The 2010 NCTE Presidential Address:
To Cherish the Interests of Literature

Carol Jago
California Reading and Literature Project,
UCLA, Los Angeles

The following is the text of Carol Jago’s presidential address, delivered at the NCTE Annual Convention in Orlando, Florida, on November 21, 2010.

All across America we struggle to find new ways to improve education. Teachers are urged to discard outdated practices. Publishing companies are investing millions in innovation funds to rethink instructional materials. The Institute of Play is designing a curriculum where students learn by playing video games. Students already addicted to their handheld devices may soon spend every waking minute plugged into some digital device. Oh, brave new world and all the devices in it!

Has no one engaged in this endeavor read Philip K. Dick’s Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? Published in 1968 and recast in the cult film Blade Runner—the original title was too long for a marquee—the novel depicts a dystopian world where the last standing humans covet any living thing—cats, birds, sheep. To meet this fundamental human need, scientists create electronic pets. And as night follows day, the same scientists create electronic people, androids so like the real thing that bounty hunters have to be dispatched to destroy the androids lest the line between human and less-than-human become blurred.

Margaret Atwood painted a similarly grim picture in her novel Oryx and Crake. In this fictional world—which she argues is speculative rather than science fiction—bioengineers produce hybrid pets, rakunks (rat/skunks) for example, which become the fauna du jour in a natural world so toxic that life is only possible within enclosed, man-made spaces.

As we gather here in Orlando, considered by many the happiest place on earth, I can’t help but reflect upon the artificial quality of our surroundings. Everything inside this delightful bubble is sanitized and secure. Princesses abound. Bad guys are clearly labeled. Creative engineers have designed a bountiful safe haven for celebrating imaginative worlds. But whose imagination exactly are we celebrating here? Educating children’s imaginations entails more than buying Disney toys. It means kindling the spirit of creativity in every human heart.
Speaking in a commencement address to graduates of the Stanford School of Education, Elliot Eisner (2006) argued that, “Imagination is the neglected stepchild of American education. Questions invite you in. They stimulate the production of possibilities. They give you a ride. And the best ones are those that tickle the intellect and resist resolution.” It is a remarkable message to send to future teachers and school administrators who will be working in a country in thrall to testing. Eisner urges us to nurture questions not answers, most particularly questions without easy answers. Many teachers find it difficult to make time for such questions and imaginary play in a school day increasingly devoted to the mastery of basic skills. I worry that the focus on serious certainties may in the long run only contribute to our nation’s continuing hard times. Consider the instructional approach of schoolmaster Thomas Gradgrind in Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times*:

Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!

Well, you all know how things turned out in Coketown.

Reading literature offers ballast to a Gradgrinding, facts-based education. Stories like Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, A. A. Milne’s tales of Winnie the Pooh, and the Uncle Remus stories about Br’er Rabbit feed the imaginations of young readers and resist narrative resolution. Such literature is compelling because of, not in spite of, its ambiguities. When creative engineers sanitize such tales for easy digestion, they strip the stories of their dark magic. As with fast food, the taste has instant appeal and is addictive, but the nutritional value is low. Today, few children know the works of Lewis Carroll, Kenneth Grahame, or Rudyard Kipling in their original form. While I see no harm in a quick spin on Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride, it saddens me that so many ticket-holders have never met Mr. Toad on the pages of *The Wind in the Willows*, never visited Toad Hall nor watched Mr. Toad in court. Wearing a Winnie the Pooh backpack is no substitute for carrying Milne’s verses around in one’s head.

Of course, the history of literature is one long chain of borrowed stories. Shakespeare lifted “Et tu, Brute” from Plutarch. David Wroblewski built *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* around the plot of *Hamlet*. Suzanne Collins borrowed Shirley Jackson’s lottery for the reaping scene in *The Hunger Games*. Neil Gaiman acknowledges the debt he owes to Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Books* and the irrepressible Mowgli as his inspiration for the Newberry Medal–winning *The Graveyard Book*. Gaiman’s hero calls himself Bod, short for Nobody. (By the way, does this remind anyone of another hero on another odyssey to self-discovery who called himself Noman?) Bod was raised, not like Mowgli by wolves, but by graveyard ghosts. Gaiman’s charm-
ingly ghoulish coming-of-age story sent me back to Kipling, whose work I hadn’t read in years. I was flabbergasted by the richness of these stories, their intensity, their power, and the subtle play of setting and character.

