Wolf, S. A., & Heath, S. B. (1993, November/ December). The net of story. The Horn Book Magazine, 705-713.

The murmur of kings and queens, courage and destiny, rhythm and rhyme, new and strange vocabulary flows into her mind. When the story is over and the voice in her ear ebbs away, the child is left with a residue of the treasure. In the child's mind one story combines and recombines with other stories, connecting text with text and text with life. A child who moves easily in and out of the pages of a book carries a full spectrum of stories in her head. She links texts together, creating a weave of books with everyday life, using the senses of sight, sound, and movement to uncover and explore a common theme.

This article stems from the work of a nine-year case study of my two young daughters' response to literature. We were looking for answers to some of the following questions: Where does children's literature go? What happens to the reading experience once the immediate situation of adult and child reading a story is over and the cover of the book is closed? What grows out of the reading experience that appears to have lasting influences on mental, social, imaginary, and critical capacities? We focused on how, when, and where my children use the "talk" of text, both prose and poetry, to enhance, enjoy, and express their own verbal repertoires. When the children move *prose* text into their talk, they clip out phrases and individual words and splice them into the smooth talk of their conversation or composition, but when they call on *poetry*, it more than likely occurs as a recitation of a whole piece or a complete verse. Children make, break, and re-create rules for language, finding new applications for chunks of text which, to their minds, are not frozen in print but available for use.

Following in the footsteps of earlier parent-researchers interested in their children's literate behaviors such as Dorothy Butler, Dorothy White, and Hugh and Maureen Crago, we explored the leading role children's literature played in Lindsey and Ashley's ways with words.

Prose connections made by the children called for heightened formality, varied intonation, and precise vocabulary. "Sister! Sister!" I heard Ashley exclaim one night, when I asked her to call her sister in to set the table for dinner. "Come in the house before the darkness comes." Her tone was dramatically overwrought, her hands clasped together. Lindsey responded in kind: "I'm coming, o sister," leaping through the door as if pursued by wolves.

Their language was not a direct quotation of any text I could locate, yet it had the familiar ring of the fairy tale where children were constantly lost or abandoned and worried about the oncoming night. The words "before the darkness comes" were far more typical of story language than the language of the everyday – in

other words, "before it gets dark." And Lindsey usually addressed her sister by her name, rather than "o sister." The use of story language helped to soften the harsh or disliked demands of everyday life – setting the table was "boring," as was coming in from play, but story language helped to smooth the transition from the extraordinary to the ordinary.

It was also used to avoid or delay work, or if work was unavoidable, make it seem more like play. One Sunday morning, the girls were engaged in a quarrel, alternating between crying and yelling. I was upstairs working and had interceded several times before I lost my temper. "If you girls have so much time to argue, then you probably have time to do some housework!" I flung the dusty kitchen rug out the door and sent Lindsey up the stairs for the vacuum cleaner. I stationed Ashley at the sink to do the breakfast dishes. Both girls eyed me resentfully, but I ignored their pleas and went back to work. After a while, I realized that it was much too quiet and descended the stairs again, expecting the worse. Instead, they were both happily scrubbing the kitchen floor, a task which I had not even thought to suggest. "I'm Laura and Ashley is Mary," Lindsey explained. "We're playing *Little House in the Big Woods* [Harper], and we've got to get the cabin clean for our mom!"

Vygotsky suggests that in play a child acts as though she were "a head taller" than herself. In this case, the girls knew that no pleas of "do we have to?" would mitigate my irritation. Instead, between them, they made their tasks acceptable by moving into the rules of the Ingalls girls' world, where children obeyed their parents instantly and rarely squabbled. Getting the cabin clean was far more intriguing than doing the breakfast dishes.

Lindsey and Ashley often used the text on the page to express the emotions of the everyday world. They teased apart the dialogues of literary texts and transformed them to operate within the set of social relations and desired actions of the current situation. Lindsey often used words from text to shape and soften the blow of her critical comments. One afternoon I asked her to accompany me on a fast walk. She excitedly agreed and grabbed her bike so she could "keep up." As we walked and rode through our neighborhood at a fairly fast clip, my voice became rather breathy, since I was unaccustomed to carrying on a conversation while exercising. Lindsey regarded me and complained, "Mom, I thought you said we were going to go fast. Here you are huffing and puffing and I'm just dawdling!" "Dawdling?!" I exclaimed. "Where'd you get that word?" She rolled her eyes. "From Pearl, Mom. From Pearl."

