Stepping into the Wardrobe: A Fantasy Genre Study

Two teachers share the ways they organize a genre study within a readers' workshop to invite students into fantasy worlds.

"Fantasy feeds a hunger we didn't know we had."

—Jane Langton (1973)

Felix, Lucas, Chesley, and Lenaye sit in a tight circle in the classroom Library of Room 306. Lenaye can barely contain her excitement. She wiggles as she clutches her book to her chest, waiting to announce her discovery to her club. "But listen, you know how we've been arguing about what the quest is? Well, I was thinking that maybe the quest doesn't have to stay the same through the whole book. Maybe quests can change," she says. Her fellow club members sit silently while they think about this new possibility.

Across the hall in room 305, Julienne, Chris, Rosie, and Gabe settle in a secluded spot for one of their famous debates. Every day for a week they have met to discuss the nature of evil. "Is a villain really evil? I know what Rosie is saying, but just because he wants different things from our hero, is he really evil?" asks Julienne.

"Yeah," agrees Gabe. "After all, don't villains think they are doing the right thing? I mean, if they didn't think they were doing the right thing for at least them, then why would they be doing it?"

Just as Lucy pushed past fur coats hanging in a dark wardrobe and stumbled out of her world into Narnia, our students leave the predictable world they know and enter into a world of magic when they read and study fantasy fiction. At the heart of a genre study in fantasy is the collision of students' notions of the world around them with their
inherent fascination for all things magical. Jane Yolen (1997) wrote, “As a child I had imaginary playmates, spoke to my dolls and heard them answer, played Knights of the Round Table on a pile of rocks in Central Park. I could easily believe six impossible things before breakfast” (p. xii). In this place where the fantastical blends with reality in our students’ lives, powerful teaching opportunities await.

AN OFTEN-OVERLOOKED GENRE

At first we thought of fantasy as a fun, albeit somewhat shallow, genre. We thought that it lacked the seriousness and depth of more respected genres such as memoir and historical fiction. However, when we had an opportunity to develop our own genre study, we impulsively chose fantasy because we thought it would be fun to teach.

After a few years of studying the genre, we realized that this genre is more than simply fun. True, the entertainment value of fantasy is one of the factors that draw so many students to the genre outside of school. Fantasy hooks children with enchanted forests, courageous heroes, and dastardly villains (Lynn, 1995). It was precisely this passion that our students already had for the genre that made us recognize a great teaching opportunity. We knew that we could teach many reading lessons within the framework of fantasy, and that our students would be motivated to learn because of their love of the genre. What we did not know until we began to study the genre is that fantasy itself was also worth teaching.

We discovered that the archetypal characters and themes in fantasy are a connection to the literary canon (Clute & Grant, 1997). Identifying the characteristics of fantasy can be a natural way to move our students into reading more critically. We realized that this genre can also be a safe way for students to make connections between themselves and their reading because fantasy is so far removed from their daily lives. Laurence Yep (2001) stated that fantasy, more than any other genre, is closer to children’s emotional reality. When children read about a fantastical world, far removed from their real lives, it is much safer to think about issues of loss, betrayal, and change. Yep has spoken often about being a Chinese-American and the difficulty of growing up in often-divided worlds. He feels that today’s children can relate to heroes in fantasy books because children often shuttle between two worlds.

Fantasy also lends itself to close reading of texts for themes and ideas that are often metaphorically described. T. A. Barron (2001) said that good fantasy has, underneath it, an idea with weight. Topics such as self-discovery, alienation, ethics, and the environment are found in fantasy stories as familiar to us as Through the Looking Glass (Carroll, 1999). Fantasy gives us rich material with which to explore these topics. When we teach some of the fundamental elements of fantasy, we introduce common threads capable of sparking deep conversation and analysis that cross the boundaries of reading ability.

THE READING WORKSHOP AND FANTASY

We each teach fourth grade at P.S. 321 in Brooklyn, New York, a diverse community of ethnic, religious, racial, and socioeconomic groups and family structures. Our school has a long-standing relationship with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, and therefore use their workshop model for the teaching of reading and writing.