As I read, I began to wonder how many students today would have the patience to work their way through Kipling’s *Jungle Books*. While *The Graveyard Book* is a slim volume with lots of space on the page, extended dialogue, and occasional illustrations, my Penguin edition of *The Jungle Books* contains 344 pages of dense prose and curious nineteenth-century poetry. Why pick up a book that looks like such hard work? And where would young readers ever stumble upon books by Rudyard Kipling in the first place? It’s the rare few who might find a copy on their parents’ shelves. When Kipling fell out of favor with the literary establishment for his colonialist views, the only story from *The Jungle Books* that continued to be widely anthologized in textbooks was “Rikki-tikki-tavi.” While this helpful-animal story about a friendly mongoose is a charming tale, “Rikki-tikki-tavi” is a slight thing compared with “Toomai of the Elephants,” “The White Seal,” or the original Mowgli stories. Today’s children only know Mowgli as a cartoon character who cavorts with wild animals. Alas, Kipling’s rich commentary on beastly behavior and natural folly has become lost in translation.

Some argue that it doesn’t matter that students no longer have the patience for words on the page. Times change. As Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote about the passing of King Arthur, “The old order changeth, yielding place to new / And God fulfills himself in many ways / Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.” Are books the old order? Have they, like Camelot, run their course? Is it time teachers simply accepted that today’s students no longer have the time or patience to read anything more complex than a series of tweets? Some argue that today’s students have evolved. Raised on the lightning-quick access and brilliant images of the Internet, these students are bored by old black-and-white hard copy. Addicted to the constant exchange of Facebook and texting, they thrive in a more interactive, digital learning environment.

The evidence supporting this view is powerful and persuasive. A study published earlier this year by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2010) reported that, “Today, 8- to 18-year-olds devote an average of seven hours and 38 minutes to using entertainment media across a typical day. And because they spend so much of that time ‘media multitasking,’ they actually manage to pack a total of 10 hours and 45 minutes worth of media content into those 7½ hours.” These are the same students who tell us they don’t have time for homework; they don’t have time to read. In response to this news—and in an effort to stay in business—publishing companies are investing huge sums in the research and development of instructional materials that look less like books and more like video games.

Jane McGonigal, a game designer working at the Institute for the Future, thinks this idea has merit. She explains that online games are so compelling because they
promote “blissful productivity” (2010). Players of games like World of Warcraft feel they are accomplishing something important, that the battles they are fighting have “epic meaning,” and that they can be their best selves in this virtual environment. She has a point. Why else would people all over the world invest three billion hours a week playing video games? By the age of 21 the average gamer will have spent 10,000 hours playing video games, approximately the same amount of time spent in school between grades 5 and 12. It is no wonder that a generation of children, the same children whose NAEP reading and writing scores are below proficient, are becoming expert gamers. Imagine if students put a comparable amount of effort into reading and writing as they do into World of Warcraft. Imagine if students felt so “blissfully productive” at the end of every school day that they were eager to return on the morrow for more.

The economist Edward Castronovo reports that what we are seeing among the youth population is a mass exodus from the real world to virtual worlds (McGonigal, 2010). I worry that students’ blissful engagement in virtual worlds could lead to a dangerous disengagement from the real. In Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World, the masses went to the feelies and took soma to keep them from thinking too much about problems in their society and in their lives. If we care only about keeping kids satisfied with their lot as Deltas, turning the language arts curriculum into a giant online game may be an excellent plan. If, on the other hand, we believe that our mission as teachers is to prepare students for life in the real world, teaching literature seems to me a much superior one. We need to help students figure out how to make this a better, not an alternate, universe.

Unfortunately too often, teaching literature has been an occasion for teachers who know and love books to showcase what they love and show off what they know. Students come away from such classes—and this is when they are done well—in awe of their teachers but with little confidence in their own ability to read literature. Louise Rosenblatt asserted that, “The problem that a teacher faces first of all, then, is the creation of a situation favorable to a vital experience of literature. Unfortunately, many of the practices and much of the tone of literature teaching have precisely the opposite effect” (61). I believe that classrooms from preschool through college should be places where that vital experience of literature takes place every day.