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She was referring to the female heroine in William Steig's *The Amazing Bone* (Farrar). Pearl is a pig who, though bound for more exciting adventures, has time to relax on her way home from school: "It was a brilliant day, and instead of going straight home from school, Pearl dawdled. She watched the grownups in town at their grownup work, things she might someday be doing."

Lindsey combined two stories she knew well. She made a physical match between the action of the wolf in "The Three Little Pigs" and my own rapid breathing, while she used a leisurely word from *The Amazing Bone* to describe her own action.

At seven, Lindsey was frequently able to attribute the literary source of her word choice, particularly if the word came from Steig. A wizard with words, Steig never substitutes an ordinary word when a more accurate and dazzling word will do. Ashley likewise used his words, but at four years of age, she could rarely tell me the source.

One afternoon, Ashley discovered a spider on a web underneath a corner table. Having an intense dislike of these creatures, she began to yell: "A spider! A spider! Go away, you spider!" She began to wave her hands threateningly close to the web. I ordered her to stop tormenting the creature, explaining for the hundredth time that spiders did us no harm and ate pesky flies. She hesitatingly left the spider alone to turn back to her coloring. But seconds later she leaned toward the spider once more and issued her Parthian shot. "Scrabboonit!" she shouted, waving her fist in the air.

I recognized a key word in *The Amazing Bone*, in which a talking bone uses magic incantations to transform a threatening fox and save Pearl. I took the word *scrabboonit* to be a humorous combination of *scram*, *beat it*, and *git*, and each time I had read the story, I had yelled the word, waving my fist in the air. Ashley adopted both my tone and my gesture when she yelled at the spider, but when I asked her where she had got the word, she said, "I don't know. I just made it myself!"

In children's reported speech, which often lacks reference to the literary source, the child's "real" feelings are identified with those of the character (or the adult reader's interpretation of character) who uttered the original words. In the book, the bone wanted to rid himself of a fox, and Ashley had to contend with her spider. The situations were similar, and the word chosen for dealing with that situation was the same.

Yet, words selected from text were not always used as verbal weapons; many times they were selected to create expressive analogies. One evening, after Ashley and I dropped Lindsey off at her gymnastics class, we emerged from the building to be greeted by a brilliantly blue evening sky.

"Look at that sky," I exclaimed. "It's beautiful." Ashley gazed up into the darkening sky. "Yes, it's a blue and nightingale sky." I clasped her hand and praised her metaphor: "What a beautiful thing to say!" We continued walking in silence, watching the sky. But when we reached the car, Ashley turned to me and asked, "What's a nightingale?"

Ashley had chosen a word of beauty, a word she could only have encountered in written text, to capture the indescribable loveliness of the evening sky. "The Nightingale" by Hans Christian Andersen was a tale we read months before, and although she had forgotten the definition of *nightingale*, she remembered the beauty attached to the word. The sky was too brilliant for ordinary words.

Both Ashley and Lindsey inserted story phrases to extend or explain their comments, to analogize their stance or feelings with that of a character in a story. At times, however, their use of story language was on a literal plane – gleaning information from text. One evening, the girls took a bath together. Because Ashley was young and still a bit unsteady, I stayed in the bathroom with them after the shampoos were done. I was brushing my teeth when Ashley took a nose dive into the water.

"Mom!" Lindsey yelled. I dropped to my knees and yanked the baby up. Ashley came up gasping for air, coughing and sputtering. I worriedly watched her face, holding her close. Lindsey, too, was worried, and her voice was panic-stricken as she suggested, "Push the water out of him and push the air into him!" But Ashley recovered quickly, and had no need for emergency techniques.

Lindsey's frantic advice came from *Tikki Tikki Tembo* (Holt), the story of two small boys who take turns falling into a well. An old Chinese man with a ladder methodically pushes out the water and pushes in the air and thereby saves their lives. In her sense of urgency, Lindsey forgot the proper transformation of pronoun, but she did not forget the survival information. Even in an emergency, she reached to text for resolution.

