

# Children's Literature

## Early Literacy Initiative Resource Book 2



### Editors

Shailaja Menon  
Shuchi Sinha  
Harshita V. Das  
Akhila Pydah



**TATA TRUSTS**



# Children's Literature

## Early Literacy Initiative

### Resource Book 2

#### **Editors**

Shailaja Menon

Shuchi Sinha

Harshita V. Das

Akhila Pydah

**Project Director:** Rekha Pappu

Published by Early Literacy Initiative,  
Azim Premji School of Education,  
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad.



© 2019 by Early Literacy Initiative, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad.  
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International  
License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>

**Website:** <http://eli.tiss.edu/>

**Contact:** [earlyliteracyinitiative@gmail.com](mailto:earlyliteracyinitiative@gmail.com)

**Suggested Citation:** Menon, S., Sinha, S., Das, H. V., & Pydah, A. (Eds.). (2019). *Children's Literature*.  
Hyderabad: Early Literacy Initiative, Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

**Copy Editor:** Chetana Divya Vasudev

**Cover Photography:** Community library in rural Bangalore, **Courtesy:** Harshita V. Das

**Layout and Design:** Zinc & Broccoli, [enquiry@zandb.in](mailto:enquiry@zandb.in)

This Resource Book is part of a series brought out by the Early Literacy Initiative anchored by the  
Azim Premji School of Education at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad.



# Introduction

That Indian children are not learning to read or write proficiently is fairly widely known. The ASER annual reports document this dismal picture year after year—with little improvement over time. “Fixing” early literacy is not easy. The solutions don’t lie in simplistically finding the “right methods”, or teaching the “right skills”. Early literacy and language learning in India occur in complex landscapes characterised by rich linguistic diversity, and riddled with deep socioeconomic divides, poor teacher education, and a somewhat poorly functioning educational system. Debates related to issues such as medium of instruction, language planning and policy making abound. In this context, there is an urgent need to facilitate conversations around important issues as well as to contribute to knowledge creation and dissemination.

The Early Literacy Initiative (ELI) is a project anchored by the Azim Premji School of Education at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad with a view to address the need for building awareness and knowledge related to early language and literacy in India. The initiative is funded by the Tata Trusts.

ELI undertook two kinds of print-based initiatives to address the need for disseminating knowledge in a usable form for practitioners – the creation and distribution of thematic blogs and practitioner briefs. This work is available at the ELI website: <http://eli.tiss.edu/>, and is also compiled into ELI Resource Books.

**Thematic Blogs.** Five themes were identified as centrally relevant to the domain of early language and literacy in India (see below). We invited original blog pieces related to each theme from a variety of stakeholders working in the domain—from practitioners to academics. Members of the ELI team also wrote pieces for these themes. Care was taken to address various aspects of each theme through the invited pieces. While putting together the themes, the ELI team created brief annotated bibliographies for each. Talks, presentations, essays and opinion pieces by ELI team members related to each theme were also collected. A total of 45 original blog pieces and approximately 150 annotations were created across the five themes and are represented in the five ELI Resource Books.

The five books are:

ELI Resource Book 1. Multilingual Education in India

**ELI Resource Book 2. Children’s Literature (this book)**

ELI Resource Book 3. Children’s Writing

ELI Resource Book 4. Decoding the Script

ELI Resource Book 5. Comprehension

**Practitioner Briefs.** The blog pieces, while written in an easy-to-access style, are more focused on building perspectives. On the other hand, the practitioner briefs are a collection of “How-tos” for people working in the field. The briefs draw upon perspectives to help practitioners imagine relevant practices on the ground. A total of 21 briefs are compiled into seven thematic booklets. Each thematic booklet consists of a set of three to four briefs.

While both blog pieces and practitioner briefs were written originally in English, the intent is to eventually translate them into regional languages to make them widely available to practitioners. We hope that this consolidation of original and accessible writings on early language and literacy for Indian contexts will be of help in your work!



*Nearly every book has the same architecture—cover, spine, pages—but you open them onto worlds and gifts far beyond what paper and ink are, and on the inside they are every shape and power. Some books are toolkits you take up to fix things, from the most practical to the most mysterious, from your house to your heart, or to make things, from cakes to ships. Some books are wings. Some are horses that run away with you. Some are parties to which you are invited, full of friends who are there even when you have no friends. In some books, you meet one remarkable person; in others, a whole group or even a culture. Some books are medicine, bitter but clarifying. Some books are puzzles, mazes, tangles, jungles. Some long books are journeys, and at the end you are not the same person you were at the beginning. Some are handheld lights you can shine on almost anything.*

Rebecca Solnit (2019)



# Contents

## Blog Pieces

Introduction to Children’s Literature – <i>Harshita V. Das</i> . . . . .	1
Supporting Early Language and Literacy through Children’s Literature – <i>Shailaja Menon</i> . . . . .	6
The Readiness is All – <i>Usha Mukunda</i> . . . . .	17
The Child Beyond the Threshold – <i>Jane Sahi</i> . . . . .	22
To Teach or Not to Teach? A Closer Look at Morals and Values in Children’s Literature – <i>Maitri Vasudev</i> . . . . .	31
Writing for Children - It’s Complicated! – <i>Mini Shrinivasan</i> . . . . .	38
Relating with Children through Literature – <i>Harshita V. Das</i> . . . . .	42
Children’s Literature: Concluding Thoughts . . . . . – <i>Shailaja Menon and Harshita V. Das</i>	48

## Talks, Essays and Opinion Pieces

Building Communities of Readers and Writers – <i>Shailaja Menon</i> . . . . .	52
Judging Quality in Children’s Literature – <i>Shailaja Menon</i> . . . . .	62

## Annotated Reading Resources

Resources for Read Alouds. . . . .	66
Resources for Understanding and Engaging with Children’s Literature . . . . .	67
Resources on Children’s Libraries. . . . .	70
Resources on Storytelling. . . . .	71
Resources for Practitioners . . . . .	73

<b>Contributors</b> . . . . .	75
-------------------------------	----



# **BLOG PIECES**

---





# Introduction to Children's Literature

Harshita V. Das

Children's Literature is the second of five themes taken up by the ELI. Harshita V. Das introduces us to the blog pieces curated under this theme.

Why take up children's literature as one of a handful of themes that are deemed critical for early language and literacy? What is the relationship between these concepts?



Figure 1. Collection of children's books. **Image Courtesy:** Sarika Moon for Early Literacy Initiative, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad.

Literature can introduce children to worlds they may have never seen or heard of, even as it allows them to relate these to their own lives and reflect on them. Good literature has an aesthetic quality to it that sets it apart from other writing—say, most textbooks that children are exposed to on a daily basis in classrooms. Children can also be invited to understand the elements of stories—for example, plot, character, theme, setting, values, and language use. These can be used to deepen their

understanding of the story, as well as of their appreciation of the literary qualities of the text. It is therefore the contention of most educators working in the domain that literature is central to education. The relationship between literature and language is also deep. Key concerns of a language classroom, for example, reading texts critically, relating texts to one's life, expanding vocabulary, comprehension and the capacity to read and write in particular genres – are all aided tremendously by the use of literature. Unfortunately, despite the central role that literature could potentially play in early language classrooms, they are most often noticeable by their absence in Indian contexts. It, therefore, becomes critical to develop awareness and to build shared understandings around the use of children's literature in early language and literacy learning.

A few pertinent questions guide this quest. For example:

1. What is children's literature?
2. Why is literature useful in early language and literacy classrooms?
3. What are the qualities of *good* children's literature?
4. How can we engage children meaningfully with literature?

Some aspects of these questions are explored through the blog pieces that form a part of this theme; while others are left for the reader to explore through the annotated resources. Librarians, teachers, teacher educators and other affiliated professionals have written the blog pieces for this theme.

Table 1  
*Examples of Genres in Children's Literature*

Genres of Literature	Definition	Examples
Fiction	Based on the author's imagination. Fiction has sub-categories such as fantasy, realistic fiction.	<i>Ismat ki Eid</i> (Author: Fawzia Gilani Williams; Illustrator: Proiti Roy, Tulika Publishers, 2017).
Picture Books	Texts and pictures are used together in this genre to create a narrative.	<i>The Why Why Girl</i> (Author: Mahasweta Devi; Illustrator: Kanyika Kini, Tulika Publishers, 2003).
Wordless Picture Books	Uses pictures only, and no text, to weave together a narrative. Used largely for very young children.	<i>Ammachi's Glasses</i> (Priya Kuriyan, Tulika Publishers, 2017).
Non-fiction	Based on reality and facts.	<i>The House that Sonabai Built</i> (Author: Vishaka Chanchani; Photographer: Stephen Huyler, Tulika Publishers, 2014).
Poetry	Uses text and rhythm to convey meaning.	<i>Dum Dum Dho</i> (Various authors, Tulika Publishers) <i>Akkad Bakkad</i> (Eklavya Foundation).
Comic Books	Use panels consisting of text and graphical representations to create a narrative.	<i>Chacha Chaudhary</i> (Diamond Comics).
Young Adult Fiction	Either written for adolescents or has an adolescent as a central character.	<i>Dear Mrs Naidu</i> (Mathangi Subramanian, Young Zubaan, 2015).
Folklore	The verbal cultural repertoire of a community consisting of stories, rhymes, songs, poems etc.	<i>Khichadi...ek lok katha</i> (Retold by Jitendra Kumar, Eklavya Foundation).

The first blog piece is an English translation of Shailaja Menon's article in Bhasha Boli, "Supporting early language and literacy through children's literature". As the title suggests, this piece provides a comprehensive overview of the place of children's literature in the early language and literacy classroom. It engages with the questions—what is literature? Why do early language classrooms need literature? What genres of literature are suitable for young children? (See Table 1). It ends by considering how literature can be used productively in the early language classroom.



Figure 2. Reading corner in a *balwadi*. **Image Courtesy:** Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan, Pragat Shikshan Sanstha, Phaltan, Maharashtra, 2019.

The next piece by Usha Mukunda, pushes the conversation forward. It asks: How does one know that a child is *ready* to read a particular book? Does a child's age matter when she reads a book? Should librarians, teachers and parents keep a close and keen eye on who is reading what, and whether they are reading *above* their levels of understanding? Usha Mukunda is a noted children's librarian who has also written several pieces on the idea of *open libraries*. You could learn more about open libraries from her article in our resources section.

Effectively engaging children with literature includes reflecting critically on the portrayal of characters and the unfolding of the events in stories. Jane Sahi's piece discusses how children are portrayed in children's literature, with examples of some Indian authors who represent them as resilient, insightful and receptive learners.

Indian teachers and parents often want to use moralistic literature to teach children "good values". Panchatantra and Jataka Tales, for example, end with morals meant to educate and guide children. Maitri Vasudev takes issue with this—should literature be used to teach children morals? Are morals and values the same thing? Can stories model values without teaching morals?



In the following piece, Harshita V. Das shares her experience as a teacher who used children's literature extensively in her classrooms. She writes of how she was not only a witness to the huge possibilities of using literature to support learning in the language classroom, but also of how it helped build a special bond with each child, that she continues to cherish.

It is the hope of the ELI team that you find this set of blogs, as well as the other resources that follow it to be enjoyable and useful reading!



Figure 3. Example of an open library, where children have access to books and can select them independently. **Image Courtesy:** Harshita V. Das, Community library in rural Bangalore.

# Supporting Early Language and Literacy through Children's Literature\*

Shailaja Menon

Why would we want to reimagine the way in which we define literacy? Is it important that we expand our understanding of the term and the idea it entails? When we do that, what implications does it have on the pedagogical practices in the classroom? Shailaja Menon, through this paper, nudges the reader towards a nuanced understanding of the role of children's literature in an early language and literacy classroom.

Language is often taught in inadequate and unimaginative ways in classrooms throughout India. The focus of early language and literacy in these classrooms appears to be the mechanical transfer of script knowledge to children—the endless presentation of aksharas, and their combinations into words, phrases, sentences, and finally, passages. Writing in these classrooms takes two forms—copy writing of aksharas, words, and 'answers' from the board, and dictation given by the teacher. Meaningful conversations and discussions rarely occur. Reading and writing are taught and learned without a sense of relevance or connect between the word and the world of the child (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Contemporary policy documents, such as the National Curriculum Framework (NCERT, 2005) call for a move away from rote and mechanised learning to a more active involvement of the child, her surroundings, and her imagination in teaching

---

\* This piece was originally published in Hindi by Room to Read's publication *Bhasha Boli*. Menon, S. (2015). Baal Sahitya Ke Zariye Prarambhik Bhasha Evam Saksharta Ko Seenchna. *Bhasha Boli* (1), 3-9.



---

## Reading the Word and World

The act of reading cannot be explained as merely reading words since every act of reading words implies a previous reading (**or understanding**) of the world and subsequent rereading (**through new experiences**) of the world. There is a permanent movement back and forth between “reading” reality and reading words... Thus we see how reading is a matter of studying reality that is alive, reality that we are living inside of, reality as history being made and also making us. (Freire, 1985, p. 18)

---

and learning. The Right to Education Act (2009) calls for a library in every school that provides children with access to newspapers, magazines and books on all subjects, including story books.

These are steps in the right direction. But for these steps to take root, teachers need to develop an understanding of how to translate these ideas into practice, and why. Children’s literature can play a very important role in enriching many aspects of education. In this article, I look at how children’s literature can be used to support language and literacy learning in classrooms.

## Why Literature?

To understand why we need literature in early language and literacy classrooms, it is important to reflect on what we mean by terms ‘literacy’ and ‘literature’. Let us start with literacy. What does it mean to be a ‘literate’ individual?

If the goals of literacy education are to teach children to sign their names, or to read and write basic texts with accuracy, perhaps we could continue to teach children mainly *akshara*, word, sentence and passage reading. And stop there. However, there could be an expanded vision of what it means to be a literate individual. In this vision, it is no longer sufficient that people learn the script in minimalistic ways; we would also like them to *understand* what they’re reading and writing, and its *relevance* to their lives. We would like them to be able to use, *critique* and *navigate* written worlds effectively. If this is our vision of what it means to educate literate individuals for our society, then the use of children’s literature in language and literacy classrooms becomes, not optional, but central to the curriculum.

High quality literature refers to writing that has imaginative or aesthetic qualities (Lukens, 2013). Literature does not include just storybooks; so long as it meets the criteria of ‘imaginative or aesthetic’, non-fiction books can qualify as literature too.

Good literature introduces children to stories, ideas and issues related to their lives as well as to lives and worlds yet unseen or unimagined by them. It makes collective knowledge about how individuals and communities have understood themselves and their relationships with each other, with nature, and more available to children.

Children can’t be expected to live lives they can’t imagine; and they need to be provided with opportunities to examine the lives that they live at present. Literature, therefore, plays a crucial role as both a *mirror* and a *window* to the worlds in which children live (Galda, 1998) (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. A representation of the mirror-window analogy of Literature.  
**Illustrator:** Jamuna Imamdar.

Higher-order thinking skills, comprehension, writing for a purpose and an audience, nuanced understandings of vocabulary and syntax are all related to rich exposure, wide-reading and deep engagement with literate discourses.

Lukens (2013) says that at its core, literature helps us to struggle with the question *what is it like to be a complicated human being living in a complicated world?* Is such a question for adults alone? We can argue that even children, the very young, can be provided with opportunities to engage in deeper questions in developmentally appropriate ways. This would mean that we acknowledge children as capable thinkers, able to engage with questions and issues of significance in partnership with the adults around them.

Currently, language and literacy education in Indian classrooms is dominated by textbooks, and in some cases, activity cards and worksheets. Many of these materials carry the implicit assumption that younger children are not capable of thinking about complex issues, and therefore, should be restricted to mastering the script, learning rhymes and reading short passages that are often not notable for their literary quality or their connect with children's lives. Bringing children's literature into the classroom provides an opportunity for teachers and children to have rich and meaningful discussions around topics that many children can resonate with (e.g., friendship, human-animal relationships, family life, loss). It also provides opportunities for educators to introduce topics of societal/cultural relevance that children may not have thought of on their own. Finally, it introduces children early on to the aesthetic dimension of language use—language play, metaphors, art in picture books, and so on. It allows them to consider: What makes one kind of narration more/less effective than another? How does the style of writing change across genres? And so on.

Such opportunities develop skills, attitudes and knowledge-bases are central to the expanded vision of literacy that aims to develop individuals who are capable of navigating, using, and critiquing written worlds effectively.

## What Kinds of Literature are Suitable for Young Children?

Having established the importance of children’s literature in the language classroom, I turn to the question of what kinds of literature are suitable for young children. There is no objective or “correct” answer. But, first, we would need to develop an understanding of what we mean by *children’s* literature. How is this similar or different from *adult’s* literature? There is no clear line of demarcation between children’s and adult’s literature. In fact, historically, cultural narratives were often shared by adults and children alike. In Indian villages, folk tales, drama, and storytelling performances of various kinds did not distinguish amongst the audience on the basis of their age. Themes considered *difficult* for young children to handle in contemporary societies, such as violence, sex, death, and loss, were a routine part of these sagas. In the West, some of the most enduring children’s books, such as *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Huckleberry Finn*, were not written with children in mind. The commercialised category of “children’s literature” is a relatively recent advent, dating no more than about 200-250 years in the West. This is even more recent in India, becoming somewhat visible in the last 50 to 60 years.

---

Rebecca Lukens, discussing the nature of children’s literature, says there is a duality to it that arises from the fact that children’s literature is usually written for two kinds of audience—the adult who approves of and buys the book, and the child for whom the book is bought. Children’s literature is also not written by people who actually read it: it is written by adults for children, based on their imaginations of what could or should be enjoyable for children. Thus, the quality of children’s literature varies across time and space, heavily dependent on the thoughts and cultures of the adults writing, selecting and approving them. (Lukens, 1998)

---

Of course, there are exceptions to this. The original Panchatantra tales were supposedly written exclusively for the education of three princes in approximately the 3rd century BCE. But consciously creating (and marketing) a sizable body of texts marked as children’s literature is connected to a certain modern conception of children and childhoods that separates it from adult life as well as to access to modern means of printing and distribution located within a modern economy.

Therefore, when we ask the question, “What kinds of literature are appropriate for young children?”, we need to understand that the conception of who a child is, and what is *appropriate* for a child at a given age are subjective considerations that shift across cultures and time.

Next, let’s take up a related question: should literature selected for very young children (say, Classes 1-3) be different from literature that is selected for older children (Classes 4 and upwards)? Anyone who has worked with children will agree that all books will not work as well for all age-groups. You cannot read a 450-page novel with complex themes and dense vocabulary to a six-year old and expect rapt attention from her. Certain developmental stages will have to be kept in mind while selecting literature for younger children. A few are discussed here (not an exhaustive list).

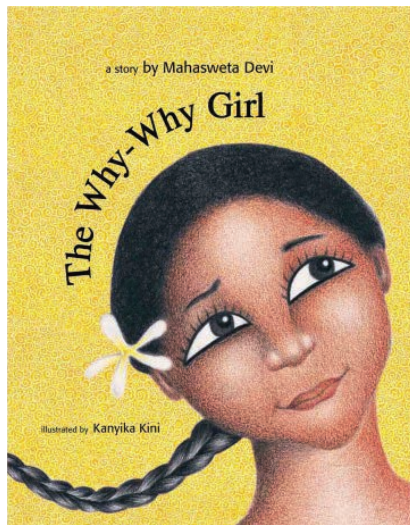


Figure 5. The illustration of the little girl in *The Why Why Girl*, a story about a tribal girl inquisitive about her surroundings, helps the reader put a face and context to the text.

