

Constructing Readers and Reading: Depictions of Learning to Read in Children's Literature

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I won't ever catch up with Mrs. Deal's class, but the kids I'm with now, they are nicer to me, anyway. They don't think I'm stupid anymore, just different, thanks to Miss Hamble. And maybe a little thanks to me, too. Ma says when Miss Hamble told them I saved the baby's life and Ma's life, too, the kids in my class said they bet I'd grow up to be a famous doctor someday.

But I know better. I'm glad everything turned out with Ma and Sugar. But if I had to choose between being a doctor or a machinist, I'd rather be in Pa's shop, with the smell and sound of metal moving just the way I want it to. I figure it this way: If I can bend metal by now, by the time I turn twelve, who knows?

Maybe I can play fiddle.

Maybe I can read a whole book all by myself, out loud, to my baby sister. And she'll look at me the way all of us look at Pa, the way all of us look at Ma.

The thing is, I don't have to be a famous doctor or anything fancy like that to be happy. All I have to be is Juice, just Juice. And that's enough.

Just Juice (137-138)

Other scholars have analyzed children's literature and images of schooling, teaching, and literacy. For instance, in their article, "Literacy to Inform and Transform: Empowering Lessons from Children's Literature," Janelle Mathis and Leslie Patterson analyzed texts which made reading and writing a central theme. They found a wide variety of reasons and purposes for characters to engage in literacy process; however, they found that the majority of texts focused on personal reasons for being/becoming literate (such as communicating with friends and family), while few depicted characters using literacy to act on or change their worlds. In "'Creeping Like a Snail Unwillingly to School': Negative Images of School in Children's Literature," Betty Greenway identified negative images of school and teachers in children's

books, noting themes relating to power, domination, and submission which led characters to "creep unwillingly" to school.

In this article, we look closely at a subset of books about literacy in and out of school by analyzing images of children learning and struggling to learn to read in realistic fiction. There are several books in which characters wish to learn to read, worry about being poor readers, and work hard to learn to read. These books raise important questions about the messages we send to children (and their teachers and parents) about the nature of reading and reading difficulty. We analyze these texts against the backdrop of two bodies of theory: literary (cultural) theory and critical literacy.

Theoretical Perspective

Literary (Cultural) Theory

The strand of literary theory that informs this work focuses on the relationship between literature and the larger world of culture and ideology. It begins, therefore, by acknowledging the inherent power of literary texts. Literature contains “socializing power” because “readers assume a one-to-one relationship with the characters and actions depicted in a work of literature” (McGillis 12) and because literature acts on the world by acting on its readers (Schweikart 31). As a result of this socializing power, literature is an important arena of political struggle. As Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer put it, “Whatever else literary texts are, and whatever pleasure they might afford us, they are also expressions of the values and assumptions of a culture and a significant way of embedding readers in those values and assumptions” (69).

Consequently, children’s books are not innocent, nor are the portrayals they contain ideologically neutral. Instead, texts are motivated cultural constructs—they do not represent reality “as it is”; rather, they promote a certain version of reality, positioning their readers within a certain version of reality as well (Apol 34). In order to resist being manipulated by these images, readers must be able to recognize that “[texts] are put together in particular ways by particular people hoping for particular effects” (Comber 179). Therefore, readers should identify and interrogate the messages—explicit and implicit—that those texts contain.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is a broad array of theories, linked by an underlying understanding of the political and social nature of texts and literacy practices, and a political aim: the disruption of the social and cultural systems that perpetuate injustice and inequity. As explained by Lankshear and McLaren in *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis, And The Postmodern*, by Luke and Freebody in “Critical Literacy and the Question of Normativity,” and by Morgan in *Critical Literacy In The Classroom: The Art of the Possible*, critical literacy serves as a lens that helps us to examine assumptions about reading and literacy and the role they are presumed to play in the lives of individuals. The assumptions that children, teachers, parents, and policy makers hold about literacy learning influence the enactment of literacy pedagogy.

In turn, as J. Elspeth Stuckey asserts in *The Violence of Literacy*, these assumptions shape literate identities available for learners to assume. According to Stuckey, in the dominant ideology of Western society, literacy is assumed to provide access to power. The overt message portrayed in TV commercials and in classrooms is that learning to read will provide individuals with access to power through economic

security and social prestige and that literacy is available—through school—to anyone who wishes to acquire it. Stuckey further argues that a corresponding belief is those who do not acquire literacy have rejected that which is readily accessible, or that they have an inherent, individual flaw that prevents them from acquiring literacy. This leads, quite naturally, to the view that struggling readers are individuals who are unwilling—or unable—to access a resource that is readily available and that is unequivocally “good” for them.

Luke and Freebody challenge the notion that society extends literacy to anyone wise enough and able enough to accept it (185-225). The social institution of schooling is the primary means by which we make literacy available to children. The reading pedagogies enacted in schools may appear to be natural and inevitable phenomena equally available to all students. However, they are not. School-based literacy practices are drawn from a pool of limited selections and are “supportive of the organizational needs of the institutions of schooling and the stratified interests within social organizations” (191). When schools are embedded in an inherently unjust social, economic, and/or political system, the choices that literacy educators make are constrained in service to those systems. To that end, “a great deal of institutional effort is put into making these materials and activities appear ‘natural’ and ‘essential’ characteristics of literacy” (191-192), even when they are inequitably distributed, and even when they fail to help children learn to read. Schooling practices appear especially neutral and inevitable when the individual, rather than the system, is blamed for reading failure.

It is with these lenses of literary (cultural) theory and critical literacy, then, that we came to interrogate the novels written for children in which school-aged protagonists struggle to learn to read. The ways in which these children’s novels depict characters learning to read (or failing to learn to read) provide a means of examining the assumptions about literacy and literacy acquisition and how those assumptions are communicated to the intended audiences for these books—the children themselves.

