt Benson essentially created the girl detective that millions have loved and followed avidly for generations, despite earlier claims that Harriet Stratemeyer Adams, Edward's daughter, was the series' author. According to an interview, Benson did not model Nancy after herself, although the author has had many great and independent adventures of her own, but instead "made her good-looking, smart and a perfectionist. I made her a concept of the girl I'd like to be," she told *New York Times* reporter Patricia Leigh Brown right before her appearance as guest of honor at the first Nancy Drew Conference in 1993. Benson's comments perhaps present an insight into why the girl sleuth became, and remains, so loved. In a way, *Nancy Drew* is not just a popular set of books, but also a popular person in the eyes of her young readers.

Nancy and Her Critics: How She Fights Back

Though critics have derided the *Nancy Drew* series for its formulaic nature and its sometimes flat and unchanging characters, the series began as a blockbuster and continues to be written and sold even today. Interestingly, many of the claims made against the books turn out to be its best points when reconsidered. For example, as with all series, critics have claimed that the characters are too stereotypical and structured. However, taking as example Bess and George, Nancy's best friends, the juxtaposition of the three characters next to one another reflects traits of the main character that are significantly made clearer through her friends' personalities. George is typically described as a 'tomboy,' with a short hair-cut and a penchant for participating in adventures and physical activities with Nancy. Oppositely, Bess is described as a 'romantic,' who is pleasantly plump and the first to become scared in dangerous situations. Despite their stereotypes, more than one scholar has commented on the reflection of Nancy's two sides, male and female, that her friends initiate. Mason, though agreeing that the characters are shallow, says of George and Bess, "[t]hey are recognizable only by their loyalty and as mirrors of Nancy's two halves, demonstrating the extreme options open to females—tomboy and fluff head" (56).

Sally E. Parry has also recognized Bess Marvin and George Fayne as representations of the male and female sides of Nancy's personality (qtd. in Parry 149). The cousins have also been seen in a homosexual context, in particular at the "Rediscovering Nancy Drew Conference" in a talk entitled "Lesbian Code in Nancy Drew Mystery Stories" (Brown). As could be expected, Benson, who began writing the stories in the late 1920's, is appalled at this suggestion (Brown), though modern reader

response theory leaves the *Nancy Drew* stories open to many interpretations. Whatever can be found in the characters, it is clear at least that the two portray extremes from which young girls are expected to learn. In some cases, George is too manly; she does not have the tact or nurturing that is sometimes necessary in difficult situations (Keene, *Haunted* 49). Bess, on the other hand, is sometimes too feminine, always being tempted by rich foods and romantic settings, while being too scared to help herself in dangerous situations. Thus, neither character is the ideal, a lesson girls, especially girls of the early 1930's, needed to hear to understand the best balance of traits. In contrast, Nancy appears as the heroine should, the perfect balance of male and female, able to comfort a hurt child and able to change a flat tire in the rain ten pages later. As Deborah L. Siegel points out in "Nancy Drew As New Girl Wonder: Solving It All for the 1930's," Nancy was exactly the kind of heroine needed during the Great Depression, for her social activism in returning money and treasure to its rightful owner, and providing a role model for young females whose mothers had only just won the right to vote and had not usually achieved anything beyond housewifery (160).

As for Nancy herself, though her numerous adventures allow readers to see many perfected sides to her, from maternal caring and social justice to rational thinking and adroit speaking skills, her character, as critics point out, is largely unable to develop or change. Many people argue that one of the most important aspects of books is how main characters change or grow based on the circumstances; this is true even for series books where scholars comment that the only good series can be ones where the characters grow and age. Examples of this type of series are L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* series and Louisa May Alcott's short *Little Women* series. Despite this view, Nancy

Drew remains a good character in a good series precisely because she does not change. As Mason says, “Nancy can’t afford to look back” (134). If she does, she will have to grow up, and it is exactly her position—just past childhood, with the freedom of responsibility this entails, and just prior to adulthood, with the respect and freedom of movement it permits—that allows the stories work. Nancy’s stance on the precipice of independence is appealing to children who wish they could be as clear-headed and independent as an adult while still having the fun and adventure of a child in the way that only Nancy Drew does (50).

Also, Nancy’s existence in a perpetual eighteenth summer, a frequent criticism, only seems to bother adults. For children, time passes much more slowly than it does for adults; in the time it takes the child to read the whole series, which could be less than a year for an interested and avid reader, it is not odd that Nancy is always eighteen, even if it is an unusually long and eventful summer. A child does not care that the series was written over the course of seventy years, or that Hannah never becomes elderly (in truth, she becomes younger if any change occurs). This steadiness allows for a reader to pick up in the middle, reading number twenty-five before number one, and never be confused about what is going on. And a devoted reader is actually rewarded, as small pieces of Nancy’s family history are revealed throughout the series, filling in gaps that were unattended to in earlier editions. One example of this is Nancy’s mother, who had died when Nancy was very young, and who left items, such as a black veil and fan for her daughter (Keene, *Haunted*). These details are not revealed immediately and simultaneously, though; they must be gathered from many volumes of the series.

In addition, Nancy does not have a lot to learn and thus, as contrary as this seems to scholars of ‘good’ literature, cannot really develop. Though only eighteen, she is essentially a fully-formed and completely rational adult in the first book, *The Secret of the Old Clock*. She delivers papers to a judge for her lawyer father, she decides to take on the solving of a mystery for herself, using her own car and governing her own day, and she even drives fifty miles to do some sleuthing (and vacationing) at a friend’s camp ground. In short, Nancy is unlike many characters that begin flawed, with bad tempers such as Anne Shirley and with overly impulsive natures such as Jo March. Her personality and maturity may seem too perfect to be true, and even impossible, but in fiction, stranger things have happened.