**Image Courtesy:** *The Why Why Girl* (Author: Mahasweta Devi; Illustrator: Kanyika Kini, Tulika Publishers, 2003).

- **Length:** Assuming a shorter attention span, we would choose shorter texts and stories for young readers.
- **Illustrations:** Picture books, where illustrations and texts create a narrative together, would be a very good choice for younger readers.
- **Language:** Should be rich, but accessible to the young child. Some difficult vocabulary can be included, but too many such words or complex syntactic structures can be avoided.
- **Context, theme and range of topics:** Topics and contexts can move gradually from the known to the less familiar. It is important to introduce children to both known and less known worlds. But themes, characters, etc. should resonate with young readers.
- **Engaging style:** It goes without saying that the style of the book should draw young readers and listeners into the story.
- **Variety of genres:** Even the very youngest readers should be introduced to a variety of genres, including poetry, realistic fiction, fantasy, and non-fiction (informational). It is a mistake to believe that informational books are only for older readers. Even two- and three-year-olds would love to see picture books of animals, know the sounds they make, and so on. Six- and seven-year-olds are ready for more information.
- **Readability:** If the goal is to have children read these books *independently*, then readability becomes important. However, my recommendation is that we don't mix up two different purposes: (1) to give children exposure to good literature; (2) to teach them to read independently. If we design children's books based largely on readability considerations, the quality of the language, narration and illustrations will be adversely affected. Rather, we should be prepared to *read literature aloud* to young readers until they are able to read it for themselves. In the United States, publishers distinguish between "early readers" used for teaching children to read independently, from authentic children's literature. Early readers are designed with readability in mind; children's literature, on the other hand, is created by authors and illustrators trying to bring *real* or *authentic* literature to children. Both are important in the early language classroom, but it's best to keep these overlapping categories somewhat separated in our minds and in classroom practice.

In addition to these considerations, teachers should also avoid literature selections that contain weak themes and plot, poor or inappropriate language, biases and stereotypes, and poor quality illustrations and production (NCCL, 2014).



---

## Literature and Teaching Morals and Values

Should literature be used to teach children morals or values?

Again, there could be varied answers. But I believe children's literature should play a similar role in the lives of children as adult literature plays in the lives of adults. Do we, as adults, read literature to learn values? This is possibly not the first thought on our minds when we select books for ourselves. We select books based on interest, availability, theme, author, and various other factors. Once we finish reading a book, do we learn something as a result of having read it? Most probably. If literature helps us to grapple with the question "*What is it like to be a complicated human being living in a complicated world?*", then having engaged with a good piece of literature will often enrich our thinking. Likewise, if we help children to engage meaningfully with high quality literature, it will, no doubt, enrich their thinking and lives. But this need not mean that we select literature for the morals or values it conveys. Rather, we could select literature for the potential that it provides for rich thinking and meaning making around complex issues.

As the Guide to Good Books (NCCL, 2014) reminds us, "There is a need to realise that many groups—and their world-view and perspectives—are often ignored in children's literature... Moral development does not take place simply by being told what is right and wrong, but by being given the opportunity to think about the issue. The collection of books in the library, as a whole, should therefore reflect diversity—different kinds of environments, peoples, events, issues and points of view." (NCCL, 2014; p. 8). Therefore, the aim should be to create an understanding of the human condition through close observation, discussion and commentary rather than to create black-and-white understandings of "right" and "wrong".

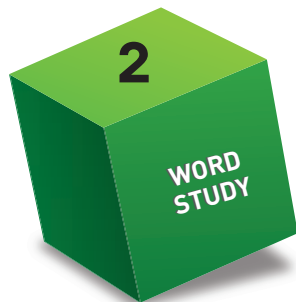


Figure 6. The Four Blocks model used at Organization for Early Literacy Promotion(OELP), Ajmer, is embedded in a balanced approach to teaching literacy.

## Learning to Read and Reading to Learn

Can literature be used to support children to “learn to read”? Or should it be used primarily to teach children to “read to learn”? I believe this is a *false distinction* created by educators who subscribe to a narrow definition of what it means to “learn to read”. In the expanded definition of literacy discussed earlier, learning to read always involves reading to learn. There is no separation between the two.

When a child comes to school for the first time, especially a child who is a first-generation school-goer, this child needs to learn not just the mechanics, but also the larger culture of literacy—literate attitudes, values, knowledge and skills. Why should a child invest so many hours of her life learning to master the written word? What is her interest in doing so, what is its relevance to her life? All of this is a part of learning to read; in fact, it is a part of learning to become a reader, of developing a *literate identity*.

Well-chosen, well-used literature can help young readers develop a sense of connect with the written word, and with written worlds. It can help children understand the structure of a narrative, of different types of narratives. It can help them understand how language can be used in a variety of ways, for a variety of purposes. It can help them to develop “concepts of print” (Clay, 2000)—how to hold a book, where to begin reading, which direction the print moves in, etc.

All this is a part of learning to read, and literature can support these. Of course, it will also include *reading to learn*—about cultures, places, people, times, and so on. What it will not include is learning to decode the script.

Mastering the script is a very important part of the early language and literacy curriculum. Teachers could follow a *block* approach (see Figure 6) in planning their language class, where they spend dedicated time teaching children to master the script. They could also use small, easy readers during this time to give students practice with reading connected texts. It is best that teachers not try to use literature to teach script-level knowledge; in the process, neither will the script be mastered, nor will the literature remain of sufficiently high quality.



## Using Literature in the Classroom: Bringing it All Together

The renowned American educator Louise Rosenblatt famously said, “Our business seems usually to be considered the bringing of books to people. But books do not simply happen to people. People also happen to books. A story or poem or play is merely ink-spots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols” (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 62). In this last section, I will briefly outline some simple ways in which teachers can bring their students to books, and help them to transform the ink-spots into meaningful symbols.

**Reading aloud:** Reading aloud should be an integral part of the day in classrooms. Read alouds provide an opportunity to introduce children, from an early age, to high quality literature, without worrying about readability. It also helps create a space in the classroom for productive talk and discussion around the books, ideas and stories shared. Children are often discouraged from talking in classrooms. Research, on the contrary, suggests that classrooms rich with productive talk around shared ideas create conditions for children to develop oral language, vocabulary, comprehension and literary engagement and appreciation. Reading aloud permits teachers to show how good readers read: with expression and intonation, pausing and re-reading when confused, looking ahead or predicting what’s going to come up next, and so on.

---

Children who haven’t had access to books within the intimacy of the family do not associate feeling of love and pleasure with books. Read alouds can create this intimacy and pleasure. The communal experience of a Read Aloud in our library is a bridge to the pleasure of reading alone. Without the read aloud the initial loneliness of reading can be intimidating. (Koshy, 2017)

---



*Figure 7.* A read aloud session at KathaVana, an annual bilingual children’s literature festival organised by Azim Premji University in Bangalore.

---

**Literature discussions:** Whether we read aloud books or have older children read them on their own, it is important to set aside time to develop literary appreciation in the classroom. You can do this through literature discussion time. We can analyse the plot or the characters or the setting or the theme of a book the class has read earlier in detail. We can discuss the relevance of the book to children's lives. Or we could help children analyse, critique or respond to the text. Young children can respond to the text verbally, or through art, drama, or early invented writing. There are no right or wrong responses to texts; children should be allowed to express what they are really experiencing in response to a text—even disinterest or dislike.

**Writing:** Writing instruction should be a part of every early language and literacy classroom. Currently, we teach children only to copy-write, spell, and form *aksharas*. We forget to teach them how to compose in a variety of genres for a variety of audiences and purposes. When composition finally makes an appearance, it does so in higher grades, in formalistic forms far removed from the child's own desire to express or communicate. The alternative is not *free writing*, where children are encouraged to write "anything" without feedback from the teacher. Rather, the alternative should be guided writing. To guide the writing of young children, we need to (a) expose them to good models of writing; (b) free them from the burden of correct spellings and good handwriting while they express themselves. Spellings and handwriting need to be taught, but not simultaneously with expression; other time slots can be found to focus on these. But where will we find good models of writing to expose children to? In literature, of course.

When teachers read aloud and discuss literature with children, they can also dedicate time to analysing the writing of some texts. How did the writer hold our attention there, build suspense here, use language to convey mood? And so on. Techniques discussed in class can be used to create pieces of shared writing, where several children (and the teacher) work together to create a single piece of writing. Children can also be encouraged to write independently using art and invented spellings, with teacher guidance and feedback. Children can express what they feel about a text, or they can change a part of the text (for example, the ending, or the point-of-view), or they can use elements and techniques discussed to create a completely new text. The possibilities are endless.

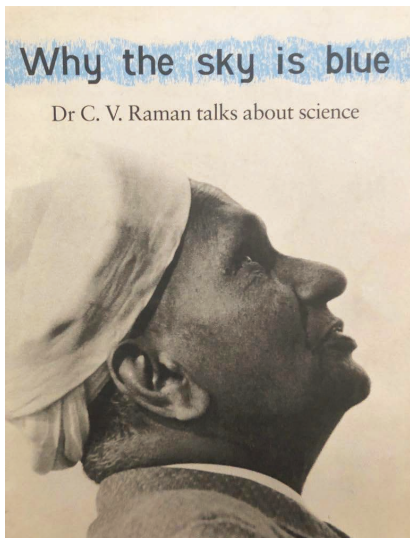
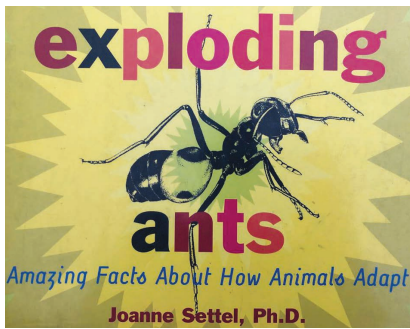


Figure 8. Example of books which can be used for content area instruction. *Exploding Ants* (Joanne Settel, Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 1999); *Why the Sky is Blue* (Dr. C. V. Raman, Tulika Publishers, 2010).

**Integrating literature with content area instruction:** Thematic units can be created such that literature related to a certain theme can be read by the class, and linked to content area learning, especially in EVS.

Literature is always about *something*. That something can usually be linked to the EVS curriculum. For example, the study of a particular culture, history (e.g., the lives of children a 1000 years ago), science content (e.g., weather, seeds, etc.).

**Reading independently:** Teachers should also create weekly “quiet reading” times. An effort should be made to provide children with books to suit different interests, and varying difficulty levels.

Even if young readers cannot independently and correctly read books, they should be encouraged to leaf through them, examine pictures, engage in talk with their friends around what they’re seeing, and be encouraged to take these books home and share them with family and the community. Teachers can ask children to narrate/read stories to willing family members, and to collect stories from home and bring them back to school. This will encourage not just reading, but also serve as a useful channel to build rich and meaningful home-school relationships.

These are just a few ideas for using literature to support early language and literacy instruction. I am sure there are many more for you to discover as you work with and experience the power and joy of literature in your classroom, and in the lives of your students.



Figure 9. Children engaged in independent reading at a community library in rural Bangalore. Image Courtesy: Harshita V. Das.

## References

- Clay, M. (2000). *Concepts about print: What have children learned about the way we print language?* NY: Heinemann.
- Freire, P. (1985). Reading the world and reading the word: An interview with Paulo Freire. *Language arts*, 62(1), 15-21.
- Freire, P. & Macdeo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and reading the world*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Galda, L. (1998). Mirrors and windows: Reading as transformation. In T.E. Raphael & K.H. Au (Eds.), *Literature based instruction: Reshaping the curriculum* (pp. 1–11). Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Koshy, M. (2017, July). Mridula Koshy: We hope to find in stories the language with which to tell our own story. Retrieved from <https://theduckbillblog.wordpress.com/2017/07/24/mridula-koshy-we-hope-to-find-in-stories-the-language-with-which-to-tell-our-own-story/>
- Lukens, R. J., Smith, J. J., & Coffel, C. M. (2013). *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature*. NJ: Pearson.
- National Centre for Children's Literature (NCCL). (2014). *Guide to good books: Criteria for selecting quality children's books*. New Delhi: National Book Trust
- National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) (2005). *National Curriculum Framework*. New Delhi: NCERT.
- Rosenblatt, L. (2005). *Making meaning with texts: Selected Essays*. NY: Heinemann.



# The Readiness is All

Usha Mukunda

A child's readiness for reading is an important aspect of her experience of reading. In this piece, Usha Mukunda brings out the many layers and complexities that go on to determine this readiness.



"There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will..."

If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come,  
it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come:  
the readiness is all.

– William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

In my many years as a school librarian, my insouciant response to parents who asked, "Is it okay for my child to read this?" or "Why can't my child read this now?" was the quote in the title. But now, as the years pass, I have time to reflect and ponder, "What do I mean when I say 'the readiness is all'?"

There can be so many different interpretations of *readiness*. Firstly, it would be about the skill and ability to read. No arguments on this score. The child is struggling to decipher words and it is obvious she is not ready. At the next level would be reading with meaning, with comprehension. This too is fairly straightforward. A few questions, both explicit and implicit, or even a chat with the child will tell us if he is or is not ready for a particular piece of writing. The readiness to listen and comprehend, along with a parent, librarian or teacher, can come earlier than reading with meaning on one's own.

Finally, let us look at reading and understanding the layers or hidden meanings in a book. 'Reading between the lines' as it were. How do we, as librarians, pick up on those vibes and decide on the readiness? Here is a hilarious take on readiness. A six-year-old hell-bent on borrowing one of the later *Harry Potter* books said to me, "Look, Aunty. I can carry the book. I am ready!"

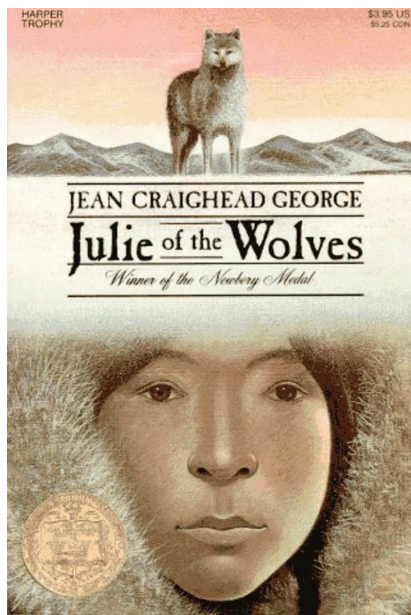


Figure 10. *Tiger Eyes* (Judy Blume, Macmillan Children's Books, 2005); *Julie of the Wolves* (Jean Craighead George, T4T Learning Materials, 1998).

A few weeks ago, a former student reminded me I had told her not to borrow *Tiger Eyes* by Judy Blume until she was a bit older. Naturally, that made her want to read it all the more! She now shared with me that she had asked her older sister to borrow it in her name, and then read the book. "And?" I asked. Nothing startling, it seemed. But what prompted me to feel she should wait? Is readiness subjective? As many parents have said to me, they have no objection to their children reading way above their age level, so why did I mind?

On the other hand, there was a parent who objected to my suggesting *Julie of the Wolves* by Jean Craighead George to a young child who was a nature lover. Her complaint was that there is a sentence in the book which talks about consummation. I went back to the book and found that the allusion was so fleeting that, in the entirety of the story, it would not really be picked up by the child. But these are genuine questions I will try now to respond to.

Looking at my motives and actions closely, I feel I want each child to experience a book fully. When I read *Good Earth* by Pearl Buck at the age of eight (no gatekeepers around!), I read it at a very superficial level. The only thing that hit me was the slow onset and inevitability of the famine. The feelings, the complexities, the culture of the Chinese society at that time—all of it fell by the wayside. I feel I got to know each character in a one-dimensional manner. I grew up, and when anyone mentioned *Good Earth*, my refrain was, "Oh, I've read that book."

Later, as a librarian, I have been less ruthless and let it go when children read books with difficult themes. But whenever I tried to talk with them later, it was sad for me to hear that they had read *Sadako and the Paper Cranes* with no emotional investment. This is the story of a young Hiroshima victim and

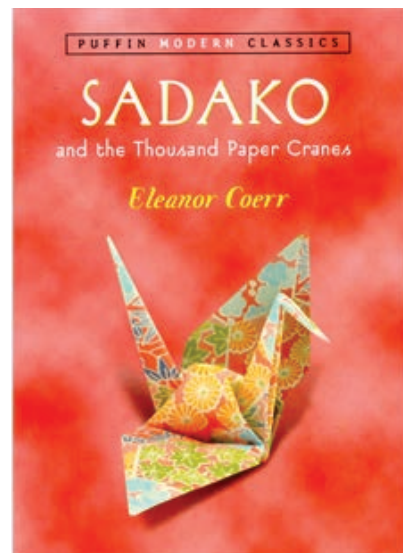
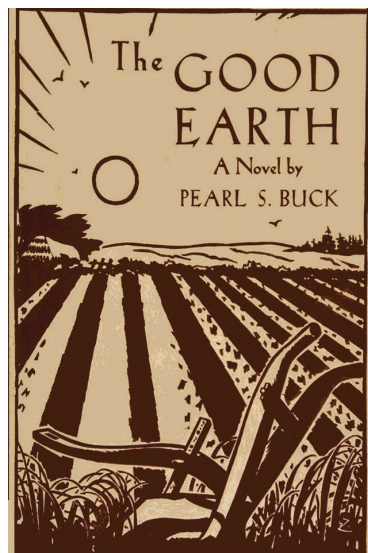


Figure 11. *The Good Earth* (Pearl S. Buck, John Day Company, 1931); *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* (Eleanor Coerr, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977).



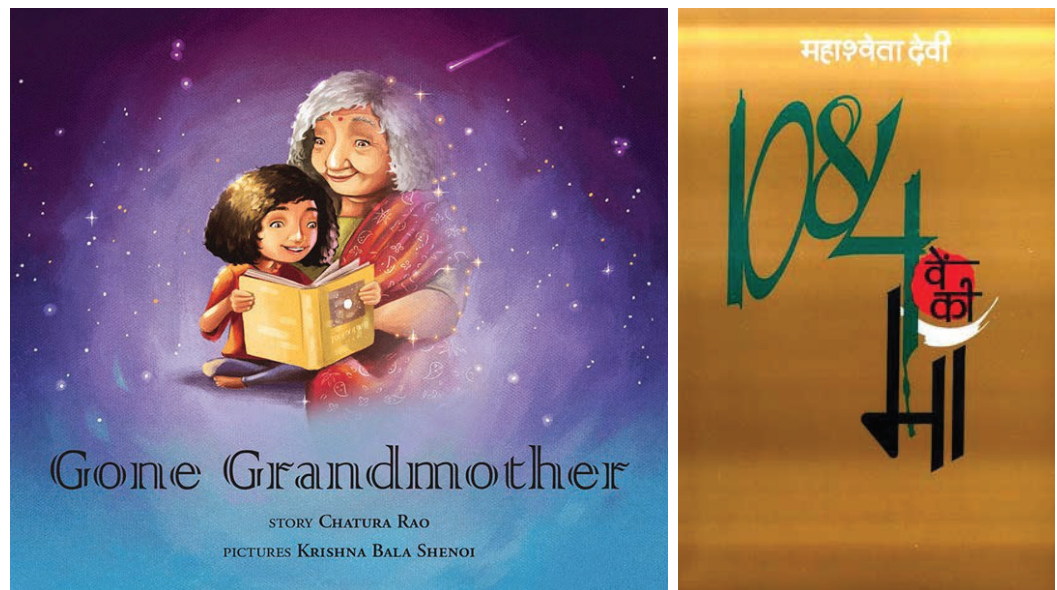


Figure 12. *Gone Grandmother* (Author: Chatura Rao; Illustrator: Krishna Bala Sheno, Tulika Publishers, 2016); *Mother of 1084* (Mahasweta Devi, Seagull Books, 1997).

how her whole family tries to keep her alive in vain. On the other hand, I have the experience of a young girl of 12 who read *Gone Grandmother* (about the death of a loved grandmother), stayed back after everyone had left, read it through again with complete quietness, gave me the book with a muted “thank you” and left. For me, that was very moving and it was readiness.

One book which had a strong impact on me was Mahasweta Devi’s *Mother of 1084*. This is the story of a woman whose son joins the Naxalite movement in Kolkata. With much hope, I suggested it to a young girl of 17, an insightful reader. When she was done, I was anticipating talking to her about it and sharing the harrowing feelings portrayed in the book. “Oh, ya. I finished it. It was OK,” was her response. After my first feelings of sharp disappointment, it dawned on me that the identification I had experienced as a mother could never be duplicated by this young girl. So readiness was more complex than I had thought.