When the children moved prose into their everyday language, it came in isolated words or short phrases. Some were unique to the world of literature, while others were familiar in life but stated with a reference attached or with the dramatic intonation and formality of language that signaled a shift into the world of story. As the children made metaphors between what they saw, heard, and felt in text to matching features of their lives, they

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softened the blow of their verbal criticism and created verbal art.

What about the children's use of poetry? Lukens suggests that the principal difference between prose and poetry lies in poetry's "compactness" and suggests that "a single word in a poem says far more than a single word in prose; the connotations and images hint, imply, and suggest other meanings." Instead of poetic words having one uniform meaning which perfectly fits the poet's intention, the words are chosen specifically to pack in multiple meanings.

For the young child, perhaps the most important difference lies in rhythm. While rhyme is a common feature in children's poetry, rhythm is a requirement. At the age of four, Ashley was able to discriminate between the sound of a story and a nursery rhyme, and one of the central differences was in rhythmic stress of the words in the poem. In addition, she was also interested in making rhyme, and her creations were often compilations of the many rhymes she had heard in text.

One afternoon, she and I sat on the sofa to read a story. She requested *Old Mother Hubbard* (Random), a version of the Mother Goose rhyme done by Alice and Martin Provensen. I opened the book and had barely made it through the first line – "Old Mother Hubbard went to the cupboard" – when Ashley stopped me. "Let me say it," she commanded. And then she sang: "Old Mother Hubbard / Went to the cupboard / Eating her curds and whey. / Along came her doggie, / And snapped off her nosie, / And frightened Miss Mother away."

Her verse was a blending of three Mother Goose rhymes whose chosen parts may have fed her inspiration. The first was the original "Old Mother Hubbard," while the other two seem to have been "Little Miss Muffet" and "Sing a Song of Sixpence." We had sung the latter since she'd been an infant, always ending the final line with my fingers scissoring through the air to "snap off her nose."

As she composed her verbal poem, Ashley called on and transformed the trio of verses and spliced them together in order to describe the picture on the page – that of Old Mother Hubbard and her dog heading for the cupboard. Although the text of "Old Mother Hubbard" was long and unfamiliar to her, the rhyme pattern was the same as that of "Little Miss Muffet," allowing Ashley the poetic license to use curds and whey in lieu of a bone. Still, there was no spider in sight, and Ashley conformed to the rule of taking objects from the picture on the page by replacing "along came a spider" with "along came her doggie."

In the fifth line of her verse Ashley interjected her third rhyme, from "Sing a Song of Sixpence," to slip in her own interpretation of the power of dogs to snap off noses. The word nose was stretched to "nosie" to make the rhyme. Finally, she reverted back to "Little Miss Muffet," substituting "Miss Mother" for Miss Muffet, to show a dog's ability to frighten people away. Ashley was frightened of dogs herself. They were not allowed in our university housing, and her own brief encounters with dogs had been unpleasant. Thus, it was perfectly reasonable to her that the "doggie" would be the agent of Mother Hubbard's ill fortune in losing her "nosie," but this reasonable bit of poetic license had to accommodate the necessary inclusion of end rhyme.

Ashley's creation met many of the criteria for a child-created Mother Goose rhyme: it is nonsensical (original meanings have been lost over the years due to unfamiliarity with word meanings, and the sense is not as important as the rhythm and rhyme); lines in close proximity rhyme (*Hubbard/cupboard, doggie/nosie, whey/away*); and it exemplifies the intertextual nature of Mother Goose – one rhyme may lend or pull its rhythm or meaning from another.

When the girls moved poetic text into their everyday talk, the "chunk" was a larger piece than that of prose and carried the original rhythm and rhyme, rather than the drama of the intonation. Once, during a particularly violent argument, Ashley came screaming down the stairs with Lindsey in hot pursuit. Ashley accused Lindsey of pinching her, and Lindsey denied it.

