Beverly Cleary, Ramona Quimby, and the Teaching of Reading

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Children's Literature Association Quarterly, Volume 13, Number 3, Fall 1988, pp. 131-135 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/chq.0.0067

she won honorable mention in the *Cricket* illustration competition. At age eleven she designed her school logo. At age ten she won a school creative writing competition. Her summers are spent at a music composition camp. This year she composed a choral/piano piece with lyrics which has won the state and regional junior high competition and placed second at the national competition. Last year, when we were talking, Beth called herself "a writer." Most of all, she would like to be a music composer when she grows up. Right now she finds author/cartoon artist/violin player Lloyd Alexander fascinating because "he does it all."

Heather is struggling through her AP English class and enjoying it all of the time. She has learned that she has a right to her own ideas, and she has questioned her teacher's interpretations of literature more than once; often she has argued for an acceptance of "reader's response" that acknowledges her generation, but she also understands that literary structures depend upon conventionalization. Right now Heather and her teacher are having a real battle over poetry analysis. In the end, she will not be the loser. She is learning about ways of seeing and hearing that support her analytic skills. Now that she feels more secure to interpret as she chooses, she is beginning to write some very fine poetry. She already has a literary sophistication that I admire and covet.

My two daughters have shown me something important. Every child creates if given the chance. Creating from literature, however, varies with the reader. Both imagination and interpretation are fostered when the literature shared has meaning for the listener. Literature expands the world of the educated reader who learns to read for understanding and enjoyment. That reader is apt to grow into an adult who sees the world in a complete way, to be an adult who is not afraid to respond and interpret literature—and life—in her own ways.

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Beverly Cleary, Ramona Quimby, and the Teaching of Reading

by James Zarrillo

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).

Cleary's school experiences

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 desparately "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

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 the way through and did not end with word lists or contain the dreaded word, *Review*" (Cleary 1970 5). Cleary remembers, "It was one of the most exciting days of my life. Shame and guilt dropped away from the ex-Blackbird who had at last taken wing" (Cleary 1969 290). As a proficient reader, Cleary found books at a branch of the public library with the assistance of a caring librarian. Cleary became a discriminating reader, bored with books that contained needless descriptions, stereotypical heroines, and moral lessons. At school Cleary found a way to cope with the dreariness of her reading texts. She recollected, "Teacher and textbooks had to be put up with, but one could get around them by reading the entire reader the first week of school and after that hiding *Heidi* or *The Secret Garden* inside the cover" (Cleary 1970 6).

As Cleary grew older she thought seriously about becoming a writer. She received encouragement from "a succession of aloof, exacting English teachers" (Cleary 1984a 429). Her mother had a great influence, encouraging her only child to use "imagination" and "ingenuity," and to remember "the best writing is simple writing" (Cleary 1984a 430-431). Cleary went on to receive bachelor's degrees from Berkeley and the University of Washington. She became a children's librarian. In 1948 Cleary and her husband moved to California. In that year she began her first book, *Henry Huggins* (1950). Cleary has written twenty-seven books since then (Mercier; Reuther).

Most of her stories are about the every day lives of ordinary children. Cleary has achieved wide popularity with children. She has been the recipient of fourteen separate awards voted by school children. Professional response to her work has been equally enthusiastic. Cleary received the 1984 Newbery Medal for *Dear Mr. Henshaw* (1983). Two of the Ramona books, *Ramona and Her Father* and *Ramona Quimby, Age 8*, were Newbery Honor Books. She has received many other awards, most notably the 1975 Laura Ingalls Wilder Award (Shaw), and she continues to write at her home in California.

Ramona the Reader

Ramona Quimby's school adventures are of particular interest for two reasons. First, Beverly Cleary has written one book about each of Ramona's years in school from kindergarten to grade four. (There are two books, *Ramona and Her Father* and *Ramona and Her Mother*, about second grade.) The books stand as a longitudinal case study of one fictional child's development. Second, there is a consistent response among a variety of critics that Cleary is uniquely perceptive, both in her ability to enter a child's mind, and in her ability to write about home and school life (Burns; Flowers; Ellen Goodman; Heins; Hunt; Lewis; List; McDaniel). Ethel Heins has described her perceptions as "uncannily accurate" (535) and Peter Hunt has described Ramona Quimby as "quietly humorous and immensely real" (771). Ellen Goodman, reviewing *Ramona the Pest* in the *New York Times Book Review*, concluded Cleary's "familiarity with both children and school produces some lively, authentic scenes" (34). Goodman found that Ramona's "adventures, the small ones that lace every school day, ring as true as the recess bell" (34). As a teacher with ten years experience in the elementary school, I found Cleary's school episodes amazingly accurate. Cleary cites the experiences of her children and letters school-age children write to her as important sources when writing about school (Reuther; Roggenbuck).