Readiness can also be anticipated when a book with a nuanced and difficult theme is opened up by the adult with a group of children. Two books come to mind. *The Two Named boy* and *The Sackclothman*. They are different tales in more ways than one. But a group of 11-year-olds could enter into the complexities of religion, loss, death, depression and mental disturbance with sensitivity and feeling, thanks to an adult facilitating and opening up the contents of the book.

If I have given the impression that readiness is only applicable to difficult themes, let me hasten to correct that. Appreciation of humour, discerning elegance of language, recognising

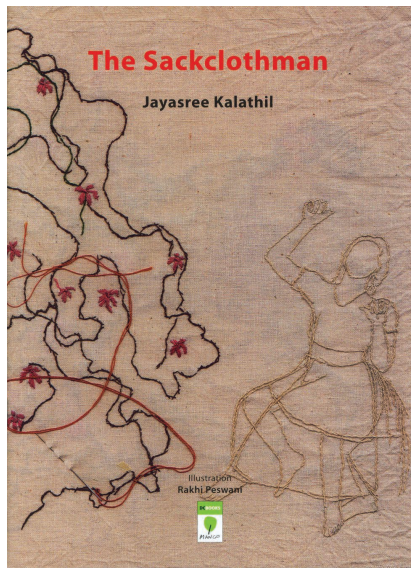


Figure 13. *The Sackclothman* (Jayasree Kalathil, D.C. Books, Printers, Publishers, Booksellers, 2009); *The Two Named Boy* (P.Y. Balan, D.C. Books, Printers, Publishers, Booksellers, 2008).

complexity in characterisation, being able to unravel mysteries— all these also need a maturity in the reader.

It is a new and exciting phase in children's literature, especially in India. There are more and more authors and illustrators taking on gritty issues and treating them with care and thought. An admirable number of writers who write for young adults are emerging. Mainstream publishers of children's literature now welcome books with unusual themes. As librarians, teachers and parents, we have to keep in step with the breakthroughs in this space.

One of the other questions I am often asked is about an open library. If all material is available on open shelves, how am I able to monitor who is reading what. For me, this begins and ends with relationship and trust. There is no book that enters the library that is not put on display and introduced to the whole user body. At that time, I would say this is a book for older children and if any younger ones wish to ask me why, come and talk. This never fails, for if they don't come, I might open it up. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is an excellent book about our bodies and sex. I kept it in the library and told younger children that I would be happy to look at it along with them when they were ready. It worked. There was an open curiosity and nothing more. For me, that denoted readiness to wait.

More recently, I was in conversation with young readers who wanted to know why some of their friends were 'let' to read books which were not at their level when these children were told they were not ready. In a revealing chat, we ended by saying



Figure 14. Child selecting books at the open library in her school.  
Image Courtesy: Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan, Pragat Shikshan Sanstha, Phaltan, Maharashtra, 2019.

that I would be happy to have them borrow such books, and trust that they would come and tell me later how they really responded. More than one young user caught me the next time I entered the library to share that they read a chapter and felt they were not *ready* and returned the book. So here was yet another window to understanding this tricky word.

The crucial thing to ask ourselves is where this notion of readiness springs from. Is it, on the part of the adult, coming from a feeling of censorship and wanting to screen children's reading? Censorship, even with the best of intentions, can be a dangerous beast. What are our parameters for this censorship? The adult who is doing this must look inward very carefully to examine her or his conditioning and biases. On the other hand, if this recommendation of readiness is coming from a relationship with the child and a wish to have the child fully experience a book in all its facets—if, as Hamlet says, "there is a divinity that shapes our ends," readiness in its purest sense is the way to go.

"If it be not now, yet it will come."

Let me end with a pet peeve. When we can see how layered 'readiness' is, how do publishers and libraries label their books according to levels? And librarians and teachers follow this quite assiduously! The rest is silence.

---

---

Paro Anand, when asked about the importance of children reading 'difficult topics' said, "I get asked this question a lot but I think Manjula Padmanabhan answered it much better. Children read our myths, legends and epics and that is never questioned. There is so much violence, gender inequality, cross-dressings and everything in these stories, yet we object if there is any such in a contemporary story. Isn't this hypocrisy? Just to take one example, Arjun, in the Mahabharata, spends a year as a woman. If we were to talk about a young man being a cross dresser in a modern story, there would be objections.

The so-called difficult topics and situations are all around us. I am not pulling young people out of cotton wool and exposing them to horrors they know nothing about. They are already dealing with difficult things, I am only doing two things in any of my stories. One, presenting those subjects and asking my readers to raise questions, think about things and secondly, giving them hope that there is the possibility for them to be agents of change and not be helpless beings." (Anand, 2017)

---

## References

Anand, P (2017, July). Paro Anand: Empowering young people to take action. Retrieved from <https://theduckbillblog.wordpress.com/2017/06/29/paro-anand/>



# The Child Beyond the Threshold

Jane Sahi

How are children portrayed in children's books? Jane Sahi explores implicit assumptions about children as portrayed in children's books, using vivid examples to make her points.

Looking at the way the child is portrayed in children's literature reveals underlying assumptions about a child's capacity or the lack of it to be autonomous and independent. Attitudes towards authority and learning become evident in the way relationships between child and adult are described, both in the family and in school.

Sudhir Kakar in his book, *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Child and Society in India* (Kakar, 1978) details how hierarchical the family structure in India is and how little autonomy children have to make their own choices. He writes, "We know that if a child is praised and loved for compliance and submission, and subtly or blatantly punished for independence, he cannot easily withdraw from the orbit of family authority during childhood, nor subsequently learn to deal with authority other than submissively." (pp. 119-120)

In a more recent study about adult-child relationships, Bisht (2007) documented responses by parents and teachers asked about the role of the child. The dominant perspective was that the child is emotionally immature, vulnerable, dependent and incompetent. Adults largely saw their role towards children as mentors, protectors and monitors of their behaviour.

The pressure on the child to submit to adult authority and be mentored is reflected in a number of children's books published in India. In comparison, very few books position the child acting outside the family sphere. In an interesting unpublished study of CBT books, Meenu Thomas (2012) describes how the child accepts uncritically the decisions of parents. She cites a number of books as

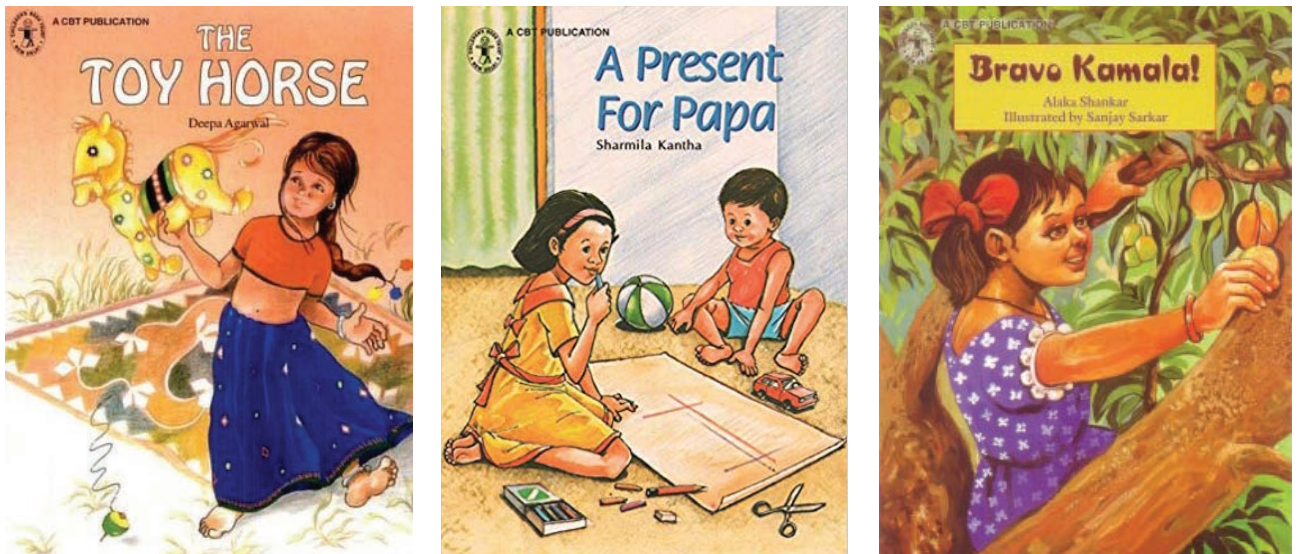


Figure 15. *The Toy Horse* (Deepa Agarwal, Children's Book Trust, 1998); *A Present for Papa* (Sharmila Kantha, Children's Book Trust, 2003); *Bravo Kamala!* (Author: Alaka Shankar; Illustrator: Sanjay Sarkar, Children's Book Trust, 2011).



Figure 16 (a). Bala Krishna defies the taboo of using the left hand to eat with.



Figure 16 (b). Krishna steals buttermilk in *Krishnaleela, A Childhood Story of Lord Krishna* (Manu Desai, Thomson Press, 1974).

examples, which include *The Toy Horse* (1998) by Deepa Agarwal, *A Present for Papa* (2003) by Sharmila Kantha and, *Bravo Kamala* (2011) by Alaka Shankar.

Typically — particularly in text books — children are shown conforming to family expectations: they have “good habits”, study hard, say their prayers and do not ask too many questions. They rarely move away from the protection of the surrounding adults in the family or community. There is also a tendency to show the rewards of obedience and conformity so that the explicit moral in many children's books is to accept dependence.

Yet, there has been a strong counter-narrative of a child who is subversive, critical of social norms, poses awkward questions and challenges adults to re-think beyond conventional norms. It is refreshing to find in *the possible worlds* created by some adult authors of children's literature representations of a child who is resilient, insightful and a receptive learner.

In the long tradition of stories, songs, poems and dramas about Bala Krishna, his naughtiness has been celebrated. He crosses every boundary of social correctness. The child disturbs and disrupts order; he lies, steals, breaks and spills things but it is these very qualities that make him so endearing. He reminds adults that there is meaning beyond a limited life of being bound by other people's rules and regulations (see Figure 16(a) and 16(b)).

Now, I will discuss books that offer an alternative to the dominant sentimental view of the child who is dependent, passive and naive. These include some of the earliest publications of children's literature in India and some more recent books.



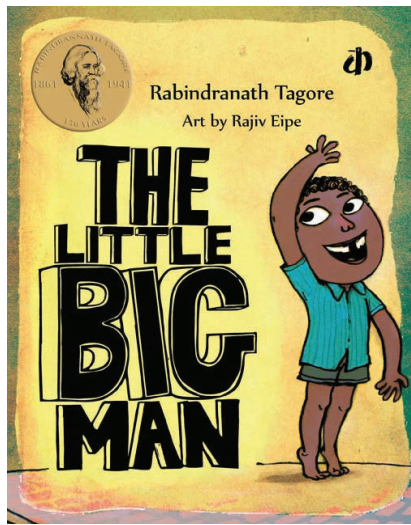


Figure 17. *The Little Big Man*  
(Author: Rabindranath Tagore;  
Illustrator: Rajiv Eipe, Katha, 2011).

*The Little Big Man* (2011),  
Author: Rabindranath Tagore;  
Illustrator: Rajiv Eipe. New Delhi: Katha (2011).

Tagore's poem *The Little Big Man* was first published in 1913 in the collection of poems called *The Crescent Moon*. It is a translation from the original in Bengali by the poet. The poem has recently been published as a children's picture book. The illustrations highlight the poet's capacity to enter into the imaginative world of the child. In this poem, the child is momentarily liberated from the authoritarian figures that make decisions for him—the teacher, the uncle, his parents—as he imagines his response as an equal adult. Each time the child is confronted with the expectation of dependency, he counters it with how he is in charge of his own life and the adult acknowledges the justice of it.

An encounter with the teacher is an example.

*My teacher will come and say,  
"It is late, bring your slate and your books."  
I shall tell him, "Do you not know I am as big as father?  
And I must not have lessons anymore."  
My teacher will wonder and say,  
"He can leave his books if he likes, for he is grown up."* (See Figure 18).

This capacity for 'make-believe play' gives the child the possibility of a world beyond the present and an opening to forge a new layer of identity. The child enjoys a sense of power and the illustrator shows a child full of delight and confidence at his new-found freedom. There is an unexpected reversal in roles and the pictures represent a child at ease with his choices and the adult disarmed by the child's logic.

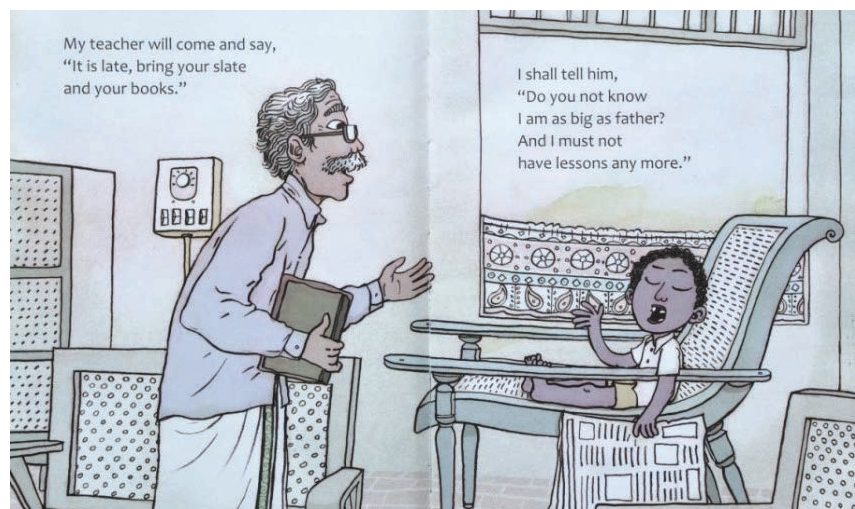


Figure 18. The child imagines being liberated and adult-like. **Image Courtesy:** *The Little Big Man* (Author: Rabindranath Tagore; Illustrator: Rajiv Eipe, Katha, 2011).

*Life with my Grandfather* (1967),  
 Author: Shankar Pillai. New Delhi:  
 Children's Book Trust.

This book was the first publication of the CBT and is written by one of the most creative pioneers in Indian children's literature. A striking aspect of the book is how Shankar captures what goes on in the child's mind beyond the external events. The narrative is insightful because it is very close to the author's autobiographical experience and this gives the text a rare authenticity. The stories are set in rural Kerala in the early part of the 20th century.

The book recounts Raju's adventures; his mischief is never malicious or destructive. One incident is entitled "The Snake Bite". The irony is that there was no snake bite but only a bee sting. The grandfather panics on seeing a blue mark on Raju's finger and fails to listen to the child's logical explanation. Instead, he rushes to a healer to get the child "cured" before a crowd of fascinated onlookers. Raju is a silent observer of what is happening but it is he who is most aware of the facts. He notices the folly of his grandfather, the incredulity of the bystanders and the shrewdness of the healer. There is a strong sense of humour as the child tolerates the rituals knowing full well that no purpose is served except to relieve his grandfather's anxiety. The author, the child and the reader share the inside story! (See Figure 19).

In this book, Shankar crystallises the delight and wonder of the young child as he learns about the natural world and the dynamics of social relationships. The child in this narrative learns best not through explicit teaching, but through his own ability to observe and reflect. Despite misunderstandings and confusion Raju trusts his family's affection and also his own intuitions.



Figure 19. Shankar Pillai's illustration of the grandfather's alarm when he thinks that Raju has been bitten by a snake. *Life with my Grandfather* (Shankar Pillai, Children's Book Trust, 1967).



Figure 20. Observing ants at close quarters. *Busy Ants* (Pulak Biswas, National Book Trust, 1987).

***Busy Ants* (1987), Author: Pulak Biswas.  
New Delhi: National Book Trust.**

There are not many examples in literature of children actively engaged in learning about the world independently and outside the school context. *Busy Ants* is a book that shows a child absorbed in watching the antics of ants. The picture book has no words but the illustrations show the child's concentrated gaze as he observes details of the ants' behaviour. So much of our knowledge is gained second-hand through books or internet but here we are presented with a child's disciplined, patient and careful study of nature first-hand (see Figure 20).

The book is particularly appealing because it represents the child's perspective of the scene. We see the ants from the child's vantage point as he stretches out on the ground for a better view. The child is motivated by his compelling interest and no rewards or incentives are offered or required. No adult is represented in the book and the whole focus is on the child's fascination with the ants. The boundary between work and play is blurred and the child's capacity for engagement and undivided attention is celebrated.

***Night* (2008), Author: Junuka Deshpande.  
Chennai: Tulika Publishers.**

In this unusual book, a boy and a girl explore the beauty and the mystery of the night in the forest. Here, too, like the child in *Busy Ants*, the children are engrossed in the immediacy of the moment. The minimal, evocative text and suggestive forms capture the surprise as they hear the sounds of the night and catch fleeting images of wildlife. The children are receptive to the sensory experience of stillness and movement, light and shadow, and there is no hint of fear or anxiety.

This journey through the moonlit forest is a time of enchantment deeply rooted in actual experience. The children are alert and attentive but they do not need to speak to each other to intuitively enter into this extraordinary experience of the ordinary natural world (see Figure 21).



Trees all around.

चारों तरफ़ पेड़।



Tap-tap. Tap-tap.

खट-खट. खट-खट.

Figure 21. Visuals and sounds of a forest. *Night* (Junuka Deshpande, Tulika Publishers, 2008).



***Malu Bhalu* (2010), Author: Kamla Bhasin; Illustrator: Bindia Thapar. Chennai: Tulika Publishers.**

*Malu Bhalu* was first written in Hindi. The author introduces the book as a story co-written with her son, Chotu, following a shared reading of another story about polar bears. This story describes the adventures of an independent polar bear cub. The author writes, “This book, then, is dedicated to the carefree, fun-loving, whimsical wanderer and seeker hidden inside each one of us.”

Many texts for children hint at the dangers of taking risks to explore the unfamiliar world beyond the threshold of the safe home. Malu Bhalu’s adventures in her attempt “to see the world” and find “where the sunbeams danced” very nearly ends in disaster. The mother bear who pursues her missing daughter does not scold her when she finds her stranded on an ice floe. Nor does the mother threaten to confine her to her home. Instead, she prepares the adventurous cub to cope with the challenges of survival by teaching her to swim (see Figure 22).