Text Selection and Analysis

To identify titles of children’s novels that portray the teaching and/or learning of reading, we first examined subject indices and guides to children’s literature (e.g., *Books for You*, Beers & Lesesne). However, we soon found that learning to read was rarely an indexed topic. To locate more texts, we conducted searches at websites for Internet booksellers (e.g., www.amazon.com and www.barnesandnoble.com) using keywords such as reading, dyslexia, and learning disability. In addition, texts were drawn from references provided by colleagues and classroom teachers through listservs,

post-conference suggestions, and informal professional conversations. We limited text selection to realistic fiction and selected only texts published within the last twenty-five years. We also limited our study to books with school-aged readers, thereby excluding some notable fiction with adult characters learning to read, such as Jerry Spinnelli's *Maniac Magee*. We did this because we were interested in examining how authors portray schools, school age children, and the sources of and remedies for reading difficulties. We chose to focus on realistic fiction because we were interested in understanding how authors depict recent trends and issues in reading and learning to read; doing this, however, required us to exclude some well-known texts of other genres (e.g., Gary Paulsen's *Nightjohn*).

Although seven of the texts were published before 1990, these older books remain in print and are readily available on the shelves in school libraries, through Scholastic book clubs, and/or from Amazon, where they can be bought and shipped within twenty-four hours. Five of these older titles (e.g., *The Beast in Ms. Rooney's Room* by Patricia Reilly Giff, Barthe DeClements' *Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You*, Joyce Hansen's *Yellow Bird and Me*, *The Flunking of Joshua T. Bates* by Susan Shreve, and *Herbie Jones* by Suzy Kline) are volumes in series that continue to have popularity in 2006.

Eighteen texts fit the parameters for inclusion in this study (see bibliography); in each, the protagonists are depicted struggling with reading. Most have failed at least one grade. Reading and learning to read are major plotlines in each of the texts. As mentioned, the eighteen texts selected were analyzed using the lenses of literary (cultural) theory and critical literacy. In each text, we examined the assumptions about learning to read, the relationship between reading and power, and the process of learning to read. As we read, we found recurring themes that led to the questions that shaped our analysis: Which reading pedagogies are used and with what results? How are reading and empowerment connected in these literary depictions of reading and learning to read? Who has power in the process? What is the relationship between power and success? Where is the responsibility for reading failure located? How are family contexts and socio-economic status, race or class implicated in the process?

The "Natural" Process of Learning to Read

Before looking at stories of "struggling" readers, we present Lois Lowry's novel *Zooman Sam* as an example of the way that learning to read is depicted when it is a "natural" or "normal" process. This text stands outside our sample because the protagonist, Sam, is a preschooler (and not a school-aged child), and because Sam learns to read at an appropriate time without any apparent struggle or a sense of failure.

Zooman Sam's protagonist, Sam, is a white, upper middle-class preschooler. Sam's world is full of literacy and literature. His father is a poetry professor and his mother is an artist and book illustrator. Sam's mother reads to him at bedtime and throughout the day. His house is stocked with plenty of paper and pencils. There are shelves full of books, including a special shelf filled with Sam's favorite picture books.

In the novel, Sam learns to read as a process of interacting naturally with texts at home and at preschool. Sam's family encourages him to name and sound out letters, as when Sam "reads" the letters on his zookeeper costume. Sam "always liked when his mom played the sound-of-letters game with him" (28). Sounding out letters and reading at home help Sam's developing pre-reading skills, but Sam primarily becomes a reader because he needs to communicate with his classmates during preschool show and tell. As part of "Job Week," Sam spends several days telling his classmates about the different animals on his collection of sports caps. As he struggles to figure out which hat says "Marlins" or "Dolphins," Sam unlocks the mysteries of the alphabetic code.

In *Zooman Sam*, reading brings Sam power. Because he can read, Sam is able to impress his preschool class and to hold their attention for several days of show-and-tell. *Zooman Sam* depicts the acquisition of reading as unproblematic—magical, even. As the novel concludes, Sam

remembered how, at the beginning—not that very long ago—his mother had to help him sound out the word, putting together the zzz and the ooo and the mmmm until he understood what it spelled. Now, magically, he could just look at it, and the word told itself to him. Not just the zooman word, but *all* the words, even the hardest ones. (153)

In this text, Sam has ready access to the resources he needs in order to learn to read—a warm, loving family interested in texts; shelves full of books; writing materials; well-timed explicit instruction in reading skills; and an innate desire to learn to read as a means of gaining access to the wider world of written communication. Learning to read is presented as a natural process which takes place successfully when resources and motivation are present. As a result, *Zooman Sam* stands in sharp contrast to the novels in our sample which depict older readers struggling with reading.

Struggling Readers and Learning to Read

Learning to read is anything but a natural process in most of the novels in which school-aged children attempt to learn to read; words do not magically "tell themselves" to these struggling readers. The children depicted in these eighteen

novels are acutely aware that they are “behind” their classmates in reading ability. The characters express shame or anger about their “failure”; their peers tease them and their teachers and parents worry about them. To greater and lesser degrees, the characters tend to question their self-worth, express regret about their difficulties with reading, and worry that they will never become readers. This can be seen when Brian, in *My Name is Brain Brian* by Jean Betancourt, remembers his nightmare on the first day of school:

Big gray letters. Big gray rocks. Being chased by huge rocks. My nightmare comes back and I realize that the rock-monsters were shaped like the letters of the alphabet. Big stone alphabet letters crushing me to death. I think about how much I hate the letters of the alphabet and press down even harder on my eraser. My paper rips. (18-19)

Patrick feels the same sense of pressure and worry as he continues to let his reading tutor down in Tom Birdseye’s *Just Call Me Stupid*:

It was that feeling again, as if a weight were pushing in on his chest and the walls were pressing in from all sides.

Mrs. Nagle scooted her chair closer to the table. “Read, Patrick,” she kept insisting. “Look at the letters and read.”

Patrick looked at the letters, but it was no use. (4)

Jamie, in Anne Schlieper’s *The Best Fight*, is embarrassed to go to the resource room for reading instruction. He knows that he is behind his peers and wishes he could catch up.

[Jamie] worked so hard at it that he felt more tired than after an hour of hockey practice. The kids in real fifth grade still just looked at their real books and knew all the right words without even trying. That kind of reading was never going to happen to him. (14)

Against this backdrop of failure and embarrassment, the novels we studied tend to depict some shared sets of assumptions about literacy and learning to read. Analysis of the novels in our sample has led us to identify the following factors involved in depictions of struggling readers learning to read: the role of the reading pedagogy that struggling readers are provided; the power that teachers have (or don’t have) in the lives of students who struggle; the empowering events that provide children with confidence to learn to read; the family contexts that support—or fail to support—young readers; and issues of socioeconomic status, race, and class that are represented in the novels.