Cleary's Ramona, like so many kindergarteners, comes to school with three attributes that should lead to successful encounters with the printed word. She is eager to learn, she has extensive verbal ability, and she has a background with some literary works. Ramona "was a girl who could not wait. Life was so interesting she had to find out what happened next" (1968 11). She is familiar with fairy tales, and knows what type of books she likes. *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* (1939) is a favorite because it is "neither quiet nor sleepy, nor sweet and pretty" (1968 22). Ramona enters school expecting, from the first day, to learn to read and write. She learns, though, that she will spend a great deal of her time doing assignments which require her to sit quietly at her desk and complete a variety of skill-oriented exercises.

Like virtually all elementary students, Ramona's day includes assignments in her reading workbook. This bright child finds the workbook boring and confusing. In *Ramona and Her Mother*, second grader Ramona finishes a worksheet, becomes bored, and fills "all the double *oo*'s she could find with crossed eyes and frowns" (64). Cleary provides another example that is typical of what happens when a child encounters a context-free exercise in a workbook. Ramona's first grade reader includes characters named Tom and Becky. They have a dog, Pal. Mrs. Griggs is Ramona's teacher. The following transpires:

> One day the reading workbook showed a picture of a chair with a wrinkled slipcover. Beneath the picture were two sentences. "This is for Pal." "This is not for Pal." Ramona circled "This is for Pal," because she decided Tom and Becky's mother had put a slipcover on the chair so that Pal could lie on it without getting the chair dirty. Mrs. Griggs came along and put a big red check mark over her answer. "Read every word, Ramona," she said, which Ramona thought was unfair. She *had* read every word. (1975b 121-122)

Ramona is frustrated again when "she explored her reader to see if she could find the grown-up words she knew: *gas, motel, burger*. She could not." In *Ramona the Brave* Cleary describes a situation many young readers face. The basal fails to build upon each child's unique pattern of development. Ramona's experiential background, her knowledge of words and phrases, and personal interests are special, and different from the other children in her class. Unfortunately, Ramona's basal reader attempts to meet the needs of a generic first grader. Later in this book, Cleary tells us Ramona is learning to read. The material that stimulates her, though, does not come from school. Rather, Ramona was learning to read from "newspapers, signs, and cartons" and "the world was suddenly full of words that Ramona could read" (129).

There is an excellent example of how children develop as language users by using writing to communicate in *Ramona and Her Father*. Second grader Ramona and her older sister mount a campaign to convince their father to stop smoking. Together they make signs and write notes to their dad. Ramona learns to read and write words like *pollution* and *hazardous* by including them in messages to her father. Ramona and her sister paint about a dozen signs. They include "Stop Air Pollution," "Cigarettes Start Forest Fires," and "Smoking Is Hazardous to Your Health" (95). During the afternoon Ramona learns to spell words she can say, and becomes acquainted with the meanings of several others.

In her fourth year of school, Ramona is exposed to a school reading activity she likes, Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). Ramona finds refuge from her reader and workbook as her teacher, Mrs. Whaley, allows her to read whatever she wants for a few minutes a day. Cleary tells us how Ramona feels about SSR and elementary school reading:

from Ramona Quimby Age 8

> How peaceful it was to be left alone in school. She could read without trying to hide her book under a desk or behind a bigger book. She was not expected to write lists of words she did not know, so she could figure them out by skipping and guessing. Mrs. Whaley did not expect the class to write summaries of what they read either, so she did not have to choose easy books to make sure she would get her summary right. Now if Mrs. Whaley would leave her alone to draw, too, school would be almost perfect. (1981 42-43)

It is difficult to say how many of our students share Ramona's perspective. Certainly the elaborate instructional systems used in most elementary classrooms, complete with texts, workbooks, dittos, and prescriptive-diagnostic tests, create formidable obstacles to be overcome by children who want to read books of personal interest.

Lessons to be Learned

Two sources have the greatest influence on curriculum and pedagogy in elementary reading: tradition and the standardized test. It is time educators looked to other sources, such as the child's point of view, to determine the efficacy of reading programs. Cleary offers vivid descriptions of children whose development was frustrated, rather than facilitated, by the reading instruction they received. Those responsible for helping students become readers should learn from Cleary's accounts of how children are affected by basal-oriented reading instruction. Reading programs that better serve the needs of children can, and should, be created.