"You did!" Ashley glared at her sister and then turned to me. "She pinched me!" "I didn't," Lindsey pleaded innocence. "You did!" "I didn't!" At which point Ashley screamed, "Liar! Ninnyhammer! Dimwit! Dunce! To jail at once!"

Ashley was quoting lines from Harve and Margot Zemachs' story poem *The Judge* (Farrar). She recognized the potentially punishable use of the word *liar*, but simultaneously softened and hardened the blow with a humorous bit of literature. She also did not extract the unique words and use them in isolation. While she could have easily used the word *ninnyhammer* alone, she kept the word intact in its original phrase and moved in the whole piece.

Margaret Meek explains that those "who know how to recognize bits and pieces of other texts in what they read find it is like the discovery of old friends in new places. . . . They become 'insiders' in the network." Ashley and Lindsey are part of the network of literature and cite, revise, and elaborate on text to make social meaning. This network serves a social purpose, to build and maintain the social and literary connections of our community.

One night, as I tucked Lindsey into bed, I read her Edith Hamilton's story *Pygmalion and Galatea* (Little), a childhood favor-

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ite of my own. Pygmalion, sculptor and misogynist, creates a statue of a woman more beautiful than any in life. He names her Galatea – and Lindsey laughed in delight at the name. She rolled it about in her mouth, savoring the name, repeating it several times.

Poor Pygmalion. As an ultimate irony, he falls in love with Galatea. But his kisses, his embraces, his gifts of little birds and bright flowers evoke no response from the cold, hard beauty. A wretched man, Pygmalion goes to the temple of Venus and prays that he might find a maiden with the form of his beloved Galatea. The goddess of love is touched by this devotion and makes the flames of her temple fires flare three times as an omen of her favor. Pygmalion returns home, reflecting on the message of the flames, and embraces his love.

As Pygmalion kisses Galatea, I kissed Lindsey, and just like the young hero, I started back in surprise. Instead of the cold reality of the statue, Pygmalion discovered a trace of warmth, a slight response. Could it be? Pygmalion touched Galatea's lips as I touched Lindsey's. Yes, they were warm! Lindsey stared at me with pleasure. "I'm coming to life, aren't I? I'm coming to life!" I assured her that indeed she was and ended the story with the wedding of Pygmalion and Galatea. Lindsey leaned back against her pillow and sighed. "And they all lived happily ever after."

As Lindsey lay in bed listening to the story of Pygmalion and Galatea, she was able to anticipate the ending of a text she had never heard. Before the climactic transformation of Galatea from statue to life, Lindsey knew the outcome. "I'm coming to life!" she whispered. The essence of the narrative, that love is the great restorer, was one she knew well. Sleeping Beauty was awakened with a kiss, and Snow White was brought to life by the love of her prince. The use of the personal pronoun in Lindsey's words was yet another example of the intimate ties between the language of story and the language of her life.

When the young child listens to the sound of story and translates this sound into the talk of life, she becomes a ventriloquist of multiple voices. Yet, she does not mimic the voice of story, but rather transforms text to meet the needs of life. She creates a dialogue between texts – a dialogue that both expresses and educates the imagination. The best of texts call on multiple voices to create a unified whole: tone, style, dialect, puns, jokes, and phrases are transported intact or edited to make meaning. All children have access to multiple texts – alternative voices, accents, and forms of language. Text from the printed page offers only one of the myriad possible sources for diversity. Yet, in a community that values literature, this source takes on heightened meaning. Those who study children's response to literature suggest that both prose and poetry add to the individual child's vocabulary, but the incorporation of text is far more complex than recitation; it is re-creation.

De Beaugrande suggests that when we pick up a text we quickly discover its connections to the net of story. By this he means the intertextual relationship of one printed story to another. Equally important, however, are the connections to the real world. The children's ways of making metaphor and meaning, hooking text to life, are the accepted and applauded ways of the social community to which they belong. Lindsey and Ashley choose their own treasures from story: shimmering roles, unique dialogue, and iridescent insights into the world of life and literature. They turn the pieces of story over in their heads, assessing the quality, weighing the consequences, judging the beauty. Some pieces they throw back into the sea. But many they weave into the net of their thoughts to be brought out at some private pleasurable moment or shared with friends and family.

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