

Children's Literature, Adulting, and Career Development

Responding to the “precipitous decline” in majors since 2008,ⁱ the ADE’s recent report (July 2018) on the state of the English major commends departments that have developed career-oriented courses offering a “clear sense of the links” between English and “life after graduation” (*A Changing Major* 1, 13). It also observes the diminishing status of, and need to more vigorously defend, literary-historical content, the discipline’s organizing principle throughout the twentieth century. As undergraduate English programs continue to face the intense pressure (from students, parents, administrators, and legislators) to address career preparation and other such outcomes, what case might be made for the study of something like children’s literature—a genre that, until recently, has been the ugly stepchild, as it were, of our own academic community, often dismissed as lacking the seriousness literariness required for “adult” investigation?

This essay explores my recent experiences teaching children’s texts in a newly instituted Literature capstone (titled “Beyond English”) at Purdue University, a large, STEM-focused public land-grant university in the Midwest, where these pressures are very much at the forefront of educational decisions. In the face of Helen Myers’ admonition that English departments must “start acknowledging that many students and their parents literally cannot oppose education as vocation” (“Feeding English Majors”), it asks: What should or could or might be the relationship between the teaching of children’s literature at the college level and the race towards job training as a hallmark of twenty-first-century higher education? What for instance is gained (or lost) by incorporating children’s books into a senior capstone ostensibly about “adulting,” professionalization, and career development? And how might animating debates within the fields of children’s literature and childhood studies lend themselves to students thinking about the afterlives of college experience?

ⁱ For another account about students fleeing the humanities response to the recession, see Benjamin Schmidt, “The Humanities Are in Crisis.” *The Atlantic*, 23 August 2018. Accessed 13 September 2018.