Reading Pedagogy

Although learning to read and/or characters’ reading

difficulties are central to each of the novels, reading pedagogy is minimally depicted in the texts. The novels tend to focus on characters’ interactions with one another in and out of school rather than on teaching methods. Reading pedagogy is not depicted at all in four of the novels. One of these is set in the summer time, and the other three make vague references to tutors or reading groups without describing anything that that could be construed as reading instruction. In the other fourteen novels, reading pedagogy generally plays a very minor role, with brief scenes of reading instruction set against the backdrop of the students’ interactions with their classmates, teachers, and, occasionally, their families.

It is perhaps not surprising that pedagogy is rarely depicted, since it likely makes for dry reading. Effective pedagogy, in particular, might be rarely depicted since plots tend to focus on problems to be resolved. The depictions of pedagogy which do appear in these novels generally emphasize issues of power, either by emphasizing the students’ sense of powerlessness in the face of negative pedagogy, or by highlighting the importance of student choice and the power to make their own decisions at school.

For example, the pedagogical strategy of round-robin reading (mandatory turn-taking in oral reading) is usually viewed negatively and often underscores characters’ sense of powerlessness; in three novels, this teaching tactic humiliates struggling readers in front of their peers and proves publicly how “behind” the characters are. For example, in *Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You* by Barthe DeClements, Helen is required to read aloud portions of a play with the rest of the class. Helen stumbles over even the simplest words, which the teacher and her classmates provide in exasperated tones. Helen says:

It went on like that. Forever. Mrs. Lobb made the kids quit giggling, but it was still more horrible than my worst nightmare. When the play was finally over, I put my book into my desk and kept my head down while I secretly tried to pull my sticky blouse away from my sweaty skin. (32)

Stereotypical school texts, such as basals and controlled-vocabulary readers, are also consistently shown to frustrate readers and intensify those readers’ sense of powerlessness and failure. For example, in *Herbie Jones* by Suzy Kline, Herbie is bored by his reading text; he thinks it is pointless, and he knows he is not learning. In March, after six months of school, Herbie is “still reading in the red book (the one with the suitcase on the cover). His teacher said the stories were about people going places. Herbie didn’t think his group was going anywhere” (7). Likewise, in *Yolanda’s Genius* by Carol Fenner, Andrew is unwilling to read from his first grade reader because he views the kids depicted in the

reader as “boring looking,” and because he already knows what these children are doing and saying and has concluded that “he wouldn’t even want to play with them” (23).

In these depictions, basals and controlled-vocabulary readers do not provide struggling students with the inspiration or motivation to learn to read. However, when students are given the power to make choices about their reading and when interesting trade book literature is available, struggling readers are depicted as much more supported and engaged. In seven of the eighteen novels, choice and motivation are shown to be important elements of reading success—so much so that one character even becomes a reader without even really noticing. In Patricia Reilly Giff’s *Shark in School*, Matthew’s friends and teacher give him good literature, the time to read it, and the power to make choices about what, where, and when to read. After just a few weeks, Matthew’s teacher notices him reading in class, saying:

“You have your head stuck in a book all day. You read like a shark.” . . .

He thought about what she had said. His nose in a book. Reading. Every spare minute. It was true. “I love to read,” he said.

He was so surprised, he said it again. “I love to read.”

And he knew it was true. He didn’t think about reading the words on the pages anymore. Somehow, they had turned into stories. (82)

Much like Sam in *Zooman Sam*, Matthew becomes a reader by participating in a larger literate community—one that shares, talks about, and loves books. Choice, ownership, and interest support these characters’ learning to read. And in one novel, writing serves a similar role. Brian in *My Name is Brain* becomes a better reader and a more confident person as he researches Canada geese and writes a report that his teacher and classmates admire.

Phonics instruction is depicted, sometimes very briefly, in eight of the novels. Three portray phonics as helpful. For example, Richard Best, the “beast” in Giff’s *The Beast in Ms. Rooney’s Room*, finds it useful to learn about “bossy r” and how to break larger words into smaller units. Because he feels successful with his reading teacher (she likes him and lets him put artwork on the walls), Richard is also able to take advantage of the tools that phonics instruction provides. However, Herbie Jones in Kline’s *Herbie Jones* has less success with phonics. In the novel, Herbie has been incorrectly placed in the low group, a group that has been embarrassingly named “The Apples” by the girls. Being in the low group is

so discouraging to Herbie that he makes little effort to learn, especially phonics. As the text says, “Part of Herbie’s problem was that he didn’t care anymore. When he got worksheets and was asked to circle words with a ‘short a’ he circled them all” (8). Fenner’s *Yolanda’s Genius* portrays phonics instruction as irrelevant and confusing. Andrew’s teacher gives him a worksheet with smiling children and a dog and asks him to simply name the objects in the picture as a precursor to naming the sounds they begin with. Andrew says nothing, and his teacher becomes frustrated; however, it soon becomes clear that Andrew has not answered simply because he did not understand the directions. “It was so obvious what was in the picture that Andrew thought Miss Gilluly must mean that something he couldn’t see was hidden in the lines on the picture like the puzzles on the comics page. . . .” (24).

For the most part, reading instruction (good, bad, or simply available) plays a minimal role in these novels. When the stories *do* focus on classrooms, most of the time is devoted to depictions of the roles teachers themselves play in the reading process.

Relationships with Teachers

Depictions of teachers’ roles in these novels tend to focus less on teachers’ ability to provide effective reading instruction and more on the relationships they create with their students. Portrayals of teachers tend to emphasize the capacity of teachers to influence (both positively and negatively) children’s perceptions of themselves and to strengthen or undermine characters’ sense of their own abilities, thus strengthening or undermining the characters’ reading as well.

The main character’s relationship with her teacher is a central theme in five of the eighteen novels. For example, in *Keep Ms. Sugarman in the Fourth Grade* by Elizabeth Levy, Ms. Sugarman is the first teacher who has ever believed in Jackie. Jackie confesses to Ms. Sugarman that she is unsure she will ever be able to learn to read or spell, let alone pass fourth grade. But Ms. Sugarman is confident in Jackie’s abilities.

“Let me worry about your spelling,” said Ms. Sugarman. “You worry about being the best Jackie Milanzo that you can be. That’s what we’re here for this year.”

. . . Suddenly I could understand why some kids like school. If a teacher liked you, school was a whole different ball game. (38)

Susan Shreve’s *The Flunking of Joshua T. Bates* is primarily about the relationship between Joshua and his third grade teacher. She befriends him, inviting him to her home for cookies and tutoring after school almost every day. Because

of their friendship, Joshua becomes a better reader and moves back into fourth grade.

