

English 335: Critical Approaches to Children's Literature

Instructor: Dainy Bernstein
 Office: Carman 393
 Office Hours: Wednesday & Thursday, 5-6pm
dainybernstein@gmail.com

Fall 2019
 Section XW81
 Wednesday 6-8:40pm
 Carman 323

Course Description: *3 hours, 3 credits.* Critical examination of selected works written for children and enjoyed by children and adults. Consideration of fantastic and realistic fiction and analysis of appropriate literary forms, such as fairy tale, animal fable, adventure story, and the novel of development.

Children's literature is often approached with a very different set of expectations than literature marketed to adults. Much of the focus when first thinking about children's literature might be on **what it "teaches," what lessons children can learn from the texts**, etc. While this is a useful approach, especially for those planning to pursue careers in teaching or librarianship, it is also useful to think about children's literature in a different way: **What do the books we give to children say about us?** What do these books say about society's expectations of children? about society's ideas of childhood, of civic engagement, of education, of selfhood, of morality, of gender, etc.?

This course will read children's books from both of those angles. As many of you are preparing for teaching careers, we will spend some time thinking about the effects of this literature on children, and how these texts might be taught. We'll also take a literary-critical and cultural studies approach, and examine the texts through the lenses of narrative theory, feminist theory, disability studies, postcolonial theory, critical race studies, queer theory, etc.

We'll read books in a variety of **genres and points of view**. We'll talk about how identities (of writer, character, and reader) affect which stories are told and how they are told; how genre opens up possibilities for various kinds of stories; how children's literature breaks boundaries or conforms to social norms; etc. You will become familiar with the **forms and conventions** of each genre and **critical approaches** useful for analysis of all literature. We will be examining the **ideologies** embedded in texts, as well as the ideologies that guide our **cultures**, particularly in terms of children and the literature they read or are given.

We'll examine these questions from perspectives of **literary scholars** as well as **educators**. Some of the questions we'll be addressing throughout the semester:

- a. What is children's literature? Can one **definition** encompass all children's texts?
- b. What is the **purpose** of children's literature, and how does it function?
- c. What are adult **expectations** of children as set forth in these texts?
- d. What might these texts say about the **culture** of their times? about our culture?
- e. Why study children's literature in the first place?

Course Objectives

- to develop an awareness of a variety of literary genres, structures, values, and purposes
- to write about literary texts with imagination, precision, and detail
- to place literary texts within their aesthetic, political, religious, and historical contexts
- to critically examine how children’s literature affects and reflects society’s views of childhood, gender roles, race and ethnicity, etc.
- to recognize the role of ideology in children’s texts
- to examine issues relevant to the reading and teaching of children’s texts at home and in the classroom, including the censorship of children’s literature and the use of children’s texts as tools for critical thinking and/or moral instruction
- to explore traditional storytelling motifs, symbols, and techniques

Course Goals

- demonstrate the ability to read texts closely, critically, creatively, intellectually, and theoretically
- refine understanding of works of literature as expressions of individual and cultural values in historical and social contexts
- refine the ability to analyze and clearly articulate interpretations of the various meanings of texts, with particular reference to contexts and subtexts
- demonstrate the ability to compose well-constructed and rhetorically effective writing in various modes and media, including formal essays, creative think-pieces, and use of social media
- refine use of critical methods and approaches to literature in written work
- develop effective pre-writing techniques, including active reading, drafting, and responding to critique from peers and the professor
- demonstrate mastery in use of English language conventions and MLA formatting

Assessment

15%	Picture Book
25%	Essay 1
30%	Essay 2
15%	Annotated Bibliography
15%	Blackboard Posts

Required Text(s)

Most, if not all, of these books are available in the Lehman and/or public libraries. You are free to acquire them from **libraries** instead of buying them – but make sure you borrow them with enough time to read before class! You may acquire ebooks, but I strongly recommend that you get print copies. It’s easier to take notes and flip through to find passages in print books than ebooks.

1. Philbrick, Rodman. *Freak the Mighty*. Scholastic Books, 1993. Repr. 2001. ISBN: 978-0439286060. \$6.
2. Ostertag, Molly Knox. *The Witch Boy*. Scholastic, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-338-08951-6. \$11.
3. Lowry, Lois. *Number the Stars*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1989. ISBN: 978-0-547-57709-8. \$5
4. Young, Brigit. *Worth a Thousand Words*. Roaring Book Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-1626729209. \$10.
5. Grimes, Nikki. *Jazmin's Notebook*. Puffin Books, 1998. ISBN: 0-14-130702-1. \$5
6. Ryan, Pam Muñoz. *Esperanza Rising*. Scholastic Books, 2000. ISBN: 978-0439120425. \$5.
7. Mafi, Tahereh. *Furthermore*. Puffin Books, 2016. ISBN: 9781101994771. \$9.

