

Connecting Point-and-Click Kids to the



The sonnet has a lot of competition these days. Genres have proliferated – we have graphic novels, rap, realistic fantasy, music videos, and novels in verse sitting alongside the explosion of informational books, interactive books, and the to-be-expected range of fiction. Even media have changed – the three-channel, rabbit-eared television is now a 253 channel high-definition flat screen, the radio has gone nano, and the book has turned Kindle. Information and entertainment comes from computers, iPads and iPods, cell phones, YouTube, blogs, wikis, RSS feeds, Facebook, Twitter, and, well, wait a moment and new technology will have arrived. It may seem that literature and its reading are dwindling in significance as we move into the second decade of the 21st century. The penned letter has been challenged by the text message; the manual typewriter has been replaced by the touch-screen computer; and literature is being replaced by . . .

Power of Novels

Reading Literature as a 21st Century Skill

By Kylene Beers and Robert E. Probst



that sitting for her was a serious affair not to be lightly entered upon. Her sisters came to her sometimes, they trembled, or would have trembled, could they have dared, when the round black eye of the Camera was turned upon them. They were made to realize the disastrous waste of time, money and effort that would result from one quiver of emotion. Julia intimidated practically every utter she had – though wrapped up in her private world and intent only on her work, she was either unaware of this, or uncaring.

She once decided to photograph Laura Troubridge and her small friend as two of the angels of the Nativity, each scantily clad with a pair of heavy swan's wings fastened to their narrow shoulders. She touched their hair to rid them of a nursery look. Laura said that she wasn't at all surprised that when she looked at the old photographs of her and her friend as angels, these showed them leaning wistfully and anxiously over the imaginary ramparts of heaven, as they never knew what 'Aunt Julia' was going to do next. They knew, however, that 'once in her clutches we were perfectly helpless'. She would shout at them to stand still, 'and we stood for hours, if necessary, gazing at the model of the Heavenly Babe' (in reality a sleeping child deposited in a makeshift manger). The parents, anxious and uneasy, were outside, 'no more able to rescue their infant until Aunt Julia had finished with it, than we should have been'.

freshwater in Tennyson's time has been lyrically (and exaggeratedly) likened to Athens in the time of Pericles: sooner or later, every famous man in Britain came to visit the poet. One visitor once asked, rather desperately, 'Is there nobody here who is commonplace?' Julia took advantage of the stream of Tennyson's guests, looking on them as potential subjects for her. In this way, she was to photograph practically every one of his eminent visitors. She didn't always succeed. On one occasion in the mid-sixties, when Garibaldi was staying with Tennyson, Julia, her hands blackened as usual with photographic chemicals, robed up and knelt in front of the two men, imploring Garibaldi to come to the glasshouse at Dimbola and allow her to take his picture. For a moment there was a misunderstanding as Garibaldi took her for an overdressed beggar woman asking for charity. Mrs Cameron, realising what was passing through his mind, waved her hands in front of his face and explained, 'This is not dirt but art!' Her plea failed.¹⁵ However, she did once manage to inveigle herself into the presence of the Crown Prince of Prussia when he and his wife came to Ventnor in strict secrecy, and managed to photograph him.

In general, however, Julia put the fear of God into all those who sat for her. Browning was left in a position of acute discomfort while Julia went off to find some missing equipment and only rescued him two hours

But perhaps it isn't being replaced. One writer, Matthew Wilkens, estimates that "it seems pretty safe to say there are around 100,000 new English-language works of long-form prose fiction published globally each year."* He acknowledges that that's a rough estimate but even if the actual number is half that, it's still a lot of novels. Someone out there is reading literature, so, even if the sonnet is losing ground, the novel seems to be holding its own. We should still teach it. We should even teach the sonnet.

As we have talked with teachers about NCTE's definition of twenty-first century literacies, we've talked about the importance of collaboration; of managing, analyzing, and synthesizing multiple streams of information; of learning to solve complex problems for global communities; of developing proficiency with the tools of technology, of attending to the ethical responsibilities required in online environments. And more and more we've reminded ourselves and others of the critical role literature plays in this bold new world.