Eight other books depict the relationship between teacher and student as important, although they do not make this relationship the central storyline in the novel. For example, *How to Write Really Badly* by Anne Fine is mainly about the ways that Chester Howard helps his struggling friend Joe to complete his assignments. When their teacher gives Joe an award for being the “best home model maker” and asks him to make more models to help her teach math, Joe feels that the teacher accepts and values him for the first time. This relationship gives the character hope that his reading and writing will improve.

Six texts in the sample depict teachers who are unhelpful or even harmful. These texts emphasize the relationship with the teacher and the ways that the teachers’ opinion can shape a struggling readers’ sense of her own ability. These unhelpful teachers assign trivial or meaningless work and may embarrass characters in front of their classmates, sometimes openly stating that they believe the struggling reader cannot learn or is just being lazy. The characters respond to these actions by assuming they cannot and will not learn to read. However, these negative depictions of teachers do not go unchallenged; in each of the books with negative portrayals, the unhelpful teacher is offset by a positive teacher—a teacher who believes in the student and helps that student achieve success. For example, in Joyce Hansen’s *Yellow Bird and Me*, Yellow Bird’s fourth grade teacher tells him he is only a “clown” and will never succeed; she repeatedly embarrasses him for not being able to read out loud and frequently sends him to the office. In response, Yellow Bird gives up on learning and stops coming to school. By contrast, the new drama coach believes in Yellow Bird’s ability and gives him the lead role in the school play. Because the drama teacher believes in him, Yellow Bird comes to believe in himself. After his success in the school play, even his fourth grade teacher comes to see Yellow Bird in a new light and begins to adapt the curriculum to accommodate his dyslexia.

For the most part, teachers (and in one case, a principal) are portrayed positively. In fifteen of the books, at least one teacher believes in and supports each of the struggling readers (two of the other three are set in the summer with no teacher present at all). These teachers demonstrate confidence in the struggling readers by casting them in plays, assigning meaningful work, or giving them praise for their ideas. These teachers help students get tested for special education, intervene with family members who do not understand about reading disabilities, and tend to give

assignments in which students can feel successful. In the majority of the novels, teachers help children learn to read because of the relationships they build with them, and, in turn, the ways these relationships help to increase students’ trust in their own abilities. Thus, all of the students in these fifteen novels have ready access to teachers who want to and are able to help them learn to read.

As depicted in all of these novels, then, schools have the resources and teachers available to help struggling readers, and even the novels that depict unhelpful or harmful teachers balance these depictions with other, more positive teachers who help the struggling readers attain success.

Empowering Events

Regardless of pedagogy or teacher stance, in these novels the struggle to learn to read makes characters feel embarrassed and even powerless, and teachers and pedagogy, when they are depicted, simply serve to either increase or diminish characters’ sense of powerlessness. No matter how helpful, teachers are rarely depicted as the direct key to reading success. Rather, in these novels about struggling readers, almost without exception the key to reading success lies in a change in the reader’s sense of his or her own abilities and power *outside* reading.

In the majority of the novels, the struggling readers become more confident through an “empowering event” (or series of events) unrelated to reading that helps them gain self-esteem. This increase in confidence in their own abilities in turn leads characters to experience (or at least expect to experience) success in reading as well. (By an “empowering event,” we mean any event that helps characters feel confident about their abilities or which enables them to have a positive effect on others.) In these novels, characters’ successes as they experience empowering events—winning awards, rescuing a relative, helping a classmate, and so on—lead them to feel they are capable of making decisions and acting in the world and on their own behalf. The feeling of empowerment these events provide is depicted as being directly related to characters’ eventual success at reading. The novels tend to focus a great deal of narrative energy on the empowering event or series of events, and the books typically conclude with the character learning to read, or with the character feeling hopeful that learning to read is imminent.

Karen Hesse’s novel, *Just Juice* (quoted at length in the introduction), provides an example. Justus Faulstich (known as Juice) is a fourth grader who avoids school as much as possible because she cannot read. Juice believes she is “plain stupid when it comes to reading” (20). School

is so embarrassing and frustrating that Juice almost never shows up. But then Juice experiences a series of empowering events. She successfully learns to operate the equipment in her father's machine shop and makes gifts for her family; the teacher gives her a role in the school play; and, most importantly, she single-handedly delivers her baby sister, Sugar. During the delivery, Juice saves her mother's life by accurately reading a blood sugar monitor and administering sugar cubes. As a result of all these events, Juice recognizes that she can help others, that she has talents, and that others believe in her. She realizes that "All I have to be is Juice, just Juice. And that's enough" (138). Juice begins to believe that one day she will learn to read. She allows herself to go to school, to be tested for a reading disability, and to try to learn her letters. Although she does not become a reader by the end of the novel, readers are left feeling confident that Juice will learn to read and that she will use her reading skills to accomplish great things.

A similar pattern can be seen in Caroline Janover's *How Many Days until Tomorrow?* In this book, Josh should be in seventh grade, but he has been held back because of his dyslexia. He is forced to stay for the summer on an island off the coast of Maine with his grandmother and crotchety grandfather. Josh often feels bad about himself, especially when his successful, book-smart brother calls him "stupid." Josh doesn't want to read a half hour every day as his reading tutors have suggested and believes that "if he ever got a good grade on a test, it was pure luck" (26). Josh does hard physical labor over the summer (such as patching the roof and helping rebuild a stone dock); gradually his grandfather begins to praise instead of criticize. Josh takes pride in things he does and plans to share them at school. These events add up to a growing sense of self-confidence. When, at the end of the book, Josh rescues his grandfather from an accident and his grandfather praises him, Josh thinks to himself that "If he [Josh] could hammer shingles on a roof, chop down trees, build a dock, burn a whale, and keep control of the dory with whitecaps in the harbor, he figured he could handle sixth grade. He'd use his level head and do just fine, even if he still needed Orton and Gillingham tutoring" (171).

All eighteen of the novels in our sample depict one or more empowering events (see Table 1). These empowering events and their explicit connection to reading play roles of varying importance to the novels. Most often, they provide major plotlines in the novels, and the character's sense of empowerment is explicitly or implicitly responsible for their developing ability to read. Thirteen of the eighteen novels, including *Just Juice* and *How Many Days Until Tomorrow?* (summarized above) focus primarily on the

empowering event or events and explicitly or implicitly credit this empowerment with changing the characters' abilities as readers. (These thirteen novels are indicated with an * in Table 1.)