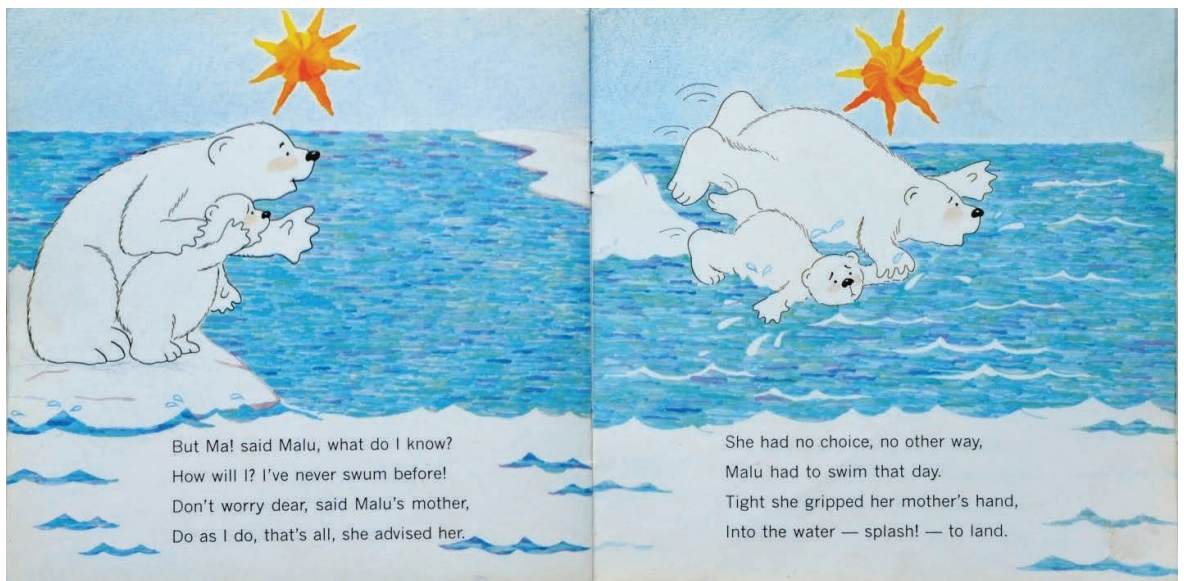


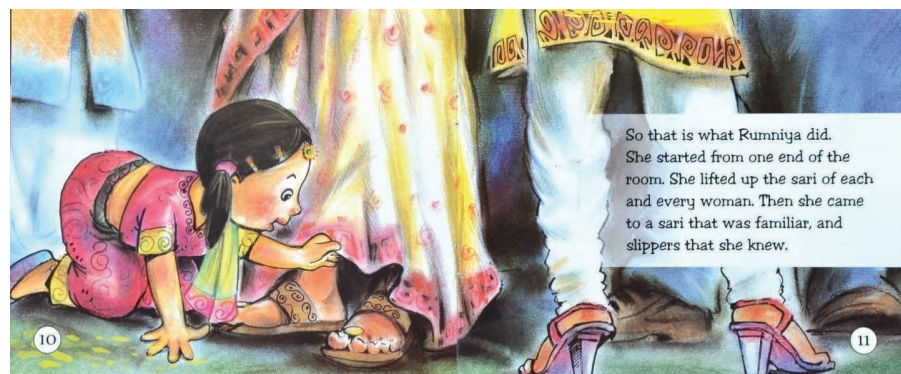
Figure 22. *Malu Bhalu* (Author: Kamla Bhasin; Illustrator: Bindia Thapar, Tulika Publishers, 2010).

*Rumniya* (2007), Author: Rukmini Banerji;  
Illustrator: Henu. New Delhi: Pratham Books.

This book portrays a resourceful child who finds her grandmother, whom she has been separated from, at a crowded wedding. Traditionally, a child is not the sole responsibility of the immediate family but the community as a whole plays a caring role towards its younger members. The child here seems to sense that she is not in danger even though she is temporarily separated from her grandmother. Rumniya sets about searching for her grandmother unfazed, confident that she is in the midst of a sympathetic non-interfering community (see Figure 23).

Figure 23. Rumniya tries to find her grandmother by identifying her feet.

**Image Courtesy:** *Rumniya*  
(Author: Rukmini Banerji;  
Illustrator: Henu, Pratham  
Books, 2007).



So that is what Rumniya did. She started from one end of the room. She lifted up the sari of each and every woman. Then she came to a sari that was familiar, and slippers that she knew.

The appeal of the book lies in the way the illustrator shows the world from the child's perspective. From an adult's point of view the normal course of action for a person who is lost is to search for a familiar face, but here we see the unlikely but sensible way the child crawls on the floor to identify her grandmother's feet!

This story is refreshing in that it shows a child alone and confident. This is a sharp contrast to the growing anxiety about the constant need for monitoring children's movements in the urban context. Few middle-class children are independent enough to go to school unaccompanied and parents often feel compelled to escort their children to and from the school bus stop. Children are frequently warned to avoid encounters with strangers and many families would feel they are failing in their duty if they did not protect their sons and daughters from getting lost.

In another book by Rukmini Banerji, *Going Home* (Pratham Books, 2009), a young girl is shown confidently negotiating the chaos of city life as she rushes home from school to meet her father before he leaves for work (see Figure 24). In contrast to the sheltered and restricted life of the average middle class child, the feisty girl weaves her way through heavy traffic and crowded streets unaccompanied. She shares the same determination and sense of purpose as the young Rumniya who is engrossed in her search for her grandmother.

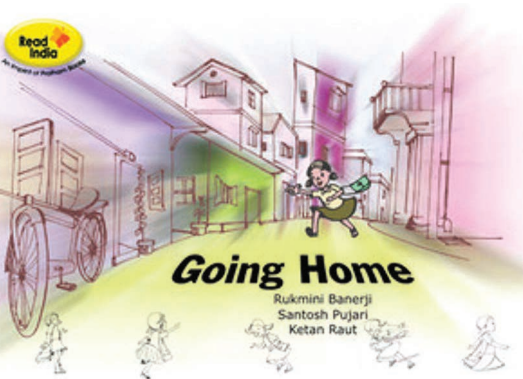


Figure 24. *Going Home* (Author: Rukmini Banerjee; Illustrator: Ketan Raut, Santosh Pujari; Pratham Books, 2009).

***Mohini and the Demon* (1990), Author: Shanta Rameshwar Rao. New Delhi: National Book Trust.**

*Mohini and the Demon* is a myth re-told. Interestingly, in this version Mohini is a girl that the reader might readily identify with. She is the only person in the village who is not afraid of the demon Bhasmasura, who claims he can reduce any human to ashes with a touch on their head. Mohini considers the situation. "I'm sure there's a way out of this. I'm quite, quite sure. If only we could find it." After careful thought, she fearlessly confronts the demon and offers to teach him to dance as a trick to bring about his own destruction. Cleverly Mohini demonstrates the movements and unwittingly the demon destroys himself by placing his own clawed paws on his head as he follows Mohini's dance. Mohini greeted by the villagers who then "(carry) her home in triumph".

In this story, all the adults are paralysed with fear and Mohini acts alone to save the entire village, not through magic but through cleverness and bold thinking (see Figure 26).



Figure 25. Mohini demonstrating movements for the demon to follow. **Image Courtesy:** *Mohini and the Demon* (Shanta Rameshwar Rao, National Book Trust, 1990).



## Conclusion

In the books mentioned above, each one, in diverse ways, portrays the child as an intrepid explorer of his or her surroundings. The child is eager to venture beyond what is safe and known and is resilient even in the face of danger or the unfamiliar.

In most of these texts the adult plays a minimal role. Even in *Malu Bhalu*, where the mother rescues her cub, she plays a supportive and not an authoritarian role. In a couple of the texts, such as Shankar's *Life with Grandfather*, the child demonstrates a surprising maturity in contrast to the adult who seems to lack sense and wisdom. In *Mohini and the Demon*, it is the young girl who is ready to take risks and to defeat the menace of a ruthless monster and so succeeds in saving the community.

In these texts, the child is not represented as a "savage" that needs moulding and shaping, nor is there a romantic view of the "natural" child unsullied by culture. The child's innocence and playfulness are distinct from naivety and there is often a healthy realism that underlies the child's view of the world. The child is also not wholly defined within the context of the family, educational institution and cultural norms of society but instead maintains a certain confident independence, curiosity and capacity to learn.

---

## References

- Kakar, S. (1978). *The inner world: A psycho-analytic study of childhood and society in india*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Bisht, R. (2008). Who is a child?: The adults' perspective within adult-child relationship in India. *Interpersona: An International Journal on Personal Relationships*, 2(2), 151-172.
- Thomas M.A (2012). Field Attachment Report as part of MA in Elementary Education. Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

# To Teach or Not to Teach? A Closer Look at Morals and Values in Children's Literature

Maitri Vasudev

Maitri Vasudev uses two stories to help discern how Indian children's books incorporate values and morals in their stories. She grapples with a key question in this piece - whether it is better to present children with morals or values in the texts they read.

1. moral  
'mɒr(ə)l

## **adjective**

concerned with the principles of right and wrong behaviour.

## **noun**

a lesson that can be derived from a story or experience.

2. value  
'vælju:

## **noun**

principles or standards of behaviour; one's judgement of what is important in life. – *Oxford English Dictionary*

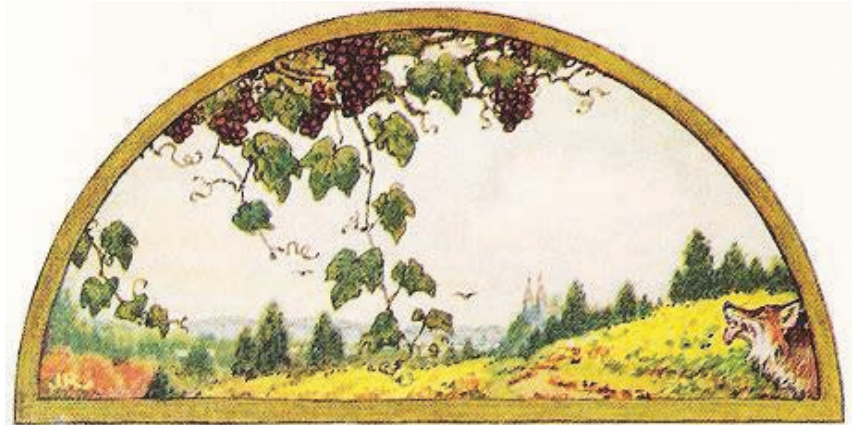


Figure 26. Illustration of the story *The Fox and the Grapes*.

Once upon a time, there lived a fox. He saw a bunch of grapes swinging enticingly in a vineyard. He broke his way in, drooled a little before he realised they were higher up than he'd estimated. He jumped high to reach them, jaws wide. But his teeth snapped on air. He kept at it till he was tired. Then, he shook the pole supporting the vine, in the hope that a few grapes would fall. Nothing did; the disappointed fox slinked out, telling himself the grapes were probably sour anyway (see Figure 26). Moral of the story: *what you cannot get need not be bad*.

Nyadosh the cow was ugly and untameable. She was bought by a large Bengali family from its milkman. She chewed up clothes, barged into the house, ate books and pushed policemen into the river. One day, she devoured the banana leaves that the family ate its meals on and developed an immediate craving for ilish fish. She became a non-vegetarian cow. Another time, she came home drunk on date palm wine after chasing away the workers harvesting it from the trees. When she finally fell sick, perhaps due to her eventful lifestyle, she wouldn't let any vet near her, so she never fully recovered.

Two animal stories that couldn't be less alike. The first from *More Moral Stories from Panchatantra* by Shree Book Centre, claiming "Easy Vocabulary, Large Print" right on cover. The second, a summary of *Our Incredible Cow* (see Figure 27) by Mahasweta Devi, republished by Tulika Books from Seagull's collection titled *Our Non-Veg Cow and Other Stories*. In this post, I intend to use them as examples to decode how Indian children's books incorporate morals and values in their stories. The main question I'm trying to answer is this—which works better for children, morals or values?

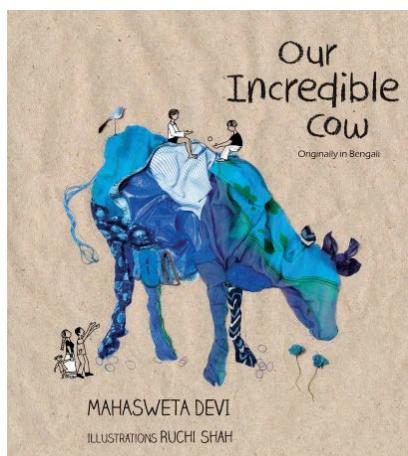


Figure 27. *Our Incredible Cow* by Mahasweta Devi. **Image Courtesy:** *Our Incredible Cow* (Author: Mahasweta Devi; Illustrator: Ruchi Shah; Tulika Publishers, 2015).

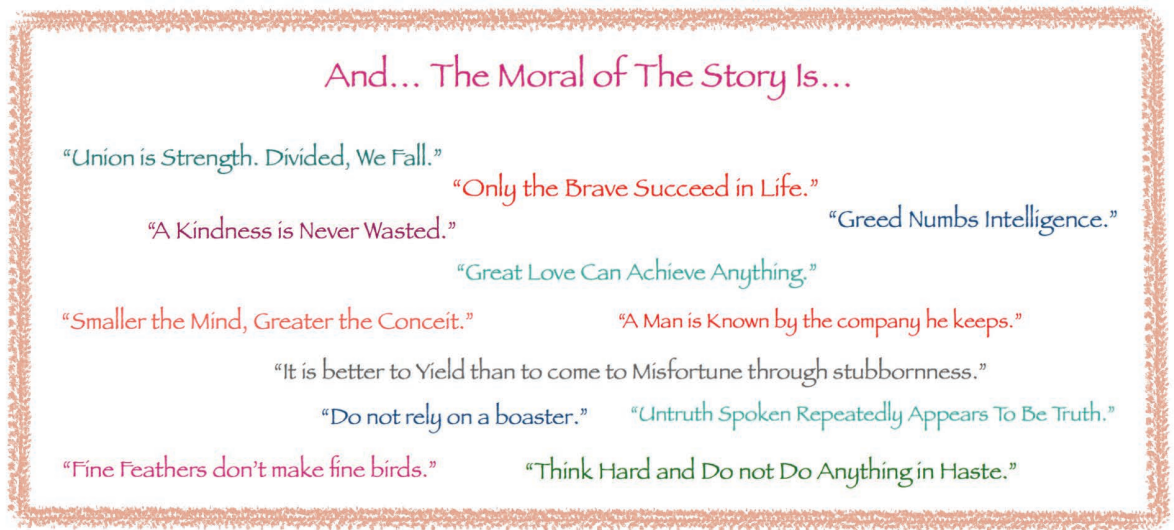


Figure 28. Morals commonly found in children’s stories.

To begin addressing that question, let’s look at what morals and values are. Although the distinction isn’t watertight, I’d define morals as one-liner teaching aids (see Figure 28), in which the author imparts a very particular instruction to the reader (in this case, the child). If we looked at the fox and grapes fable, there could’ve been several obvious takeaways: how greed is detrimental to all creatures, how thievery never does anyone good, how resentment never gets you what you want.

Instead of leaving it open-ended, so the reader can figure out the message on her own, Vishnu Sharma—let’s assume, for the sake of this piece, that the tale is a reliable translation from the “original” Panchatantra, with Sharma as the author—chose resentment and handed it to the reader in a platter. Had he left it to the child to derive the meaning of the story, I would’ve said he was imparting values, not a moral.

As stated in the definition above, a value also tries instilling certain behavioural codes. In fact, looked at strictly in terms of this definition, morals could even be viewed as a subset of values. Both kinds of stories take human error into account, using it as the basis for the plot; both hint at the idea that a behavioural change might be necessary to set things right. But, if we made a table separating the two, the first point on the moral side would be that morals look for quick fixes, derived from hard lines between good and bad, right and wrong. If you looked closely at the fable format, the story is narrated in third person; in the last line, however, the author addresses the reader directly—“What *you* cannot get need not be bad,” he says, or,



“Think before you act.” The conduct values are trying to ingrain, on the other hand, are less direct, more fluid with the right-wrong boundaries. Unlike morals, they can’t be summarised in a sentence. They require more than one reading and some mulling over for understanding to set in and, even then, they inspire a feeling rather than a specific message.

If that’s too abstract or long-winded an explanation, let’s take an example. *The Fox and the Grapes* has a moral, but if we stripped it of this, it could still contain a message. How? Through values. It’s relatable—every child is tempted by some food or the other; every child pouts when the adult tells her it’s time for lunch, and she can have *paayasa* later. This tale is also retold in *More Moral Stories from Panchatantra* with great sensitivity. Accompanying the text on every page is an illustration with a dialogue box or thought bubble, providing additional insight into the character’s mind. When he’s salivating, the fox’s expression is endearingly soppy. When he’s unable to make the grapes fall, his frustration is tangible. As he walks away from the vineyard, his disappointment is so human that the reader could feel sorry for him, despite his desire to steal.

An easy value takeaway could be the sensibility with which the illustrator has treated an erring protagonist, which could, in turn, demonstrate to the child thoughtfulness in dealing with others’ emotions. It’s still instructive, but the child can first laugh at the foolishness of the fox if she wants to, or empathise with him over his bad luck. If she likes the fable, she’ll ask to read/for it to be read aloud/narrated again the next day, during which time she’ll have the chance to tease the message out.

Be it with textbooks, mythology or moral stories, the hold that instruction has had over reading since after the Middle Ages hasn’t loosened. A few months ago, I sat in a circle with a group of 17-year-olds fresh out of government school. Every one of them said they read to learn. When I asked if there were books they’d opened for enjoyment, they responded firmly that they could enjoy something only if they simultaneously learned from it.

And no matter how hard I try to deny it, they’re right. Every story has something we can learn from; every storyteller is human; every human believes she know something worth sharing. In explaining that stories and morals needn’t go hand in hand, am I not doing the same? Am I not trying to convince you that values tell superior stories through examples? An author is more *efficient*. She could *demonstrate* that value-based stories are instructive as well as entertaining by deliberately omitting morals from her book, as Mahasweta Devi does with *Our Incredible Cow*.

As with the stories in the *Panchatantra*, this too regales its reader with the antics of an animal. But Nyadosh the cow is no Gomata. If personified, she'd be exactly what the *Panchatantra*-proponent would keep away from her child. Children, however, *love* immorality. Authors of moral stories know and use this fact too: the fox's greed is what makes the *Panchatantra* story worth telling in the first place. But while Sharma lays it out as a problem to which a solution must be sought, explaining to children how not to be in the process, Devi draws no such parallels. The cow's boisterousness is exactly what children's secret lives, away from adult eyes, are all about. Nyadosh breaks her way out of the cowshed everyday; which child doesn't dream of sneaking out of her house without parental permission and embarking on an adventure? She eats up books; which child doesn't wish her books disappeared so she wouldn't have to study anymore? She pushes policemen back into the river when they're getting out after their morning dip; which child hasn't been told that policemen are out to get her, inciting the wish for a little revenge? She gets drunk and comes home; for which child is drunkenness not forbidden adult knowledge that she'd press her ear against closed doors for? Even when the narrator suggests that Nyadosh fell ill because of these activities, she doesn't pause to lecture the reader. She allows her, her own time in coming to the conclusion that an eventful lifestyle isn't good in excess, and goes on instead to a light-hearted description of Nyadosh's treatment of the vets who come to see her.



Figure 29. Nyadosh made of books.  
**Image Courtesy:** *An Incredible Cow*  
 (Author: Mahashweta Devi; Illustrator:  
 Ruchi Shah; Tulika Publishers, 2015).

Furthermore, if our children's preferences aren't incentive enough to give them this book, we could bore straight through the story's foundation for what *we* wish them to imbibe. To begin with, the story is rich in detail. Written first in Bengali and translated later by the author herself, the English version retains key Bengali words: Nyadosh (clumsy), Monimashi and Monididima (aunt and great-aunt), ilish (a kind of fish). It mentions the Ganga, the field in front of the court, the earthen bowl in which hay, husk and oil-cakes are stored for Nyadosh, the tradition of presenting the cow-seller with new clothes. In its crudest form, these details shape the value of Indianness. More subtly, they localise culture, hinting to the reader that she's surrounded by people and places that are dissimilar to yet like her own (let's get past unity in diversity). A chain could be strung from here, with cultural/linguistic/religious tolerance as the last link.

Next comes art. The pictures on each page don't replicate the words—they illustrate them. When the narrator describes Nyadosh's taste for books, Ruchi Shah portrays a cow made

---

Books that have a 'moral of the story' overtly stated should be avoided. Books that 'preach' in an overt fashion should also be avoided. This is because moral development is a complex process. Children learn through observation, experience, reflection, and not by being 'told'. Therefore, the books need to give the child opportunity to question, enquire and learn. (NCCL, 2014)

---

up made up of books (see Figure 29). Similarly, descriptions of the animal's fish cravings are accompanied by a seafood-onion cow. Tastefully coloured, perfectly proportioned and placed, the reader's education in art appreciation could begin right here.

This list could go on to the understanding of human-animal relationships (which adult does Nyadosh like or dislike and why?), glimpses into adult personalities (whom does Nyadosh listen to, whom is she afraid of and why does she avoid chewing on anything that belongs to Baba?), even messages for us parents and teachers on how to balance enjoyment and censorship for our children. We are, after all, the author's first targets; we surround children; we believe we know more about them than they do and hence give ourselves the power to decide what stories they read or don't. If the author can't get past us, she can't reach them at all.

