



Outlier Literature Lives

Over the years, I have become convinced that the corollary is true: most English types have an aversion to anything mathematical. Of course, I must admit the operative word is “most.” For all I know, some of you might have picked up *The ALAN Review* immediately after seeking a solution to an algebraic equation. Exaggerations aside, I’ll acknowledge that anything is possible, but choosing to solve a few algorithms is as foreign to me as choosing to chew glass.

In our English world, one that takes pleasure in the merits of young adult literature, we contentedly deal with plots, themes, and devices rather than proofs, permutations, and integers. Ours is not a perfect world. We have come to enjoy and expect multiple truths, while in math, there is always a lovely and definitive answer. Given my math phobia, it has given me a measure of comfort to know neither could co-exist, at least until now. With my high regard for literature and its tolerance for subjectivity, imagine my surprise at the title of an excellent literary article that came across my desk. It was entitled *Outlier Literature Lives* by Joseph O. Milner.

“Outlier” was not a word I was familiar with. For half a century, the words “in and out” have made perfect sense to me, but operating with a near-meaning of the word “outlier” was just not good enough. A simple Google search was called for, and to my astonishment, the search confirmed a growing suspicion: a math term had infiltrated, and very effectively infiltrated, our business of English.

The question was obvious. In what way could an outlier, a data point that is located far outside standard deviations or far from the rest of the data, possibly refer to the literature of adolescents? First of all, what was an outlier in literature? Secondly, if, in math, an outlier required investigation, would outlier literature also suggest an investigation of something unsuitable or badly out of place? In this very interesting essay, I learned that our mutual pedagogy begged for investigation. I was pleased to learn the answer, and after you read about the importance of enriching our students’ lives with outlier literature, all of us may finally understand why mathematicians spend so much time with their calculators and theorems.

Outlier Literature Lives Joseph O. Milner

Decades ago when I was seeking my doctoral degree at the University of North Carolina I realized that I was an outlier. I did not have the rich reading repertoires of my fellow English dons and I had a much stronger social-political awareness than most of them. I was attracted to the vitality of Victorian prose and American texts that were heavily loaded with political and religious subtext. My advisor accentuated these unacceptable tendencies, having been a journalist and remaining an ardent baseball fan.

So, I was naturally attracted to American Studies programs at Minnesota, California Berkley and Harvard, but an esteemed and wise professor cautioned me about the unlikely possibility of most candidates completing Harvard’s arduous program and the lack of good fit of the other two with English departments who might hire me. My compromise was to focus on the marginal literature of the old Southwest (the present Southeast) that appeared in Eastern newspapers and was the forerunner of

Twain's magnificent disingenuous narrative *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

I was interested in how Twain used the ironies of Huck's report to deliver scalding criticism of the social mores of that time and how he'd learned how to create this duplicitous look at his culture from the newspaper humorists who had themselves created unvarnished spokesmen to deliver their wayward opinions of the rough frontier. I looked at four of the best known newspaper humorists, (Longstreet, Baldwin, Harris, and Thompson) to unearth the social, economic, political and religious rhetoric embedded in their work. When I arrived at Wake Forest to teach English, I realized that one of my tenure track colleagues was an American Studies graduate from Minnesota who shared many of my same broad interests in texts. Through the early years of our teaching, I could see that both of us were not in sync with our colleagues about how we taught or what we taught. To make matters worse, I was becoming ever more concerned with pedagogy because I was teaching an English methods course that no one else in the English department would have had the least bit of interest in. In addition, I taught a course in contemporary literature, "Cats Cradle to Cuckoo's Nest," that appealed to students and gave serious attention in the rhetorical postures in emerging sixties and seventies texts that were considered outside the canon much like my dissertation's literature. As I became more fully committed to preparing teachers and my appointment was shifted to Education, I

began to discover the rich vein of adolescent and children's literature that was similarly non-canonical and equally loaded with life issues. These books had some of the same humor and poignancy that flowed through the pages of *Huckleberry Finn*; but more than that, they begged for exploration of the social, economic, and political and religious dimensions of contemporary life. Moreover, the Reading Cycle (Milner and Milner, 2003) that I developed urged teachers to help students *enter, explore, and extend* these texts, so unearthing such implications became a regular part of my methods class since they were such compelling features of many of the captivating adolescent texts. Because they are too often excluded from the canon, they become forbidden fruit and all the more powerful texts for adolescent readers.