The reading workshop in our classrooms is based on student book choice and independent reading goals. Other components of reading workshop include book partnerships and book clubs to develop students’ ability to have good conversations about their reading. A typical reading workshop consists of a short minilesson, an independent partnership/book club time, conferences between teacher and student, guided reading lessons for small groups, and a share-time (Calkins, 2001). For example, during a recent reading workshop, we each gathered our students on the rug and taught a ten-minute minilesson on how to use a map to help understand setting in a fantasy book. We used an overhead transparency of a map from our class read-aloud, The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe (Lewis, 1950), to demonstrate different ways a reader can use a map. Students turned and talked to other students seated near them on the rug about how they could use maps to help them envision the settings in their books. We sent the students to read independently and further explore the strategy taught in the minilesson. While students read independently, we circulated through our rooms meeting individually with students and gathering a few small groups to practice the skill, as well as supporting students with other reading work. After 30-40
minutes of reading time, we gathered the students back on the rug for a share time to assess how the period went.

In our school, we work closely with staff developers from the Reading and Writing Project. A few years ago, while working with Kathleen Tolan, she suggested that some of us spend time creating a reading genre study. Along with Cory Gillette, another fourth-grade teacher, we took Kathleen up on her suggestion and chose fantasy as the genre we would study. Kathleen suggested that we spend some time exploring and learning about the genre as adult readers.

Because all three of us were unfamiliar with the genre, we began by scouring local bookstores for books identified as fantasy. We created text sets for ourselves that combined fantasy written for adults and children. We then read through the stacks of books noticing similarities across texts, jotting down questions as they came up, and noting any difficulties we had as readers. We talked to each other frequently about our discoveries, making note of thoughts we had in common.

When we felt that we had identified everything we could as novice readers of the genre, we talked to more experienced readers, both children and adults, to make sure we were on the right track. At the end of our study of the genre as adults and teachers, we created a list of teaching points for fantasy that included: characteristics found in some or all fantasy stories; difficulties readers might have while reading fantasy that we should teach into; themes that could warrant further exploration. We took what we noticed as adult readers of the genre and applied it to our plans for teaching the genre in our reading workshop.

Since that initial exploration into teaching the genre, the two of us have further explored fantasy. We attended national conferences on fantasy, researched scholarly work, and read the newest in fantasy literature. Any reading genre study gives students an opportunity to learn and study a particular genre in its form and structure. Students learn the characteristics of the genre by constant exposure to and immersion in that genre. As teachers, our role initially is to act as guides for the students, choosing texts that exemplify the characteristics of the genre. Later in the study, our role changes from guide to consultant as students gain more knowledge in the genre and need less teacher direction.

In this article, we provide an overview of a fantasy genre study from our classrooms. We outline the characteristics of the genre and describe our methods for teaching those characteristics to our students. Finally, we explain how the components of reading workshop, such as read-aloud, independent reading, and book clubs, are implemented during a fantasy genre study.

**Kicking Off the Study**

Our class sizes range from 26 to 30 students. Academically, our students range from a first-grade to an eighth-grade reading level; however, a majority of our class reads on a fourth-grade level. We planned our study to meet all of our students’ reading needs using a variety of texts and engagements.

On the day we launched our study, students entered the classroom to find a big, empty, silver laundry basket in the front of each of our classrooms. Students knew from previous units of study in reading and writing that this basket would be used to collect books and other reading materials for the genre study. Isoké Nia (2001), one of the staff developers from the Reading and Writing Project, calls this process “gathering.” After the students were given an opportunity to guess what might be filling the basket, we gathered for a meeting.

We told our students we were beginning our next reading study on fantasy. Responses varied from Gabe’s “yes!” to Maria’s “I hate fantasy.” We reminded them that earlier in the year, we had read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950) and *The Thief of Always* (Barker, 1992). Both books are great examples of fantasy because each clearly illustrates the characteristics of the genre. We read them aloud in advance of the study so that we would have some shared examples firmly in our minds to use as a foundation for our study.