That might seem odd. At a time when it appears paramount to prepare students to read short, informational texts, to know when to hit the hyperlink to jump to another site, to know how to synthesize the video pop-up with the music and the scrolling sidebars with the colors on the screen and the multiple fonts, to understand how to challenge the author of a website when that author is basically invisible, we're suggesting that students also need to know how to read the novel. Seems very 20th century. Early 20th century. We aren't surprised when students sometimes ask why.

Our reason for teaching literature, however, isn't its popularity. The novel (if perhaps not the sonnet) is going to survive even without our help. More important than the novel's popularity is what it teaches the student. The reading of literature invites students into an important conversation. Literature, and we include in that category the excellent literature for children and young adults, addresses the interesting and eternal questions about human experience. It asks readers to think about what they value, what they reject, what they accept, and what they would fight for. And they are asked to hold these thoughts for longer than it takes to scroll down a screen. Novels require a sustained investment of time, something that is important to share with a generation that has decided that email is *too slow* and texting barely fast enough. Email, too slow. And during that sustained investment in a book, something very important happens. We become a part of the characters' lives and through their lives learn more of our own.

And it does that, not in the abstract, where it's easy to take a stand, but in the concrete, where it's harder to escape the consequences of events and of our choices. We can all agree that we'd do what we could to survive in difficult circumstances. But in *Hatchet* we can watch an individual face not just the *idea* of difficult circumstances, but the crash of the small plane, the moose, the wolves, the loneliness, and the starvation. If we read well – if we are taught to read well – we will visualize the north woods, feel the cold, imagine the despair, place ourselves there, and consider what we might have done and how we would have fared in Brian's situation. In the novel the abstract issue becomes the concrete and specific problem, enabling us to think about matters in a way that wouldn't otherwise be possible, short of diving our own plane into a lake miles from civilization.

That thinking the novel provokes and sustains can lead to conversation. As students discover that the society in *The Giver* is perhaps less utopian than its citizens seem to believe, they have the opportunity to discuss its virtues and its flaws. It is safe and peaceful. People do seem content. It's harmonious and orderly. Do your young readers like that? Do they value safety highly enough to accept what they may see as its flaws. On the other hand, it is constraining. It *does* make all the significant decisions for individuals. It leaves almost nothing for chance or personal choice. Could they live with that? Would they fight against it? What would they do in Jonas's circumstances? All of those issues are up for discussion.

And that conversation can lead to clarified understanding, our own understanding, which really means it helps us learn more about ourselves, more about the person next to us, more about the world in which we live. True, Brian is a fiction character and his survival is entirely in Paulsen's hands. Jonas is an invention, an image and a voice that emerges from print on the page, and his society with all of its good and bad is imaginary. But the concerns are real. The student reader has to struggle to survive in whatever his circumstances may be. They won't be identical to Brian's, but they'll call for similar courage and resolve and wit. Jonas's society is a fiction, but the reader is also in a world that limits his choices and imposes its will upon him. The fictional world teaches us about the real world.

Literature offers our students the chance to think not only about the characters they meet in the pages of the books, but also about their own lives. At a time when our own lives are bumping up against those of people across the globe, at a time when the world is not only flattened, but also smaller, at a time when, more than ever, we want students considering situations from another point of view, experiencing things they have never before experienced, developing empathy, developing the stamina to read critically texts longer than a few clicks of the computer screen, at a time when we want students to think for themselves, then we must give them texts that provide characters worth empathizing with, ideas worth wondering about, settings worth traveling to, and themes worth exploring. When we do that, then we are helping prepare them for the demands of the 21st century.

Kylene and Bob explore these thoughts and offer strategies for connecting point-and-click kids to novels in their *firsthand* project titled *Book by Book* (Heinemann, 2011).



To continue to engage with Kylene and Bob on this topic, go to www.Heinemann.com/pd/journal.

* <http://workproduct.wordpress.com/2009/10/14/how-many-novels-are-published-each-year>