

English 508
Constructing Reality and Reconstructing History in
Children's and Adolescent Literature:
Topic: From Right to Left: Representations of Religion in Adolescent Literature

Dr. Susan Louise Stewart
Tuesday, 4:30-7:10
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Office: Hall of Languages 314
 Phone: 903-468-8624
 e-mail: susan_stewart@tamu-commerce.edu
 Website: <http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/slstewart/>
 Office Hours: T/R 9:00-10:30; T 3:00-4:00 and by appointment

Required Texts:

Schmid, <i>A Basket of Flowers</i>	Aidinoff, <i>The Garden</i> (not available through the bookstore)
Wyss, <i>Swiss Family Robinson</i> (Must be Penguin edition)	Napoli, <i>Song of the Magdalene</i>
Lenski, <i>Strawberry Girl</i>	Jenkins & LaHaye, <i>The Vanishings</i> (Left Behind: The Kids # 1)
Pratchett, <i>Nation</i>	Blume, <i>Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret</i>
Almond, <i>Skellig</i>	Rylant, <i>A Fine White Dust</i> (not available through bookstore)
Brande, <i>Evolution, Me + Other Freaks of Nature</i>	Secondary readings available through eCollege
Kidd, <i>Monkey Town</i>	

Overview:

Religion. Children's literature. At one time, the two were one and the same. Youngsters were raised on the deathbed scenes of *A Token for Children*, and *Pilgrim's Progress* is referenced in numerous early American novels, including *Little Women*. But, as with almost anything, representations of religion in children's literature, or more accurately, adolescent literature (part of children's literature) have changed. Thus, during this class, we will be exploring various representations of religion in adolescent literature beginning with excerpts from *Pilgrim's Progress* and *A Token for Children* and including some of the most contemporary novels such as *Nation* and *Monkey Town*.

In general, this is a course in how authors construct reality and reconstruct history. We'll be pushing the envelope a wee bit. One of the novels appears to be historical, but it's not because it's set in an alternate universe. However, readers don't find that out until the end. Two of the novels are retellings of Biblical characters. Technically, these would be historical fiction, particularly for those who embrace the various accounts in the Bible. Still, they would likely

take issue with these accounts. Or perhaps not. Other novels attempt to construct a sense of reality. Everything is fluid, including the age of the readers.

Goals:

Understand the changing role of religion (more specifically, Christianity) in historical and realistic fiction for young readers.

Gain an understanding of what (or what does not) constitute historical and realistic fiction as well as the conventions associated with the genres.

Become conversant with a particular area, including the scholarship, of historical or realistic fiction for young readers

Produce a proposal suitable to submit for a conference.

Gain an understanding of the cultural and social milieu that produces these texts and genres.

Produce an essay that demonstrates your understanding of some facet of historical or realistic fiction that introduces new scholarship or contributes to the scholarly discussion. Please note that you do not have to deal with religion if you do not wish to do so.

Offer intellectual and thoughtful contributions to class discussions.

In-Class Etiquette:

Beliefs regarding religion cause wars. We will have no wars in this class. Everyone at all times will be respectful of other people's opinions and belief systems. That might be difficult at times. Religion is based on faith. Academics are required to rely on proof. The two, however, do not have to be incompatible. Nevertheless, it will be our responsibility at all times to find the balance and to be courteous toward each other. Having said that, some of the texts you'll be reading will be slightly painful in that they are not all well-written and terribly didactic. We can critique the writing; we can examine the historical and cultural settings that give rise to these novels and comment on that; we can express pleasure or displeasure. There will, however, be no personal attacks. Students are expected to be civil, polite, and accommodating to differences of opinion. University policy provides the means for dismissing students who do not meet these requirements, and I will take politeness very seriously.

Assignments and Grading

Participation: 10% Discussion should demonstrate intellectual curiosity, exhibit a sense of professionalism, and reflect the nature of the class. Missing class will affect the participation grade, as will remaining silent, or other activities that distract you from the conversation. Also as part of participation, I'm asking that you identify throughout the semester, 2 novels that deal in some way with religion (Christianity) and adolescent literature (realistic or historical fiction). They need to have been published between 2000 and the present. They also need to be from mainstream publishers. You don't have to read them, just give me the titles/authors. I'll provide a list of exclusions (I already know about them). You'll identify the titles in class and explain how they deal with religion by using the summary provided by Amazon or any other source.

Evaluation: I will evaluate this part of your grade according to how well you meet the above criteria.