Using these books as guides, we asked students to hunt for other examples of fantasy. They could check the library, their bookshelves at home, and our classroom library. Once they found an example they thought was fantasy, they added it to the collection in the basket. We didn’t expect our students to be completely accurate in their knowledge of what was and was not fantasy.
sources for our study. The students knew we weren’t monitoring them for the “correct” answers and that they would soon have the opportunity to dig into the basket and decide with more certainty what was and was not fantasy.

While the baskets in our respective classrooms were being filled, we moved on to introduce our class touchstone text. A touchstone text is a piece of literature that is a solid example or model of the topic being taught and will be used and referred to throughout the unit of study (Nia, 2001). It helps if the text is short enough that all students can have a copy and is at a reading level accessible for everyone. The touchstone text becomes a common denominator for class discussions and lessons as well as a textual reference for students’ independent reading work.

We chose The Paper Bag Princess by Robert Munsch (1988) for our touchstone. We absolutely loved the story of the plucky princess who outsmarts a dragon and rescues the prince, and the book is a great example of a text containing the six elements of fantasy we wanted to explore. (See the six characteristics and students’ application of them to different books in Figure 1.) The story had such a sense of humor that we knew we could read it again and again, and neither we nor the kids would tire of reading it.

We started out by simply reading the book for enjoyment and so the students could get to know the story. After this initial exposure, we moved into looking through our silver baskets filled with the materials students had brought in. Students sorted through the materials in small groups, with partners, or as a whole class, and placed them into three piles: “definitely fantasy,” “not fantasy,” “maybe fantasy.” Usually the pile that elicits the most discussion is the “maybe” pile. If there’s a talking pig, is that fantasy? Maria picked up a copy of Charlotte’s Web and said, “Pigs don’t talk. This has got to go in the ‘definite’ pile.” Another student argued, “But besides the animals talking, there’s nothing else magical going on.” Some students wondered, what if there’s a dragon, but he doesn’t do anything magical except be a dragon? The questions abound. We shared as much of the decision-making process on these questionable books as possible with our students. Nia (2001) calls this process of sorting through books to define genre “sifting.”

Based on the sifting process, our classes came up with working definitions of fantasy. Lenay pointed out, “There’s always good guys and bad guys,” and Lucas added, “Yeah, you know there’s going to be some kind of battle between good and evil, and good always wins.” Rosie, a reader of fantasy before we started the study, remarked, “There is lots of magic in fantasy, and usually the hero has to use the magic to complete their quest.” Recalling the class read-alouds, Chris said, “The characters in fantasy travel back and forth between two different worlds, so I think that there’s always a magical world in fantasy books.”

After we discussed what the students knew about fantasy and what they discovered while sifting, we gave the students our own definition of fantasy. We defined fantasy as a genre with a hero on a quest who changes along his or her journey, magic and magical creatures, a clear presence of good and evil, and a setting in a world different from our own or with some connection to another world. This definition became an invaluable tool as we dug even deeper into the genre.

On our next reading of The Paper Bag Princess, we showed our students a chart that listed six common characteristics we had identified in fantasy. Below is a brief description of each characteristic we noticed:

Connection to another world: Most fantasy stories take place either in
a world completely different than our own, or include a visit to or a visitor from a fantastical place. The tie to a setting that is imaginary is one of the key signals to readers that they are reading fantasy (Clute & Grant, 1997).

The Quest: The hero must complete a journey, fulfill a mission, or reach a goal. The quest is central to any fantasy story because it builds suspense and pushes the action forward (Clute & Grant, 1997). While this journey to succeed with one’s quest is fraught with hardships, no hero is truly heroic without a quest (Campbell, 1973).