The social dimension of these non-canonical books blatantly permeates their pages. They explore and expose serious problems in the social fabric through the eyes of engaging adolescent characters. These narrators are as out of kilter with mainline adult understanding as were my newspaper observers of the old Southwest. These narrators see the failures of adults and their world and seek to replace them with ideal worlds and pure relationships. John and Lorraine in *The Pigman* see the flaws of parents, the foolishness of conventions, and the need for a stay against the loneliness of the Mr. Pignattis of the world. In *A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich* and *That Was Then, This Is Now*, we see the social dread wrought by drugs and the slim family ties that leave open the door

to self degradation. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* and *Night John* are books from rural settings with very different tones that nevertheless

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make the social injustice and evil of racism their central story.

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The economic inequities of our culture are ever present in the lives of students but are perhaps for that reason less often dramatized and somewhat less poignantly portrayed in this literature. The book that most forcefully presents the grinding poverty of daily life is *Out of the Dust*. Billy Jo's family is literally smothered by the ubiquitous dust; her community is being snuffed out by its grip.

somewhat less poignantly portrayed in this literature. The book that most forcefully presents the grinding poverty of daily life is *Out of the Dust*. Billy Jo's family is literally smothered by the ubiquitous dust; her community is being snuffed out by its grip. The dust jacket picture does not really point to the sad saga of the dust bowl, but it is appropriate because it captures the equally economically devastated share cropper world that James Agee and Walter Evans etched in America's soul with their telling words and somber photographs in *Let Us Now Praise Famous*

Men. While Billy Jo's world is growing grimmer and her father's labors seem less purposeful, we see the hand of the caring federal government reach into their world and the image of Roosevelt as the restorer ever more present in their lives. It is not the intruding or marauding hand that some reactionaries complain about today, but a healing and supporting hand that sustains the weak and needy.

Religion often provokes powerful classroom discussions. Jim Fowler's *Stages of Faith* (1981) claims that the introduction of certain faith issues changes the nature of class so fundamentally that mere recitation becomes authentic discussion when these issues emerge. When core issues that embrace metaphysical or religious questions arise in the classroom, a new level of seriousness is engendered. *The Chocolate War*, *The Slave Dancer* and other books that touch on such issues as humans' predisposition for evil captivate students and make these non-canonical novels powerful attractors. Even less seriously treated children's books' non-canonical stance allows them to raise serious questions about belief and dogma. When a simple scheme of belief steps taken from *Engaging the Powers* is laid out from childlike concreteness to gnostic abstractness, young readers can see how *Dog Heaven's* warm fuzzy afterlife appeals to one part of our religious understanding, while the more perplexing *The Next Place* and the antagonistic *Starry Messenger* speak of a theological belief system more closely allied with process theology. When these non-canonical texts are thoughtfully encountered their

capacity to create cognitive dissonance concerning religious issues is powerful.

Politics is central to these fictive stories. The science fiction genre and others that would seem to be even more closely reflective of our present social arrangements embody strong and dichotomous rhetorical stances that are a part of their non-canonical assessment. *The Giver* and *The White Mountains* both create exaggerated portraits of our present culture. Lowry's powerful book shows us a world where intrusion and control are subtle and not so obviously noxious while Christopher charts a society where external and internal control are complete and life is

The *Enchantress from the Stars* shows us controlling and exploiting social states very like our own, but Engdahl also shows us a culture built on a wholly altruistic principle. The leaders from that hyper-moral world live out a Kohlbergian stage six existence where explorers give their lives to save lesser developed humans rather than control them for their own purposes.

worn bare. Both are so debilitating and life denying that the heroic adolescents who people these stories see the loss of will and personal choice for what it is and break away from the culture to an uncertain but exhilarating freedom. The *Enchantress from the Stars* shows us controlling and exploiting social states very like our own, but Engdahl also shows us a culture built on a wholly altruistic principle. The leaders from that hyper-moral world live out a Kohlbergian stage six existence where explorers give their lives to save lesser developed humans rather than control them for their own purposes.

Social issues, economic forces, religious concerns and political

pressures run deep through the pages of these non-canonical texts, just as they did 150 years earlier in newspaper print. Neither was acknowledged as true literature, they were clearly outside the canon. Interestingly, today, the schools of my state are squeezing out these questionable adolescent texts and replacing them with Dante's *Inferno* and Pascal's eternal wager essay. The message in the old canon seems more palatable to rigid adults and frightened members of our Board of Education. They see such texts as time tested through ponderously onerous and use the authority of their longevity to further instill them in the canon at the expense of books that more surely speak to the lives of today's

students. But if we are to create classrooms where true learning is aroused, we need to turn to these outliers as well as the sacred texts. They create words on world, as James Moffet said, not mere words on words.

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