

Common Interests by Grade Level from *Teaching and Learning at Home*

KINDERGARTEN: AGE 5

Priscilla Vail in *Common Ground* suggests that perhaps because children at this age are struggling with self-control, they typically like stories about animals and children who successfully stretch the limits of adult tolerance. Any of the Curious George books by Rey and the books of Madeline's adventures by Bemelmans will interest this reader. Although many of the activities in the Educators Publishing Service series, *Well-Told Tales*, are beyond children at this age, the stories in the Tricksters unit will delight the young learner.

1ST GRADE: AGE 6

Around age six children begin to separate reality from fantasy, making stories in which characters float between the two a favorite. Their need for justice is satisfied by the triumph of good over evil in fables and fairy tales. At age six children may not be ready developmentally for the activities in *Well-Told Tales*, but they will enjoy hearing the stories read aloud.

Easy-to-read Books

As children become able to decode simple words, they will enjoy reading other books besides their phonetic readers. In the young children's corner of your library, look for easy-to-read books. Great favorites are published by Harper and Row in the *I Can Read* series, especially the *Frog and Toad* books. Bradbury Press publishes the *Henry and Mudge* series; Candlewick Press has a series of *Little Bear* books; Children's Press publishes *My First Steps to Reading*, a series containing a book for each letter of the alphabet; Dial Books for Young Readers also has a collection of titles in this easy-to-read category. The language in these books is more natural than that in tightly-controlled phonetic readers, giving rise to the need for increased sight-word vocabulary. However, the motivation to read "real books" is often strong enough that children master the new words quickly and happily.

2ND–3RD GRADES: AGES 7 & 8

This is the age at which children begin to enjoy learning information from books. For this reason, books about children from other cultures and other times are favorites, allowing for a natural blending of social studies and language arts.

At some point between ages seven and eight, children become ready to move deeper into the magic inherent in great stories; thus, they are ready also to appreciate the language and structure of them. The stories and activities in any of the *Well-Told Tales* units will work to help you develop this appreciation. Even if children cannot read the books on their own, and most cannot at age seven, they are ready to begin learning about the language of books and the elements of a great story from someone else's reading it to them. If you've read these books earlier, familiarity will only enhance your children's enjoyment of the stories. The older children will especially enjoy the *Folk and Fairy Tales* unit.

Books written to give accounts of the same historical event, but from different perspectives, open young minds to the idea of considering circumstances from differing points of view. *Sam the Minuteman* and *George the Drummer Boy*, both *I Can Read* books published by Harper Trophy, tell the story of the Battle of Lexington and Concord through the eyes of Sam, a boy from Lexington, and those of George, a British drummer boy.

Their command of language and word meanings should have developed enough to allow them to "get" jokes, making simple joke books popular with this age reader. The antics of Parrish's character Amelia Bedelia delight the seven- or eight-year-old who sees trouble coming with every misinterpreted word.

4TH–5TH GRADES: AGES 9 & 10

As children mature, their thirst for understanding the world grows, making them prime audiences for myths from around the world. Many children's books are based on early beliefs about the world and explanations of human nature. Older children and those with good reading skills will be ready for some of the easier books of mythology. By all means, don't limit your study to Greek and Roman myths; there are wonderful myths from the Norsemen, from Africa, from the East, and from Central and South American Indians. Through the richness of myths, your children will gather much cultural information for their social studies work. Acclaimed in *Reading for the Love of It*, the six Homeric hymns translated by Penelope Proddow and illustrated by Barbara Cooney may serve your children's thirst for tales of mythology. Children's rooms at public libraries and bookstores typically have a wide selection of myths and folktales.

It is at about this age that children gain the reading skills and attention span to read novels written for young readers. Fantasy is a favorite at this age, especially the books of Madeline L'Engle and the Narnia Series by C.S. Lewis. There are other children's authors whose characters and adventures delight this age reader. Many can be found in paperback and purchased inexpensively. An "owned" book has the added advantage of writing one's name in it and allows re-reading. Revisiting old literary friends to relive adventures with them inspires a child to make new friends in the pages of other books.

6TH GRADE: AGE 11

Add to the fantasy novels suggested above, survival novels such as *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and *Julie of the Wolves*. Your students will have special interest, perhaps history or sports, which will guide you in making literary selections. There are some fine historical novels, biographies of historical figures, and non-fiction history books to keep young minds reading. Children at this age may also be interested in short stories on topics relevant to their experience.

7TH–8TH GRADES: AGES 12 & 13

Among the interests of students at this age are the environment, family and friends, sports, mystery, adventure, and survival. Many libraries have young adult

sections containing titles specifically chosen to meet the reading needs and interests of this age.

Historical Fiction

Young teens interested in history enjoy historical fiction and non-fiction. Howard Fast has written many novels, long enjoyed by young teens; of particular interest to American history students are *April Morning* from the Revolutionary War period and *Across Five Aprils* depicting life during the Civil War. *Johnny Tremain* by Esther Forbes gives a picture of life in Boston at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. Mildred D. Taylor wrote of the experiences of Blacks in the South before integration in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* and *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*. Recently, to meet the rekindled interest in the Vietnam War Era, some fine books on the topic have been published for teens. Through a teenage friendship, Theresa Nelson dramatizes the conflict between activists in the peace movement and supporters of the military in her novel *And One for All*. Also from this era, *December Stillness* tells the story of a Vietnam veteran, a victim of post-traumatic stress syndrome, befriended by a teenage girl. You will find other examples of fine historical fiction to illuminate America's past, as well as the histories of people throughout the world.