Magic: Although magic is a characteristic difficult for us to define, our students seem to have no difficulty identifying it. As one student told us, “Magic is when something happens and there’s no other logical explanation for it besides magic.” Michael Page and Robert Ingpen (1985) give a more formal definition of magic as “the art or science of persuading supernatural beings to give one power over animate creatures, over the weather and the elements of the earth, and over all things which grow in or on the earth” (p. 159).

Magical creatures: While magical creatures are clearly an important part of the magic in a fantasy story, the roles they play go far beyond just the magic. They serve as symbols, helpmates, villains, and comic relief. Most fantasies are not complete without the appearance of at least one fairy, dragon, or unicorn (Page & Ingpen, 1985).

Heroic change (or Character change): In any story, the protagonist changes. In fantasy, the quest plays an integral role in the hero’s transformation. One book club group even pondered whether the close relationship between the quest and heroic change might account for the large number of “kids-growing-up stories,” also known as coming-of-age stories, in fantasy (Campbell, 1973).

Good vs Evil: The classic dichotomy is easy for students to identify. What we found more difficult to discuss were the gray areas in between and the way some characters fluctuated between the two, or in some cases even transcended the delineation between good and evil. In The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe (Lewis, 1950), Edmund, who first betrays his siblings and sides with the evil White Witch only to later join with the good Aslan, was an important character to return to as we navigated our discussions about good vs. evil.

After showing our students a chart listing these characteristics, we discussed what each meant. Students then went off to code their copies of The Paper Bag Princess to show where they thought they found a characteristic. Some students used different highlighters, for example yellow to highlight the quest and blue to highlight magic. Other students used different ways to underline the text indicating where they found evidence of the characteristics, such as a double underline for heroic change and a squiggly line for magical creatures.

After they marked up their text, we added examples from The Paper Bag Princess to the chart to illustrate each characteristic. For example, under the section “Heroic Change,” our students told us that, “Elizabeth changed by realizing she didn’t want to marry Ronald after all.”

Immersion—Becoming One with Fantasy

In addition to the books brought in by our students, we stocked our classroom library with many fantasy books. We had hidden most of these until just the right moment. We made sure there was a variety in style, level, and number of copies so that students could read both independently and, later, in book clubs.

Nia has taught us that the key to good immersion is to have as many different texts as possible available to our students on all different reading levels. In both of our fourth-grade classes, we used short stories, novels, picture books, and poetry to help fully immerse our students in the genre. Figure 2 shows some of the students’ most popular choices.

Immersion is the time for our students to fall in love with the genre. To facilitate this love, we sometimes needed to guide our students toward good matches for their reading levels and interests. For example, we suggested Ursula LeGuin’s Catwings (1988) to a struggling reader and Which Witch? (Bobotson, 1979) to a student who enjoyed the humor of Roald Dahl. We hooked many of our students into K. H. McMullen’s Dragon Slayers’ Academy series by sharing the first book, The New Kid in School (1997), as a class read-aloud. Before putting books into our library, we gave a brief introduction to some of the books by telling our students about the
characters, the magical places characters travel, or the basic plot line. It’s essential for us to know most of the books in our fantasy library well, so that we can guide students toward appropriate choices and have more productive conferences with them on these books (Calkins, 2001).

**Read-Aloud**

Read-aloud is an essential and much anticipated part of our students’ day, and it happens at least once a day, every day. In addition to our first whole-class read-aloud and touchstone text, *The Paper Bag Princess*, we read aloud several other picture books, as well as short stories from various collections, so that students quickly got a feel for the genre and were able to discuss whole texts with ease. We then moved onto a longer read-aloud. In our case, we read novels.

We chose as our first novel, *The New Kid at School* (McMullan, 1997), a short, easy-to-read chapter book that is not only laugh-out-loud funny, but also a wonderful example of the genre. The six characteristics of fantasy are readily apparent. It also offers clear examples of maps, medieval vocabulary, and archetypal characters, while remaining accessible for our most struggling readers who are not quite ready for the much-coveted *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (Rowling, 2001).