Course Requirements

1. **Regular attendance.** Regular attendance is essential. Since this class meets only once a week, one absence means missing 7% of class meetings; two absences is 14%; three absences means missing 21% of class meetings. More than **two** absences will significantly affect your grade. All missed work must be made up. Email me as soon as possible after your absence.
2. **Weekly readings.** Since this is a class on children's literature, we are usually reading one book per week. Stay on track with the reading schedule, read carefully and attentively, and take notes as you read. I understand that you may be overwhelmed at times and end up not having time to read. This is okay if it happens once or twice all semester. But **please be honest** with me and let me know when you haven't read. It will help me guide you during class discussions, and it will be less stressful for you than trying to fake it during discussion!
3. **Participation.** Bring your text with you every day and be ready to contribute to the class discussion. Participation will be graded holistically (ie you won't get a certain amount of points per class; rather, your grade will be based on your overall participation over the course of the semester). Effective participation will engage with the text **and** your classmates' and professor's comments and reflections. *If you are uncomfortable speaking in class, please contact me as early as possible in the semester so we can potentially arrange other ways for you to participate.*
4. **Informal writing and social media.** In-class writing will help you in thinking through specific points about the texts we discuss, as well as in preparing and practicing for the essays you will write. Most will not be handed in. Keep all your writing and any work you do, as much of it can help you when you're writing your essays. There will also be some Blackboard prompts and social media assignments throughout the semester to help you think through the topics covered in class.
5. **Two formal essays.** Your first paper will be an in-depth study of one aspect of one book. Your second essay will be a thesis-driven analysis of one text *or* a theme in children's literature. Detailed assignment sheets for each essay will be provided in class. *Make every effort*

to attend class on days when papers will be assigned. Being present for those discussions will be essential to your ability to write an effective paper.

6. **A picture book.** Each of you will write and illustrate your own picture book! We will work on the beginnings of your picture book in class. This assignment is a chance for you to get creative with the ideas we'll be discussing. You will *not* be graded on your drawing ability. The grade for your picture book will be based on how well your creation demonstrates an understanding of the concepts discussed in class. A detailed rubric will be provided.
7. **Annotated bibliography.** Our syllabus aims to take a sampling of various genres and issues in children's literature, but we of course cannot read all the many books that represent all of children's literature. One of your assignments will be a bibliography to make sure that you have a complete view of the current state of children's literature and (for those of you who plan to be teachers) to help you build a store of books you can draw from. You'll use the library and databases like Goodreads to find books and compile lists of topic-appropriate books, bibliographic information, and summaries. *You are not required to read these extra books.*
8. **Extra credit: Live-Tweet as you read.** I will award extra credit (up to three points total) if you live-tweet as you read each book. You could - and should - take notes in addition to what you post on Twitter, but make sure to post at least *three* tweets before each class session to get the extra credit. Your tweets can be raw reaction ("omg I can't believe they followed through on their plan! I bet they get in major hot water") or analysis ("the image of the bluebird when Carrie goes home echoes the bluebird when her mom gave birth to her") or questions ("why does the ogre use baby-language?"). Use the hashtag **#eng335lehman** in every tweet. See these threads for examples of live-tweeting books:
https://twitter.com/Ernest_Robyn/status/1061816767272677376
 (*Harry Potter*, JK Rowling)
<https://twitter.com/DainyBernstein/status/1085306006761021440>
 (*Sometimes We Tell the Truth*, Kim Zarins)
<https://twitter.com/profchander/status/1064687070713704448>
 (*Bleak House*, Charles Dickens)
<https://twitter.com/destinyuniquex3/status/1141397727600885766>
 (*Beauty*, Robin McKinley)

*****In all areas and all requirements: If you see that you will have difficulty completing an assignment as described or by the due date, approach me as soon as you become aware of the problem. It is far easier to work out alternative solutions in advance of the deadline than to try to patch up missed deadlines, etc.*****

CLASS POLICIES

Breaks. This class runs from 6:00 until 8:40 - two hours and forty minutes. We will take a short 15-minute break around the midway point of each class, to allow you to grab a quick coffee or snack, drink some water, or stretch your legs.