For example, Gertrude in *Will the Real Gertrude Hollings Please Stand Up?* receives services from two different reading tutors and goes to private school with an individualized curriculum designed specifically to help her become a stronger reader. Yet all this specialized instruction is not the key to her eventual sense of hopefulness and ability in learning to read. Gertrude gains a sense of confidence throughout the novel as she appears in a school play, befriends her cousin, and rescues her cousin when they both get lost. This confidence lets her break free of the labels her learning disability have given her—labels such as "slow" and "LD" and "poor reader"—and to believe what the second tutor tells her, that she is "an intelligent and capable young woman" (106).

Rodman Philbrick's 1993 novel *Freak the Mighty* provides another example. Max, an unusually large teenager, lives with his grandfather and grandmother who became his guardians after Max's father killed his mother. Max attends the LD classes at his school. At the beginning of the novel, Max thinks of himself as someone who cannot read or write, a "nobody . . . nothing" because, as he puts it, ". . . I'm an L.D., and reading books is the last thing I want to do, right after trimming my toenails" (19). Max has not been learning because he's been fighting and hiding, worrying that he might be like his father. But then he meets Kevin, small and "crippled," but brilliant. Together, they become *Freak the Mighty*, Max carrying Kevin on his shoulders. As Max says, "I never had a brain until Freak came along" (1). Together, Max and Kevin engage in quests and adventures. They stand up to bullies, find missing treasure, and together they rescue Max from his father, who is out on parole. As Max becomes more confident, and as he interacts with Kevin around words and books, Max learns to read, saying, "Like Freak says, reading is just a way of listening, and I could always listen" (82). When Kevin dies from his illness at the end of the novel, Max writes down their story. The writing heals him and reminds him that he does, after all, have a brain. Max says, "I'm feeling OK about remembering things. And now that I've written a book, who knows, I might even read a few. No big deal" (160). In this way, learning to read and becoming a writer are two of many positive results that result from Max's growing sense of his own self worth.

In each of these thirteen novels, reading is depicted as something achieved by an individual when—and only when—that individual is emotionally or psychologically ready. Even when the struggling reader struggles because

Table 1. Empowering Events

* indicates novels in which the empowerment is a central plot line and in which empowerment is connected to learning to read

Title	Author/Year	Empowering Event	
<i>My Name is Brain Brian</i>	Betancourt, 1993	Brian stands up to a bully, makes a good friend, the teacher praises his report writing	
<i>Just Call Me Stupid</i>	Birdseye, 1993	Patrick's dictated story wins the school writing contest, he makes his first friend	*
<i>Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You</i>	DeClements, 1985	Helen takes responsibility for her own actions, repays the school for her graffiti, succeeds with a new, interesting teacher	*
<i>Double Dutch</i>	Draper, 2002	Delia wins the international Double Dutch jump roping contest	
<i>Mr. Stumpguss is a Third Grader</i>	Duey, 1992	Seth helps Mr. Stumpguss come back to school to learn to read	
<i>Yolanda's Genius</i>	Fenner, 1995	Yolanda's little brother Andrew plays his harmonica on stage at a Chicago blues festival	
<i>How to Write Really Badly</i>	Fine, 1996	Joe wins a medal for making the Best Model	
<i>The Beast in Ms. Rooney's Room</i>	Giff, 1984	Richard makes friends, his artwork is appreciated, he helps the class win the good behavior banner	*
<i>Shark in School</i>	Giff, 1994	Matthew befriends his new teacher, helps her solve problems	*
<i>Will the Real Gertrude Hollings Please Stand Up?</i>	Greenwald, 1983	Gertrude appears in a play, helps her cousin when they get lost	*
<i>Yellow Bird and Me</i>	Hansen, 1986	Yellow Bird helps write and then stars in a school play	*
<i>Just Juice</i>	Hesse, 1998	Juice saves her mother's life, delivers a baby, gives gifts to family, has role in school play	*
<i>Herbie Jones</i>	Kline, 1985	Herbie passes a spelling test, is brave in front of girls	
<i>How Many Days Until Tomorrow</i>	Janover, 2000	Josh saves his grandfather's life, helps with chores like roofing and dock building	*
<i>Keep Ms. Sugarman in the 4th Grade</i>	Levy, 1992	Jackie's teacher appreciates her enthusiasm and imagination	*
<i>Freak the Mighty</i>	Philbrick, 1993	Maxwell makes his first real friend, stands up to his father during kidnapping	*
<i>The Best Fight</i>	Schlieper, 1995	Jamie's principal and father tell him he's smart, deals with bullies	*
<i>The Flunking of Joshua T. Bates</i>	Shreve, 1984	Joshua becomes the class leader, comforts his teacher during her divorce	*

he has dyslexia, becoming a more empowered person is the key to achieving success with reading. This heavy emphasis on children's ability to learn to read only after they feel successful and in control implies that the struggling reader becomes capable of learning to read *only when something about him or herself is altered*.

In the other five novels in this study, empowerment does not lead as directly to reading as it does in the first thirteen. In this subset, the characters also experience empowering events; however, these accomplishments are depicted as peripheral to the main plot and/or less central to eventual reading achievement. These five novels, *Herbie Jones*, *How to Write Really Badly*, *Yolanda's Genius*, *Mr. Stumpguss is a Third Grader*, and *Double Dutch*, focus primarily on the struggling reader's relationships with his or her classmates. For example, *Herbie Jones* is mainly about Herbie's

friendships and interactions with his classmates. Herbie gains confidence when he passes a difficult spelling test and is brave in front of a group of girls. These successes (and his supportive relationship with his teacher) help him to explain why he doesn't work very hard in his reading group. Herbie hates being in the low reading group mainly because they are called "The Apples" (a sissy name) and because he finds the phonics worksheets so boring.

In *Yolanda's Genius*, the plot is mainly about Yolanda and her struggles to make friends. The struggling reader is her brother, Andrew, who is a musical genius with his harmonica but who cannot make sense of his first grade pull-out reading program. Andrew takes part in an empowering event when Yolanda finagles a way for him to play for B.B. King on stage at a Chicago blues festival. Although the novel ends with the hope that Andrew will continue to get help from his speech

teacher (who connects reading music to reading letters) and the implication that their mother might let Andrew go to a private school that will recognize his musical ability, there are really no marked changes in Andrew's sense of self or ability to read. Instead, it is Andrew's mother who changes, and for the first time she comes to see her son as talented.