Weekly Paper Topic: 20% (figured four times during the semester, 5% each time). Beginning the second week of class, you will post on the eCollege discussion board one idea (including a title, a brief background or context, and an argument or a unique observation) for a paper topic regarding one of novels we are discussing or a topic related to the class. This should NOT be over 100 words. I anticipate the topics to become more sophisticated as the class progresses. Be prepared to discuss your idea in class. To give you an idea of what I'm asking for, after reading *Nation*, I might post something like the following:

Revising the Robinsonade: When Daniel Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe*, he introduced a particular genre, one where someone is stranded on a desert island. One of Defoe's purposes was to advance his ideas about nationalism/imperialism and the role of God. Later, Johann Wyss, drawing from *Robinson Crusoe*, wrote his own Robinsonade: *The Swiss Family Robinson*. Nationalism is no longer an issue, and God is simply part of the family's life. God provides. He doesn't punish. Terry Pratchett has continued the Robinsonade tradition with *Nation*, but he has dramatically revised it. In this novel, nationalism is critiqued, as are traditional understandings of God.

(This part would not be included in your posting. I'm just clarifying the above.)

So, the title is "Revising the Robinsonade"

The background or context is the information regarding *Robinson Crusoe* and *Swiss Family Robinson*.

The argument or observation is "Terry Pratchett has continued the tradition of the Robinsonade with *Nation*, but he has dramatically revised it. In this novel, nationalism is critiqued, as are traditional understandings of God."

You can address any topic as long as it deals with **one** of the following:

Realistic or historical fiction for young readers (preferably adolescent)

Religion and literature for young readers, but again, it does not have to deal with religion.

Evaluation: I will evaluate the assignment according to the level of sophistication, how unique the idea is, and how well you discuss it in class. This is a fairly challenging assignment.

Annotated Bibliography with Introduction and Conclusion: 30%:

1. In a brief introduction (4 or 5 pages), contextualize the annotated bibliography that will follow. In other words, lead your reader into your annotated bibliography. Help your reader understand the topic of the bibliography. Offer any definitions you think necessary.

2. Your annotated bibliography should consist of 10 entries (about 100 words each). The entries should in some way contribute to an understanding of the **scholarship** regarding your topic and/or the primary texts that help illustrate your point. (For instance, if you are discussing the Left Behind Series, you would want to include entries of existing scholarship on at least some of those texts.)

3. As a conclusion, provide a brief commentary (4 or 5 pages) noting the overall importance (in general) of these entries.

A note regarding bibliographic entries: Make certain that the secondary sources you incorporate or reliable and scholarly. Look at the publisher. Is it obscure or a niche market (as in self-help books)? Avoid obscure publishers and niche market/popular texts. Does the author look to other scholars to inform his or her work? Look for university presses. Generally, avoid public websites unless you need it to make a specific point (for instance, it would be appropriate to look at what Gene Yang says about *American Born Chinese* on his blog. This, however, would not be considered a scholarly source. Do NOT use Wikipedia. If you need to provide a definition, don't use a dictionary definition. Rather, tailor the definition to fit your needs.

Please note that you can use up to 2 articles in the bibliography that are assigned as class reading.

An example will be provided in eCollege, document sharing.

Evaluation of Assignment: I will evaluate the assignment according to how well you have contextualized the bibliography, how insightful your conclusions are, your ability to efficiently summarize the scholarship, the relevancy of the scholarship (do not use public websites; these must be articles/books/book chapters that are considered academic) and your use of MLA.

Proposal and Final Paper, 40%: You will write an article-length paper (5,000-6,000 words not including endnotes or works cited) that explores some facet of historical or realistic fiction for young readers and provides original scholarship on your topic. Prior to writing the paper, you will need to write a proposal (between 450 and 500 words) that establishes your topic and methodology. Your proposal should include a working bibliography (when you write the paper, the bibliography will become a works cited. If you don't cite the work in the body of the essay, do not include it in the Works Cited). Use MLA format. Again, you do not have to deal with religion if you do not wish to do so. It need only be about historical or realistic fiction for adolescent/YA readers.

Evaluation of Assignment: The proposal should be suitable to send to a call for papers regarding a related conference. A sample will be provided. Regarding the paper, I use Karen Coats's rubric. According to her, the best papers (A papers) will reflect the following (this is taken word-for-word from her website and can be found at <http://lilt.ilstu.edu/kscoat2/general/grading.htm>):

Conception: Your idea should contain some new, perhaps surprising, element, some angle that is uncommonly thoughtful and insightful. You are not rehearsing other people's ideas, and you are going beyond the kind of reading that an average intelligent person might do. You expose and challenge the explicit and implicit assumptions of the text. If you are incorporating research, you will have WORKED your sources--using what supports your argument, and acknowledging and dealing with what challenges it.

Organization: Your organization should be flawless. You should address and work through opposition to your argument early, and spend the rest of your time building a strong case, supported with evidence, that moves from weaker points to stronger ones. If you are incorporating research, you will spend some time positioning your argument in the context of the larger conversation.

Style: Your presentation should be artful. You have obviously paid attention to the way your language sounds as well as what it says. You have found a way to make your presentation style match the content of your paper (other than a groovy font style!), perhaps through a sustained metaphor, or a particularly apt example that you carry through and refer to in the entire paper.

Grammar and Mechanics: Your paper should be absolutely clean and free (or very close to it) of grammatical and mechanical errors.