Chatting hours. Officially called “office hours,” this is a time for you to come by my office and talk to me about anything at all! You can have specific questions or concerns, you can have general concerns about the class or your work, or you can just be in the mood for a chat. No matter the reason, **you should absolutely make use of this time.** I will be in my office (Carman 393) every Wednesday and Thursday, 5pm-6pm (before class). If this time does not work for you (ie, you have a class or work during that hour), please email me to set up an alternative appointment. **Your professors are here to help you. It’s part of our job.**

Early and late assignments. Deadlines for assignments are on the reading schedule. If you submit your assignment one day early, you will receive 2 points of extra credit for that assignment. If you submit your assignment up to one week late, you won’t be docked but I won’t comment on the assignment.

Accessibility and accommodations. If you require accommodation, please contact me privately to discuss your specific needs. Please also visit the **Office of Disabilities Services in Shuster Hall, Room 238**, to coordinate reasonable accommodations. These can range from speech-to-text devices to more frequent breaks - anything you need, please ask.

Names and Pronouns. If you would like to be called by a name other than the one given to me via CUNYFirst, please let me know. I will ask for each student’s pronouns on the first day of class. If you would like me to change the way I refer to you at any point, or if you would like me to use different pronouns in class versus via email (for example), please let me know. **My pronouns are they/them.**

Diversity and inclusion. It is my intent that students from all diverse backgrounds and perspectives be well-served by this course, that students’ learning needs be addressed both in and out of class, and that the diversity that the students bring to this class be viewed as a resource, strength, and benefit. It is my intent to present materials and activities that are respectful of diversity: gender identity, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, nationality, religion, and culture. Your suggestions are encouraged and appreciated. Please let me know ways to improve the effectiveness of the course for you personally, or for other students or student groups.

Point of view. The readings, class lectures, and my comments in class will suggest a particular point of view. This perspective is my own and does not have to be yours! I encourage you to disagree with the ideas in the readings and lectures as well as the perspectives of your colleagues in the course. Please express yourself! A significant part of a college education is learning about the

complexity of various issues; therefore, it is important that we listen and respect one another, but we do not have to agree. A richer discussion will occur when a variety of perspectives are presented in class for discussion.

Important note: Given the sensitive and challenging nature of some of the material discussed in class, it is imperative that there be an atmosphere of **trust and safety** in the classroom. I will attempt to foster an environment in which each class member is able to hear and respect each other. It is critical that each class member show respect for all views expressed in class. It is expected that some of the material in this course may evoke strong emotions; please be respectful of others' emotions and be mindful of your own. Please let me know if something said or done in the classroom, by either myself or other students, is particularly troubling or causes discomfort or offense. While our intention may not be to cause discomfort or offense, the impact of what happens throughout the course is not to be ignored and is something that I consider to be very important and deserving of attention. If and when this occurs, there are several ways to alleviate some of the discomfort or hurt you may experience:

1. Discuss the situation privately with me via email or during office hours. I am always open to listening to students' experiences and want to work with students to find acceptable ways to process and address the issue.
2. Discuss the situation with the class, either during the relevant discussion or after conferring with me. Chances are there is at least one other student in the class who had a similar response to the material. Discussion enhances the ability for all class participants to have a fuller understanding of context and impact of course material and class discussions.
3. Notify me of the issue through another source such as your academic advisor, a trusted faculty member, or a peer. If for any reason you do not feel comfortable discussing the issue directly with me, I encourage you to seek out another, more comfortable avenue to address the issue. The Counseling Center's information is listed below in the Resources section.

Children in the classroom. I understand that you are more than a student, and some of you may be mothers, fathers, or guardians. Nursing babies are always allowed in class. If your child's school is cancelled, or if for any other reason you need to bring your child along to class, please check in with me before the start of class, and try to sit near the door for that day so you and your child won't disturb the class if you need to take a bathroom break etc.

How to succeed in this class:

- Read the material thoroughly (including any introductions or forewords) before class.
- Check Blackboard for reading guides before each class.
- Annotate your reading(s). Underline key passages (not everything), record reactions in the margins, ask questions, use asterisks and other symbols to indicate your process. Make that text your own!
- Attend every class. If you miss, get notes from a classmate (make sure you have someone's contact info at the start of the semester).

- Listen and take notes by hand or on a computer. That way you'll have to hear, think, summarize, and write – each of which engages your brain and body differently and more comprehensively than just sitting passively in class.
- Participate in class discussion and ask questions when you're unclear about something, if you have a question, or if you have an interesting thought or idea. You never know - your comment may make or break the class for another person! If you tend to be quiet in class, that's fine, but I will call on you from time to time. Please let me know in advance if you have anxiety and/or have other reasons for not wanting to be called on.
- Talk with others about what you're learning, what you're confused about, and what you're interested in. Respond to classmates' tweets and Blackboard posts, even when I'm not grading responses!
- Reread the text, and let your annotations guide your reflection. And (re)annotate!
- Create a reading group. Read together, share notes and insights.
- Plan ahead for discussions and writing assignments so that you have time to prepare thoroughly and to revise your essays prior to turning them in.
- Take advantage of my office hours. Don't wait until you're struggling to get help. Stop by when you're only slightly confused, or when you're excited about something you read – stop by for a chat about anything at all!

