

The Literature of Children and Adolescents

*Course number: V05.0191; 4 points credit.

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*This course will be first offered in spring of 2009 and each spring thereafter.

*Prerequisites: None.

Course Description:

Children's and teen literature constitutes a vibrant, mature, and many-faceted literary genre that presents students of psychology, child development, and related disciplines with opportunities for insight-harvesting thought and reflection. The field's most gifted writers (and the illustrators with whom they often collaborate) share with the social scientists who study childhood and adolescence a dedication to understanding the basic dilemmas and conflicts of growing up. The unusually high degree of clarity and distillation required to connect effectively with a young readership impels these authors to create works that can be fairly described as paradigmatic statements of childhood and teenage experience. W. H. Auden once said, "There are no good children's books which are *only* for children." This course seizes upon the largely untapped potential of this literature as a resource for getting at the crux of child and adolescent development issues.

This course is unique in its presentation of children's and teen literature from the dual perspective of a literary genre and window on pivotal issues of child and adolescent development. Following introductory lectures aimed at putting the literature in a historical/cultural context and providing an overview of the surprising range of work encompassed by the term children's and teen literature, lectures and discussions explores six developmental/literary themes:

1. Learning to Trust – Making a Home in the World
2. Family Feelings and Family Relationships
3. Anger, Fear, and Confronting the Forbidden
4. Beyond Home – The Call to Adventure
5. Embracing the World of One's Peers
6. Questioning Reality (Asking "What if?")

Each of these six themes is considered twice – first in relation to books for children and then, and in the same sequence, in relation to books for preteens and teens. This arrangement is intended to highlight the salient differences and similarities between books published for different age groups and to give students the opportunity to think about developmental issues as ongoing concerns that we revisit at different stages of life, each time from a new perspective. The dynamic interplay between developmental issues of temperament, early parent-child relationships, attachment, learning, cognition and language have profound implications for how we study and understand children and how children understand and interact in the world. By repeating these themes for adolescents, the topics of brain

development and the development of executive functions is reviewed in light of metacognitive skills, social skills, identity formation and moral development.

Course Aims:

Knowledge

Students will expand their understanding of literature by:

1. Reading a broad cross-section of the best children's and teen books;
2. Learning to see children's and adolescent literature in the context of both literature as a whole and the professional literature of developmental psychology; and
3. Reflecting on young people's responses to books and how these may differ from year to year, as well as from the responses of adults.

Skills

Students will develop:

1. A critical vocabulary for the thoughtful evaluation of children's and adolescent literature;
2. An understanding of the utility, and limitations, of children's and adolescent books as therapeutic tools ("bibliotherapy"); and
3. Better communication skills for future use in their work with young people whether in the fields of education, pediatric medicine and psychiatry, child psychology, or social work through a careful consideration of the tone or "voice" in which the assigned books are written.

Perspectives

Students will gain new perspectives by:

1. Taking seriously the notion that children's and adolescent literature, although labeled as being for young people, does, in fact, have something worthwhile to say to receptive adult readers as well; and
2. Rereading books remembered from childhood with the deepened understanding provided both by the experience of their own development histories and by their studies of childhood and adolescence as universal stages of life.

Course Syllabus:

Session:

Course Topic

1 – 2

Introductory Lectures: The first two sessions provide a historical overview of the development of children's literature; its intellectual underpinnings in the educational theories of Enlightenment philosopher John Locke; its twentieth-century development and refinement into age-graded subgenres; and the impact of the theoretical writings of Freud,

Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Jean Piaget and others on modern writers for young people.

The subsequent course sessions are divided into two equal halves. During the first half, we focus on literature for children, and in the second half, we focus on literature for teens. The goal of this separation is to allow for an exploration of the same developmental themes while emphasizing the separate biological, psychological, and social factors unique to both childhood and adolescence.

Assigned Reading:

- 1) Piaget, Jean. Selected chapters from A Child's Conception of the World.
- 2) Lanes, Selma G., "Blow-Up: The Picture Book Explosion," in *Down the Rabbit Hole: Adventures and Misadventures in the Realm of Children's Literature*
- 3) Mintz, Steven, "Parental Panics and the Reshaping of Children," in *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*

Part I: Children's Literature

3 - 4

Learning to Trust (Making a Home in the World)

These sessions explore the literature of preschool children from the perspective of Erik Erikson's first of eight developmental stages (Trust vs. Mistrust). In Erikson's view, if we pass successfully through this first stage (roughly birth to 18 months), we will learn to trust that life is essentially a safe endeavor, and we will have basic confidence in the future. If we fail to experience trust and are constantly frustrated because our needs are not met, we may end up with a deep-seated feeling of worthlessness and a mistrust in the world in general. The books selected for this week explore this theme and focus, not surprisingly, on children's most significant early relationships and the notion of temperament and goodness of fit.