And despite Nancy’s static nature, the series itself is far from unchanging. Over the years since the series was written, Harriet Stratemeyer Adams has updated the books to stay modern and to appeal to the newest generation of readers. Some of the things that have changed are Nancy’s clothes, which went from sports dresses to pant suits, her mode of travel, from trains to planes (Mason 131), and her car, which started as a roadster, then became a convertible, and finally a Mustang GT convertible, always in blue (Siegel 159). Adams has also included sub-plots to complicate the mysteries because modern readers are more “sophisticated” and demand more intricate plot lines. She points out that some stories needed to be entirely rewritten, with some, such as *Nancy Drew: The Invisible Intruder*, gaining as many as five sub-plots to keep readers intrigued (Mason 134). Not only have the first books been re-written with these changes, but new books have been added to the series, including new paperbacks, still called the *Nancy Drew Mystery Stories*, followed by the paperback *Nancy Drew Case Files*, where

most of the adventures occur on college campuses. The latest, *Nancy Drew: girl detective*, features the girl sleuth on the researching Fabergé eggs on the Internet and speaking in the first person (Keene *Without* 69). Though the revisions have come under critical fire because they do not change Nancy enough to become as radically independent in relation to today's society as she was for women in the 30's, the new adaptations have allowed for corrections of the older texts. In this vein, rewrites have also included updates allowing the series to be more politically correct, removing racial stereotypes that were common in the 1930's such as lowered status of servants, particularly black servants. Mason explains that "[t]he racism and snobbery which were an inherent part of the original series—because they were an inherent part of the society it mirrored—have been dealt with firmly in the revisions and newer volumes" (132). These changes then, are clearly for the better in at least some aspects, because society has changed significantly in regard to class and society and old references would be out of date and inappropriate for new readers.

Commentators have also criticized Nancy, as they have all of the Stratemeyer Syndicate books, for what they consider to be a mindless string of adventures that keep children reading but do not constitute good literature. Deborah O'Keefe disagrees with this theory, claiming that "[a]t an extreme, plot-driven stories are a series of meaningless physical actions, as witless as today's action movies composed of a karate fight, a gun fight and a car chase. Nancy Drew's adventures were better than that. She had 'male' qualities like courage and initiative, while remaining thoughtful, cooperative, and 'feminine'" (116). No matter how action-oriented the books may be, it remains that the books promote values that society still cherishes, such as kindness to those in need,

respect of elders, even when they are wrong, and strong moral codes against promiscuity. Despite these values, which could be considered drawbacks to the series from a young, modern reader's point of view, the allure of a girl detective and her many adventures is one that has been long-lasting.

Nancy's real strength is her feminist independence and strength, which she exhibits as much today as for women of the 1930's. An enormous part of this is that Nancy is a female character that is not defined by her boyfriend; in fact, she hardly notices him and he is often referred to as her friend. This aspect is what actually draws young girls into the books. Many people have put together theories on why the books, especially the older ones, are still popular despite their somewhat outdated situations and even messages. The fast moving, intricately laid out plot, which rewards a careful reader by infallibly tying in every loose end, is the initial appeal. But what keeps girls coming back for more of the books is Nancy's alluring relationship to Ned. Somehow, American girls are ingrained with a fascination and adoration of fairy tale endings, despite feminist movements and society's continuing push against the unrealistic Cinderella-type finale. But Nancy never gives the reader even the pleasure of a kiss with her prince, though no young girl knows this when they pick up book after book of the series to savor the few chapters into which Ned is allowed. Interestingly, this absence does not discourage the most fairy-tale fixated girl; instead, she is further drawn into to the life of Nancy, who does not let her man define her, control her, or distract her. Despite the fact that is a female reader's attraction to the idea of the Nancy and Ned couple that often brings them to read each and every volume of the series, it is exactly the nonexistence of this

relationship that intrigues her, and provides Nancy's knock out punch to her critics: she is the ultimate female model, even when she is relying on the capital of Mr. Drew.

Nancy Goes to School

As could be expected, Nancy Drew is not a mainstay in school curricula because her critics have done a good job keeping her out of libraries and schools for decades. However, this has not deterred every teacher, nor should it. As discussed previously, series books are ideal for new and slow readers because their similarity allows readers to gain confidence, fluency and practice. The *Nancy Drew* stories, as the *Hardy Boys* stories, are ideal for this purpose because they are fun, action-filled and spellbinding for children. In addition, there are many educational aspects of the books that allow them to fit well into the classroom, and the wide variety of books to choose from permits teachers to adapt their reading lessons to other subjects that children are learning simultaneously. For example, in *The Haunted Showboat*, there is an extensive and accurate discussion of New Orleans, its ports and the Mississippi River. One of the characters, Donna Mae, explains that the New Orleans port is a foreign trade zone and that this means goods can come into the port and be transferred to an outgoing ship without automatically being subject to United States tariffs (Keene, *Haunted* 108). This makes the port very busy and an important part of trade in Louisiana and in the US. A page later, the same character points out a banana boat that is painted white to reflect the sun and keep the fruit stored in it cool with the purpose of keeping it from rotting (109). Interestingly, the author also uses this explanation as a character development piece, allowing Nancy to see beyond Donna Mae's seemingly spoiled and fickle outer personality to her true intelligence within, leading to clues about the solution of the mystery. The same book also centers on

an old showboat that used to make trips up and down river, by means of tugboats, designed for the wealthy to vacation on it. Clearly, there is much material in the book that can be expanded upon in the classroom in literature based lessons about southern history, foreign trade and even the festival of Mardi Gras, which is taking place during the story. Other books include scientific aspects about how things work, such as types of cars, the mechanisms inside a clock and the use of Archimedes' lever (Keene, *Secret* 114).

In addition to exposure to facts about science and history, young readers are also introduced to many words that readers of their age would not use in conversation but should begin to recognize. An eight-year old could read *Nancy Drew* and come across words such as 'harrowing,' 'obligingly,' and 'belligerent,' and be presented with phrases such as "an azure blue" (*Secret* 94) and "courage of your convictions" (62). As cliché as these passages may be to an adult, few, if any, children will have come across them before and just this cursory exposure to adult words will help their reading and writing skills to improve and their vocabularies to expand. Teachers can use the words and phrases in classroom lessons that range from how to consult a dictionary when you come to a difficult word to how to use context clues, which are abundant in the *Nancy Drew* series, to make an educated guess at what a word means. Other word lessons that educators can pull from the series revolve around how words can create a feeling. This lesson is one that is important for children especially when they are learning how to write on their own. For example, when Nancy is about to uncover a big clue in *The Secret of the Old Clock*, the words 'hurry,' 'directly,' 'eagerly,' and 'quickly walked' are used within one page of writing (Keene 27-28). By choosing these words, the author leads the

reader to feel Nancy's sense of urgency to get to her appointment with a man who might help solve the mystery. Examples such as this one abound in the series, making it an excellent choice for teaching, especially because it contains a writing style that children can not only understand, but can imitate easily as they begin to learn about word choice in texts.