So when we walk into a bookstore to pick up something for them, how do we know which book's *the* book? How can we decide whether it's extolling a moral or propagating a value? Sometimes, authors don't go all out in stating, "So the moral of the story is—" at the end of the narrative; a direct moral could be present somewhere in the middle, when a wiser character preaches to an erring one, obviously intended for the child reader, as happens very often in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. So we need to create filters and pass each book we pick up through these. To do this efficiently, I'd suggest these three steps:

- a) If it's small, read the book cover to cover; if long, read the blurb and the first two pages at least—does it seem like your child will *enjoy* what you see?
- b) Glance through the illustrations—do they add meaning to, not just describe, the words? Could they be good examples of art the reader could learn to appreciate?
- c) Scan for morals and values—which seem more dominant? If it's morals, is the story worth the preaching? If it's values, are they ones we agree with? Do they seem to arise naturally from the narrative, or have they been squeezed in just so that some learning can exist in the tale, making them as obvious as morals?

Children’s author and theorist Emily Neville says in her essay titled *Social Values in Children’s Literature* (Neville, 1967)—

“The problem in dealing with the social or moral issue in fiction for children or adults is that the author must not preach, must not make the reader’s decision for him, must not indulge in the fallacy that all nice people do good things and that all evil things are done by bad people. The author’s job is to throw sharp light on how some real people act in a particular time and place.

“We’ve always thought of children’s stories as fantastical, simplistic tales, of children as imaginative young humans. It’s time for us to press the clutch down, shift gear, to think of our young as *intelligent* beings capable of understanding complex, real stories. It’s time to tell ourselves—“They can. Yes. They can.”

---

## References

Neville, E. (1967). Social values in children’s literature. *The Library Quarterly*, 37(1), 46-52.

National Centre for Children’s Literature (NCCL). (2014). *Guide to good books: Criteria for selecting quality children’s books*. New Delhi: National Book Trust.

# Writing for Children – It’s Complicated!

Mini Shrinivasan

What does it mean to write for children? Are there qualities critical to such writing? Noted children’s book author Mini Shrinivasan draws from her journey as a children’s author to shed light on what is good writing for children.

---

We have an obligation to understand and to acknowledge that as writers for children we are doing important work, because if we mess it up and write dull books that turn children away from reading and from books, we’ve lessened our own future and diminished theirs. (Gaiman, 2016)

---

Almost each time I am introduced as a children’s writer, regardless of whether the audience is young, middle-aged or elderly (not children, though, they have too much sense!), one of the first questions I am asked is, “I want to write for children, how do I start?” My counter question inevitably is, “What do you want to say to children?” And to my surprise and disappointment, most of the time the answer is a blank look.

What does writing for children involve? First and most importantly for me, it is having something to say—you want to tell a story, or invoke an emotion, or pose a moral or ethical or logical question, or convey facts, or open up a world for the child to explore. It may be as complex as dealing with death, or as simple as teaching English to children who don’t have much opportunity to learn it. But you must have something to say. Something that children would like to read. And what **WOULD** children like to read? How do you know?

Well, the second and perhaps equally important component to make you a children’s writer is that you have some understanding of children—you must know how to speak to them. This implies that you have spent time with them, have an interest in them and how they think and feel. It is said Roald Dahl did not like being with children, but I suspect he *listened* to and *observed* them nevertheless, which is what makes him so delightful to read. So, you may not be the sort who always has a toddler on your lap, but you must have an interest in the unique and complex mind of the child.



---

### **Roald Dahl's Advice to Children's Writers**

What makes a good children's writer? The writer must have a genuine and powerful wish not only to entertain children, but to teach them the habit of reading...[He or she] must be a jokey sort of fellow...[and] must like simple tricks and jokes and riddles and other childish things. He must be unconventional and inventive. He must have a really first-class plot. He must know what enthralls children and what bores them. They love being spooked. They love ghosts. They love the finding of treasure. They love chocolates and toys and money. They love magic. They love being made to giggle. They love seeing the villain meet a grisly death. They love a hero and they love the hero to be a winner. But they hate descriptive passages and flowery prose. They hate long descriptions of any sort. Many of them are sensitive to good writing and can spot a clumsy sentence. They like stories that contain a threat.

"D'you know what I feel like?" said the big crocodile to the smaller one. "I feel like having a nice plump juicy child for my lunch."

They love that sort of thing. What else do they love? New inventions. Unorthodox methods. Eccentricity. Secret information. The list is long. But, above all, when you write a story for them, bear in mind that they do not possess the same power of concentration as an adult, and they become very easily bored or diverted. Your story, therefore, must tantalise and titillate them on every page and all the time that you are writing you must be saying to yourself, "Is this too slow? Is it too dull? Will they stop reading?" To those questions, you must answer yes more often than you answer no. [If not] you must cross it out and start again. Roald Dahl (as cited in Lazar, 2012)

---

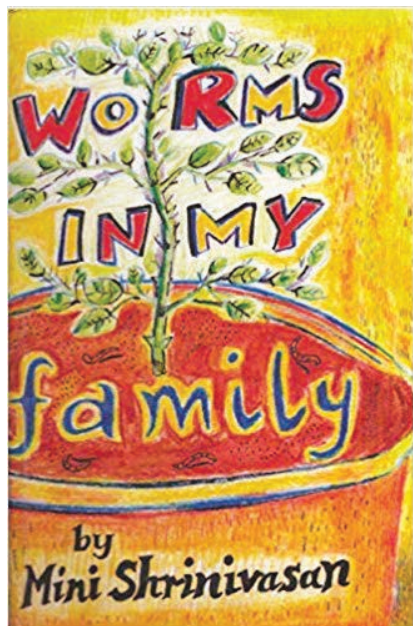
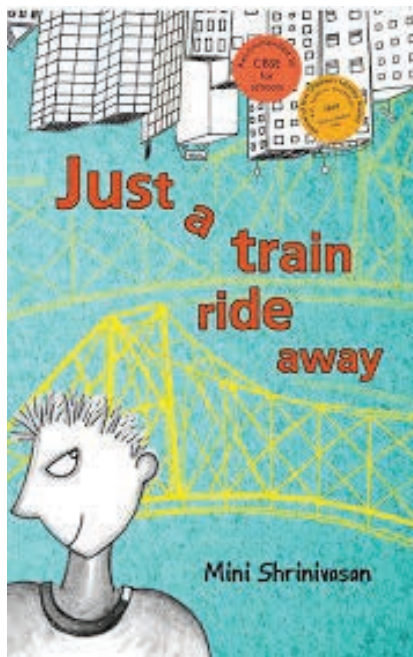


Figure 30. *Just a train ride away* (Mini Shrinivasan, Tulika Publishers, 2006); *Worms in my Family* (Mini Shrinivasan, Sakal Prakashan).

Without these two things, I think you become the sort of children's writer who either writes preachy and tedious stories or some awful whimsical fantasy which somehow leaves kids cold.

What has driven me to write is the germ of a story. I remember when I wrote *Just A Train Ride Away*, the germ of the story was a rather dusty looking but handsome lawyer who had set up a table outside the office where one went to register affidavits. Here was a qualified professional, quite personable, who seemed to have set up his office on an old wooden table under an umbrella. Who was he? How did he land up here? And, because I work with children, the next question—what did his children say when someone asked them, “What does your father do?” This set off the series of ideas that became the book about a 12-year-old's search for his father.

*Worms In My Family* arose out of a horribly embarrassing teenage memory when my father shamed me in front of a boy I had a crush on. I wanted to share that with children and laugh about it, and help them understand their sometimes-embarrassing parents.

For me that germ of an idea comes easily because my work involves constant contact with children, and because I have brought up two of my own. It is the rest that is hard. Very, very hard! Building up that idea into an interesting book takes so much work that, at times, I have shelved the project for years. It involves fleshing out the story, peopling it with believable characters, with interesting turns in the plot and, especially for older children, with a satisfying ending that is not too fairy tale-ish. All of this must be interesting to read, be funny and, above all, be authentic. Whew!

Authenticity is a strange thing—the whole fantasy world of Harry Potter is authentic, but a recent book I read about a poor beggar girl is not. What makes something authentic? Hard to say. But within the fantasy world of Harry Potter, everything hangs together, everyone behaves in believable ways. While in this beggar girl story, the girl actually thanks God for making her poor because it helps her to be more spiritual or something like that, making it totally inauthentic to my ear.

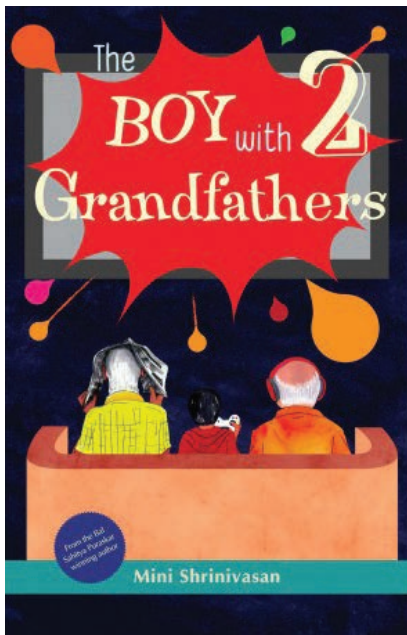


Figure 31. *The Boy with Two Grandfathers* (Mini Shrinivasan; Illustrator: Anupama S. Iyer, Tulika Publishers).

While writing my latest book, *The Boy With Two Grandfathers*, I needed to understand how an 11-year-old would feel when his mother died. Sad? Of course, that's obvious. But what else? I just could not get into his mind. You cannot research something like this, you cannot go about asking kids who have lost their mothers how they felt. I tried to read up psychological studies of loss among children, but they did not really help. So I just left it for two years! I could not bring myself to invent inauthentic feelings and emotions—I don't believe good fiction comes like that. Suddenly, one day, serendipity! Reading a travelogue, I found the writer digressing into his childhood memory of his mother's death, and the feeling of embarrassment when he went back to school and faced the kindness and pity of teachers and classmates. There, I had it, and the book wrote itself to a conclusion in the next week.

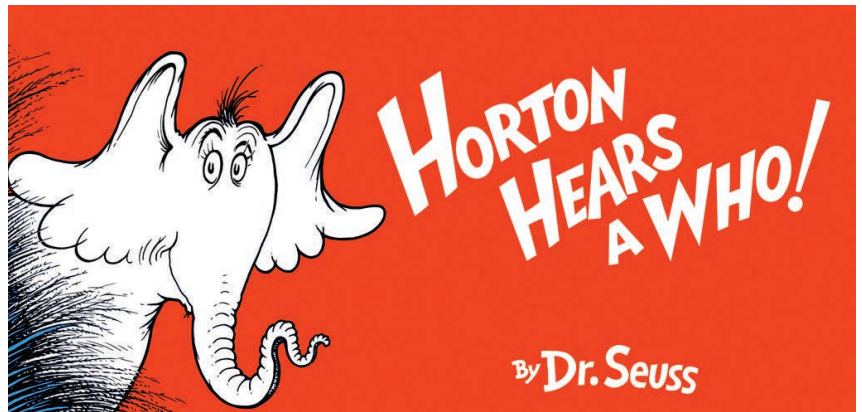


Figure 32. *Horton Hears a Who* (Dr Seuss, Random House Books for Young Readers, 1990).

If we look at all the children's books we love, we will find this authenticity there somewhere, even if the subject is outlandish like *Horton Hears a Who*—Horton is entirely believable; we WANT him to succeed. In the world the writer has created, Horton is real and true.

And that child in the story I mentioned earlier—thanking God for her poverty? We don't really care because we don't believe she exists or can exist in any world.

## References

- Gaiman, N (October 15th, 2016) *Why our future depends on libraries, reading and daydreaming*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/15/neil-gaiman-future-libraries-reading-daydreaming>
- Lazar T. (July, 10th 2012) *Roald Dahl: What makes a good children's writer?* Retrieved from <https://taralazar.com/2012/07/10/roald-dahl-what-makes-a-good-childrens-writer/>

# Relating with Children through Literature

Harshita V. Das

In this delightful piece, Harshita V Das brings us her experience and understanding about building meaningful relationships and memories with children through literature.

A teacher's life is difficult. More so when she finds herself in the company of ever-scheming children, every single day. I'm sure those of you who are teachers have faced this. At least one child's parent tells you, "My child seems to be seeking excuses to give school a miss!" And your mind races through various possibilities about who's responsible for the child's reluctance to attend school. The principal? The caregiver? Is the midday meal not good enough? Is it the bad score he got on a test? No, no, it could be this fight he keeps having with this girl? Ah, the maths teacher? YOU? I can imagine the number of thoughts that might come and go in a flash before you go "Thud!"

I empathise. I was there too.

But before we talk about teacher-student relationships, let's segue into *Calvin and Hobbes*.

We all know how Calvin *loves* going to school, how he *loves* being a part of that class where his teacher is giving him lessons in maths and vocabulary building, right? He *loves* that he gets to enroll himself on that game during sports period? And how he *loves* doing homework! Figure 33 has some comic strips to jog your memory.

Calvin speaks for most children I know. He speaks for us, when we remember our experiences at school. Let's look at the last comic strip when Calvin says he could not *appreciate* the moments at school. What could you do as a language teacher to make some moments at school worthwhile for children like him? What could you do to help him get *great pleasure in being right here, right now, doing what he's doing, in your classroom?*



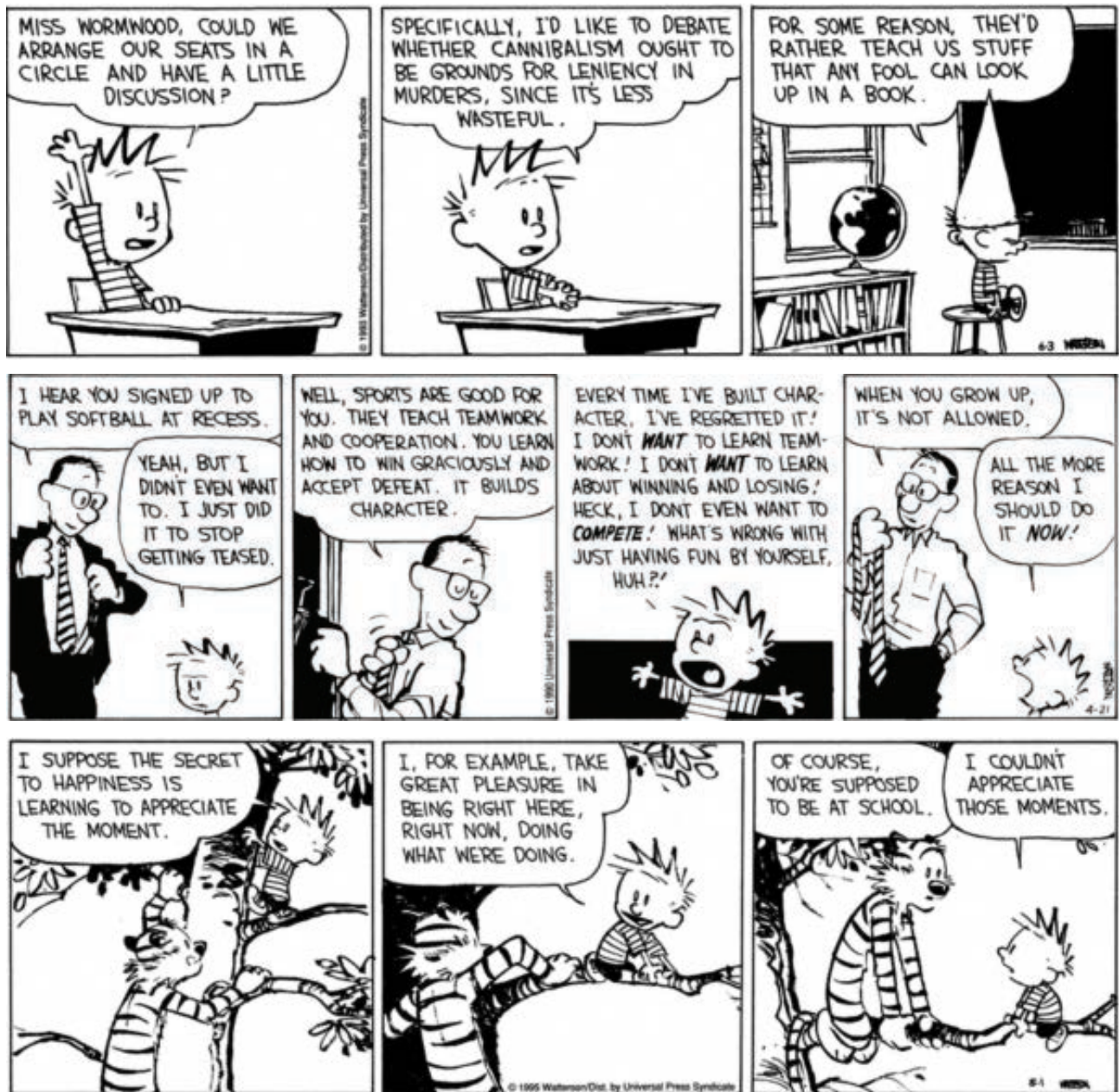


Figure 33. Calvin and Hobbes strips reflecting Calvin's reluctance towards going to school.

If we begin asking ourselves this, we would discover that there is a great deal we could do. I have come to understand that a great way for teachers to ensure that children have a fairly good experience as they learn is by building strong interpersonal relationships. And that *children's literature can play a very important role in this.*

Children's literature introduces many possibilities for motivation, a sense of appreciation of others, of bonding and belongingness, a sense of love, respect, compassion for and responsibility towards one another. And you can do this without sounding preachy because stories and the issues that



---

The thing fiction does is to build empathy. When you watch TV or see a film, you are looking at things happening to other people. Prose fiction is something you build up from 26 letters and a handful of punctuation marks, and you, and you alone, using your imagination, create a world and people in it and look out through other eyes. You get to feel things, visit places and worlds you would never otherwise know. You learn that everyone else out there is a me as well. You're being someone else, and when you return to your own world, you're going to be slightly changed. Empathy is a tool for building people into groups, for allowing us to function as more than self-obsessed individuals. (Gaiman, 2016)

---

they raise, the conversations you have around them can model these attitudes subtly yet consistently. Therefore, rather than investigating the literary merits of using children's literature in the classroom, or considering its impact on children's cognitive development, I emphasise its role in meaningful relationship building.

I have worked as a teacher in various settings – an alternative school, a bridge school for migrant children, and a library at a government school. The context in each place was very distinctive, but the experiences that the children and I had around children's literature were somewhat similar. Each space offered different challenges to me as a teacher, the most striking of them was this strong need I felt for a personal connect with the children.

As teachers, we all experience this – that moment when you realise something is amiss and we, the children and the teacher, go about the "act" of teaching and learning. At such times, teaching and learning feel like a chore, like we are rehearsing for that play that will never see an audience.

In each space I worked in, the initial days were testing because the children and I did not know each other well. Children trust easily, but there is a short gap between when you're a stranger to them – the lone adult in the classroom – and when you become one *among them*. Bridging this gap becomes essential, and their acceptance is key to that.



Figure 34. A story-reading session at Poorna Learning Centre, Bangalore.

Children’s literature has always been an indispensable part of my language and literacy classroom. I had a classroom library of books handpicked from a variety of sources. As I have read aloud to children, I have slowly but definitely noticed a change in my interactions with them. To me, this is the highlight that has stayed with me through my teaching journey. I would like to share a couple of these experiences to give you a sense of what I mean.

This incident happened within a month of my joining the alternative school as a class teacher. One Monday morning, my group (a bunch of energetic eight-year-olds) and I were headed to a neighbouring farm for a read aloud as part of the English class. By now, the children were warming up to this practice. We sat under a huge tree in a circle and I began reading aloud. The story we read that day was *Virginia Wolf* by Kyo Maclear. It is a heart-warming story of how the older sister, Vanessa, tries to soothe her little sister, Virginia, who is feeling rather wolfish, facing those blues.