Sharon Draper's 2002 novel *Double Dutch* is perhaps the biggest departure from the typical "empowerment of a struggling reader" plotline. Delia is an eighth grader who cannot read and has gotten by in school by memorizing read-alouds, watching movies of assigned books, getting help with homework, and being a "good girl." Delia takes part in many "empowering" events. She and her team win first prize at an international Double Dutch jumping contest, for example, and she is depicted as a fairly confident character from the beginning of the story. Although she hides her illiteracy and is embarrassed by it, she is an engaged student, has many friends, and trusts her own abilities. Delia is afraid of failing the eighth grade standardized test but does not ask for help until she realizes the importance of literacy through an event that occurs outside of school. Delia's classmate and friend, Randy, is living alone because his father, a trucker, has not come back from a trip. When Delia sees a picture of Randy's father on a poster, she is unable to read it. As a result, she erroneously assumes it is a criminal-wanted poster and hides the picture. Rather than a criminal-wanted poster, however, it is a poster searching for friends or relatives of Randy's father, who has lost his memory after being attacked. When Randy discovers the poster, he confronts Delia, asking why she did not tell him that his father had been located. Delia has to confess her illiteracy, and in the process she realizes that if she were able to read, she could have helped Randy find his father. The sense of powerlessness she feels in not being able to read or to use literacy to act in the world outside of school convinces Delia to admit her problems to her mother and ask for help. In this novel, an empowering event does not help a character become a better reader. Instead, recognition of the power of literacy itself (and the ways it will empower the protagonist if she attains it) serves as motivation to learn to read. *Double Dutch*, then, is the only novel in our study in which the acquisition of literacy is portrayed as important because of the ways it gives a character power, rather than the more prevalent reverse pattern we found among the books, in which the character attains power and then, as a result, acquires literacy skills.

Family Context

In contrast to the roles of schools, teachers, peers, and events as portrayed in these stories, interactions with family members play a minor role in the lives of characters struggling to learn to read. In four novels, parents are not

even presented. In Sheila Greenwald's *Will the Real Gertrude Hollings Please Stand Up?*, for example, Gertrude's parents fly to Greece at the beginning of the novel, only to return home to find their daughter has conquered her fears, made friends, rescued her lost cousin, and (as a result of all these triumphs) is now well on her way to becoming a reader.

In several other novels, family members play limited roles in the character's learning to read. For example, in the beginning of four of the novels, family members exacerbate students' reading difficulties by insisting children memorize lists of words, or sit and "practice" with books they cannot read. Sometimes, parents mistake their children's reading difficulties for laziness or stubbornness, or insult children in their efforts to get their children to try harder at school. For instance, in *My Name is Brain Brian*, Brian's father calls Brian "lazy" and yells when Brian mixes up the letters in his spelling words, asking, "How are you going to learn if you can't even copy right?" (31). Brian takes his father's yelling to heart, thinking, "My father's an INCREDIBLY mean man, and I'm an INCREDIBLY stupid boy" (31). After the teacher explains to his parents that Brian has dyslexia, readers learn that Brian's father also has undiagnosed dyslexia and that he yells at Brian out of fear that Brian will end up, as he has, struggling with reading for the rest of his life.

Two texts in the sample imply that a parent's actions have caused a reading problem. In Tom Birdseye's 1993 novel, *Just Call Me Stupid*, Patrick is in the fifth grade, but he cannot read. During a tutoring session, Patrick tries to decode the *wh* combination. Trying to say the letters reminds Patrick of the times his alcoholic father locked him in the closet for failing to read, taunting, "Any idiot can remember that! Don't be stupid!" (7). These memories make Patrick too scared to try to read when he works with his tutor. (When Patrick's friend copies down a story Patrick tells, then enters it in a school-wide contest which Patrick wins, he gains the confidence he needs to learn to read.) And in *Freak the Mighty*, Maxwell has not learned to read because of his father's violence, because he is angry about the murder of his mother, and because he does not believe in himself.

More often, however, the parents in the texts are willing and able to help their children learn to read. Parents find time to work with children, attend school meetings, and support their children to the best of their abilities, and families are not depicted as playing a role in students' reading difficulties. In all but four of the novels, the children live at home with two married, available parents. Three characters live with their single mother, and Max in *Freak the Mighty* lives with his grandparents. These strong support systems enable children to take advantage of tutoring, teaching, and other necessary

resources when characters themselves are empowered and ready to learn to read.

Socioeconomic Status, Race, and Class

In the texts in our sample, reading difficulties are depicted as occurring in children from a variety of middle- to working-class socioeconomic backgrounds. Thirteen of the books in the sample have protagonists who come from homes where parents hold middle class jobs, such as management or office work. These parents talk with their children and eat regular meals, and the families tend to have resources that support children's success when they are ready to learn to read. The families can afford tutors, for example, and books and writing materials are readily available.

In five of the books, children are portrayed as dealing explicitly with issues common to families that struggle with poverty, including parents who are forced to work nights, mothers who take on extra jobs to supplement the family income, or parents who make decisions to delay purchases because funds are not available. However, in two of these five novels (*Just Juice* and *Yellow-Bird and Me*), this poverty is not portrayed as being part of the cause of (or the solution to) reading problems. Although the parents may be poor, they still engage in practices at home that are assumed to support children's learning, such as family mealtime, helping children with homework, and valuing education. For instance, in Hesse's *Just Juice*, Juice's family struggles daily with household bills, the threat of eviction, and hunger. However, neither hunger nor poverty is depicted as the source of Juice's reading difficulty, since Juice's sisters have all learned to read and they go to school every day. Instead, Juice's sporadic school attendance and her struggle to learn to read are the result of Juice's lack of confidence in her own ability and the ways that school embarrasses her.

Just Call Me Stupid by Tom Birdseye is one novel in which poverty is depicted as *contributing* to a child's struggles to learn to read. This is the novel in which the abusive, alcoholic father belittles Patrick so much that he becomes afraid to try to read. Because this abusive father eventually abandons his family, Patrick is raised in a single-parent household. In the novel, Patrick's mother is forced to work to support the family, so Patrick comes home to an empty house, where no one is available to help with homework or to talk about the school day. Patrick's mother is depicted as loving and caring, and she supports Patrick's education; however, her work schedule prevents her from being very helpful, and Patrick's schoolwork suffers as a result.