The *Nancy Drew* series is also an excellent way for teachers to give male and female students an introduction to the feminist notion of an adventurous, strong, independent woman. As far as American society has come since the series first began, it is obvious that women are not equal in every way to men, and community pressures still often cause young girls to feel weak, while their male counterparts feel dominant. Nancy Drew, who acts grown-up, but is still young, represents a strong female role model for young boys and girls alike. Fortunately, there also exist Nancy's male counterparts, the *Hardy Boys*, which can be read in the classroom as well, to introduce male detectives to the class in a balanced way. By using one of the books from each series in lesson plans that involve ideas about detectives, gender, and the mystery genre, educators can accomplish legitimate teaching objectives while concurrently introducing children to a set of books they might read at home for pleasure, with every bonus, including practice, which reading for pleasure brings to young readers.

Another aspect of the *Nancy Drew* series is the fact that it is a set of mystery stories, a genre many people have advocated as great tools for educating children. One website, mysterynet.com, describes why mysteries can work in the classroom. The site explains:

“Mysteries get reluctant students enthusiastic about reading, thinking and writing. While textbooks can be dry, mysteries, with their intrigue, characters, and

gradually revealed storyline, hold the students' interest. Students become involved in what they are reading because they use deductive reasoning and research skills to solve the mystery." ("Why Use")

The site also argues that mysteries can be used to attain "higher levels of thinking" based on the stages of Bloom's Taxonomy, with knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation all being enhanced through classroom use of mysteries. It provides free lesson plans for teachers that generally work with any mystery and also has a page devoted entirely to *Nancy Drew* that can be used by the teacher for background information and other ideas. Mysterynet is not the only website offering lesson plans that work with many books in the mystery genre, and even a quick search of the web supplies a teacher with many resources for designing a unit that includes *Nancy Drew* and other mysteries as well.

As with all literature, the *Nancy Drew* series is multilayered. When taken at face value, the books can easily be dismissed by critics who know little about education and less about children. However, with a little ingenuity and creativity, teachers can easily bring out the educative aspects of the series and employ it successfully in the classroom, perhaps bringing an entirely new group of children to the books and giving them a gateway into the world of reading outside of the schoolroom, for pleasure, for adventure and for escape.

Chapter 5: Case Study of *Harry Potter*—The Newest Empire

The phenomenon of the *Harry Potter* series is one that will not be soon forgotten. The series' popularity seems poised to place it within the canon of children's series books for a long time to come, despite the negative reactions of literary critics and conservative parents worldwide. In fact, it is precisely this popularity that has given rise to the numerous critics who have spoken out about the detriments of the series. It was not until 1999, three books and nearly three years into the series, that significant criticism was being leveled at the stories by book reviewers and literary critics such as Harold Bloom and *Horn Book's* Martha V. Parravano (Nel 55). Prior to these criticisms, which seemed concerned more with Harry Potter's popularity than any other issue, most commentators "embraced the novels" (54). Interestingly, this popularity factor is ubiquitous in criticisms of all series books, as if, in the minds of often snobbish literary analysts, modern-day fame is the ultimate sign of unworthiness.

There are two main groups of critics of the *Harry Potter* series—professionals and parents. This, however, does not mean all people who fit into these categories are automatically against the books. Professionals include reviewers, English professors, and journalists who generally have some knowledge and training in relevant fields to assess books. Unfortunately, not every critic has adequate knowledge of children's literature, or of the literary tradition at all, to present opinions that are educated, despite the wide audience their ideas, in the form of newspaper columns and journal articles, usually receive. Bloom, who is well known for his Shakespearean and Romantic-era criticisms, spoke out against the *Harry Potter* series in the *Wall Street Journal* in July, 2000, opining that the stories, or at least the first story, is full of clichés and does not "[possess] an

authentic imaginative vision” (Bloom, “Can 35” A26). Just last year, Bloom, writing in the *Boston Globe*, returns to the Rowling books in an article condemning Stephen King’s receiving the 2003 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, arguing that the *Harry Potter* books do not deserve the attention of children, even if they are the only reading material that competes with video games and other modern day distractions. Bloom would have children reading Rudyard Kipling and other classics such as Kenneth Grahame’s *Wind in the Willows* and Lewis Carol’s *Alice*, or nothing at all, despite the lack of appeal these canonized pieces have for many children. It is his feeling that Rowling is an inferior writer and therefore it is his belief that children would be better off reading nothing than reading the nearly 2,000 pages of her series (Bloom, “Dumbing”).

Bloom’s obvious distaste for anything popular, which even extends to fifteenth-century female writers such as Aphra Behn, presumably for the current popularity of feminist analysis, perhaps explains his vehemence toward the series and hints at why other critics have similar concerns (Bloom, “Dumbing”). Children’s writer and member of the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), Aaron Shepard, aptly demonstrates why adults, especially highly literate adults such as critics, reviewers and professors, automatically distrust anything that is popular. In an article criticizing the growth of the children’s book business, Shepard points out that whatever becomes popular in a small sense receives attention from large companies who pour money in to reap the benefits of what they see as an investment in growing popularity. Once businesses become involved, anything unique or expressive about the original product is often erased. He describes the phenomenon in this way:

“When big money moves in, creativity, originality, and freedom move out. The reason is risk. When a lot of money is at stake, the investors insist on a safe

product. And they get what they want. Formulas reign. Products are geared to the mass market meaning, the lowest common denominator.” (Shepard)

Shepard uses these factors to condemn children’s series, which he believes are solely produced as ‘safe’ money makers and are inherently ‘schlocky.’ Though written in 1988, this article is re-published on the web as “hold[ing] interest for the light it casts on conditions [of the children’s book business] today.” Clearly, the SCBWI questions multi-million dollar enterprises such as the *Harry Potter* series. When critics use these justifications to denounce J.K. Rowling and her books, however, they are not considering the origins of the series. In more than one account, including Philip Nel’s comprehensive guide to the first four books of the series, it has been pointed out that from the start Rowling saw *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*⁴ “as the first in a seven-book series” (20). At the time of writing this first volume, Rowling was first supported by public assistance, then teaching, and finally a grant of £8,000 by the Scottish Arts Council (21). Undoubtedly, the idea of losing money for the sake of originality did not deter a nearly-broke Rowling while she was crafting the basis for the series, especially considering that she had no way of knowing if the book would achieve the popularity to fund her writing of the following six volumes. Later popularity, no matter how great, could never go back and change the plot devices and series plans that were laid out in the first book, which include major story lines about Lord Voldemort, Sirius Black, and even the origins, and thus the formative aspects, of the main character (Rowling, *Sorcerer’s*).

