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Meaning-Making and the Dragons of Pern

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Children's Literature Association Quarterly

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 15, Number 1, Spring 1990

pp. 27-32

10.1353/chq.0.0718

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Meaning-Making and the Dragons of Pern

Kay E. Vandergrift (bio)

Many literary scholars, as well as teachers and librarians who share literary experiences with young people, have been accustomed to studying texts, assuming that meaning resides therein and that a mythical

"perfectly informed" reader could extract full meaning from that text. Reader-response criticism reminds us, however, that what a reader takes from a text is not always what someone else presumes to be contained there. Meaning is made as much from what one *brings* to a text as from what one *takes* from it. Thus, different readers decoding the same text may actually be "reading" very different stories and the same reader may read that text quite differently at different times. Subsequent readings would build on earlier ones and personal interpretations grow with life experiences and in interaction with others who discuss their perceptions of that work.

This article demonstrates a process through which young people are encouraged to believe that their own personal meanings made in response to literature are valid interpretations of a text. They also recognize, therefore, that very different interpretations are also valid and authentic responses to that same text. Through the process of sharing and discussing these meanings they come to an increased understanding of themselves, of each other and of the world of the text. More specifically this article describes reader imagination and interaction with the dragon lore portions of the Pern novels by Anne McCaffrey in seeking to demonstrate how young readers make meaning.

Pern is an imagined world with medieval overtones in which humans and dragons co-exist and grow in their symbiotic relationship. This metaphoric world also challenges readers to become engaged with it and to respond fully to its potential meanings. Pern is the locus of a number of novels and the complexity and connectedness of these works evokes from the reader a correspondingly complex and connected series of responses. McCaffrey's Harper trilogy was written for young people, but the remaining Pern novels are classified as adult science fiction. This does not, however, make them less accessible or less relevant to a young audience since readers who truly respond to Pern are eager to read all the books, each of which contributes to the total impression of dragon lore in that world.

Pern, like most mythic fantasy lands, is the scene of an ongoing battle

between good and evil, between dragons and Thread, a mycorrhizoid spore that destroys all life upon contact. Also true to traditional literature, it is evil, Threadfall, which evokes the good-dragon response. Threadfall is the time when dragons knowingly rise to destroy Thread before it destroys the land and the people. This familiar motif provides a starting point for the interpretation of story events in this imaginative land.¹

The Model of a Child's Meaning-Making Process in Response to a Literary Text (Figure 1) depicts a circle of meaning and some of the many factors around that circle which either contribute to or provide insight into the process of going from a very personal and private "felt meaning" to the shaping of that felt meaning into language that may be expressed and shared and then to a more common group-developed meaning in an interpretive community. Since I am concerned with interpretive communities in schools and libraries, I also examine the role of the adult intermediary who participates in that community. Readers must keep in mind, however, that this diagram merely attempts to "hold still" or make static enough for observation what is, in reality, a dynamic, on-going process. Making-meaning exists in a moment in time; and any meaning, even a community meaning, is itself an event in time, likely to change from moment to moment, response to response. The process described here begins with the assumption that readers are creators of meaning, not just consumers of an author's prepackaged and predetermined meaning. The private part of that meaning-making inevitably goes on in the mind of one who reads or hears a story, but the public aspect requires a community of trust, one in which all participants are valued, listened to and respected. Only in a...

———. *The Unicorn Tale*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971.

Farr, Sharon L., and M. Jean Greenlee. "Profile: An Interview with Erik Christian Haugen." *Language Arts*, 56 (May 1979): 549-61.

Mifflin Lane is at the University of Albany. She has published widely in children's literature, including an essay on Jill Tarter, *Waltz in the Winter* (1988 Quarterly).