Sharon Draper's *Double Dutch* also explicitly indicts poverty (this time within the school itself, where poor conditions

have led to a high turnover of teachers and subs) as a cause of reading difficulty. Delia explains how she made it to eighth grade without learning to read:

Delia sighed. "It was easy in elementary school. That school was a mess. Teacher parade. Remember? Miss Pringle in fourth grade got pregnant and left. Then Mr. Balboa took her place, and all he did was read the newspaper while we played cards and checkers."

Yolanda nodded. "In fifth grade we had that long-term sub until Thanksgiving—the one who kept falling asleep in class—Mr. Biski."

"Yeah, old Biscuit Head Biski!" Delia laughed. "Then the lady they finally hired quit by January—I don't even remember her name—said her nerves couldn't take thirty-five fifth graders. And the new lady was so confused, she never learned our names. If we did purple ditto sheets and shut up, we passed."

. . . . In sixth grade Mrs. Davenport decided to retire early, so we got Mr. Franklin, who got fired for smacking Willie Williams in the face [and the next sub] never figured out I had a problem."

. . . . "[You were] unlucky. Somebody could have helped you back then."

"I didn't need any help. I figured out how to beat the system." (25-26)

While these few novels depict socioeconomic status as a factor in learning to read, only one of the novels depicts race or ethnicity as complicating the acquisition of literacy. The majority (all but four) of the novels in this study feature white protagonists, and even in the books in which the protagonists are persons of color, it seems that the reading difficulties that the characters experience are personal in nature rather than systemic or race related. Only *Yolanda's Genius* specifically mentions issues of race as a complicating factor in reading acquisition. When Andrew's teacher asks him to complete phonics worksheets, Andrew finds the work irrelevant, partly because the characters seem so phony and distant.

He didn't really care what the message was because above the marks was a picture of some boring-looking kids playing in a sandbox. He knew what they were doing and what they were saying and he knew he wouldn't even want to play with them. . . there were two white kids in the picture and two colored brown. The brown ones didn't look like him or any other black kids he knew. They looked like white kids colored brown. He didn't want to play with them at all. (23)

In summary, then, the power of reading in children's lives is portrayed as overwhelmingly positive, as are the portrayals of the contexts in which children learn to read. In most cases, families are supportive and schools are able to provide appropriate resources, teachers, and curriculum in order for students to succeed. Authors' depictions of socioeconomic status, race, and class largely ignore the ways that poverty, ethnicity, and culture complicate literacy learning and instruction. Overwhelmingly, the blame for reading failure is located within the individual student rather than within the wider power structures of society at large.

Conclusion

Taken together, these novels form a remarkably consistent picture of what children are told—through their literature—about learning (or not learning) to read. The images these novels contain perpetuate the myth that literacy is available for the asking and that only the weak or the flawed (people who do not feel good about themselves or trust their own ability) fail to acquire literacy. The novels mask the ways that chronic poverty, failing schools, and institutional racism actively deny literacy to segments of the population, and in doing so, the texts contribute to a tendency to blame the individual for his or her personal failure in learning to read, rather than examining the societal and institutional systems which contribute to and bring about low reading achievement. As R.P. McDermott says in "The Explanation of Minority School Failure, Again," "By making believe that failure is something that kids do, as different from how it is something done to them, and then by explaining their failure in terms of other things they do, we likely contribute to the maintenance of school failure" (363).

In addition to assigning blame to the struggling readers themselves, the novels also fail to interrogate basic assumptions about the unequivocal benefits of school-based literacy. Only one novel even begins to question the value of schooling and learning to read. (In Ann Fine's *How to Write Really Badly*, Chester Howard asks the teacher why she's "torturing" Joe by making him sound-it-out and guess at right answers. The teacher has no answer, and later, Chester creates a check-off chart for Joe, so that he can count down all the days left in school and, as Chester says "feel free to get on with what you're really good at all day!" [107]). And only one character (Delia in *Double Dutch*), actually wants to learn in order to gain the empowerment that she believes reading will bring. All the rest do not examine why they want to read; instead the characters in these novels automatically assume that learning to read is a worthwhile goal and that reading will provide desirable results, and they seem to be motivated to learn to read almost exclusively by a desire not to be

perceived as "behind" their peers and not to be embarrassed about being a struggling reader.

An Alternate Depiction from an Earlier Era

After reviewing our findings in this study, we wondered what a novel would look like that acknowledged that the acquisition of literacy is inherently political and that examined the ways access to literacy is inequitably distributed. To answer this, we needed to reach outside the parameters of our study to *Nellie Cameron*, written by Michelle Murray in 1971. Although *Nellie Cameron* was written thirty-five years ago, the text provides a powerful counterpoint to the texts we have examined in this study. *Nellie Cameron* was written in an era in which texts that contained African American protagonists and that depicted the challenges of urban life were being actively solicited by publishers and editors in order to expand the range of cultural representations available in children's literature. *Nellie Cameron* tells the story of a third grade African American girl struggling to learn to read in her walk-up apartment and urban school in the late 1960s; it situates the process of learning to read within larger social and political contexts, illustrating ways that reading has been systematically denied to poor and minority children and questioning the presumed value of literacy in the lives of all children.

From the outset of the novel, Nellie struggles against poverty and inappropriate school policies. From day one, school is shown to be inhospitable to children who are poor and Black. Nellie is told she cannot come to school until she has the right kind of shoes. Her mother has to miss work (and lose pay) to explain that Nellie has to wear tennis shoes until she gets a pair of hand-me-down loafers. Nellie struggles to find reasons to try to read (or even to open) her basal reader, with its smiling, White, middle-class children and their pet dog playing under the trees. She finds nothing authentic in the text. Nellie tries to read at home, but with seven people in a tiny apartment, she cannot find a place where she won't be embarrassed when she struggles with the words. To make matters worse, Nellie's only friend at school moves away when the friend's mother becomes unemployed. Soon, Nellie gives up on school.