At the same time many of these criticisms were coming out about the books in particular, other publishers began getting angry about the popularity of the books as well. Contrastingly, this was not because they had anything against popularity; in fact, these

⁴ In the United States, this British title of the first Potter book was translated to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* to be more appealing to American children.

critics were often the biggest names in publishing best sellers such as John Grisham and Danielle Steele. The complaint the publishers lodged against J.K. Rowling and *Harry Potter* was just the opposite: being too popular, and therefore excluding other books from the bestseller lists, particularly the top spots of the list. When the fourth book came out, the *New York Times Book Review* listened to the other publishers and took the drastic step of dividing its bestseller list into an adult list and a children's list (Bloom "Can 35," Nel 65). According to Caroline Gascoigne, the *Sunday Times* in London had always excluded the books from its list because it never believed children's books should be included in the "prestigious and reliable list" (qtd. in Nel 64), though it did, however, list the *Star Wars* books when they were popular (65). It was on July 23, 2000 that the *Harry Potter* books should have taken "four of the top five spots on the list," when all of the books were moved over onto a newly created children's list. This list was later further divided by editor Charles McGrath into 'Chapter,' 'Paperback,' and 'Picture' lists which rotated in appearance every three weeks (65). Thus, Rowling and Potter went from the filling out the top of a bestseller list that is posted in bookstores and libraries around the country weekly to a list that is published only every third week and rarely noticed or posted.

The *Harry Potter* books suffered in the hands of others as well. In *Harry Potter Novels: A Reader's Guide*, Nel also chronicles professional critics, most of whom began speaking out after the publication of the third Potter novel, at what could be seen as the peak of the series' popularity up to that point. Three European critics, Terence Blacker (a children's author), Alan Taylor (a Scottish journalist) and Pico Iyer (a writer known for travel narratives) found the novels morally 'black and white' and old fashioned (56-57).

Nicholas Tucker, professor at the University of Sussex, wrote similarly about the “distinctly backward-looking quality” and the lack of “moral ambiguities” in Rowling’s books in his article “The Rise and Rise of Harry Potter” published in a 1999 volume of *Children’s Literature in Education* (221-222). Other critics seemed to want to warn adults about the books, with Hettie Judah of the Glasgow *Herald* admonishing that the books are “‘not strictly timeless stories’ but ‘Enid Blyton with broomsticks’” (qtd. in Nel 58), a gibe at the series intended to focus adults’ attention on the tenet of the inferior quality of children’s series books in general. When the third book arrived in the United States, critics, including Bloom, were sometimes just as harsh in their need to steer adults away from praising and further popularizing *Harry Potter*. One example is Roger Sutton, writing in *Horn Book*, that the Rowling books are a “likeable but critically insignificant series” (qtd. in Nel 59).

An entirely different set of criticisms arose from the parental opponents of *Harry Potter*. Though many readers of the books have found it hard to believe, a large group of mainly conservative, evangelical and fundamental Christians have leveled charges of Satanism and occultism at the series. Because the books include witches, wizards, potions and magical spells, these people claim that Rowling and the series are promoting witchcraft and demonism in children. Groups such as these have challenged the *Harry Potter* books with such vehemence, the series topped the American Library Association’s list of Most Frequently Challenged Books of 2002. J.K. Rowling also topped the Most Frequently Challenged Authors list in 2000, 2001, and 2002. And though *Harry Potter* only became popular in the very late 1990’s— indeed, it did not exist before 1997—the series managed to come in at the forty-eighth position on the 100 Most Frequently

Challenged Books of 1990-2000, including both adult and children's books. Interestingly, there are six other children's series on the list, all of them falling within the top twenty-eight, and one, the *Scary Stories* series by Alvin Schwartz, even topping the list. These challenges, according to the ALA are brought by parents, patrons, and administrators in schools, school libraries and public libraries. Nearly 850 of the challenges were brought on the grounds that the books contained "material with an 'occult theme or promoting the occult or Satanism'" (American Library Association).

Groups such as Family Friendly Libraries (FFL), Parents Against Bad Books in Schools (PABBIS) and Mission American all have spoken out against Harry Potter on their websites, in their publications, and in interviews published in newspapers and journals. However, one article by Jonathan Zimmerman points out that "many—possibly most—'evangelical Christians' actually *like* Harry Potter" and that is only a handful of outspoken people who express the belief that the series promotes Satanism. In fact, Zimmerman argues that many evangelicals, including the prominent Charles Colson and Alan Jacobs, consider Rowling's books to be promoting Christianity, presumably because of the way they advocate the triumph of good over evil (Zimmerman). Unfortunately, the parent groups who do dislike the books because of the inclusion of what they believe to be occultist themes have caused problems for teachers, libraries and school districts that own the books and include them in the curriculum. In fact, after a complaint by a parent in the Zeeland Public School system in Michigan, Superintendent Gary Feenstra decided to immediately make every child obtain a parent's permission to read the series, despite the district's policy of reviewing books before restricting access to them (Manzo). This event sparked a nation-wide campaign against censorship by groups such as the National

Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), kidsSPEAK (an organization of children supporting free speech), and an association created by the children in the Zeeland schools called 'Muggles for Harry Potter' (Manzo).

Teachers have been significantly affected by parental concerns over the *Harry Potter* books, and some have chosen to exclude them from the classroom because of the debates they bring. For teachers who do decide to use the books, controversy has sometimes been so great that the National Council of Teachers of English has created rationales for teaching the books that can be used by teachers at no cost to defend their choice of employing the book in the classroom. The rationales exist for many books that are frequently challenged, including *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and even the children's picture book series *Strega Nona* (Brown and Stevens 7). They include the intended audience and grade level of the book, a summary of the piece, its educational values, the significance, potential problems, a collection of positive professional reviews, and alternatives to reading it for students whose parents do not agree with the book being used in the classroom (2). Armed with this information, a teacher should be able to adequately present the case as to why *Harry Potter*, or any of the other challenged books, can and should be used in the classroom. However, tensions run high in the realm of children and education, often causing passionate viewpoints to stand in the way of rational decisions.