Meaning-Making and the Dragons of Pern

by Kay E. Vandegrift

Many literary scholars, as well as teachers and librarians who share literacy experiences with young people, have been accustomed to studying texts, assuming that meaning resides therein and that a mythical, "perfectly informed" reader could extract full meaning from that text. Reader-response criticism reminds us, however, that what a reader takes from a text is not always what someone else presumes to be contained there. Meaning is made as much from what one brings to a text as from what one takes from it. Thus, different readers decoding the same text may actually be "reading" very different stories and the same reader may read that text quite differently at different times. Subsequent readings would build on earlier ones and personal interpretations grow with life experiences and in interaction with others who discuss their perceptions of that work.

This article demonstrates a process through which young people are encouraged to believe that their own personal meanings made in response to literature are valid interpretations of a text. They also recognize, therefore, that very different interpretations are also valid and authentic responses to that same text. Through the process of sharing and discussing these meanings they come to an increased understanding of themselves, of each other and of the world of the text. More specifically this article describes reader investigation and interaction with the dragon lore portions of the *Pern* novels by Anne McCaffrey as seeking to demonstrate how young readers make meaning.

Pern is an imagined world with medieval overtones in which humans and dragons co-exist and grow in their symbiotic relationship. This metaphoric world also challenges readers to become engaged with it and to respond fully to its potential meanings. *Pern* is the locus of a number of novels and the complexity and interconnectedness of these works evokes from the reader a correspondingly complex and connected series of responses. McCaffrey's *Hunger* trilogy was written for young people, but the remaining *Pern* novels are classified as adult science fiction. This does not, however, make them less accessible or less relevant to a young audience since readers who truly respond to *Pern* are eager to read all the books, each of which contributes to the total impression of dragon lore in that world.

Pern, like most mythic fantasy lands, is the name of an ongoing battle between good and evil, between dragons and Thread, a mythological spore that destroys all life upon contact. Also true to traditional literature, it is evil, Threadfall, which evokes the good/evil response. Threadfall is the time when dragons knowingly use us destroy Thread before it destroys the land and the people. This familiar motif provides a starting point for the interpretation of story events in this imaginative land.¹

The Model of a Child's Meaning-Making Process in Response

to a Literary Text: (Figure 1) depicts a circle of meaning and some of the many factors around that circle which either contribute to or provide insight into the process of going from a very personal and private "felt meaning" to the shaping of that felt meaning into language that may be expressed and shared and then to a more common group developed meaning in an interpretive community. Since I am concerned with interpretive communities in schools and libraries, I also examine the role of the adult intermediary who participates in that community. Readers must keep in mind, however, that this diagram merely attempts to "hold still" or make stark enough for observation what is, in reality, a dynamic, on-going process. Making meaning exists in a moment in time and any meaning, even a community meaning, is itself an event in time, likely to change from moment to moment, response to response. The process described here begins with the assumption that readers are creators of meaning, not just consumers of an author's prepackaged and predetermined meaning. The private part of that meaning-making inevitably goes on in the mind of one who reads or hears a story, but the public aspect requires a community of trust, one in which all participants are valued, listened to and respected. Only in a group in which it is safe to attempt to express these felt meanings, to take risks, knowing that those risks will be met with respect rather than ridicule, can one make the conceptual leaps that lead to more insightful, sometimes even startling, meanings. Of course, such an interpretive community, like any other community, takes time and care to develop, but a skilful adult intermediary can facilitate and speed up that process by encouraging all participants to listen carefully and consider seriously the comments and questions of others.

This research was undertaken over a six-month period (beginning in Spring, 1985) as one of several studies to test the above model. Seven young adults (11th and 12th graders, 4 males and 3 females) shared during three two-hour taped sessions, their visions of the dragons of *Pern*. Each was an avid fantasy/science fiction reader and all were articulate in discussing plot, characterization, language and other literary elements in the *Pern* novels. This particular interpretive community was brought together after individual discussions with students during which I discovered a common interest in the *Pern* novels.

Six major categories of questions were used with the group as a means to collect and analyze data on reader responses. These questions, listed below, were intended to elicit general responses which capture personal imperfections with the works but also to refer readers back to the books in an attempt to examine the transactions between reader and text in the meaning-making process. In our first session together, students were asked to write brief personal responses to each of these questions for their own use in sustaining and refining them-



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