As always, I paused at intervals and asked my group questions to make sure they were following the story, that they were with me. It was an interactive read aloud. I (maybe we) noticed something beautiful was transpiring. Three or four children were by now perched up a tree. A few others lay on the ground, relaxed and content.

As they listened intently, M had a question. “Harshita, what would you do if you felt like Virginia, what if you felt like you were in the doldrums?” While I was thrilled that he used the word ‘doldrums’, what happened as I responded is a memory I cherish. I said, “Umm... I would imagine myself sitting on a cloud and probably would want to drift away, just so I forget

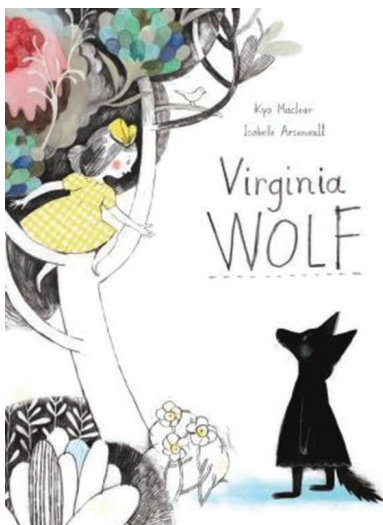


Figure 35. *Virginia Wolf* (Author: Kyo Maclear; Illustrator: Isabelle Arsenault; Kids Can Press, 2012).

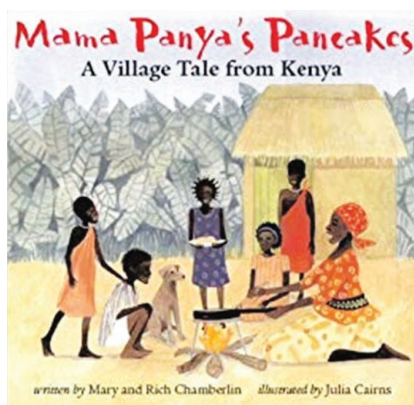


Figure 36. *Mama Panya's Pancakes: A Village Tale from Kenya* (Authors: Rich Chamberlin; Mary Chamberlin; Illustrator: Julia Cairns; Barefoot Books, 2006).

what is troubling me..." Two children perched up the tree looked down at me and, with a certain kindness in their voice, said, "Harshita, would you take us onto that cloud?"

There was silence, and in my heart, *something happened*. Of course, I nodded and quickly gathering my thoughts, I said emphatically, "Yes, I'd like all of you up on that cloud with me!"

Then, I asked them the same question, and even the most reticent child had something precious to share about his/her way of dealing with the blues. Each sharing is too precious to give away, even as an example. Those magical moments made all the difference in how the children warmed up to me. Those moments defined how we would soon be one big group of learners in our collective journey in a space we called "our school".

Then there is another story that helped break the ice. This was at the bridge school and it was the first time I was reading aloud. It was a story from Kenya called *Mama Panya's Pancakes*. It is a beautiful story about a boy named Adika who believes in sharing that occasional special meal of pancakes with his many friends even if it means he gets very little himself. It gives us valuable insights into community bonding and how there is much we could build on by sharing— love, trust, a sense of belonging. Weeks later, a little girl would tell me how she remembered this story as she took me home with another teacher and offered us a preparation of beaten rice, jaggery, desiccated coconut and cumin— considered festive food.



Figure 37. A few special books from Harshita's classroom library.



---

Read to them. Take their breath away. Read with the same feeling in your throat as when you first see the ocean after driving hours and hours to get there. Close the final page of the book with the same reverence you feel when you kiss your sleeping child at night. Be quiet. Don't talk the experience to death. Shut up and let these kids feel and think. Teach your children to be moved.

— Cynthia Rylant (as cited in Calkins, 1986, p. 53)

---

There are many such instances, each a pearl firmly planted in my heart. There are some stories that will never fail you if you want to make a lasting impression in your language class. To name a few special ones – *The Mountain That Loved a Bird* (*Hakkiyannu Preethisida Betta* in Kannada), *Basava and The Dots of Fire* (*Basava Mathu Benkiya Chukke* in Kannada), *Ju's Story*, *The Why Why Girl*, *The Boy Who Asked Why?*, *The Heart and the Bottle*, *Charlotte's Web*...there are many more (see Figure 37).

Stories help you to have a conversation with young people. These conversations are special in that they help us make connections to our lives and make space for our stories of sharing to take shape. As they take shape, something magical is being woven between you and the children. These are not isolated incidents to be soon forgotten. These are memories and bonds forged that are bound to last.

So if you use children's literature in your classroom, your young friends will hold you close to their hearts and you may well be the reason why they come to school, or stay in school. And what's more, this also has implications on the children's learning of language and literature. I know children who started enjoying reading so much more after read aloud sessions, and gained confidence, interest and a sense of self-efficacy vital to learning.

---

## References

- Gaiman, N (October 15th, 2016) *Why our future depends on libraries, reading and daydreaming*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/15/neil-gaiman-future-libraries-reading-daydreaming>
- Calkins, L. M. (1986). *The art of teaching writing*. Heinemann Educational Books Inc., 70 Court St., Portsmouth, NH 03801.

# Children's Literature: Concluding Thoughts

Shailaja Menon and Harshita V. Das

As stated in the introduction to this theme, children's literature is central to both the broader educational enterprise, as well as specifically to early language and literacy learning. As educators, it is clear that we would want children not only to "decode" the texts that we hand them, but also to make meaning of them. We want them to draw connections from the texts to their lives and the other way around. We want them to be able to use different texts for different purposes, and to become critical readers. We want them to not only *learn to read*, but *read to learn*. Children's literature is indispensable to these aspects of early learning.

Shailaja Menon's article helped set the context related to the "big" questions – What is literature? How can we distinguish children's literature from adult literature? Why should we use it in early language classrooms? And so on. The piece established that the answers to seemingly simple questions (such as: what is children's literature?) are often complex, especially in a multilingual country with long and rich traditions of oral and performative literatures. Distinguishing adult from children's literature is also more tricky than it seems!

The trend of "more tricky than it seems" appears to run across several, if not all of the blog pieces related to this theme! Jane's piece introduced the reader to how children are conceptualised in well known pieces of children's literature in India, permitting us to reflect on and be sensitive to these portrayals. From Usha's piece we learnt that deciding on the age appropriateness of books for children is complex and riddled with factors that we might not have anticipated as teachers. It is only through experience, fine-tuning and a deep reflectiveness that we are able to make thoughtful matches between books and readers! Mini Shrinivasan provided an author's perspective, an insight into what it means

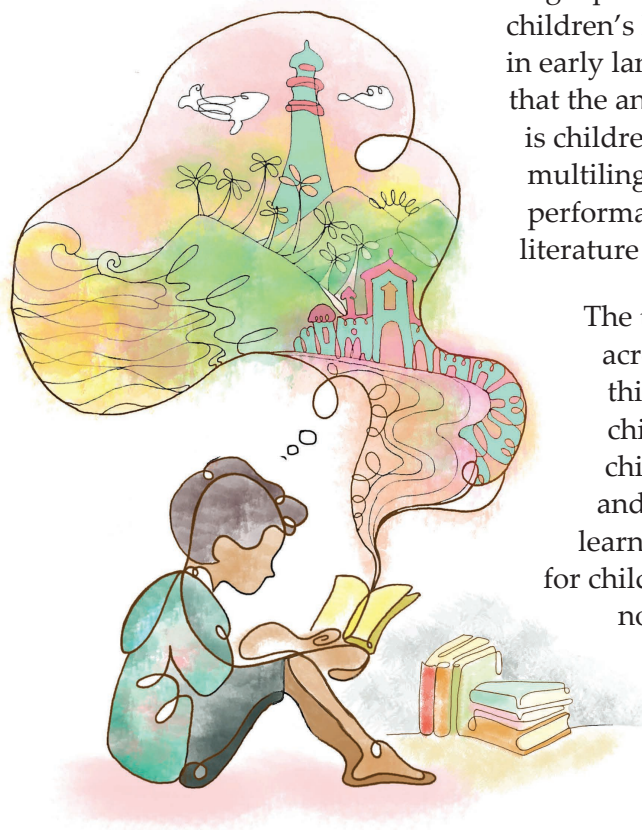






Figure 38. A classroom reading corner. **Image Courtesy:** Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan, Pragat Shikshan Sanstha, Phaltan, Maharashtra. February, 2019.

---

The object we call a book is not the real book, but its potential, like a musical score or seed. It exists fully only in the act of being read; and its real home is inside the head of the reader, where the symphony resounds, the seed germinates. A book is a heart that only beats in the chest of another. Rebecca Solnit (as cited in Popova, 2014)

---

to be writing for children and what it takes to be such an author. Mini alerts readers to the need for authenticity in writing for children, while showing us how complex the idea of authenticity really is!

As vital as literature is for enabling children to become good readers and writers, it also has a larger role to play in their lives. In addition to its pedagogical value for language learning, it also enables children to develop attitudes and values that are essential for social living. Can literature be used, then, to *teach good values* to children? Maitri Vasudev's piece distinctly discourages teachers from using too many overtly moralistic books in their classrooms. She draws a fine distinction between *morals* and *values*, with values involving the learner's own judgment. Tricky, indeed, because, rarely in Indian settings, do educators leave children with open questions related to values! Our educational experiences tend to be characterized by didactic methods, materials and individuals, and in this context, an opening up of moral questions to include the learners' own thinking and experiences seems radical! It leaves us with the question – how are traditionally moralistic tales like *Panchatantra* and *Jataka* to be used? Should they be used at all? Perhaps, in combination with a variety of other, more open-ended genres, and with a pedagogy that encourages reflection, some of these books could once again find their rightful place in Indian school libraries. But, most definitely, they should not be the exclusive fare for young minds!

Thus far we have established that literature is important for language learning, and also for learning about larger attitudes and values. Harshita Das expanded this understanding in her blog piece, by alerting us to the role played by literature in establishing emotional bonds in the classroom. Children's literature has the power to help build lasting relationships, not only between the reader (or the listener!) and the text, but also between the facilitator and the children. Harshita emphasises the need to use read alouds as a meaningful way of engaging children with literature and comments on how rewarding this experience can be for both the teacher and the taught!

The role of children's literature does not end there. It enables children to experiment with writing as well, to learn how to discuss books meaningfully with each other, and so on. As Shailaja suggests in her article, the possibilities are endless, if we only begin to walk the path equipped with good children's literature.

By engaging meaningfully with literature, children are likely to emerge as more reflective and skilful human beings who are aware of the history, contexts, societies and individuals that surround them, even as they become more aware of their own motivations, emotions and responses. Both insight and an aesthetic stance towards language can be fostered through the use of literature in classrooms. In addition, specific language capabilities can also be built. Most importantly, the relevance and joy of language learning can be established in the young learner's mind!

The ELI team hopes that this set of perspective building blog pieces has piqued your curiosity and whetted your appetite for continuing to explore issues related to children's literature, and to its uses in the early language and literacy classrooms. For more explicit "how-to" style pieces, we refer you to ELI Resource Book 6, which will include detailed practitioner briefs!

---

## References

Popova, M. (2014) A book is a heart that only beats in the chest of another: Rebecca Solnit on the solitary intimacy of reading and writing. Retrieved from <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/10/13/rebecca-solnit-faraway-nearby-reading-writing/>

TALKS, ESSAYS &  
OPINION PIECES

---

# Building Communities of Readers and Writers

Shailaja Menon

This talk was given as the closing address at  
Parag Children's Library UnConference in March, 2017

Many interesting and important themes have come up this afternoon, and some might suppose that the Closing Address is a place to tie up all loose ends. I may be disappointing some, but I will not use this precious time to tie all the threads together, although, I will note some of the more important ones here—

- a. the tug between providing basic literacy versus higher order skills through library services;
- b. the dilemma of whether to aim for scale or depth in library-based efforts in our country;
- c. whether to focus on the availability of books or the usage of books;
- d. whether libraries are central to curricular efforts, or peripheral to them;
- e. whether to select books for their utility for instructional purposes or for their literary qualities;
- f. how to get people interested and motivated in reading;
- g. the vision of library spaces as larger than that of accomplishing basic literacy.

Having noted these, I will respectfully set them aside for the duration of this talk because I come here with an agenda of my own—to talk about the much neglected aspect of using libraries to build communities of readers and writers, – which I believe is critical for library based efforts in our country.



Figure 39. Reading and writing as a collective practice. **Image Courtesy:** Sarika Moon, ELI, TISS Hyderabad, 2018; KathaVana, Azim Premji University, Bangalore.

In his keynote address at a conference for academic librarians, R. David Lankes, a professor of librarianship noted that, “*Bad libraries build collections, good libraries build services, great libraries build communities*” (Lankes, 2012). I am encouraged to see that not a single organization here today is merely engaged in building collections of good literature. Every organisation is making an effort to build high quality services to connect children to literature, and that is heartening. I would like to push our thinking about good libraries a little further. I would like to encourage us to continue to build good collections of books; to provide high quality services to children; and also to start thinking about how we can begin to build engaged communities of readers and writers (see Figure 39).

What does it mean to build “communities of readers and writers”? Why is this important? To understand why we need to build communities of readers, it is important to understand reading as a cultural practice. I begin my talk this afternoon by exploring the idea that reading is culturally located and, therefore, it is important that when we try to inculcate the reading “habit”, we also try to locate that habit in the wider culture that the children are a part of.

Once you’re convinced of the idea that reading is a cultural practice, we can then explore what it might mean to build communities of readers. I will end by providing a few examples of the work we’ve done at Azim Premji University, Bangalore, over the past few years, to build such a community.





---

I didn't go to bookshops to buy. That's a little bourgeois. I went because they were civilized places. It made me happy there were people who sat down and wrote and wrote and wrote and there were other people who devoted their lives to making those words into books. It was lovely. Like standing in the middle of civilization. (Pinto, 2012)

---

## Reading as a Cultural Practice

If we ask ourselves why people should read, why children should read, we will get varied answers, even in this room. From a historical and cultural perspective, most cultures across the world have not necessarily valued reading, and in particular, reading for pleasure. Literacy is a recent cultural entrant in many societies, especially in its modern guise—literacy for all.

Literacy has historically been unevenly distributed in society. Even in relatively well-developed societies that claim close to a 100% literacy rate, different classes of society have related to literacy differently, used it for different purposes and functions. It is possible to argue that the higher the class of society you belong to, or the more “developed” the society you belong to, the more access you have to the idea that people can read for leisure and pleasure. Even in societies that had access to literacy, not everyone read with this intent. Different classes or groups of people used literacy to fulfill different functions in their lives.

For example, my caste, the Menons of Kerala, were possibly scribes and accountants to the kings of Kerala—they used literacy mainly for administrative purposes. Even amongst this caste, only men traditionally had access to literacy, while women became literate fairly late. When literacy is used for the purposes of recording, then accuracy is very important. What is valued is not how deep your interpretation is, but how accurate your recording is.

In other castes and religions, literacy might have been used to access scriptural knowledge—to read holy books. Think of Brahmins in India receiving Vedic instruction, Muslims learning to read the Koran, or Christians learning to read in order to access the Bible.

According to D. D. Hall (a historian of literacy in the US), in some books written during the puritanical era in the West, authors often addressed readers in an opening statement headed “To the Reader”. These instructed the reader on how to understand and put to use the prose that followed. Since, for the most part, these were religious texts that described the process of redemption, the instructions advised readers to model the act of reading on the practice of meditation: to ingest the written word, to “chew” it, to read slowly and repeatedly (Hall, 1994). In other words, the ideal reader was one who understood the truth that resided in the text through re-reading and reflection. The reader's ability to read to derive pleasure from the text, interpret it, argue with it, etc. were not the main objectives.

The idea that people could read for leisure, personal development, for personal interpretation and response was popularised by the European enlightenment and renaissance, and this, as I've noted, has been distributed differently across the globe and across different social classes within any given society at any given point in time.

For example, in certain states of the US, literacy rates were at over 80% by 1790. Yet, a survey conducted in the 1920s showed that only a fourth of the population reported spending money on books. Only a third of the working class families subscribed to magazines, while nearly all families from the business class subscribed to at least one magazine. Further, the kinds of magazines read by the two groups varied, and differences also existed in what people in different age groups, and different genders read. The idea of what was 'good' reading was, no doubt, influenced (at least partially) by the variables of class, age and gender, pointing to the idea that reading is culturally located.

To further my argument about reading as a culturally located practice, I will also remind you of/introduce you to Shirley Brice Heath's classic ethnography of reading in different communities in the US in the late 1970s/early 1980s. Heath (1982) demonstrated through her work that families, homes and adults have a direct role to play in how children learn to interact with or to *take from texts*. She studied three communities—a relatively affluent, middle-class white community; a working-class white community; and a black community—which she called Maintown, Roadville and Trackton respectively. She saw that children from each of these communities learned different ways of holding and attending to books, of retrieving content from books, and of talking about books after reading. In the middle-class community of Maintown, children learned from an early age to discuss books analytically with their parents through dialogue and question-and-answer sessions. In contrast, in the white working class community, adults signalled to the children that it was important to respect the status or content of the books and to 'learn' from them. Children were not encouraged to relate what they read in the texts to their own lives or to argue with texts. Finally, in the black working class community, the culture was largely oral. Books were incidental to a culture that thrived on the oral telling of stories, and book reading was not a central part of adult-child interactions. Children in Heath's study correspondingly displayed different kinds of behaviours around books based on the cultural values that had shaped them. If culture shapes ideas about who reads, for what purposes, and how – then, interventions designed to shape children into readers – whether through libraries or otherwise – need to

address the issue of helping the surrounding culture to shift. From a cultural and critical standpoint, what we're attempting to do with the library movement cannot be described as an "educational intervention" – we're attempting to accomplish nothing short of cultural change – the educated elite (all of us here in this room), are trying to shape and reshape the culture of ordinary people into one that celebrates books, individuation and personal response.

## Rationale

Engaging in the project of cultural reformation is always fraught with moral and ethical dilemmas. Therefore, we require clarity on why we wish to engage in such a project. We can give many reasons for such a cultural transformation, including the common argument that books enhance the child's creativity and imagination, open up worlds unknown, even deepen the child's knowledge and understanding of the world she lives in. All of these are true.

But there is another set of reasons that, for me, is particularly compelling. These relate to the issue of empowerment, of giving children from varied social classes access to culturally valued and powerful skills, attitudes and experiences around texts. Lisa Delpit (1988), a noted African American educator, referred to these as the "codes of power". These, she argued, should be taught fairly explicitly to children who come from cultures without access to the codes at home. What are these powerful

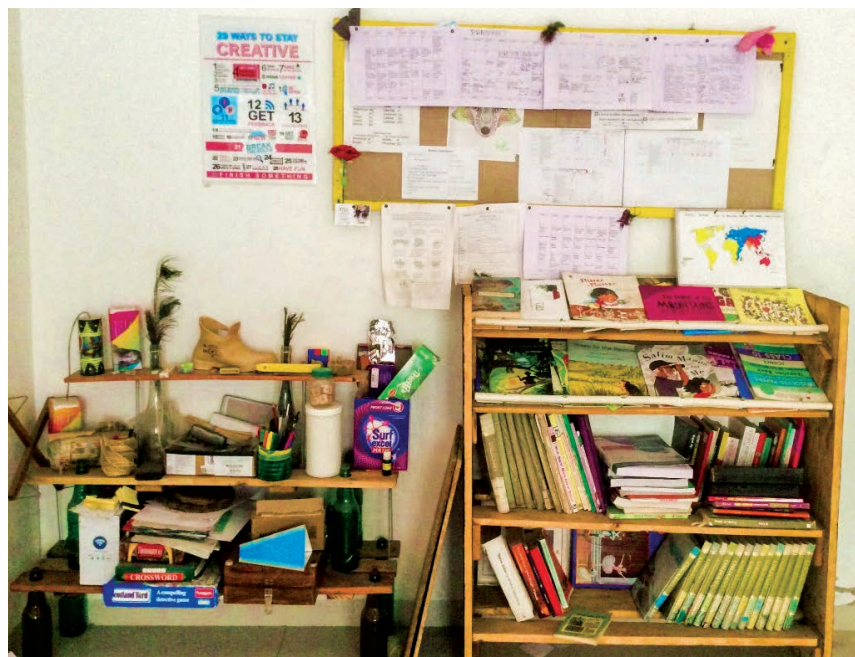


Figure 40. Example of a print-rich home environment. **Image Courtesy:** Shuchi Sinha, 2019.

skills, attitudes and experiences that educated or middle-class parents regularly provide for their children?