Rowling books in the classroom became such a heated argument that the *New York Times* even covered the issue of schools' controversies with *Harry Potter* on the front page in November 1999. The paper features the story of an elementary school in Clarence, New York where fifth grader Eric Poliner, the son of born-again-Christians

must go into the hallway or library when teacher Margaret Cusack reads aloud from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Because his parents do not agree with the book's content, he is not allowed to participate in activities dealing with it. Because the other children benefit so greatly and are so enthralled by the story, the school will not ban it (Wilgoren A1). Unfortunately, all of the time spent arguing the legal rights of parents, educators, schools, and children to read and teach the books has transferred all of the attention about the book away from the most important issue: how remarkable they are and how they can be used to show children the pleasure—not the criticism and controversy—reading has to offer.

Literary Strong Points of Harry Potter

Why are all of these critics wrong? Aside from the simple fact that books are books and reading is reading when it comes to children who have a lot of other activities to compete for their time in the twenty-first century, the *Harry Potter* books are easily some of the highest quality literature written for children in the past few decades. In addition, there is nothing in the books that promotes the worship of Satan or even the practice of the occult. The books may contain fantasy, medieval elements, and fairy tale-esque witches and wizards, but Rowling never advocates the use of curses, spells, or magic in life outside of the novels. The truth is that, despite the fears critics have about the intelligence of the average reader, Rowling's books are exemplary because they appeal to so many different levels. The fact that the books are written in a series format may increase the scorn they are given, but it simultaneously enhances the story by allowing for development, devoted readership and even for more intelligent writing.

While it may be true that marginally popular books, movies or television shows need to effectively ‘dumb down’ their storylines, characters and symbolism in order to keep up sales, the *Harry Potter* series’ immense and unalterable success allows for creativity, individuality and artistic expression that may not be allowed in anything less popular. It should be evident to any adult who reads the books that there are multiple levels within the stories, causing the widespread appeal. Examples of this are within the humor of the books, which ranges from the “gross eleven-year old humor” (Saltman 25) of the main characters, with Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans in Spinach and Earwax, to more understated adult humor, including a dialogue between Ron and Harry when they first meet and Harry is trying to more clearly understand the wizarding world he has never known:

“‘Are all your family wizards?’ asked Harry, who found Ron just as interesting as Ron found him.

‘Er—yes, I think so,’ said Ron. “I think Mom’s got a second cousin who’s an accountant, but we never talk about him.”” (Rowling, *Sorcerer’s* 99)

In these few short lines, Rowling adds a type of satire that many children may not pick up on because the humor lies in the fact that adults often ignore the existence of family members who are weird or different unless their strangeness is perceived as a benefit. While children could be aware of this societal norm, it is much more obvious to adults who participate in the censoring of family members than it would be to children who are not usually concerned with such differences. Other multileveled situations arise when Rowling presents questions of good versus bad, where children may only recognize Lord Voldemort and his followers as bad, adults and older readers can appreciate bad choices and even faulty motives in good characters, such as Harry’s initial wish of killing Sirius Black in the series third volume (*Prisoner*339).

This multilayered quality goes along with the character development that is shown throughout the series. Obviously, Harry, Ron, Hermione and their classmates grow simply because they are becoming older. When the series begins, Harry is about to celebrate his eleventh birthday; by the time we reach the end of the fifth book, the latest one to have been published, Harry is nearing his sixteenth birthday. Additionally, however, other characters grow and change throughout the series in a way that could not be done if the story was not set up in a serial format. The series 'venue' allows Rowling to lay out adventures, obstacles and events that are worked through and often overcome by characters, permitting them to develop regardless of age. She is also able to set up a certain view of a character, almost a suggestion of their relative good- or evilness, and later dispel it by more fully developing a flat or shallow character. Excellent examples of this type of development are found in the characters of Professor Severus Snape, Lord Voldemort and Albus Dumbledore. While Snape is set up for the first three books as an unequivocally bad person, his role changes in the fourth and fifth books when he becomes an essential member of the Order of the Phoenix, the secret group battling to stop Voldemort from returning to full power. While Snape still loathes Harry, his suspicious personality traits become more fully explained and the reader is able to understand the nuances of his character, which include a long history of near torture by Harry's father and friends while they were classmates at Hogwarts together. Voldemort is also developed as a character throughout the series, and though our opinion of him does not necessarily change—he is, after all, the arch-villain of the story—he is given depth in each book as a part of his history is revealed. Through these revelations, the reader is able to see Voldemort while he is a student at Hogwarts, while he is a child and while his

gaining strength as the Dark Lord. Nel describes Rowling's technique as one that "prevent[s] Voldemort from remaining a campy caricature [by telling] us about his childhood, school days, and patricide. His inner life—rejected by his father, raised in an orphanage—makes Voldemort almost sympathetic" (34). Indisputably, Rowling uses the each additional detail about Voldemort to draw a more distinct parallel between Harry and the villain, and this is perhaps to illustrate one of her main themes, which is that a person distinguishes themselves by the choices they make, not by any inherent destiny. This is a point that Dumbledore, another developing character, makes to Harry at the end of the second novel when the boy is becoming worried about these striking similarities. Throughout the following three volumes, Dumbledore's ability to assuage fears and act as a mentor to Harry is seriously undermined. When the series begins, it seems as though Dumbledore can solve any problem and has the answer to any question. As the evil forces grow in power, however, it turns out that this is not the case, disproving early critics who discounted the ability of Rowling to make her characters more realistic. One critic claimed that Dumbledore had "the air of an omniscient divinity about him" and was "always there in moments of greatest crisis, providing Harry and his readers with another reassuring and attractive fantasy figure" (Tucker 223). When Dumbledore fails to protect Harry from Voldemort's tricks and later questions his own motives in revealing the truth about Harry's past to the boy, the reader is quickly awoken from this fantasy, if it ever existed at all.

Other literary strong points of the *Harry Potter* series include well-woven intertextuality that covers children's classics, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, traditional British boarding-school books, like Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, and the

