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Beverly Cleary, Ramona Quimby, and the Teaching of Reading

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

Beverly Cleary, Ramona Quimby, and the Teaching of Reading

James Zarrillo (bio)

Beverly Cleary is one of the most popular and honored writers of contemporary children's fiction. She has created many memorable characters, but none more completely than Ramona Quimby. There are six books with Ramona as protagonist: *Ramona the Pest* (1968), *Ramona the Brave* (1975), *Ramona and Her Father* (1977), *Ramona and Her Mother* (1979), *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* (1981), and *Ramona Forever* (1984). In addition to twenty-two other books for young readers, Cleary has written nonfiction pieces which include remembrances of her childhood (Cleary, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1975a, 1984a). After reading the Ramona books and her articles, I am convinced she has a great deal to say to elementary school teachers who want to create a stimulating reading environment for their students. Beverly Cleary offers a child's perspective of elementary reading programs in both her autobiographical recollections and her Ramona stories. Her writing gives us revealing descriptions of the negative effects of misguided reading instruction on children who come to school able and eager to read. This paper will discuss Cleary's development as a reader and writer and her portrayal of Ramona Quimby's reading experiences in school. Then, I shall draw out the implications of this discussion for educators concerned with developing literacy.

From Blackbird to Bestseller

Beverly Cleary's literary development is a remarkable story. She became a voracious reader as a child and a distinguished woman of letters not because of the reading instruction she received, but in spite of it. Cleary was born in McMinnville, Oregon. After six happy years on an eighty-acre farm in the Willamette Valley, economic misfortune forced Cleary and her parents to move to Portland. She first entered school in a public first grade classroom.

Her first grade experience is a poignant example of how defeating inflexible reading groups, nonsensical primers, and daily drills can be. Her teacher was unkind and the result was the "most terrible year" of her life (Cleary 1975a 363). The teachers had three reading groups—the

Bluebirds, Redbirds, and Blackbirds. Cleary was a Blackbird and "to be a Blackbird was to be disgraced" (1970 2). She had come to school fully expecting to read. Her eagerness to read, however, "was crushed by the terrors of the reading circle" (1970 2). She described life as a Blackbird: "At school we Blackbirds struggled along, bored by our primers, baffled when our reading group gathered in the circle of little chairs in the front of the room to stumble over phonic lists. 'Sin, sip, sit, red, rill, tin, tip, bib, bed.' The words meant nothing" (Cleary 1969 288). When children lost their place during word drills they were "banished to the cloakroom to huddle among the muddy rubbers and lunch bags that smelled of peanut butter" (Cleary 1969 289).

Her reading text was as inappropriate as her teacher's methodology. Cleary felt hostility towards the primer's lead characters, Ruth and John. She considered John a sissy. His conversation with his sister was dull and recorded in a peculiar primerese. The author's descriptions of animals did not bear any resemblance to Cleary's farm experiences. The Blackbirds were bored and desperately "wanted action. We wanted a story" (Cleary 1969 288). Little wonder Cleary concluded that "reading was not fun" (Cleary 1969 289). Things improved in second grade. Cleary had a gentle and patient teacher. The first **[End Page 131]** reader was something of an improvement over the primer, and the pressures of the reading circle decreased. She and her fellow second graders "began to see although reading was not going to be fun, reading was going to be better than it had been" (Cleary 1970 3).

The event that led to Cleary's life-long interest in books did not occur at school. On a rainy Sunday afternoon when she was in the third grade, she went to the Portland public library. She discovered *The Dutch Twins* (1911) by Lucy Fitch Perkins. She was enchanted with the illustrations. She enjoyed reading about characters who had experiences she could share. This was the first "real book" Cleary had read; it was "story all...



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