I am not so naïve as to think that students will cheer when you hand out copies of a Shakespearean play or a Homeric epic—let alone Tess of the d’Urbervilles or The Grapes of Wrath. The sheer weight of the volumes is daunting. But this is not a recent development in teenage behavior. Adolescent groans mask a deep hunger for meaning. They also mask students’ fear that they won’t be able to do this work. Nor will they be able to—without your help. Instead of making the excuse that today’s students don’t have the vocabulary, background knowledge, or stamina to read complex literature, we need to design lessons that build reading
muscles page by page. Lily Wong Fillmore, a scholar and long-time researcher into English language learning, recently made an impassioned plea to teachers not to dumb down texts for English learners. Worried about the “gradual erosion of the complexity of texts” offered to students, Fillmore posits that when teachers offer only simplified materials to their English learners, it is “niceness run amok” (Zehr, 2010). Whilst she acknowledges that for the first year or two English learners need altered or alternate texts, ultimately they deserve the challenge of rich literature.

I do not believe that teaching literature should be about dragging students kicking and screaming through works they hate and poems they find opaque. It should be about nurturing the next generation of readers—readers who one day may choose to buy a ticket for a performance of Macbeth, who will excitedly order the latest Cormac McCarthy for their Kindles and Nooks, who can find solace in poetry during times of trouble. Much is made of the economic impact of education, but I’m more concerned about preparing students’ hearts and minds for whatever the future may hold. Writers from George Orwell to Kazuo Ishiguro have warned us, but unless students read and heed their warnings we may be heading not for the best of all possible worlds but for the worst. Charles Dickens opens his story of the French Revolution with a riff on the best of times and the worst of times:

It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

How many of our twittering students can parse this sentence? How many teachers have lost the will to ask their charges do so?

One myth I’m keen to dispel is that readers go to books solely for self-improvement. Children (and adults) who read do not do so to enlarge their vocabularies or to improve their reading comprehension or to build background knowledge. While all of these things may occur as they gobble up book after book, readers read because it feels good. In her memoir An American Childhood, Annie Dillard recalls how it felt for her to read as a child:

Parents have no idea what their children are up to in their bedrooms: They are reading the same paragraphs over and over in a stupor of violent bloodshed. Their legs are limp with horror. They are reading the same paragraphs over and over, dizzy with gratification as the young lovers find each other in the French fort, as the boy avenges his father, as the sound of muskets in the woods signals the end of the siege. They could not move if the house caught fire. They hate the actual world. The actual world is a kind of tedious plane where dwells, and goes to school, the body, the boring body which houses the
eyes to read the books and houses the heart the books enflame. The very boring body seems to require an inordinately big, very boring world to keep it up, a world where you have to spend far too much time, have to do time like a prisoner, always looking for a chance to slip away, to escape back home to books, or escape back home to any concentration—fanciful, mental, or physical—where you can lose yourself at last. Although I was hungry all the time, I could not bear to hold still and eat; it was too dull a thing to do, and had no appeal either to courage or to imagination. (100)

Readers like Annie Dillard, and I have known many, lose themselves in books the way gamers lose themselves in World of Warcraft. The Harry Potter and Twilight series produced young readers who lusted after the next installment, loved talking about what they were reading, and had no trouble finding time in their busy digital lives to read. The problem isn’t about time at all. It’s about desire. Students who don’t love books, and I have known many, seldom experience the kind of thrill Annie Dillard describes. One reason may be that they don’t read with sufficient fluency for the work of reading to seem nugatory and the pleasure to be paramount. Another reason they turn back to their game controllers may be that their teachers aren’t quick enough to serve up the next book, books like Philip Pullman’s *The Golden Compass* or Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. Maybe the door of possibility slams behind Rowling and Meyers because there are so few librarians left in our schools or because all over America public libraries, those testaments to the American Dream, are cutting staff and curtailing their hours.

I have always believed that the purpose of education was to help children be more, not less, than human. In 1780 John Adams wrote into the Massachusetts Constitution,

> Wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people, being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and as these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education in the various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people, it shall be the duty of legislatures and magistrates, in all future periods of this commonwealth, to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them. (Chap. V, Sec. II)

Let us embrace this duty.

**WORKS CITED**


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