Narnia series, as well as mythological tales, Cinderella-type fairy tales, and even the wit and social commentary of Jane Austen, one of Rowling's own favorite authors (Nel 13). Intertextuality is important in the series for two reasons: to appeal to adults who are aware of the wider range of literature and to introduce children to the interplay of books with each other and the enrichment of the story that this creates. The most striking way other texts come into *Harry Potter* are through references to mythology and mythological creatures. An example of this begins with the structure of the Hogwarts houses, which consist of four divisions, each with its own colors, founder and coat of arms. The Great Hall, where all meals are eaten and the school gathers together for announcements and parties, is decorated with these colors and the tables are separated by house allegiances. Most adults can recognize the medieval qualities of these accoutrements that are reminiscent of the tales of knights and the King Arthur myths. Harkening back further to Greek and Roman mythology, Rowling also includes references to legendary creatures, such as the basilisk, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes as a "fabulous reptile...alleged to be hatched by a serpent from a cock's egg; ancient authors stated that its hissing drove away all other serpents, and that's its breath, and even its look, was fatal." This creature, with much the same characteristics, is the monster Harry must face at the end of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, and its qualities are determined by Hermione after searching old books of mythological creatures in the library. Another creature that plays a role in the Harry Potter books is the phoenix, whose legendary healing powers and ability to burst into flames and be re-born of its own ashes are often referred to in literature and art of all time periods. This particular phoenix is a pet of Dumbledore's, whose name is Fawkes. Saltman suggests that this is a "tongue-in-cheek

reference to the U.K.'s Guy Fawkes, who is annually burned in effigy" (27). Ignorance of Guy Fawkes Day, his alleged treason and the plot to blow up the palace in the early seventeenth century does not, however, preclude understanding of the *Harry Potter* series, or even a comprehension of the scenes including Fawkes the Phoenix. Rowling provides a young reader with ample information to connect to the animal, especially when he saves Harry with his healing tears, while at the same time including other levels of understanding for more advanced readers. Nel has also pointed out that Rowling may be making references to Shakespeare's "brave, charming, impulsive" Harry Hotspur of *Henry IV* and his Hermione, who was thought dead when her statue came back to life in *The Winter's Tale*, as well as Jane Austen's Mrs. Norris, a "Fanny's nasty, bossy aunt" of *Mansfield Park* (32). A careful reader of the first two books of the Harry Potter series will see the similarities Rowling's characters have to these classic characters, where Hermione is frozen like a statue from a run-in with the basilisk and Mrs. Norris, the cat of the student-hating caretaker Mr. Filch, is repeatedly catching pupils and getting them into trouble. These allusions are examples of not only the multi-leveled nature of the series, but also its reference to other texts. In addition, these references educate and enrich the reader, while illuminating the reasons behind the books' appeal to people of all ages and reading levels.

Harry Potter also moves into the educational realm through the vocabulary and names used in the stories. Again, there is a double level: where young children do not know many words or have not yet learned the meanings of common Latin root words, they are able to learn something about the word based on its context and the object or person it describes; on the other hand, where more mature readers are aware of Latin

roots and have a larger vocabulary, their knowledge enhances the reading experience by providing clues about situations and characters while increasing appreciation of Rowling's clever combinations of these morphemes. Within only the first volume of the series, Rowling introduces a teacher of Herbology, a class where students learn care of magical plants, as Professor Sprout. She also names Professor Vindictus Viridian as the writer of a book called *Curses and Countercurses (Bewitch Your Friends and Befuddle Your Enemies with the Latest Revenges: Hair Loss, Jelly-Legs, Tongue-Tying and Much, Much More)*. Another example is Rowling's creation a group of bullies named Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, whose names are surely related to their ill-tempered natures. Subsequent volumes contain Dementors, who deplete people of hope, eventually leaving them insane, and animangi, who are wizards that can disguise themselves by turning into animals. The names chosen for each character clearly fits his or her profession and personality, augmenting the reading experience of adults while educating newer readers. For example, while a child may not know the words vindicate, vindictive, or vindictiveness, Rowling's use of the words in the book title coupled with the name of an author gives a beginning reader the context to relate any of these words to the concept behind them: revenge. It would be foolish to assume that all children would pick up on subtle aspects of the language such as these, especially considering the fast moving pace of the plot. However, the series lends itself to re-reading because of Rowling's word play and repetition of this use of vocabulary throughout the story. Upon second and third readings, which are sure to occur, this use of root words and context clues will clearly expand any reader's knowledge of words, an essential aspect in becoming highly fluent and literate.

Rowling's creative use of language has also been noted for its word-play that includes puns, anagrams and riddles that challenge and engage readers of all ages. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Tom Marvolo Riddle, a student at Hogwarts fifty years earlier, is discovered by Harry to be Voldemort, which is based on an anagram of his name (Tom Marvolo Riddle turns into I am Lord Voldemort). The Mirror of Erised in the first book is a mirror that Dumbledore warns Harry about, explaining that it "shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts" (*Sorcerer's* 213). Cleverly, when the mirror's name is reversed, Erised becomes desirE, and its inscription, "Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi," becomes "I show not your face but your hearts desire" (207). The books also contain riddles, such as that of the Sphinx in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, whose answer is needed to complete the third task of the Triwizard Tournament:

*"First think of the person who lives in disguise,
Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies.
Next, tell me what's always the last thing to mend,
The middle of middle and end of the end?
And finally give me the sound often heard
During the search of a hard-to-find word.
Now string them together, and answer me this,
Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?"* (629)

The answers are "spy," "d," and "er," with the final answer a combination of them for "spider." In a similar situation in the first book, Hermione solves a logic puzzle to determine which potions on the table will get Harry through a wall of flames to save the Sorcerer's Stone. The word games and puns that Rowling includes in all books of the series are important in explaining their appeal, because both children and adults are drawn in by the temptation of attempting to figure out the puzzles, which adds additional educational aspects as well. Many schools use these devices as fun ways to teach

children vocabulary, concentration and logic skills that are necessary in life for solving problems. They can also be used in the classroom for aiding reading comprehension and finding solutions to math questions and proofs. Without even knowing it, children reading the series are getting practice in this area, and it is significant that the setting of reading a book is non-threatening, even if it is in school, because while reading a story, there is no teacher looking for a solution to the puzzle, and the answer will inevitably be found within the next few pages if it becomes too difficult.