Eventually, a special reading tutor comes to the school and brings exciting new teaching methods. This tutor decorates the walls with pictures of African Americans and shares texts written by African American authors. She listens to Nellie talk about Sunday school and records and transcribes Nellie's own stories. Nellie gains confidence as she sees that her words are valued. But just as Nellie is about to take the risks that might let her learn to read, the grant funding is pulled and the tutor leaves the school. *Nellie Cameron* clearly illustrates the ways

that poverty, irrelevant curriculum, and the social structures of school actively deny many children access to literacy.

Nellie wants to learn to read, but she also explicitly questions the worth of staying in school and acquiring reading. Nellie sees firsthand that literacy is no magic ticket out of poverty. Though her parents are literate, they continue to struggle to feed and clothe their children. Nellie is also aware that success in the institution of school may isolate individuals from their communities. Nellie's brother Sam is an excellent student, so school officials offer him a scholarship to live and study at a white boarding school out in the country. Nellie and her family encourage him to go, but they recognize that Sam will probably never be able to be a return as a full member of their community or even their family. Thus, in *Nellie Cameron* literacy brings neither power nor joy. In a striking passage, Nellie questions the value of acquiring literacy when she says:

Miss Lacey [the reading tutor] acted as if reading could change everything. Nellie knew better! Take LaVerne. She could read OK. What difference did that make to her mean old mother? Would she sweeten up if LaVerne could read better? Not on your life!

. . . And Sam. Nellie remembered the things that he had said that night she had gone into his room, and underneath each word had been a drumbeat sounding "not happy, not happy." Yet Sam had so much, and he would soon have even more. It wasn't reading that made him happy or unhappy, it seemed. Anyway, Nellie would never be like Sam. (172)

Nellie believes that in and of itself, learning to read does not make people happy, does not end hunger, does not prevent poverty. Of all the characters in all the books we read, Nellie is the only one who is depicted being systematically denied literacy and who questions for herself the intrinsic value of learning to read.

Discussion and Implications

Almost without exception, the characters that are depicted in children's novels written in the last twenty-five years *want* to learn to read; they see reading as desirable; they identify themselves as personal failures for not being able to read; and school almost always offers the resources—good teachers, tutors, computers, and classrooms full of books—that will help struggling readers after they have gained enough power in their own lives to be ready to learn to read.

It is possible that the genre of contemporary realistic fiction and the reading audience for such texts shape to a large extent the content of these novels. The novels we located are generally

not classic or award-winning children's literature, and a few of the books (such as Giff's *The Beast in Ms. Rooney's Room*) are part of a fairly easy-to-read series. Because of this, the characters and story lines may intentionally avoid nuance and complication. Also, novels such as these are intended to be read independently—that is, they are meant to be read *by*, rather than *to*, children. Since children's novels often portray characters who are nearly the same age as their intended audience, and since in this case that audience is of an age and skill level to be reading independently, protagonists who are still learning to read are obviously "behind" and struggling. Because realistic fiction generally focuses on problems and on protagonists' abilities to solve problems for themselves, it may not be a surprise that learning to read, like the conflict in so many texts of realistic fiction, is depicted as something that resides in the individual and therefore must be solved by the individual him or herself. Finally, these novels often are written for a reading audience that is assumed to be largely white and middle class. This may lead authors to avoid larger issues surrounding literacy learning, such as race, class, and poverty, which are more difficult to explain—or to solve—in the space of a children's novel.

Whatever the reasons behind the depictions, the novels in our sample send a powerful message to child readers about the process of learning to read. In these books, children struggle with reading and with the negative social and psychological impact of being a poor reader. These texts imply that older students who fail to become readers are experiencing a personal failure and that self-confidence and wider success are prerequisites for these students' learning to read. Although the books may depict one or more elements of reading pedagogy, the pedagogy matters less than the characters' willingness to learn and their sense of power over their own lives. The failure to become a reader is constructed as having a unique, individual source, and the blame for reading failure is placed squarely on the shoulders of the children who fail to learn to read.

In the United States, poor and minority children are at the greatest risk of being denied meaningful, thoughtful literacy and are most likely to receive skill-and-drill instruction or instruction that has little to do with cultural and home-based literacy practices (as shown by Denny Taylor and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines in *Growing up Literate: Learning from Inner-City Families*). The majority of the texts in our sample ignore issues of race or class that are so much a part of current cycles of literacy and the struggle of learning to read. By locating the root of reading difficulties within the individual child, these novels do little or nothing to challenge the school and social systems that deny children access to literacy. The literature mostly remains silent when it comes to larger factors

in the learning or not learning of literacy: resources that are made scarce, curriculum that is meaningless or irrelevant, schools that are culturally insensitive, welfare policies that force parents to work second and third shifts, hunger and illness that distract children from learning, and situations where literacy acquisition separates those who learn from their families and communities. By laying the pathology of reading difficulties on the shoulders of children themselves, these novels excuse schools and society from examining the educational and social structures that contribute to low reading achievement and focus attention instead on “fixing” the struggling readers themselves.

While it might seem that larger issues of learning to read (or failing to learn to read) lie outside the scope and interest of children’s books and child readers, in fact the depictions found in children’s books do not simply reflect the world of struggling readers, they promote a picture of effective and ineffective reading strategies, pedagogies, and competencies. These depictions not only reflect what is viewed as “best practice” and “worst practice” in the process of learning to read (or struggling to learn to read); at the same time they reinforce what is viewed as “normal.” In focusing almost exclusively on the “problem” of the individual struggling reader, they help their audience ignore systemic components of the reading process and present both the problem and the solution as something that resides within the child. Thus, these books reflect and perpetuate the idea that for all children literacy is an unmitigated good, that it is equally available to all children, and that struggling to learn to read is a problem that lies within the individual and is therefore something the individual must solve.

We live in an era of high-stakes testing, where mandates require that no child be left behind, then place the responsibility for failure or success on the child (communicated solely through a quantifiable score that proves the individual child does or does not “measure up”). While it would be unjustified to suggest that there is a causal link between these growing sorts of individual accountability and fictional depictions of readers who are responsible—as individuals—for learning or failing to learn to read (or vice versa), in fact, the story landscape and the real lives of children look remarkably similar and must be questioned in similar ways. Ultimately, if images in children’s literature both reflect and embed assumptions and ideologies in the minds of readers, then it is important for children, as well as for teachers, parents, and other adults, to identify and interrogate the assumptions about learning to read depicted in children’s novels, for it is in this way that readers of all ages and skills can better identify and interrogate the assumptions about learning to read that are found in society at large.

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