We each chose a second read-aloud that was a little bit longer and more challenging, and so lent itself to more in-depth study and deeper thinking. Books that we found successful in meeting these goals include *Ella Enchanted* (Levine, 1997), *The Secret of Platform 13* (Ibbotson, 1994), and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (Rushdie, 1990). For many students, one of the difficulties with fantasy is making sense of a book when there are many characters, so we modeled how to keep track of multiple characters. Kate and her students kept a whole-class chart listing characters in *The Secret of Platform 13* and why they were important. Students could refer to the chart to remind themselves about characters and add to it as Kate read aloud to them. This book also lent itself to discussions about characters traveling back and forth between two worlds—the real world in London and a fantastical world on an island. Colleen read aloud *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. This book, with its strong connection to the Hindustani language and distinctly non-Western mythology, encouraged discussions about cultural influences on fantasy.

Colleen and her class began a chart noting the similarities and differences between Eastern and Western fantasy traditions as they came up in discussions. That chart continued to expand during the rest of the unit of study. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* also offered an opportunity to discuss the significance of names in fantasy. The names the author chose for characters and places often gave additional insights into the text. By identifying this common technique used by many fantasy authors, students were able to glean even more from their independent and book club reading.

Whichever read-aloud a teacher ultimately chooses, it is important to keep in mind that it is not only a means to enjoy the genre, but also a model for the kind of work we expect from our students’ independent and book club reading (Calkins, 2001). We often introduced and practiced book talks, charts, sketch-to-stretch, and other comprehension tools during read-aloud. It was helpful to keep a simple chart throughout our read-alouds called, “Things we discussed during our read-aloud.” When students raised important points, we jotted them down as a way to record what students know or wonder about while listening to the text.

Read-aloud offers the opportunity to stretch kids further than they might go in their own books (Sutherland, 1997). For example,
when discussing *The New Kid at School*, students noticed that the hero, Wiglaf, is different than the rest of his brothers and is not liked by his family. They realized that his love of all living creatures made it difficult to achieve his goal of becoming a dragon slayer. As teachers, we named their observations so that they had a common vocabulary that was shared by other readers of fantasy. Students recognized Wiglaf as a character with a "heroic flaw" who is "alienated." Again, by guiding our students in this way during our read-alouds, we helped them realize that their observations in one book were not only valid, but could apply to other works in the genre.

In fact, these observations transcend the somewhat populist genre, and are present in such classics as Homer's *The Odyssey* and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which our students will probably encounter in their later reading life (Clute & Grant, 1997; Krupat, 1989).

**Independent Reading**

The independent reading component of this study provides students with a chance to really dive into the genre on their own. However, there are a few ways we stretched students' thinking during their independent reading work. One we used most often is book talk (Harwayne, 1992). For example, in the middle of a minilesson on heroic qualities, we told students to turn to the student next to them and talk about the hero in the book they were reading independently. At the end of the independent reading time, we gathered on the rug for another share time about specific qualities readers noticed about their heroes. Hallie, always eager to talk, said during one book talk, "Charles Wallace [from *A Wrinkle in Time*] isn't alienated by his family like Wiglaf and Harry Potter, but no one likes him at school and he has no friends besides his sister Meg, so I guess he is alienated." Once students developed a common vocabulary of the genre through read-alouds and mini-

---

**Censorship: When Fantasy Becomes Nightmare**

Fantasy is often criticized as inappropriate for classroom use. This list of resources provides ways to be informed about and responsive to censorship.