Assigned Reading:

- 1) Ainsworth, M.D.S., Blehar, M.C., Waters, E., and Wall, S. (1978). Wachs, TD and Bates, JE (2001). Temperament. In G. Bemner and A Fogel (Eds), Blackwell Handbook of Infant Development (pp. 465-501).
- 2) Patterns of Attachment. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum. Brazelton, T.B., Yogman, M, Als, H. and Tronick, E. (1979). The infant as a focus for Family Reciprocity. In M. Lewis and L.A. Rosenblum (eds.) The Child and its Family. New York: Plenum Press.
- 3) Brown, Margaret Wise, *Goodnight Moon*; illustrated by Clement Hurd

- 4) Eastman, P. D., *Are You My Mother?*
- 5) Henkes, Kevin, *Owen*
- 6) Hoban, Russell, *Bread and Jam for Frances*; illustrated by Lillian Hoban
- 7) Krauss, Ruth, *The Carrot Seed*; illustrated by Crockett Johnson
- 8) Minarik, Elsa Holmelund, *Little Bear*; illustrated by Maurice Sendak
- 9) Opie, Iona and Peter (eds.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (selections)
- 10) Willems, Mo, *Knuffle Bunny*
- 11) Williams, Vera B., “More, More, More,” *Said the Baby: Three Love Stories*
- 12) Chukovsky, Kornei, “The Sense of Nonsense Verse,” in *From Two to Five*, pp. 89-113.
- 13) Mitchell, Lucy Sprague, *Another Here and Now Story Book*, pp. xv-xviii (Foreword); pp. 1-11 (“Two-Year-Oldness”); pp. 29-39 (“Three-Year-Oldness”)

5 - 6

Family Feelings and Family Relationships

These sessions provide an examination of separation, individuation, sibling rivalry, and other classic dilemmas faced by children in their first experiences as social beings.

Assigned Reading:

- 1) From Neurons to Neighborhoods, Chapter 9: Nurturing Relationships
- 2) Harris, Robie H., *Don't Forget to Come Back*; illustrated by Harry Bliss
- 3) Henkes, Kevin *Julius: the Baby of the World*
- 4) Lesser, Rika (translator), *Hansel and Gretel*; illustrated by Paul O. Zelinsky
- 5) Marshall, James, *Cinderella*
- 6) McCloskey, Robert, *One Morning in Maine*
- 7) Schwartz, Amy, *Bea and Mister Jones*
- 8) Wells, Rosemary, Max and Ruby board books
- 9) Bettelheim, Bruno, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, pp. 3-28; 45-53; 116-123; 159-166.

7 - 8

Anger, Fear, and Confronting the Forbidden

During these sessions, we consider the role that books can play in helping children come to terms with the more difficult, disturbing aspects of their lives. Fear of loss, abandonment, and envelopment frequently lead to anger, even in the earliest years of life, and much of children's literature is devoted to helping children learn to identify these emotions and

subsequently “live” with them. In addition, developmental issues of effortful control, motivation and emotion are considered.

Assigned Reading:

- 1) Bang, Molly, *When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry*
- 2) Frame, Jeron Ashford, *Yesterday I Had the Blues*; illustrated by R. Gregory Christie
- 3) Sendak, Maurice, *In the Night Kitchen*
- 4) Sendak, Maurice, *Outside Over There*
- 5) Sendak, Maurice, *Where the Wild Things Are*
- 6) Udry, Janice May, *Let’s Be Enemies*; illustrated by Maurice Sendak
- 7) Viorst, Judith, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*; illustrated by Ray Cruz
- 8) Zolotow, Charlotte, *The Hating Book*; illustrated by Ben Shecter
- 9) Kagan, Jerome, “The Emotions,” in *The Nature of the Child*, pp. 154-184.

9 - 10

Beyond Home: The Call to Adventure

These sessions focus upon the awakening of curiosity with the first recognition of interests and needs that cannot be fully satisfied within the world of the home and family.

Assigned Reading:

- 1) Anno, Mitsumasa, *Anno’s Journey*
- 2) Brown, Margaret Wise, *The Runaway Bunny*; illustrated by Clement Hurd
- 3) Carle, Eric, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*
- 4) Henkes, Kevin, *Kitten’s First Full Moon*
- 5) Myers, Christopher, *Black Cat*
- 6) Rosen, Michael, *We’re Going on a Bear Hunt*; illustrated by Helen Oxenbury
- 7) Say, Allen, *Grandfather’s Journey*
- 8) Steig, William, *Brave Irene*
- 9) Steig, William, *Doctor De Soto*
- 10) Steig, William, *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*
- 11) Chall, JS. Stages of Reading Development (1996). Harcourt Brace College Publishers. Piaget, *A Child’s Conception of the World* (1930).

11 - 12

Embracing the World of One’s Peers

Friendship, sharing, cooperation, jealousy, ostracism and other aspects of the child’s first forays into the larger social world are explored.

Assigned Reading:

- 1) Brown, Margaret Wise, *Mister Dog, or The Dog Who Belonged to Himself*; illustrated by Garth Williams
- 2) Kalman, Maira, *Smartypants: Pete at School*
- 3) Keats, Ezra Jack, *Goggles!*
- 4) Keats, Ezra Jack, *A Letter for Amy*
- 5) Lionni, Leo, *Frederick*
- 6) Lobel, Arnold, *Frog and Toad*
- 7) Marshall, James, *George and Martha*
- 8) Raschka, Chris, *Yo! Yes?*
- 9) Willems, Mo, *Knuffle Bunny Too*
- 10) Erikson, E.H. (1950) Childhood and Society. New York: Norton.