RESOURCES

The Academic Center for Excellence. ACE provides appointment-based and drop-in tutoring in the humanities, social sciences, and writing, as well as general writing skills. For more information, visit their website at <http://www.lehman.edu/issp> or call 718-960-8175. Please make use of this valuable service early and often throughout the semester.

Office of Disabilities Services. Lehman College is committed to providing access to all programs and curricula for all students. Students with disabilities who may need classroom accommodations are encouraged to register with the Office of Student Disability Services. For more information, please contact the Office of Student Disability Services at Shuster Hall, Room 238, email disability.services@lehman.cuny.edu, or call 718-960-8441.

PLAGIARISM. Plagiarism (intellectual theft) has serious academic consequences, including potential failure of the course, suspension, or expulsion. Remember to cite or acknowledge the help you received in formulating your ideas. This help includes but is not limited to magazine or journal articles, other textbooks, reference books, introductions to texts, web pages, friends, and classmates. Remember to cite quoted material as well. If you have any questions about plagiarism, CUNY's policy on academic integrity is clear and available for you to read: <http://web.cuny.edu/academics/info-central/policies/academic-integrity.pdf>. The statement in the Lehman College student handbook is available at <http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/student-affairs/documents/student-handbook-02.pdf>.

Counseling Center. The Counseling Center at Lehman College (Old Gym Bldg. Rm 114) is a safe place for students to talk about any concerns they may have. The Counseling Center offers free and confidential services in a safe environment. At the Counseling Center, students can address issues that may be keeping them from attaining their academic goals. All students are treated with respect and are seen as individuals with unique strengths. Students may seek our services for a variety of reasons, including: Stress/Anxiety; Depression; Grief/Loss; Loneliness; Family Stress; Difficulties in Romantic Relationships; Academic Concerns (e.g. poor time management/procrastination); Cultural Issues; [Life Coaching](#). Old Gym Building, Room 114. 718-960-8761.
counseling.center@lehman.cuny.edu

Title IX. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (“Title IX”) is a federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in education programs and activities at universities receiving federal funds. Under Title IX, discrimination on the basis of sex can include sexual harassment or sexual violence, such as rape, sexual assault, sexual battery, and sexual coercion. Anyone – of any gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, citizenship status, race, class or educational level – can suffer from sexual harassment, including sexual violence. The goal of this website is to help you understand what sexual harassment means and let you know that there are people at CUNY and in the community who can help if you or others experience it. We want to make sure you understand your rights as a student, CUNY’s policies, and other issues related to sexual harassment, gender harassment and sexual violence. Feel free to give us a call at (718) 960-8111 or send an email to dawn.ewing-morgan@lehman.cuny.edu or to maritza.rivera@lehman.cuny.edu

SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS: *(Please note that this schedule is subject to change.)*

Date	Reading Due	Writing Due
8/28	1. <i>Amelia Bedelia</i> (Peggy Parish) + “The Secret Rebellion of Amelia Bedelia” 2. <i>Frog and Toad Are Friends</i> (Arnold Lobel) + “The Gay History of America’s Classic Children’s Books”	Blackboard introductions (after class)
9/4	<i>Freak the Mighty</i> (Rodman Philbrick)	
9/11	<i>The Witch Boy</i> (Molly Knox Ostertag)	Essay #1 proposal
9/18	<i>Number the Stars</i> (Lois Lowry)	Essay #1 draft
9/25	<i>Worth a Thousand Words</i> (Brigit Young)	Questions for the author
10/2	LIBRARY VISIT: 310 East Kingsbridge Road	Essay #1 final
10/9	NO CLASS	
10/16	MONDAY SCHEDULE	
10/23	<i>Jazmin’s Notebook</i> (Nikki Grimes)	Twitter / Instagram
10/30	Fairy tales and mythology (text TBA)	Essay #2 Proposal
11/6	<i>Bring picture book and/or early reader from home/library</i> + in class reading: various picture books and easy readers	Essay # 2 draft
11/13	<i>Esperanza Rising</i> (Pam Muñoz Ryan)	
11/20	<i>Esperanza Rising</i> (Pam Muñoz Ryan) (cont)	Essay #2 final
11/27	<i>Furthermore</i> (Tahereh Mafi)	
12/4	<i>Furthermore</i> (Tahereh Mafi) (cont)	
12/11	<i>No reading assignment</i>	Picture Book Bibliography