Another reason that the series proves critics wrong include the use of simply good literary devices such as description, foreshadowing and the planting of minor characters that become central in later chapters or books. In fact, within the first fifteen pages of the series, Sirius Black is mentioned as a character whose motorcycle is borrowed to bring Harry to his aunt and uncle's house after his parents are killed. Black is not mentioned again in a substantial way until the beginning of the third book of the series, where the reader learns that he has escaped from Azkaban, a wizard's prison, which was holding him for his central role in allowing Voldemort to find Harry's parents to murder them. The chronology of the night of their death is eventually laid out, one thousand pages into the series, and it is at this point that the reason for Sirius's lending the bike to Hagrid on page fourteen of the series is fully realized. This intricate foreshadowing not only proves Rowling's careful planning of the series, much in the way Stratemeyer carefully laid out his series before they were written, but it also leaves ample room for educators to use the books in lessons about literary predictions. One of the main objectives of early reading education is mastering clues in texts to read more meaningfully, and the attentively woven plot lines of *Harry Potter* make the series an exemplary learning tool. Rowling's

descriptive passages also invite careful study for inventive use of language and the vivid nouns and adjectives she employs. Describing Harry's first real Christmas dinner, which occurs at the Hogwarts dinner table:

“Harry had never in all his life had such a Christmas dinner. A hundred fat, roast turkeys; mountains of roast and boiled potatoes; platters of chipolatas; tureens of buttered peas, silver boats of thick, rich gravy and cranberry sauce—and stacks of wizard crackers every few feet along the table...Harry pulled a wizard cracker with Fred and it didn't just bang, it went off with a blast like a cannon and engulfed them all in a cloud of blue smoke, while from up inside exploded a rear admiral's hat and several live, white mice.” (*Sorcerer's* 203)

Words such as ‘tureen’ and ‘engulfed’ are not necessarily used everyday, but can be brought to the attention of both children and adults for the way in which they bring what could otherwise be a boring text to life. In every way, Rowling seems to reward careful readers young and old through language, humor, intertextuality and word play and for all of these reasons, *Harry Potter* should be, and is beginning to be, used in educational settings.

Educational Implementation of Harry Potter

As described earlier, one of the most resourceful ways the series has been used in the classroom is with students learning different languages. As explained earlier, ESL students in California were able to participate in a phenomenon of their age group by learning to read English by working their way through the *Harry Potter* books (Coatney). Countless other ideas have been executed by teachers with the books in their classrooms, despite the sometimes stifling effects of parental dislike of the novels. These lesson plans, some of which are described below, are an excellent springboard for more

involved lessons that can be brought into English classes, reading lessons, and even science and math lectures in the future.

An article in *Mathematics Teacher* in February 2002 explains a math lesson that is based on Hermione's logic puzzle at the end of the first *Harry Potter* book.⁵ Roger Howe, a math professor at Yale University, put together the three page piece with the intention that teacher's could follow his reasoning during a math lesson and use the logic puzzle to determine the arrangement of the potion bottles through deductive reasoning. He describes the problem presented in this way:

“Our challenge is to find all bottle arrangements that are compatible with the first, second, and forth clues; then we must find the possible positions of the dwarf and giant that result in exactly one solution for the entire problem. We solve this derived problem subsequently. Although our exposition is in the standard deductive format, teachers can convert it to an extended open-ended investigation. This activity might appeal strongly to students.” (87)

The reason this lesson is interesting to students is twofold. First, the natural appeal of the *Harry Potter* books can be ascertained by the enormous popularity of the books. Secondly, as Howe points out and many readers have probably noticed, it is nearly impossible to understand Hermione's deduction without spending a long time working on the puzzle; the fast paced narrative at the end of the novel, when Ron, Hermione and Harry are racing the clock to stop Voldemort from using the Sorcerer's Stone's life eternalizing powers, makes stopping to solve the puzzle a highly unlikely event. A reader may spend a minute or two trying to figure it out, but, surely being perplexed at

⁵ This puzzle reads: “*Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,/ Two of us will help you, whichever you would find,/ One among us seven will let you move ahead,/ Another will transport the drinker back instead,/ Two among our number hold only nettle wine,/ Three of us are killers, waiting hidden in line./ Choose, unless you wish to stay here forevermore,/ To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:/ First, however slyly the poison tries to hide/ You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;/ Second, different are those who stand at either end./ But if you would move onward, neither is your friend;/ Third, as you see clearly, all are different size,/ Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;/ Fourth, the second left and the second on the right/ Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight.* (285)

Hermione's quick solution, would probably move on with the narrative. Howe points out that the reason a casual reader would not be able to solve the brainteaser is because Rowling does not provide a diagram of how the potion bottles are situated, and the clues are dependent, in part, on where the 'dwarf' and 'giant' bottles are (87). Through somewhat complicated reasoning, which involves axioms (that Howe describes as 'clues') and ruling out impossible configurations, Howe, the teacher, and students are able to come up with what the bottles must have looked like to Hermione for her to have solved the puzzle correctly.

As strange as it seems to use a book in a math lesson, it may be even more unusual to use the *Harry Potter* books in a science lesson. Despite this apparent contradiction, Pamela Esprivalo Harrell and Andrea Morton delineate a lesson for using *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* to teach human genotypes and phenotypes. In a note to teachers, the *Science Activities* article points out that the lesson will work with children grades six to ten, and also mention that some parents raise objections to their children reading the book (26). In these instances, Harrell and Morton suggest other books about the subject of genetics and genetic diseases that can be substituted, such as the story of the hemophilic heir to the Russian throne that gave rise to Rasputin's power or the story of the genetic diseases caused by the inbreeding of the Hapsburg family in Europe (26). Beyond these obstacles, the idea behind the lesson is that children will be interested in the lesson because they enjoy the *Harry Potter* books, and will want to learn the subject because of how it relates to their favorite characters. First, the students must, in addition to reading the story, be taught some of the basics of genetics, such as dominant and recessive traits, and how to interpret pedigrees and Punnett Squares. After

this, the children can be asked to construct the pedigrees of the characters in the books based on the information provided by the author. Using a real life example, a pedigree could show the chances of the offspring of a couple having certain dominant or recessive traits, such as a widow's peak or the ability to roll the tongue. In this activity, the trait the children use is magical ability, which would be recessive, and non-magical ability (known as a Muggle, in the language of the book), a dominant trait. Based on the family histories provided in the story, students can figure out parents', brothers', sisters', and even aunts and uncles genotypes (here, this would be MM for homozygous Muggle, Mm for heterozygous Muggle, or mm for homozygous wizard or witch). Harrell and Morton also provide sample questions to assess students and deepen their knowledge of the lesson, including some funny scenarios where various characters marry each other and students need to decide what the likelihood of certain types of offspring would be (27).

