

## Memories of Literacy, Culture and Kansas

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For two weeks in June last summer, for nine days out of the ten and accompanied by my husband Charles, I had the great pleasure of teaching a graduate course titled "Literacy and Culture in America" at the University of Kansas, Lawrence. Arlene Barry of KU (who, with her chair, Phil McKnight, scheduled the course) has asked me to write about the experience and to suggest what I would do differently.

My aim was to look at the history of literacy (mostly reading) from the perspective of the history of the book, and to mine both primary and secondary sources. We used Cathy Davidson's *Reading in America: Literature and Social History* (1989) as our basic secondary text. We also searched for the literacy activities of characters in Susanna Rowson's novel *Charlotte Temple* (1791) and Susan Coolidge's children's book, *What Katy Did* (1872); for ethics and values promoted in Elliott Gorn's selections from the 1879 McGuffey Readers; and for sexism in *Dick and Jane as Victims: Sex Stereotyping in Children's Readers* (1972). For the course outline and my explanations, see the SIG's webpage, [www.historyliteracy.org/syllabi.html](http://www.historyliteracy.org/syllabi.html).

What made this course so special, apart from the six super insightful and hardworking graduate students who took it, was its location. We were given a classroom within the university's superb Kenneth Spencer Research Library, presided over by Richard Clement, Special Collections Librarian, who gave us a personal tour of the library's children's collection. Sheryl Williams, University Archivist and Curator of the Kansas Collection, presented a slide lecture on Langston Hughes. The 800 or so textbooks (readers, spellers, grammars) Charles and I had just donated to the library were placed in cabinets around three walls of the room. Charles, who faithfully attended every class (he balked at *What Katy Did* but I utterly forbade him to duck out!) would leap up and down grabbing illustrative texts as we needed them.

What would I do differently? I would definitely keep Charles! The students loved him and he brought a most valuable publishing perspective to the discussion. I would also keep our Socratic approach--the students did all the hard work of analyzing the texts in the light of their varied experiences. (Opening the class to English graduates as well as those in the School of Education was an inspiration on Phil's and Arlene's part, as each discipline had a different perspective.) But next time I would use fewer of my own articles: the fact that their author was the grade-giver led to inhibited discussions. I would also like to redress the gender balance: our sources were unintentionally weighted towards females. One problem is that *What Katy Did* is still in print, but books by Horatio Alger are not. And I wish Cathy Davidson would update her collection: 1989 is getting a little elderly. One additional aim would be to introduce the students to manuscripts as well as rare books, in this ideal setting.

The assignments are recyclable, I think. The essay that we called our "Deconstruction of a Literacy Textbook" produced good results, as did giving almost everyone a temporary Incomplete to extend the time for the final research report on a topic of his or her choice. The quality of work promoted by this strategy may be readily seen in the essays by two of my students, Karen Bates and Jennifer Hightower, in the present issue of this newsletter.