Some Tips for Writing Graduate Papers:

Depending on the text(s) you analyze, you will have to provide a brief plot summary. However, you wouldn't necessarily have to provide a summary of a book like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or other canonical texts. But if you were to use more contemporary, less well-known texts, then a selective plot summary that will help illustrate your point would be necessary. Still, take it easy on the plot summary, and most certainly, be judicious regarding how much material you quote from the text.

When using scholarly sources, make sure you understand the argument the authors are making. Don't misquote. See also the entry above regarding bibliographic entries

For more help, [follow this link](#).

Attendance and Late Papers

First, I know how very complicated life can be. Still, as graduate students, you have greater responsibilities than undergraduate students in terms of attendance and discussion, for you're demonstrating your professionalism through the classes you take and how you conduct yourself in those classes. If you miss classes, I will assume one of two things: you have other priorities or you're not taking the course seriously. You DON'T want me to think that, for I won't make you a priority and it will be difficult to take your work seriously. The classes I teach are my priority; I expect the same from you.

Having said that, if you are absent on a day an assignment is due, you nevertheless need to make certain I receive that assignment when it is due unless other arrangements have been made. Otherwise, I reserve the right to not accept that paper. But understand that I REALLY don't like to accept late papers.

Academic Integrity

You are responsible for indicating when you have used specific words, sentences, or paragraphs, which belong to other writers. These words, sentences, or paragraphs should be designated via quotation marks and in-text citations. Additionally, identify when you use ideas from other sources. If you use the exact wording of something you've read or if you paraphrase it, provide a specific citation indicating where you found your information. If in question, cite it, and indicate that you've cited it by using quotation marks and in-text citations. Think of it in these terms: knowledge is a commodity, especially in the academic community. If you had a brilliant idea, or a wonderful way with words, would you like it if someone used your idea or words without acknowledging you? In short, I will fail papers that are copied or that do not acknowledge sources. If you have questions, ask me, and I will help you. If I discover a paper has been plagiarized, I will fail the paper, which will likely result in an F for the class. Further, according to the Texas A&M University-Commerce Code of Student Conduct 5.b[1,2,3], penalties for students guilty of academic dishonesty include disciplinary probation, suspension, and expulsion.

Reading/Assignment Schedule

GIVE ME THAT OLD TIME RELIGION

W **Week 1: Sept. 1**
 Excerpt from *A Token for Children: Examples I, II, & III*. Available at <http://www.archive.org/details/tokenforchi00janeiala>. You can open the PDF and download it, or you can read it from your computer.

W **Week 2: Sept. 8**
 Schmid, *A Basket of Flowers*
 Wyss, *Swiss Family Robinson*, Preface, Intro, and Chapters I-VI
 Nodelman Article
 Post Topic on Discussion Board

W **Week 3: Sept 15**
 Lenski, *Strawberry Girl*
Swiss Family Robison, Chapters VII –XVI
 Werner article
 Post Topic on Discussion Board

RELIGION AND THE ROBINSONADE

W **Week 4: Sept. 22**
 Remainder of *Swiss Family Robinson*
 Wood article
 Post Topic on Discussion Board

W **Week 5: Sept. 29**
 Pratchett, *Nation*
 Hunt article
 Post Topic on Discussion Board

EVOLVING IDEAS

W **Week 6: Oct. 6**
 Almond, *Skellig*
 Risk Article
 Post Topic on Discussion Board

W **Week 7: Oct. 13**
 Brande, *Evolution, Me + Other Freaks of Nature*
 Post Topic on Discussion Board
 Excerpt from *A Secular Age*

W **Week 8: Oct. 20**
Kidd, *Monkey Town*
Larson (Excerpt from *Summer for the Gods*)
Van Loon (Excerpt from *The Story of Mankind*)
Post Topic on Discussion Board

W **Week 9: Oct. 27**
View *Inherit the Wind*

Bibliography Due

Upload to eCollege drop box (Bibliography Box) before class

FROM THE BIBLE

W **Week 10: Nov. 3**
Aidinoff, *The Garden* (not available through the bookstore)
Excerpt from *Apocalypse of Moses*
Eve's Exoneration
Post Topic on Discussion Board

W **Week 11: Nov. 10**
Napoli, *Song of the Magdalene*

Proposal Due

Upload to eCollege drop box (Proposal Drop Box) before class;
also post the text (don't include the works cited) on the discussion board

W **Week 12: Nov. 17**
Jenkins & LaHaye, *The Vanishings* (Left Behind: The Kids # 1)
RaptureCulture Chapter (eCollege)
Post Topic on Discussion Board

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS. OR MAYBE MORE QUESTIONS

W **Week 13: Nov. 24**
Blume, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*
Adams Article
Post Topic on Discussion Board

W **Week 14: Dec. 1**
Rylant, *A Fine White Dust* (not available through bookstore)
Post Topic on Discussion Board

W **Week 15: Dec. 8**
Paper Due

Upload to eCollege, drop box (Final Paper Drop Box) before class