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A Unit for Writing Children's Stories

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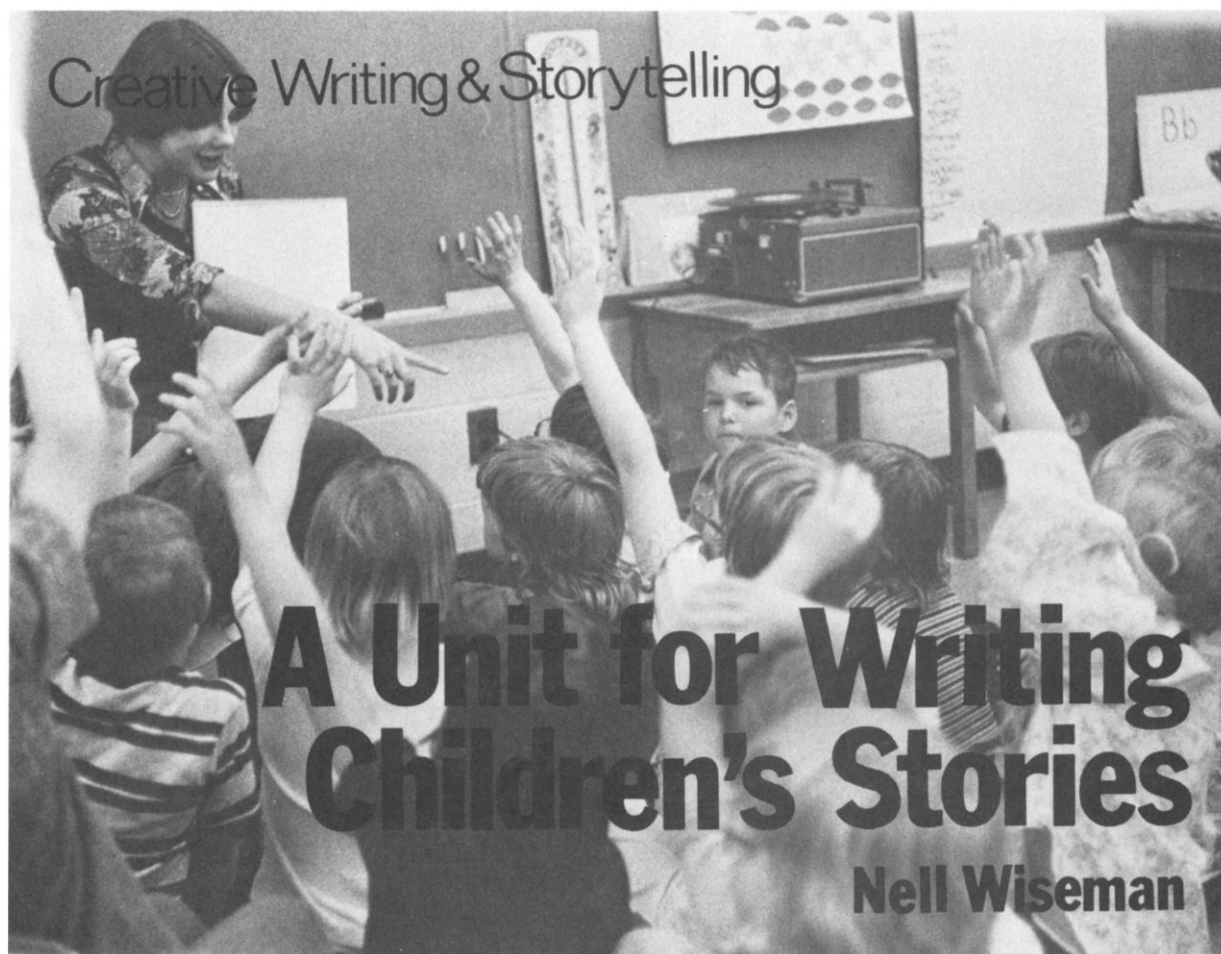
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For the past three years in my high school English classes, I have found that a unit on writing children's stories has been successful in developing an interest in writing. I have also found that an audience of children available for hearing the writings proves to be an exciting culmination to the unit. The unit is successful because high school students have not forgotten the stories that they loved to read as children, and are not too far removed from childhood.

To begin a children's story writing unit, I ask the students to remember what they were like between the ages of five and eight. Answers will vary. My students generalize that: children are beginning to make value judgements about what is good and what is bad; they have empathy for others; they are somewhat independent but still require the warmth and understanding of their parents; they have terrific imaginations and like humorous stories. This leads to my suggestion that they recall some of the chil-

dren's stories they enjoyed as young children. Then I tell them that they are going to take part in a Kiddies' Storytime. I begin by telling a story that I liked as a child called *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams. Next, volunteers from the class tell the children's stories that they remember. Near the end of the class hour, I ask the students what caused them to remember their favorite stories. From their answers come happy endings, good morals, single characters (generally animals), quick conflicts, easy plots and interesting sound words. All of these are important answers because they are a part of so many children's stories.