1. Exposure to a wide set of texts of different kinds—picture books, poetry, chapter books, biographies, encyclopaedias, magazines and more (see Figure 40).
2. Exposure to the idea that you can read books for a range of purposes, including for information and for leisure. The idea that books can be used for pleasure might be a novel idea in certain communities and cultures.
3. The idea that books can be argued with and responded to. This implies that children feel that they are on an equal power footing with the books. This, too, could be a novel cultural idea in cultures where books—where available—are meant to be mastered, not countered or discussed.
4. Exposure to reading adults who model for the children how they interact with texts and the value that they derive from them.

I believe that we can only inculcate values and habits in children that are mirrored in the society around them. It is impossible to *cultivate* the *reading habit* or any other habit, for that matter, in children whose societies and cultures do not have that habit. Therefore, before we try to make readers out of children, we need to pause and ask ourselves honestly—are we readers? If not, we need to set about rectifying that.

### Building Communities of Readers and Writers

This brings me to the last segment of my talk – which is about how we can build communities of readers and writers. A “community”, for the purposes of this talk, is defined as a group of people with a shared identity and common values. Perhaps, not in all respects, but for our purposes, towards reading books and valuing literature. How can we build communities of readers in challenging contexts in India, where most people are barely able to sign their names and struggle with using literacy for the most functional of purposes? This is a daunting task—getting enough good books published in regional or local languages; getting funding to acquire these books for libraries on an ongoing basis; getting these books out to locations where they are needed; recruiting and training people to help children interact with books. These are difficult enough tasks to manage in our country today and most organisations here are doing a fairly good job with it. However, I would argue that we will fall short of our end goals of creating engaged readers if these tasks do not consider and include the even more difficult challenge of getting the cultures surrounding the child to value reading.



When we move from illiteracy or semi-literacy to literacy, we're not just acquiring a new set of skills. We're trying to move whole cultures and communities from oral ways of being to literate ways of being.

There are many differences between orality and literacy. But one of the most significant is that oral cultures largely communicate in face-to-face contexts, where the community is a part of the meaning-making process. In contrast, reading is a relatively private, lonely task, where the burden of meaning-making appears to fall on the reader. People from largely oral cultures might be willing to acquire the script because they see it as functional in their lives. But they may be less willing to engage in the culturally unfamiliar task of confronting the printed page on their own. If we seed literacy in children, but not in the surrounding communities, it is unlikely to survive, because the pull of orality is likely to be greater than that of the "hidden treasures" of reading because they ARE, indeed, hidden and need to be chased through the pages of a book.

How can we motivate and support communities in becoming readers and writers? Here, I cite a few examples of my work (and the work of my students) at Azim Premji University, where we have tried to build such communities:

1. **Folklore project:** One way to build a community is by viewing and involving parents and community members as key stakeholders and considering innovative ways to engage them in the library. A relatively easy way community libraries across the world have engaged the adult members is by offering adult literacy classes. But we can think of other ways as well. As some of you may know, Azim Premji University has been hosting a children's literature festival, *KathaVana*, for five years now, targeting government school children – many of them first generation literates – in and around Bangalore.

A few years ago, we conducted what we called the *Folklore Project*. Children collected folklore from their families and communities and brought it to the classroom, where it was presented, performed, and later converted into some written or art form. A similar project—but on a much larger scale—called the *Kahani Mela* has been attempted by Keerti Jayaram in villages near Ajmer, Rajasthan. Folklore is a powerful way to connect literature to communities because it bridges the oral-written divide and positions members of the community as the more knowledgeable others. Thus, even as they are learning about the written form from librarians, the effort also depends on the knowledge brought in by the community.



Figure 41. Pictures from KathaVana, an annual bilingual children's literature festival organised by Azim Premji University in Bangalore.

2. **Teachers-as-Readers:** Another idea we have been using at KathaVana over the past two years is that of creating communities of teachers-as-readers (see Figure 42).

When we started working with schools and teachers around providing literature for children, an elephant in the room was that teachers were not readers of literature. Therefore, even when we taught them powerful strategies like reading aloud, shared reading, and so on, they were not able to discuss books in a meaningful way with the children. So we started reading short stories for adults (in Kannada and English) in a facilitated setting, and we used *literature circles* to conduct discussions.

During these discussions, we got teachers to consider literary elements—such as theme, point-of-view, did the setting have a bearing on the story, can we read “between the lines” and discern implicit messages the author has left, can we understand symbolism, and so on. Teachers who, just before the session, had claimed they were not readers of literature were immersed in discussing a single short story for two hours. Then they spent two more hours sharing their discussions with other groups that had also discussed the story. We were also impressed by the quality of observations and comments that they were making.



Figure 42. Teachers-as-Readers.  
Image Courtesy: KathaVana, Azim Premji University, Bangalore.

Why do we feel using literature circles with teachers is effective? Once again, it bridges the oral-written divide. Even though reading the story is a private, individual act, sense-making was done in an oral, face-to-face, highly interactive manner – which was a familiar means of communicating, even if the content was unfamiliar.

More recently, a student of mine, Trupti Abhyankar, has used the Teacher-as-Readers model with library and literacy teachers working with Quality Education Support Trust (QUEST), an NGO that works in a tribal area of Maharashtra. She, too, reported teachers who initially struggled with going beyond the protocol of conducting the mandatory discussion after reading aloud with students, suddenly exploded in their understanding of how to discuss literature with students after experiencing it.

3. **Teachers-as-Writers:** I will give one last example from the work another student, Nomita Sikand, did for her field internship a few years ago. She got teachers to engage in the process of becoming writers.

The teachers belonged to two schools for the children of migrant labourers, run by Azim Premji Foundation, in Bangalore. These teachers felt that they did not have books that represented the lives of children of migrant labourers. They wanted the children to see their lives reflected in the books they read. So Nomita, Geeta Varadarajan (a writing teacher from Teachers College, Columbia University) and I challenged them to write their own book. Nomita (with inputs from Geeta and me) mentored the teachers over 16 sessions (over four or five months) to draft, revise and edit their jointly authored book.

She also recorded and analysed teachers' conversations. We were amazed by how sophisticated the discussions were once teachers became engaged in writing the piece... They were picky about the words they used to characterise someone, the adjectives they used, the flow of the story, point-of-view, and so on. In their reflections, the teachers shared time and again that this effort had changed their understanding of the reading-writing process. They stated that good readers were often good writers, but this was not always true; some good readers were not good writers. However, good writers were almost always excellent readers, because they noticed details, appreciated the craft of writing, and so on.





Figure 43. **Image Courtesy:** Eklavya Foundation; **Illustrator:** Boski Jain.

After the writing experience, when the teachers discussed books with students, their discussions were richer and deeper. Group discussions were critical to the success of this effort—we write, we talk, we think, we read, and we write again. Bringing orality to literacy is central to building a culture or community of readers and writers.

I have given a long talk, but I hope I've succeeded in making a few points. First, that reading is a cultural process; therefore, libraries need to go beyond thinking of building collections and services, and also focus on building communities of readers and writers. Second, that while having a community of readers is important in all cultures, it is especially helpful in oral cultures like ours, where the loneliness of reading is offset by opportunities for community-based discussions and face-to-face interactions. And, perhaps the most important point that I've made but somewhat lightly, is that our reasons for imparting a love for books to children has to go beyond the cognitive or emotional reasons we commonly cite. At its heart, it is a move towards building social justice and equity in our society by providing the 'codes' of the elite to all.

Finally, to return to a question that has been troubling our participants all day long, should libraries in India focus on imparting literacy or should they serve larger goals and purposes? Some participants suggested passionately that the vision for libraries needs to go beyond that of providing literacy. I have challenged us in this talk to do the converse—to broaden the vision of literacy and literate practices to include meaningful participation in a reading and writing culture that centrally includes libraries.

## References

- Delpit, L. D. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(3), 280-299.
- Hall, D. D. (1994). *Readers and reading in America: Historical and critical perspectives*. Worcester, Massachusetts: American Antiquarian Society.
- Heath, S. B. (1982). What no bedtime story means: Narrative skills at home and school. *Language in Society*, 11, 49-76.
- Lankes, D. R. (2012). *The bad, the good, and the great*. Keynote Academic Librarians 2012, Syracuse, NY. Retrieved from <https://davidlankes.org/rdlankes/Presentations/2012/Syracuse.pdf>
- Pinto, J. (2012). *Em and the big hoom*. India: Aleph Book Company.



# Judging Quality in Children's Literature

Shailaja Menon

At last the Dodo said, "Everybody has won,  
and all must have prizes."

– Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

I have had the good fortune of being on the jury of various children's books awards. Each time, before the awards, the doorbell rings and the delivery person drops off a box of books and strolls casually away, clearly unaware of the excitement that he has just delivered! What excitement, you may wonder. Ah... but that is the closely-guarded secret of all juries...throw several well-read, strong-minded individuals together and ask them to debate the merits and demerits of a box full of books...and it gets a little...shall we say...exciting?

The next couple of months are spent reading and engaging in passionate exchanges with each other in search of "good" books in the box. And then, amongst the good books, the best. It turns out there's more to this process than meets the eye. I will try to give a flavour of some issues that come up.

An early dilemma—children's literature in India is a relatively nascent field. Authors, illustrators, publishers, genres are still emerging. Can we hold this young field to rigorous *quality*?

Should the award be given to encourage "good enough" efforts, or should we look for the best? And what if, in a given year, none of the books in the box meet our exacting standards?

"I await a text crafted so well and intelligently that it may transport me," sighed one juror, after sifting through piles of seemingly mediocre books. This led to an engaged discussion amongst us about what exactly we were looking for in a book.

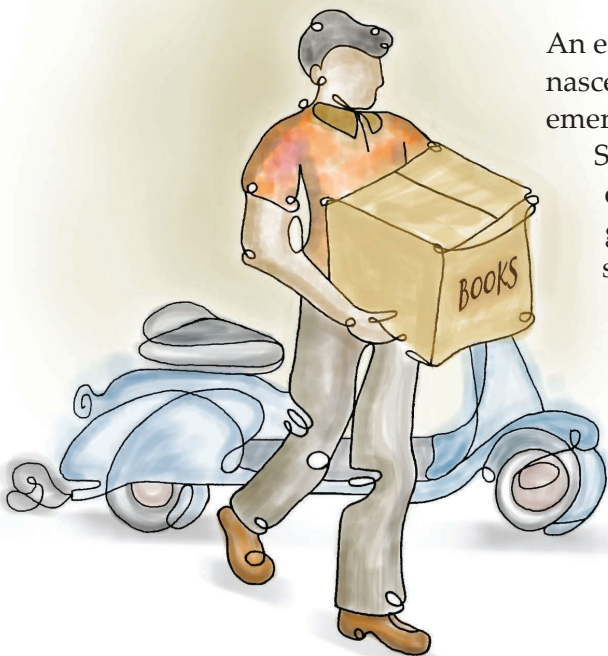




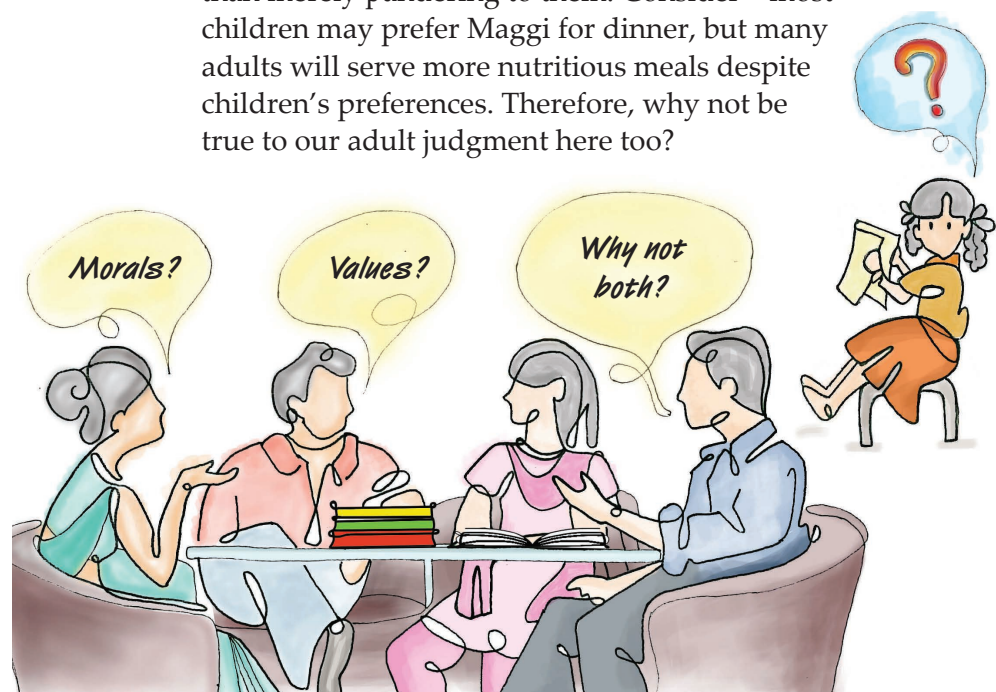
Figure 44. **Image Courtesy:** Eklavya Foundation; **Illustrator:** Boski Jain.

First, should we be more sympathetic to mass market efforts that are enjoyable and provide a racy enough read, or should we hold out for books that would leave a deeper, more lasting impact on the minds of young readers? The former are broadly *plot-driven* novels, while the latter have that ephemeral *literary quality*—a worthwhile theme, unforgettable characterisation, play of language, and more. A book worthy of discussion and re-reading...should we be holding out for such a one?

Second, even if we all agreed on the need to hold out for a book with high literary quality (and we did not!), could we all agree on what this quality might look like? Is quality reader-specific, or is it something intrinsic to the book, such that all who read it would agree on it? Clearly, the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes—we found that, broadly, we could agree on books without much literary quality, but one juror’s choice of the book with the highest quality did not necessarily match another’s. The reader’s taste certainly mattered.

This raised a third set of issues—if the reader’s taste mattered, could adults be valid judges of children’s books? That’s the conundrum of children’s literature. It is written by adults for children, adults who imagine what children might like or need. The adults have the power to determine what a “good book” for children is by giving out awards. It is slightly contorted, to say the least.

Feeling the burden of making judgments on behalf of children, some jurors rushed around “trying out” different possibilities on children of appropriate age-groups. Other jurors held out. Their logic? It is conceptually impossible for an adult to truly understand a child’s taste. Also, there is the little issue of adults being responsible for shaping children’s tastes, rather than merely pandering to them. Consider—most children may prefer Maggi for dinner, but many adults will serve more nutritious meals despite children’s preferences. Therefore, why not be true to our adult judgment here too?



This led to yet another interesting discussion. Are good books for children those that give children pleasure, or those that educate them about some worthy social cause—let's say, gender equality, or books that are *inclusive* of children from a variety of backgrounds? Some jurors instinctively went for books with a social message. Others were more conflicted. Some books that tried to be more inclusive came off as politically correct, rather than as engaging pieces of literature. Literary quality could not be defined, we realised, by political correctness alone.

Deeper discussions emerged—who were the authors of these books? Who were the intended readers? We were disconcerted to find that in many cases, children's books in India are often written by middle-class adults for middle-class children, even when they portray the lives of "others". Of course, there were some exceptions to this trend.

And, even deeper discussions emerged. I would go so far as to say that none of our discussions paralleled the intensity of our exchanges on the need for sensitivity to historically and socially marginalised groups. Books seen as presenting a distorted ideological view of history or society in particular came under fire. Children, we concluded, cannot be permitted to grow up on casual indoctrination through books, but must be given opportunities to examine social issues with sensitivity and care.

Several other issues arose in the course of picking a good book. When a single award is given out each year, it means that all genres of books for all age-groups are judged together. Should we look for similar indicators of quality in a picture-book for three-year olds as in a novel for young adults? Should we hold fiction to the same standards of accountability as we hold non-fiction?

The jurors were confused and exhausted, and finally, we had consensus—we need more than one award for children's books each year. All books cannot be clubbed together or judged using similar criteria.

Ah, yes, we had consensus on one other matter—the often overlooked dimension of editorial attention. The comment came up more than once about more than one book; practically all jurors voiced this sentiment at one point or the other: "This book would have been great—if only it had a good editor!"

We left the process with a great awareness of the complexity of the process, and deep sense of humility about our roles in it. Like the main character of Robert Pirsig's novel (*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*), we were left muttering, "What the hell is *quality*? What is it?"

---

**ANNOTATED  
READING RESOURCES**

---



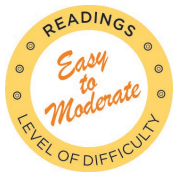
## Resources for Read-Alouds

Barrentine, S. J. (1996). Engaging with reading through interactive read-alouds. *The Reading Teacher*, 50(1), 36-43.



This is a practitioner-friendly piece, well-suited for anyone interested in literacy development through read-alouds, especially teachers and teacher educators. This paper draws from theory and gives concrete strategies to help practitioners understand how to conduct read-alouds. The author makes a case for more interactive read-alouds, as compared to the traditional approach where discussion is pushed to the end of the session. The language is simple and can be accessed by practitioners intending to adopt a more effective approach to reading aloud to children.

Fisher, D., Flood, J., Lapp, D., & Frey, N. (2004). Interactive read-alouds: Is there a common set of implementation practices? *The Reading Teacher*, 58(1), 8-17.



Research on read-alouds have mostly focussed on the importance of read-alouds in language and literacy development. However, very few have engaged with processes of read-alouds in the classroom context. This article reports a study conducted in schools in San Diego. The study attempts to identify common factors for practising quality read-alouds. Seven factors were identified and were further explored to understand how widespread they are among teachers. Students and academicians may find this interesting.

Hoffman, J. L. (2011). Co-constructing meaning: Interactive literary discussions in kindergarten read-alouds. *The Reading Teacher*, 65(3), 183-194.



Basic literacy skills like print literacy, vocabulary, and story comprehension, may continue to be the focus of read-aloud. But classroom read-alouds also provide a great scope for development of higher-level literacy skill instructions. The author defines higher literacy practices as those focused on actively interpreting and critically analysing the story than merely comprehending it. This article presents a case of how the researcher and a kindergarten teacher worked in collaboration to redesign read-alouds to incorporate interactive discussions in classrooms with a focus on co-constructing the meaning of the story. The article integrates theory with practice and is suitable for teachers, teacher trainers and practitioners interested in organising read-aloud sessions.

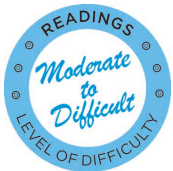
Shedd, M. K., & Duke, N. K. (2008). The power of planning: Developing effective read-alouds. *Young Children*, 63(6), 22-27.



We recognise that reading aloud every day is a quintessential part of a successful literacy classroom. A read-aloud is “a joint reading opportunity which, when done effectively, has been shown to support young children’s language development, comprehension, vocabulary and overall literacy development”. How do we ensure that children develop emergent literacy skills through a well-planned, detail-oriented and well-thought out read-aloud? The article makes useful recommendations, from choosing the right books, to setting the stage, to suggesting kinds of questions that one needs to ask during read-alouds.

## Resources for Understanding and Engaging with Children’s Literature

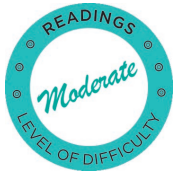
Hunt, P.(Ed.) (1999). *Understanding children’s literature: Key essays from the international companion encyclopaedia of children’s literature*. New York; London: Routledge.