13 - 14

Questioning Reality: Asking “What if?”

During these sessions we study the developmental changes heralded as children begin to reckon with the real world and to think abstractly – how does life change when a child gains a deepening sense of self? What changes in a child’s world with the growing ability to contemplate multiple views of a given situation, and does their moral treatment of others alter? As children become able to appreciate irony and paradox, how does their world view change?

Assigned Reading:

- 1) Brown, Margaret Wise, *The Important Book*; illustrated by Leonard Weisgard
- 2) Johnson, Crockett, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*
- 3) Muth, John J, *Zen Shorts*
- 4) Shaw, Charles G., *It Looked Like Spilt Milk*
- 5) Steig, William, *Which Would You Rather Be?*; illustrated by Harry Bliss
- 6) Van Allsburg, Chris, *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*
- 7) Wiesner, David, *Flotsam*
- 8) Paley, Vivian G., *The Girl With the Brown Crayon*
- 9) Kohlberg, L., Levine, C., & Hower, A. (1983) *Moral Stages: A current formulation and a response to critics*.

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Midterm Written Examination

Part II: Adolescent Literature

Recent developmental brain research shows for the first time that there is a wave of growth and change in the adolescent brain. What teens do during their adolescent years affects how their brains develop and how they understand relationships. Teens' brains actually work differently than adults' when processing emotional information from external stimuli. During this second half of the course, we explore these same literary themes but now in the context of adolescent physical and emotional development. As we revisit Erikson, Bettelheim, Mahler, and Piaget, we

ask ourselves what is different this time around – how is the adolescent developing? Why is children’s literature much less relevant to teens, and what are the unique aspects of teen literature that speak so clearly to adolescents? We also reflect back upon the “critical periods of development” hypothesis and view the literature we are studying itself along a developmental trajectory, now looking ahead toward adulthood.

16 – 17 Learning to Trust (Making a Home in the World)

Assigned Reading:

From Neurons to Neighborhoods, Chapter 8; The Developing Brain
Each individual student is given the choice of reading either:

- a) Mohr, Nicholas, *El Bronx Remembered*
- or
- b) White, E. B., *Charlotte’s Web*

18 - 19 Family Feelings and Family Relationships

Assigned Reading:

Each individual student is given the choice of reading either:

- a) Fleischman, Paul, *Seek*
- or
- b) McKay, Hilary, *Saffy’s Angel*

20 - 21 Anger, Fear, and Confronting the Forbidden

Assigned Reading:

Each individual student is given the choice of reading either:

- a) Blume, Judy, “*Are You There God, It’s Me, Margaret?*”
- or
- b) Fitzhugh, Louise, *Harriet the Spy*
- or
- c) Myers, Walter Dean, *Monster*, illustrated by Christopher Myers

22 - 23 Beyond Home: The Call to Adventure

Assigned Reading:

Each individual student is given the choice of reading either:

- a) George, Jean Craighead, *Julie of the Wolves*
- or
- b) Paulsen, Gary, *Hatchet*

24 - 25

Embracing the World of One's Peers

Assigned Reading:

From Neurons to Neighborhoods, Chapter 7: Making Friends and Getting Along with Peers

Each individual student is given the choice of reading either:

- a) Cormier, Robert, *The Chocolate War*
- or
- b) Cole, Brock, *The Goats*

26 – 27

Questioning Reality, Asking “What if?”

Assigned Reading:

Each individual student is given the choice of reading either:

- a) Carroll, Lewis, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*
- or
- b) Juster, Norton, *The Phantom Tollbooth*; illustrated by Jules Feiffer
- or
- c) Pratchett, Terry, *The Wee Free Men*

Final Paper Due

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Final Written Examination

Required Texts:

Students are encouraged to purchase those children stories that interest them for their personal libraries. All required children's books are also placed on reserve at the Bobst Undergraduate Library. All articles from the professional child development and psychology literature are photocopied and placed into a required course reader that students purchase from the NYU Student Bookstore. Students are also encouraged, but not required, to purchase the following texts, which are recommended as reference texts; both are also placed on reserve at the Bobst Library.

Berk, Laura E. Infants, Children, and Adolescents – 5th Ed.. Pearson Education, Inc./Allyn and Bacon: 2005.

Shonkoff, JP, & Phillips, DA (eds.); Board on Children, Youth and Families of the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development. National Academy Press: Washington, DC (2000).

Examinations and Grades:

Grades are based upon class participation (20%), a midterm examination (25%), a final paper (30%), and a final examination (25%).

Midterm Examination: Students choose one out of three essay questions based upon material covered in the first half of the course and complete a Blue Book essay exam and short answer questions.

Final Paper: Students complete a final paper (not to exceed eight double-spaced pages) exploring in depth a book not on the required reading list, as it relates to one of the key developmental issues highlighted in the course.

Final Examination: Students choose one of three essay questions based upon material covered in the second half of the course and complete a Blue Book essay exam and short answer questions.