The next two days are spent in what I call Kiddies' Story Reading Time. The students are to find stories that would be suitable for children between the ages of five and eight. Some students do not have children's books or magazines of their own. Those who don't may browse through the materials I have collected. To enlarge a collection, a teacher may ask other faculty members for children's books. Usually these books are given freely with no request to return them. My collection of children's magazines has been donated by faculty members and by ele-

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mentary librarians. (The latter are often willing to give old or duplicate copies of books and magazines to classroom teachers.)

Keeping in mind the basic concepts for children's stories, students spend the two assigned days reading and discussing various stories. The reading done by the students during these two days is not merely for entertainment but for research and general knowledge of how professional writers write. Students develop concepts about plots, characters, settings, and language of children's stories. These two days are valuable in developing an understanding about the age group for which children's stories are written.

During the last three days of the first week, I discuss how figurative language plays an important part in children's stories. Students locate examples of similes, metaphors, personifications, alliterations, and hyperbole in children's stories. These are collected and read to the class. Students write many different examples of figures of speech that would appeal to the age level. These examples are typed and distributed to the class members.

As an outside activity, my students visit the children's room at the public library. They notice the kinds of books that children are reading. They also talk to the librarian about the types of books that interest small children. The information discovered in this activity is shared with other members of the class during the regular class meeting.

For the next phase in teaching this unit, elementary principals are contacted to obtain names of kindergarten and primary teachers who would be willing to cooperate in an exchange program. The principals are told about the plans for having students assist in reading children's stories to kindergarten and primary children during a story hour. In addition, the plan includes having the high school students return later to read children's stories that they have

written. If possible, we make plans to have the kindergarten and primary students write stories for the high school students. Once the overall plans are approved, I contact the teachers who are willing to participate. Most elementary teachers are very cooperative because they, too, need an audience for their students' writings. If a teacher is unable to arrange an exchange with kindergarten and/or primary students, it is possible to develop an exchange plan between the two groups by exchanging stories.

At the beginning of the second week, students are given the plans for the unit. During this week, each student is scheduled to read to the class members the book s/he has chosen or is assigned to read to the kindergarten or primary classes' story hour. This activity gives the entire class additional contact with stories already published for the specific age group for which they are going to be writing.

During the third week the students are sent to the elementary classes to read published stories. Students work in pairs. As one student reads a published story, the other student observes the children and records their reactions, verbal comments, facial expressions, or body movements. These observations are later shared with the other members of the class.

The fourth week is the one students enjoy most. This is the time the young children visit the high school class and read their short stories. If it is impossible for the young students to come to the high school classroom, their teacher may send their stories for the students to read. After this exchange has taken place, students use the rest of the class hours to prepare their original stories. It is at this time that the students realize how difficult it is to be a good writer. Students learn how important it is to use a simple vocabulary. They also learn the importance of short simple sentences.

Students spend the fifth week editing their



stories. They read their stories to each other and help each other with writing. Since the students have worked closely with the young children, they realize that small children are excellent critics. Children are very alert to the credibility of the plot as well as to gaps in the overall story. This knowledge makes students very conscious of problems in their stories.

After the stories are written, the students look for pictures or do their own illustrations for their stories. Many students use water colors, string, yarn, feathers, materials and toothpicks to add to their illustrations.

During the sixth week, students read their stories to the kindergarten and primary classes. The class discussion about the experiences that happened while reading their stories reveal many humorous happenings and good constructive criticisms about their stories. Kindergarten and primary teachers sometimes have their students write letters to my classes telling which stories they liked best. This is most helpful in

identifying the stories that are considered the best.

This is not the end of the stories written in this unit. They are excellent material for the high school drama teacher's Children's Theater and Puppet Show. The students may also attempt to get their stories published by searching through the *Writer's Market* for possible publishers.

Since most children's stories end happily, this unit likewise ends with happiness that is a product of success. The students involved in the unit successfully complete stories that are interesting and enjoyable to others. They, also, discover a need to investigate the audience for which they are writing. The entire process involves research in children's stories, reading to a given audience, creating a plot, writing a story and, finally, testing it with an audience for which it is written. This unit ends as many children's stories do—they live happily ever after with knowledge gained through a fun approach to writing. ■



### A Call for Manuscripts

#### INTERDISCIPLINARY ENGLISH

A rapidly growing trend in secondary English is toward interdisciplinary courses and programs. In some cases, these programs involve interdepartmental cooperation and team teaching. In others, English teachers simply extend the dimensions of their field to include reading and writing activities based in other subject areas. This issue will be devoted to examining possibilities for interdisciplinary studies, ranging from approaches that can be developed by a single teacher, working alone, to more complex cooperative efforts. The Editor especially welcomes articles written by classroom teachers describing their interdisciplinary courses.

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