In another article in the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L.F. Nilsen explain how the *Harry Potter* books aid in vocabulary building and the ways teachers can use this in the classroom. The premise of their article is the fact that *Harry Potter* books present an engaging way to teach new words. The authors compare the book setting to that of the September 11 attacks that forced many new words into American vocabulary in a threatening and scary way. It took us many months, according to the authors, who had spent two years in Kabul, to learn the correct pronunciations of words and names of the Farci, Pashtun and Arabic language. They point out that both children and adults have easily incorporated *Harry Potter* vocabulary into everyday language, even when some of the words are as tough as Hermione, or as

imaginary as ‘parseltongue’ (a word Rowling invented to describe witches and wizards that can speak to snakes). The three points the Nilsen’s come up with are:

1. It is difficult for speakers to learn new words that they do not feel comfortable pronouncing.
2. Speakers are more likely to learn new words when they are feeling playfully engaged rather than when they are feeling threatened and worried.
3. An important key to learning new words is being able to relate parts of them (morphemes) to parts of words they already know. (255)

The authors propose some activities teachers can do with students to work on recognizing the sound of a word and similar words to figure out its meaning. For example, they give six fill in the blanks with a word bank describing, but not defining, the word choices. One of the choices is “portkey” with the description “[a] portkey relates to the Latin meaning of *port* as a gate or passageway; as seen in such nouns as *airport* and *seaport* and in such verbs as *import*, *export* and *transport*. The key part of the word relates to the magic and the restrictive nature of the item” (257). The sentence the word fits into is “Portkeys are items that have been put under a spell so that they transport whoever picks them up to a specified place” (256). Though ‘portkey’ is the missing word, the vocabulary being learned is actually in the other words, such as import and seaport, which are all being consciously connected in the example. Another suggestion the Nilsen’s have is to work with the spell and charm names Rowling provides, which often include Latin root words that will apply to many other vocabulary words. Some examples are ‘Veritaserum,’ which is a truth potion, and ‘Lumos,’ the incantation said when the witch or wizard wants the end of his or her wand to light up like a lantern or flashlight (257). Other interesting lesson ideas they recommend include using the morphemes of the character names and words to talk about how they are used in other words. One model they advise is using Voldemort’s name, whose central characteristic is

his insistence on defying death, to talk about the root “mort” and how it is used in words like mortality, mortal and mortified (259). Even just a cursory reading of one of the *Harry Potter* books should yield tens if not hundreds of other lessons with words, root words, and context clues such as the ones the Nilsen’s have published.

Nearly every example of a lesson using *Harry Potter* is one that can be done with other books, other series, or even without a book at all. For example, to work on a logic puzzle, a teacher need not find one in a story book. However, the power that comes from using the *Harry Potter* books, or using series books in general, is in teaching students that reading is not only fun, but that books contain a depth and wealth of knowledge that is rarely considered. The benefit of using series books such as *Harry Potter* lies in the fact that there is more material to explore and additional investment by the reader in the characters he or she grows to love better with every volume. These lessons, which apply to all phases of life and reading, are perhaps much more important than any specific lesson of math, history or reading that a child receives in the schoolhouse. Without learning the pleasure of reading, and gaining the basic ability to do so, no child will ever reach the point of understanding those specific lessons, and will have an immensely difficult time achieving life goals. The teaching of pleasure in reading alone is enough reason to encourage series books instead of shunning them, and the most effective way to do this is to utilize the books children already love—Nancy, Harry and all of the others—in the classroom.

Conclusion

Fortunately, Nancy and Harry are finally making progress in their debut into the library and the classroom. Unlike their counterparts at the beginning of the twentieth century, librarians of the twenty-first century are usually advocates of most kinds of children's books. In fact, the ALA is now a champion of First Amendment rights, fighting for unfiltered access to the Internet, freedom from censorship, and banned books alike. It actually began a Banned Books Week that celebrates, not censures, books that are controversial, including *Harry Potter* and many other series.

With teachers as well, series books are beginning to achieve the regard they deserve. This is evidenced by the fact that lesson plans *can* be found, often online, that use series books in various ways in the classroom. Also, as discussed previously, series such as *Harry Potter* have become so popular and are so valuable that the controversy that surrounds them has not deterred teachers such as Margaret Cusak in New York from reading the books to her class, or teacher Mary Dana from encouraging her eighth graders to start 'Muggles for Harry Potter' when the Zeeland public school district began condemning the books.

Even literary scholars and critics are coming around, with the 1990's bearing witness to many of the first conferences and essays dealing with series and other forms of 'inferior literature.' These include the Nancy Drew Conference and the anthologies *Voices Off* and *Scorned Literature: Essays on the History and Criticism of Popular Mass-Produced Fiction in America*. In fact, more than one college professor now specializes

and writes in the field of children's series.⁶ It finally seems that some of the stigma is being removed from these books that were originally considered suspect for their popularity.

Much of the change might be attributed to the *Harry Potter* series. The reasons for this are varied and include the tremendous popularity the series has already achieved and Rowling's standing as a legitimate author, unconcerned with wealth or popularity. In fact, it has been children who have shown adults the error of their thinking by preferring the Rowling books over their movie counterparts. When questioned, many children expressed doubt that the movie version of the book could be as good as the original because the movies would not allow for the same kind of imagination as the books do (Teare 520). The myth these children are dispelling is that series books are equivalent to the commercialized products that accompany them. This could not be further from the truth—the popularity of the books may trigger the creation of the product spin-offs, but the books' reading material remains unchanged. Adults' dislike of series often stems from the figurines, video games, and bed sheets they have to buy when the latest popular book series hits the bookstores. But when children say they prefer the book to the movie or toys, they are revealing that it is really the adults, in the form of overindulgent parents and money hungry advertising executives, who commercialize book series and commodify reading material.

With this reciprocal relationship between series and commercialization dispelled, the books are free to enter the classroom in ways that are immensely beneficial to all children, steady and struggling readers alike. Advocating the use of only series books in

⁶ Deidre Johnson and John T. Dizer, Jr. are both college professors, at West Chester University and Mohawk Valley Community College, respectively.

schools would be as dismissive as excluding them; the advantages of classical books, plays and poems are equally important. However, the value series add to the classroom cannot, and should not continue to be overlooked.

The reasons behind the criticisms of series books are manifold, including religion, traditionalism, commercialism, and the idea of literary inferiority, but none is compelling enough to override the benefits children receive from them. Predictability allows for reading confidence. Simplicity aids as a model to children's writing. Repetitive structure gives fluency and helps comprehension. Sequels present a forum for more practice with books. Numerous volumes give stability to the basic elements of a story so that a child can concentrate on other levels of the text. These many aspects of series books, which are hard to find intertwined in any other kind of book, should guarantee their presence in the classroom, not exclude them from it. As all of the critics and commentators agree, children's education, especially in literacy, is of utmost importance. Fluency, comprehension, and confidence in reading must be encouraged and mastered to give a child the best chance at success in life. With this in mind, the question I ask: is it fair to let the propaganda of commercialism and popularity against series detract from this goal?

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