- The National Coalition Against Censorship (http://www.ncac.org/) has a powerful search engine and links to NCTE, the International Reading Association, and many other groups.
- J. Simmons & E. Dresang (IRA, 2001). *School Censorship in the 21st Century: A Guide for Teachers and School Media Specialists*. Encourages teachers and librarians to be proactive by educating students about censorship and their first amendment rights. The activities can also be used with parents. Includes Web sites of organizations that support intellectual freedom.
- The American Library Association (http://www.ala.org/) offers a strong search engine on intellectual freedom and censorship as well as access to ALA's handbook and statement opposing censorship. The Office for Intellectual Freedom link explains how ALA supports libraries and librarians under siege.
- The American Library Association publishes the Hit List series of books that offer information and responses to counter censorship attacks.
- International Reading Association's (http://www.reading.org/) Web site has access to many articles and resources through "censorship" on their search engine.
- NCTE's position statement, The Students' Right to Read, includes lists of censored books, a discussion of the results of censorship, an open letter about the importance of reading, a statement of support for teacher selection of texts, and strategies for defending books. Type "The students’ right to read" into a search engine.
- The American Civil Liberties Union (http://www.aclu.org/) offers information and actions to protect constitutional rights. Local chapters are listed in phone books.

—Richard Meyer

---

Language Arts, Vol. 81 No. 3, January 2004

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
lessons, they were able to talk across books and reading levels. A girl reading *Harry Potter* had a valuable discussion about the roles animals play in fantasy with a boy who was reading a book from the less complex *Dragon Slayers’ Academy* series. Another way for students to stretch their independent reading skills is to keep track of this reading on personal charts. The advantage of personal charts is that they are concrete guides (Burke, 2000) and offer the benefit of a written account of students’ thinking. We introduced these charts to students by modeling a larger version of the chart during read-aloud and by studying a sample together on an overhead transparency. Another effective tool was to fill one in as a small group using a shared text. Our students have used and created a variety of charts depending on their interests and needs:

**An Element Chart:** Students kept track of the books they read and noted when each of the six main elements of fantasy occurred in a book, as well as any other elements identified by a student, such as transformation or alienation. (See a student sample in Figure 3.) One helpful way to support students in using their individual charts is to have a large version hanging prominently in the classroom that we add to as we read books together. Having students keep their own charts has been a good way for us to track what our students read and to monitor their basic understanding of their texts.

A **Character Chart:** Students used a T-chart to keep track of characters and note the characters’ significance in each of their independent reading books. Because there are often many characters in fantasy, it is sometimes difficult to decide which characters are important and to keep track of their often complex relationships. Kathleen used this chart during her read-aloud of *The Secret of Platform 13*.

A **Line of Thinking Chart:** Students who were following a particular line of thought or focus charted their progress with this line of thought throughout a book or books. For example, students who noticed that the sidekick in the story always had to disappear before the hero completes the quest charted this throughout their independent reading.

A **Symbolism Chart:** Fantasy is fraught with symbolism (Lynn, 1995). Students charted various symbols from their reading and what they thought the symbols meant. They noted if the symbolism always stayed the same from book to book, or if the meaning of a symbol changed. For example, is a dragon always bad?

There are endless possibilities for charts that could be useful for readers. We do not use all of these charts with each class, but use our knowledge of our students as barometers to decide which are the most useful charts for a particular

---

**Figure 3. Individual chart on elements of fantasy**

---

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
group; we also allow students the option of designing their own.

In addition to charts, we engaged students in experiences with art to support their explorations, particularly in envisioning fantasy worlds and their inhabitants. Since the characters, settings, and objects rarely exist in the real world, students needed to develop the ability to visualize what is implicitly and explicitly stated in the text.

During our first read-aloud, The Thief of Always (Barker, 1992), students brought their sketchbooks to the rug. As we read, they sketched characters, scenes, and other images that were vivid in their minds. Each day, students shared their sketches and compared the different interpretations they had of the same images within the text.

Another way in which art helped students understand a text occurred while reading the poem "Jabberwocky" by Lewis Carroll. This poem can be difficult to understand at first because of the nonsensical language. However, we found that when students sketched images for each stanza, they were better able to comprehend the text as a whole.