Science Fiction

Most adolescents enjoy science fiction. Those with a taste for science and technology enjoy the scientific and technological speculation. Other readers enjoy it for the imaginative account of the author's world view. But, we all are fascinated by predictions of where the future will lead us. Sophisticated readers interested in philosophy will enjoy Arthur C. Clark. The works of Ray Bradbury and others are understood and enjoyed by most young teens. Both Clark and Bradbury have written short stories as well as novels.

Myths and Folklore

Mythology, folklore, and fairy tales can all be revisited in a more academic context at this age. Students are fascinated to find the similarities in the explanations of the universe and the nature of man as presented in the early stories of people from the far corners of the globe. They enjoy making connections between the prevailing philosophy of a culture and its mythology and folklore. For instance, Eastern folklore is rich with Zen thinking from China; current Shintu teaching and Japanese

mythology are nearly one and the same; Japanese folktales teach the valued principles of order and obedience. American tall tales reflect the pioneers' attitude of Manifest Destiny and their right to conquer the vast American continent. By contrast, Native American myths and folklore demonstrate their belief in the sanctity of the land. Young teens feel the draw of the ages and diverse cultures as they study this literature. An excellent resource for adults and eager students of mythology is Joseph Campbell's book *The Power of Myth* which makes a strong case for the need for myths in our time. In both Bruno Bettelheim's *The Use of Enchantment* and Rollo May's *The Cry for Myths*, discussions center around the triumph of good over evil and the very satisfying feeling this triumph produces in children. These three books will provide a variety of provocative topics to keep the adolescent mind keen. Enjoying old fairy tales on an intellectual level and comparing these clear-cut definitions of good and evil to today's shades-of-gray explanations is an exhilarating intellectual exercise and one that produces endless possibilities of tasks to assess understanding.

Short Story

In addition to reading to appreciate the story, you will want to begin teaching the novel and short story as types of literature, looking at elements such as plot, characters, theme, etc. Of particular help in the teaching of the short story is the book *Best Short Stories*, prepared by Raymond Harris for Jamestown Publishers of Providence, Rhode Island. The ten stories printed in the book are used to teach the elements of the short story. A writing component teaches students to use the elements they're studying in original work. The combination of taking a story for study and, using it as a model, producing one's own is a very effective way of teaching the form.

Another collection of short stories worthy of note is by Robert Cormier, noted young adult author. Like his novels, his short stories are about growing up, but unlike his novels, the short stories in *Eight Plus One* are hopeful and upbeat. There are also books of suitable mystery and detective stories readily available. Collections of American short stories, although easily located, will require careful scrutiny. You'll need to choose carefully those that will be interesting and understandable, as many will be well beyond your child's experience and skill.

Although it is important that young people understand and discuss intelligently elements of literary pieces, it is critical that this study does not interfere with their enjoyment of the piece. Allow time for reading and discussion of the story before embarking on a pointed study of its literary elements; again, before leaving the story, discuss its greater impact and meaning to bring it back to its wholeness.

Non-Fiction

Non-fiction, such as biographies on the lives of people your children admire, essays, and news articles, should be a part of a language arts program at this level. In addition, humor in all forms, from comics to political cartoons, from jokes to humorous essays and poetry, indeed, reading and analyzing all manner of satirical writing, is an enjoyable way for young people to practice higher-order thinking skills.

ALL AGES: POETRY

Perhaps more than any other form of literature, poetry speaks to all ages of mankind. The very young delight in rhyming verses and often sing and dance simple poems they've committed to memory. The sing-songy verses children jump rope to are found in the far corners of the globe. Shel Silverstein, Dr. Seuss, Mother Goose—the list of children's poets is endless. A grand collection of poems for children is published in *The Oxford Book of Children's Verse in America*. Chosen and edited by Donald Hall, this collection of over two hundred and fifty poems from colonial times to the age of Shel Silverstein and Dr. Seuss will delight the reader and the listener alike. Suitable for reading aloud to very young children, the poetry deepens as the reader grows and will be a valuable resource for all ages.

Poetry is even enjoyed by adolescents if they're encouraged to find poets they enjoy reading and if they are allowed to write to express ideas and feelings that are important to them. You might gather some poetry you like and share it or you might have a poetry search, with each student sharing a favorite poem. Freedom to like what they like and understand as deeply as feels right to them goes a long way in converting the "I-hate-poetry" types. Of course, if you've made poetry a part of your student's literary lives, you'll need to do little to encourage them to enjoy poetry at this age.

Whatever the age or developmental level of your students, surround them with good literature. With the vast selection of books for young readers in print, there is no reason for your students to complain that reading is boring. By paying careful attention to interests and skill level, you will be able to meet their reading needs. When reading is difficult, you may need to share the burden by reading aloud alternate pages or chapters. Reading aloud with a thirteen-year-old may be necessary to keep a frustrated reader going. Through patience and wise choices, your reading aloud may open the doors to great stories that will make his struggle with reading worthwhile.

Dorothy Burrows Johnson, *Teaching & Learning at Home*.