“I belong to the ‘demotic’ (that which represents the common people) tradition; I believe literature belongs to all the people all the time, that it ought to be cheaply and easily available, that it ought to be fun to read as well as challenging, subversive, refreshing, comforting, and all the other qualities we claim for it. Finally, I hold that in literature we find the best expression of the human imagination, and the most useful means by which we come to grips with our ideas about ourselves and what we are.” Aidan Chambers (1985, p.16)

What comes to mind when one thinks of children’s literature? How is children’s literature defined? What is the link between children’s literature and literacy? Is children’s literature worth reading, discussing and thinking about, especially for adults? What does it mean to look at children’s literature through various lenses such as the social, cultural, ideological, historical, political and so on? This book presents a set of essays that provide essential theory for anyone interested in venturing into the world of children’s literature. It has something for every kind of reader—it outlines practical approaches, suggests areas of research and provides up-to-date bibliographies.

Lukens, R. J., Smith, J. J., & Coffel, C. M. (2013). *A critical handbook of children's literature*. New Jersey: Pearson.



This book is a comprehensive guide on children's literature. Starting from what children's literature possibly stands for, the book takes the reader through a range of genres such as fantasy, biography, poetry and traditional literature. It delves into different elements of literature such as theme, plot, character and setting. The book also provides perspective on various issues surrounding children's literature such as censorship and multiculturalism. Finally, the book provides a guide to pedagogical strategies for cultivating the habit of reading through read alouds and book discussions. The theoretical discussions are supported through rich examples and anecdotes of children's literature. Despite the fact that the book discusses literature and context pertaining to the West, many guiding points are applicable across contexts.

Matulka, D.I, (2008). *A picture book primer: Understanding and using picture books*. Westport, Connecticut: Libraries Unlimited.



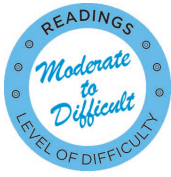
This book is an extensive guide on the subject of picture books. Divided into eight parts, the book describes different aspects of picture books such as the historical overview, the process of publishing, the anatomy of picture books—book jackets, shape, size, picture space, design, styles etc. The book also has dedicated two sections on literacy and libraries, positioning the importance of picture books in both domains. Examples of close to 500 picture books can be found in the book.

National Centre for Children's Literature (2014). *Guide to good books: Criteria for selecting quality children's books*. New Delhi: National Book Trust.



Right to Education Act, 2009, mandated the establishment of libraries in schools. Then arose the question of how to select good books for these libraries. A national consultation team of experts from institutions, authors, editors, publishers, librarians, educators and non-governmental organisations was formed to engage with this question. They came up with a set of comprehensive guidelines for finding appropriate books. These guidelines can be used by anyone selecting books for children.

Rosenblatt, L. M. (1998). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale, III: Southern Illinois University Press.



“I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.”

When is the role of a reader in making a text what it is? Does a text and what it speaks remain with the author alone? Or does the reader too bring her own meaning and interpretation to the text?

Louise Rosenblatt suggests that there is no duality between the text and the reader. According to her, the reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality in reading and interpreting the text. Thus, it would be incorrect to say that the meaning is limited to the text; just as much as it would be to say that meaning resides in the reader’s mind. According to her, meaning is created in the transaction between the text and what the reader brings to it. This is what she refers to as the transactional theory of reading, where comprehension, or meaning-making arises in the transaction between the reader and the written word. Rosenblatt’s refers to two kinds of reading—‘efferent’ (information-oriented) and ‘aesthetic’ (where the reader has an emotional response to a text). While readers may simultaneously engage in both kinds of readings, certain texts (for example, poems) evoke more of an aesthetic than an efferent response.

Wolf, S. A. (2004). *Interpreting literature with children (Literacy teaching series)*. New York; London: Routledge.



This book is an informative and easy read for those interested in exploring ways to encourage young children to engage with literature. The book is divided into three sections. In the first, the author defines and elaborates on the concepts of literature and literary interpretations, introducing critical perspectives to effectively frame literary analysis. The second section emphasises on the representation of culture, class and gender in children’s literature. The third explains ways to engage with literature through writing, visual arts and drama. Concepts in each chapter are illustrated with excerpts from children’s books, anecdotes from author’s experiences of classroom discussions and graphical representations, making them easily comprehensible. Each chapter ends with a list of recommended books for teachers, providing rich resources to engage with literature in classrooms.



## Resources on Children's Libraries

Bookworm Trust. (2019). *110 books: A diverse, thematic listing from the Bookworm collection.*

Goa: Bookworm Trust & Parag Initiative. Retrieved from <https://www.bookwormgoa.in/download/17595/>



This document has been put together by Bookworm, an organization based out of Goa which is dedicated to nurturing and strengthening libraries for children. The booklet has thematically organized an annotated list of children's books in English that draws from both Indian and international publications. A total of ten themes have been selected to represent and celebrate diversity. This booklet is an invaluable resource for any teacher or librarian in our diverse nation.

---

Mukunda, U. (2006). *Open Library.* Retrieved from <http://www.arvindguptatoys.com/arvindgupta/openlibrary.pdf>

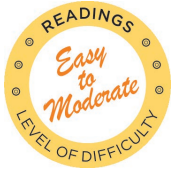


In this lucidly written piece, Usha Mukunda speaks of the different aspects of a vibrant and creative open library. She details how a library's environment, physical appearance, usage and role of the librarian, can be planned. Most importantly, this paper talks directly to practitioners, listing various strategies and activities related to the functioning of a library. Activities for selection of books, involvement of children, teachers and parents, usage of specific kinds of books, and creative projects that can be undertaken by the library are suggested.

---

## Resources on Storytelling

Berkowitz, D. (2011). Oral storytelling: Building community through dialogue, engagement, and problem solving. *Young Children*, 66(2), 36.



This practitioner-friendly piece is suitable for teachers, teacher trainers and those interested in engaging with oral storytelling. The paper argues that oral storytelling plays an important role in community building, language development and problem solving among young children. With narratives from classrooms, the paper illustrates how an oral storytelling session can be made interactive and provide an opportunity for children to express their thoughts.

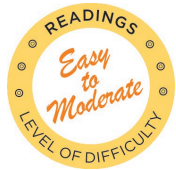
---

Parkinson, R. (2011). *Storytelling and imagination: Beyond basic literacy 8-14*. Abingdon, Oxon, England: Routledge.



This is a painstakingly written book that promotes the idea of storytelling and story making as essential catalysts in developing critical and analytical thinking skills. How can stories be used to facilitate learning—by improving comprehension, logical thinking, creating involvement and a sense of community, improving literacy and language mastery? Rob Parkinson suggests ideas you can use to develop a creative and rewarding storytelling culture within a school context, a culture that links to and feeds literacy and also reaches beyond, making teaching of many other areas of the curriculum more effective and imaginative. It is a serious yet delightful read with many ideas to help one become a good storyteller—oral and written—what with the many stories, exercises and ideas on how to get on with the best lie (yes, a story can make even a lie delightful).

Sen, S. (1996). Tagore's Lokashahitya: The oral tradition in Bengali children's rhymes. *Asian Folklore Studies*, 55, 1-47.



This is a translation of *Chhelebhulano Chharha*, an essay on Bengali children's rhymes by Rabindranath Tagore. The paper also includes a discussion by Suchismita Sen on the key ideas from the essay. A number of rhymes from Bengali folklore are provided in the essay in an attempt to unravel the nature of rhymes. Tagore compares them to dreams for their fluidity and vibrant imagery, and brings out their relevance in unburdening anxiety and sharing community experiences. This paper is an interesting pick from the archives for anyone interested in folklore.

## Resources for Practitioners

### Useful Websites

Arvind Gupta Toys: <http://www.arvindguptatoys.com>

Scroll down to “Children’s Books”, where an entire set of books is for download.

Eklavya: <https://www.eklavya.in/books/eklavya-books-pdf>

PDF version of some books from Eklavya Foundation, Bhopal.

Goodbooks: <http://goodbooks.in>

A well-curated website dedicated to children’s literature in the Indian context, with book reviews presented according to age and useful articles on topics ranging from children’s literature in India, defining children’s literature, to promotion of a reading habit in rural children. It also has an online directory of authors, publishers, and illustrators. Users can also find a range of very interesting videos featuring conversations with various authors, illustrators, book-lovers, librarians and academics, created by the Good-books team on their website.

International Children’s Digital Library: <http://www.childrenslibrary.org/>

This website offers stories from different parts of the world. It has a few from India (mostly from Pratham’s Read India initiative) in different languages, including English, Tamil, Hindi, Telugu, and Kannada.

Magic Blox: <http://magicblox.com>

This website has a range of stories that can be read online. All one needs to do is to register for free and access the stories. Not Indian in context, but a good space to explore for anyone interested in children’s literature.

NCERT, My Book Corner: <http://www.ncert.nic.in/html/rdc/docs/My%20Book%20Corner.pdf>

NCERT’s select list of book recommendations with reviews.

Storyline Online: <http://www.storylineonline.net>

An online repository of internationally-acclaimed English stories. While the context may not be Indian, read-alouds of books by well-known people can set a good example. It also has activities one could use in the classroom.

Story Weaver: <https://storyweaver.org.in>

An online repository of picture books run by Pratham Books, with stories in multiple languages. The books can be read online or downloaded for free. Storyweaver has added features now.

Torchlight: <https://journal.bookwormgoa.in/>

Torchlight: A Journal of Libraries and Bookish Love is a project that hopes to create and make accessible a digital space for nuanced, multi-disciplinary, multi-media, contemporary responses to the domain of the Library, in India. It is envisioned as a portal dedicated to preserving the spirit of free thought and the intense pleasure present in the act of reading. It is held together by library educators and assorted book lovers and anchored at Bookworm, Goa.



## Interesting Columns

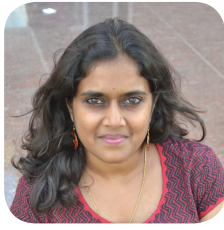
- Behar, A. (2012). A canticle for libraries. Live Mint. Retrieved from <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/p70kXyvERVVO0eRnl2MIVO/A-canticle-for-libraries.html>
- Anurag Behar writes on the importance of libraries in building thoughtful communities.
- Gaiman, G. (2013). Neil Gaiman: Why our future depends on libraries, reading and daydreaming. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/15/neil-gaiman-future-libraries-reading-daydreaming>.
- Neil Gaiman on reading and libraries and the magic they weave.
- Pydah, A. (2018, August 24). Inclusive Books & Children's Response – Part 1. Retrieved from <https://paragreads.in/inclusive-books-childrens-response-part-1/>
- Pydah, A. (2018, August 31). Inclusive Books & Children's Response – Part 2. Retrieved from <https://paragreads.in/inclusive-books-childrens-response-part-2/>
- Pydah, A. (2018, September 5). Inclusive Books & Children's Response – Part 3. Retrieved from <https://paragreads.in/inclusive-books-childrens-response-part-3/>
- Akhila Pydah's blog series on children responses to inclusive and responsible literature depicting disabilities.

## Practitioner Guides

- Pydah, A. (2019). Reading aloud with young children. Hyderabad: Early Literacy Initiative, Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Retrieved from [http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ELI\\_Practitioner\\_Brief\\_9\\_Reading-Aloud\\_With\\_Young\\_Children.pdf](http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ELI_Practitioner_Brief_9_Reading-Aloud_With_Young_Children.pdf)
- Reading aloud to children is an important aspect of literacy and language classroom practice. This brief, takes the reader through different aspects of a Read aloud such as, how should one conduct a read aloud, what kind of a book to choose, how to make a read aloud most effective and how to plan for a session.
- Pydah, A. (2019). Reading illustrations in picture books. Hyderabad: Early Literacy Initiative, Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Retrieved from [http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ELI\\_Practitioner\\_Brief\\_9\\_Reading-Aloud\\_With\\_Young\\_Children.pdf](http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ELI_Practitioner_Brief_9_Reading-Aloud_With_Young_Children.pdf)
- The brief is an attempt to help readers understand the nuances of 'reading' pictures in books. Akhila Pydah takes us through some of these key aspects of illustrations and design, and how art and words come together to enhance the meaning and experience of a book.
- Das, H.V. (2018). Promoting language and literacy development through school libraries. Hyderabad: Early Literacy Initiative, Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Retrieved from [http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ELI\\_Handout\\_Promoting\\_Literacy\\_Library\\_HD\\_Final\\_Handout.pdf](http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ELI_Handout_Promoting_Literacy_Library_HD_Final_Handout.pdf)
- Harshita Das emphasizes on the importance of libraries in the language and literacy development of learners. This brief is designed for language teachers and librarians who already have access to a library, but would like to learn how to use it better. Through a set of nine interactive activities, this brief leaves the reader with ideas about how to liven up libraries for different age groups.

# CONTRIBUTORS

---



**HARSHITA  
V. DAS**

Harshita V. Das works as a Project Coordinator with the Early Literacy Initiative. She has an M.A. in Education from Azim Premji University, Bangalore. She has worked as a teacher at an alternative school in Bangalore, and has worked with pre-primary and primary teachers in a low income private school, where she supported them with the teaching and learning of English language. She has also volunteered at an NGO that works with children of a migrant labour community, where she co-taught Kannada and English, and has actively participated in the setting up and functioning of a library in the government school that hosts the NGO.

Her key areas of interest are critical literacy, language and culture, with an emphasis on the idea of balanced bilingualism. She is very fond of children's literature and the idea of engaging young children with it. When she's not going crazy collecting children's literature you can find her happily getting her hands dirty with clay and paint. She feels a deep connect with birds in the wilderness and stars in the vast sky.



**SHAILAJA  
MENON**

Shailaja Menon is Professor and Programme-in-charge of the Early Literacy Initiative at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad. Concurrently, she also works as visiting faculty in the area of Language and Literacy at the School of Education, Azim Premji University, Bangalore.

Shailaja has completed BA (Psychology) from Delhi University, M.Sc. (Child Development) from MS University, Baroda, and Ph.D. in Literacy, Language and Culture from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Prior to joining Azim Premji University, she has taught at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and at Jones International University. She led a longitudinal project, Literacy Research in Indian Languages (LiRIL; 2011-2017), investigating the teaching and learning of early language and literacy in Maharashtra and Karnataka. She is a co-editor of the volume: *Childhoods in India: Traditions, Trends and Transformations* (2017).

At Azim Premji University, Shailaja offers courses related to early literacy, children's literature, child development and learning, curriculum and pedagogy in the early years, and research methods. Shailaja is also a key anchor of the bi-lingual annual children's literature festival, KathaVana, hosted by Azim Premji University (2012-present).

She has served on the jury for the Hindu Literature for Life awards for Children's Literature (2016; 2017), and Sir Ratan Tata Trust's Big Little Book Award (2016). Shailaja's publications have appeared in international and Indian journals, and she serves on several advisory committees that are currently shaping policy and practice related to early literacy in India.



**USHA  
MUKUNDA**

Usha Mukunda has happily interacted with books and children for over 30 years now. As a school librarian, she has learnt much from her interactions and is always looking to refresh her ideas about reading, books and libraries. As a consultant for the Parag initiative of Tata Trusts, she has been part of the faculty of three online courses for library educators at Udaipur, Sirohi and Goa. She has authored a manual on running a school library, as well as articles on library matters and reading activities. She also enjoys reading and writing reviews of children's books. Usha Mukunda is deeply interested in exploring and sharing the nuances of good literature for children. She is also passionate about bringing about discernment about books in readers wherever they may abide.



**JANE SAHI**

Jane Sahi has been working in the area of education for the last 38 years. She was born in England and moved to India in 1968 in search of a deeper understanding of Gandhiji's life and values. Gandhiji continues to be to a strong source of inspiration for her, his vision and theory of basic education in particular. In 2000 she wrote a book entitled *Education and Peace*.

She also set up an alternative school in 1975, Sita School, where the focus was on holistic, child centric education for every child. The school had an emphasis on learning through art. To Jane, her engagement at the school formed the basis of her work.

Jane has conducted a number of workshops on language teaching for the Centre for Learning, Bangalore, Teacher Foundation, Regional Institute of English, Bangalore, *Pragat Shikshan Sanstha*, Phaltan and Kiran Centre, Varanasi and *Ashram Shala* Schools in Chamrajnagar. She has been actively involved in the Alternative School Network, an informal group of individuals working in the field of education, for almost two decades now.



**MINI  
SHRINIVASAN**

Mini Shrinivasan is a teacher educator and children's author. Her books for pre-teens have won the Sahitya Akademi's *Bal Sahitya Puraskar* and the Hindu Young World Goodbooks award for Best Children's Fiction. She lives in Pune and works as an advisor to projects in education in one of the most backward districts of the country. She writes in English and Marathi.





**SHUCHI  
SINHA**

Shuchi Sinha is an alumna of Azim Premji University, Bangalore and has been working as a Communications Consultant with the ELI Blog and Dissemination team. Before this, she has worked as a teacher at Adharshila Learning Centre, a school for tribal children in rural Madhya Pradesh, and as an Academic Coordinator at the Organization for Early Literacy Promotion (Ajmer, Rajasthan), an organization dedicated to implementing meaningful early literacy ideas and practices in highly challenging contexts.

Amongst many things that interest her, she finds her heart almost always returning to examine the idea and possibilities of Critical Literacy. She believes that language holds tremendous emancipatory potential and possibilities, and that each child, irrespective of her context, must be given an environment to develop a sense of love and fearlessness of words.

---



**MAITRI  
VASUDEV**

Maitri Vasudev teaches English at the School of Liberal Studies, Azim Premji University, Bangalore. Her interest in children's literature was sparked by a course she completed in her Masters programme at St Joseph's College, Bangalore. This course, titled Children's Literature and its Discontents, explored the idea that the adult, in creating, moderating and censoring reading material for the child, constantly attempts to create a smaller, inferior version of himself/herself. It led Maitri to her dissertation on the childhood(s) Philip Pullman creates in *His Dark Materials* trilogy.

Her interest expanded when she had the opportunity to work with Shailaja Menon on KathaVana, Azim Premji University's children's literature festival, in 2017. This time, she could look at children's books from the practitioners' perspective as opposed to the theoretical one she had until then been exposed to. This also introduced her to the attempts authors, illustrators and publishers are making in the Indian context to de-moralise and re-evaluate contemporary value systems.

Maitri is currently studying illustrations in Indian children's books with Shailaja Menon.

# किताबें कुछ कहना चाहती हैं

किताबें करती हैं बातें  
बीते ज़मानों की  
दुनिया की, इंसानों की  
आज की, कल की  
एक-एक पल की  
खुशियों की, ग़मों की  
फूलों की, बमों की  
जीत की, हार की  
प्यार की, मार की  
क्या तुम नहीं सुनोगे  
इन किताबों की बातें?  
किताबें कुछ कहना चाहती हैं।  
तुम्हारे पास रहना चाहती हैं॥

किताबों में चिड़िया चहचहाती हैं  
किताबों में खेतियाँ लहलहाती हैं  
किताबों में झरने गुनगुनाते हैं  
परियों के किस्से सुनाते हैं  
किताबों में राकेट का राज़ है  
किताबों में साइंस की आवाज़ है  
किताबों में कितना बड़ा संसार है  
किताबों में ज्ञान की भरमार है  
क्या तुम इस संसार में  
नहीं जाना चाहोगे?  
किताबें कुछ कहना चाहती हैं।  
तुम्हारे पास रहना चाहती हैं॥

सफ़दर हाशमी

Children's Literature has much to offer to early language classrooms and educators; yet, sadly, this remains an area of neglect in the Indian education system. The Early Literacy Initiative took this up as one of five topics that are in need of urgent attention for creating the literate individuals that our society needs; and invited a series of blog pieces on the topic. This book is a compilation of those blog pieces, as well as other related talks and resources on Children's Literature. They offer a set of easily accessible perspectival pieces written by practitioners and scholars working in this area. We hope that they are of help to practitioners working in the field!