Our most in-depth use of art was related to independent reading. We discussed with our students how fantasy is often the inspiration for artwork because the creatures and settings are not of our world, and so the artist can make them his/her own. We told students they would be creating watercolor paintings of a character or scene that stood out to them from a selected book. We asked them to pick their favorite book from all of the ones they had read and to find a quote that depicted the image they wanted to paint. They created a rough sketch of the image described by their quote in their sketchbooks and then made a final pencil drawing on watercolor paper. They either incorporated the quote into the artwork or wrote the quote on a separate piece of paper to be mounted beside the artwork. Students used watercolors to paint over their drawings and outlined their work in permanent black marker. Maria painted a winged green dragon from Dragon for Sale (MacDonald, 1998). The quote she chose described the way the dragon looked as well as how he flew using his wings (see Figure 4).

Book Clubs

Book clubs, sometimes referred to as literature circles, offer students an opportunity to extend their book talk, read more widely than a whole-class book can allow, stretch their thinking by getting involved in literary debates with peers, and have more intimate discussions about the book (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). Book clubs are discussion groups of 3–6 students who are all reading the same book. In our classrooms of 30 students, we usually have six to eight book clubs meeting at once, each reading a different book. Some teachers form the clubs in their class on the basis of ability and/or interest in a certain book, series, or inquiry. Other teachers allow for student input into the formation of the clubs. The way we create our club groupings varies according to the needs of our students from year to year. Once clubs are formed, each club decides the books they will read from our classroom or school library. Clubs meet regularly (two to four times a week) and determine how much they will read before they meet the next time.

Depending on the teacher and students, the clubs can vary from a strongly teacher-structured format with rotating roles and responsibilities for each member, to a more open and organic format with students having complete autonomy.

Figure 4. Maria's quote and visual image based on Dragon for Sale.
over the discussion. In fact, the level of teacher involvement with book club organization might vary from club to club in the same class. For more teacher-structured clubs, teachers may want to teach into and assign roles and responsibilities for each club member; this can help students begin and maintain conversations as well as ensure that students come prepared for discussions. We have taught roles such as discussion director, artist, and quest tracker.

We recommend that students rotate roles each time they meet, or each week, instead of keeping the same role throughout the entire book. Students can keep track of this work in reading logs, on sticky notes, or on teacher-designed role sheets (Daniels, 1994). Role sheets explain the students’ responsibility and provide space for students to write down their questions, comments, or observations.

Lenaye, Lucas, Felix, and Chesley used role sheets while reading Madeleine L’Engle’s Time Quarters series. When reading A Wind in the Door (1974), they decided the discussion director would always start the conversation.

Lenaye: Do you guys think Meg and Charles Wallace have a special connection?

Felix: Well, we know from the first book that Charles Wallace could read Meg’s mind, and also they were on the quest together to save their dad.

Lucas: And in this book, I think Meg is going to have to save Charles Wallace since we know he’s getting really sick.

Chesley: This picture I drew kind of shows their connection because I drew Charles Wallace in the house and then Meg in the garden but I drew a line between their heads to show

that Charles could tell Meg was scared.

In a less formally structured book club, where students decide how to structure their own book talk time, conversation is lead more by individual students’ interests rather than an assigned role. In these clubs, students often place sticky notes as they read on pages they would like to discuss further, or they prepare for book club meetings by jotting notes in a reading notebook. Students in these clubs are not focused on a particular reading responsibility, but rather on what seems worthy of discussion.

Book clubs offer an opportunity for students to read and discuss books deeply at a comfortable pace and level with their peers (McMahon & Raphael, 1997). Students have chosen to study certain patterns they noticed in fantasy, i.e. the relationship between the villain and the hero, or perhaps simply the role that magic plays in the fantasy world. Students jot down their observations on sticky notes and reading logs to prepare for book club conversations or to remind themselves of particularly memorable passages. Eventually the clubs share their thinking with the class, either via book talks, artwork, readers’ theater, or in other more formal presentations, depending on the club and their wishes.

**GOING DEEPER**

Fantasy is a rich genre with strong roots in history, religion, science, and the classic literary canon (Clute & Grant, 1997; Lynn, 1995). This feature of the genre supports opportunities to extend and enrich our students’ reading. As a matter of fact, the genre is so rich we believe that a class could easily study it for an entire year and still not completely exhaust its depth.

Sometimes we go more deeply into fantasy as a whole class, but it makes sense for students to make their own discoveries in book clubs, partnerships, or in their independent reading. The following is a list of inquiries our students have investigated:

- Dragons
- *Religion and spirituality*
- Archetypes
- *Environmentalism*
- History of cultures
- *Identity*
- Roles of men and women
- *Societal norms*
- Feminism
- *The Hero*
- Ethnocentrism
- *Power*
- Betrayal
- *Balance*

In our classes, one of the inquiries that keeps coming up year after year is the portrayal of dragons. For example, students noticed that dragons in classic Western fantasy are shown as greedy and evil, and usually represent obstacles the hero must overcome. However, in fantasy with an Eastern influence, dragons are shown as helpful, benevolent, and symbolic of balance between heaven and earth, good and evil. Our students inevitably are drawn into discussions about the possible reasons for this difference. Some even make this a personal reading project. Dwayne became so fascinated by dragons and their various forms that he created a picture dictionary illustrating and describing several different types of dragons.
Another discussion that occurs year after year is the changing roles of female characters in fantasy. Many students noticed that older fantasies have women in supporting roles, or as the archetypal damsel in distress. However, recent examples show women and girls in more active roles, and often they are the heroes. Authors such as Jane Yolen, Tamora Pierce, and Madeleine L'Engle have taken the female archetype in new directions. Students often talk about why they think the characters have changed and how a female hero changes the scope of the traditional fantasy story.

Although we guide our students toward exploring more complex ideas in the genre, we are mindful to follow their lead about what interests them. Students truly learn and grow from these types of studies if they are the ones choosing the path they travel.

**Final Thoughts**

Jane Yolen (1997) wrote that as an adolescent, she found it increasingly difficult to play games of imagination and believe in the fantastic, “But I would not give it up entirely. The worlds of the fantastic, with their mind-stretching, metaphorical, shadow-throwing ways, were still incredibly important to me. I got to learn more about myself and my world by that kind of role-playing. And by reading.” (p. xi).

Our students are faced with an ever-growing list of standards to meet, subjects to master, and an uncertain world that they will inherit. Fantasy offers lands filled with magic, heroes who overcome impossible challenges, and bridges that connect strange worlds to the familiar. It offers a place of belonging for the outsider, and a space for the dreamer to dream. At first glance, trolls and fairies and evil spells couldn’t be further from our everyday world, and yet, as Laurence Yep (2001) noted, the flawed hero battling for the powers of good and the right to belong is not so very far from who we are. By inviting fantasy into our classrooms and taking our students’ hands as we go, we not only enrich their reading lives, but offer them another tool for exploring and understanding their lives outside of school as well.

**Children’s Books Cited**

The Poem

By Karin Johnson

Don't force the poem
from your heart
don't pump it
disable it
make it start;
But let it
trickle...
gurgle...
flow...
through the heart
just let it grow.

Karin Johnson is a third-grade teacher at Ledgewood Elementary School in Clarence, New York.

CALL FOR EDITOR OF VOICES FROM THE MIDDLE

In May 2006, the term of Voices from the Middle’s present editor, Kylene Beers, will end. Those interested in applying for the editorship now have until May 1, 2004, to submit their applications. Letters should include the applicant’s vision for the journal and be accompanied by the applicant’s vita and one sample of published writing. Do not send books, monographs, or other materials that cannot be easily copied for the Search Committee. Classroom teachers are both eligible and encouraged to apply, as are editorial teams. Applicants will be contacted after the May 1 deadline and may be asked to submit additional materials. The applicant appointed by the NCTE Executive Committee in February 2005 will have NCTE support in effecting a transition and preparing for his or her first issue in September 2006. The appointment is for five years. Questions and applications should be addressed to Margaret Chambers, Division Director for Publications, Voices from the Middle Search Committee, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096; mchambers@ncte.org; (800) 369-6283, extension 3623.

Proven with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.