In Cleary's writing we read about specific instructional methods that are not in the best interests of children. Most notable for its lasting, damaging impact on students is the practice of organizing a class into inflexible ability groups. No child should suffer through the year on the bottom rung of a reading caste system. Cleary's descriptions of her days as a Blackbird provide an eloquent testimony of life as a reading untouchable. Sadly enough, a generation later Cleary's son suffered from the same stigma when he trudged off to school with the other poor readers an hour earlier than their classmates who were good readers (Cleary 1969). The influential report, *Becoming A Nation of Readers* cited the prevalence of ability grouping in contemporary classrooms and called for educators to "explore other options for reading instruction" (91). Indeed, teachers need to consider the many legitimate ways to group children for reading. For instance, children can be grouped by their shared need for specific instruction, by their desire to share what they have written, by their common interest in a book, or by their desire to work together on a project in response to what they have read. There is a good example of the latter in *Ramona Quimby, Age 8*. Ramona and two classmates work together and present a most unusual and entertaining book report (see chapter eight, "Ramona's Book Report").

It is equally important that educators view reading as a meaning-seeking endeavor, rather than as the mastery of a sequence of subskills. Beverly Cleary and Ramona Quimby were forced to resort to subterfuge to read silently a book of personal interest in school. Theirs is not an uncommon experience, for teaching hundreds of skills in the name of teaching reading has created classrooms where children have little time to read. After reviewing evidence collected from 134 elementary classrooms as a part of The Study of Schooling, Goodlad concluded, "The state of reading in the classrooms we observed seemed quite dismal. Exclusive of the common practice of students taking turns reading orally from a common text, reading occupied about 6% of the class time at the elementary level" (106). It is this ubiquitous classroom scenario, a small group of children seated in a "reading circle" laboring over a skills lesson or reading aloud, that Cleary has so realistically portrayed. She could well be describing the feelings of today's elementary children when, recalling her childhood, she wrote, "Reading was a stomach tied into a knot of dread. . . Reading was sitting very still, hoping to become invisible, so that one might be skipped" (1970 2).

Though abolishing ability grouping and providing more time for silent reading are important, they are superficial reforms of a system of reading instruction that is fundamentally unsound. To provide a reading program that is truly worthy of the Beverly Clearys and Ramona Quimbys in our classrooms, teachers, administrators, and teacher educators must accept a redefinition of the relationship between children and basal reading systems. Such systems, used in over 90% of American elementary school classrooms (Anderson et al.), supposedly exist to serve the needs of our students. In practice, however, it is the basal that takes control and becomes the reading program. As a result instructional materials and practices frequently are chosen because they serve the needs of a commercial program, not because they foster the development of literacy.

It would seem a program utilizing children's literature would have suited Cleary and Ramona far better than the basal-oriented instruction they received. A word of caution is in order, however. These increasingly-popular programs are usually referred to as "literature-based" (California State Department of Education 3). We need, however, reading programs that are "child-based." Cleary has written eloquently of the great "diversity of the lives of children" (1984a 432). As committees at the state, district, and school-site level consider preparing lists of required novels to replace the basals, they should pay attention to this statement by her: "The rallying cry of my library training was 'the right book for the right child.' In

a world in which children's lives vary so widely, there is no reason why every child should like every book" (1984a 438).

Beverly Cleary, Ramona Quimby, and millions of children like them come to school with an eagerness to read, with five or six years of unique life experiences, with some level of literary awareness, and with sophisticated oral development. Elementary reading programs need to build on these strengths. The basals would be replaced with children's literature, since the great diversity of the children in our classrooms is matched by the great diversity of wonderful children's books available in any good library. Teachers would lead each child to the books Cleary and her fellow Blackbirds eventually discovered, "the books that every child needs, the books to read for pleasure, the books from which we could go on" (1970 5). Cleary states that "The discovery that one can at last turn lines of printed words into meaning and enjoy doing so must surely be one of the most exciting moments of a lifetime" (1970 5). This discovery will occur with less pain, at an earlier point, and with greater frequency if teachers develop a literature-based program that respects the individual differences in children.

In place of the workbook and skills lessons, the reading program should allow children to write extensively, and share the stories, plays, and poems they have composed. Drama, in several forms, would enliven the school day. Children would have daily experiences in using reading to learn concepts from social studies, science, health, music, and art. Artificial barriers separating reading, writing, listening, and speaking would disappear. Teachers would view language as a tool to give and get meaning. Children would have a high degree of control over what they read and write. I think, then, that the Beverly Clearys and Ramona Quimbys in our classrooms would be well served by teachers with a "whole language" orientation to literacy development (Goodman; Newman). Reading programs would be literature-based and similar to a model of individualized reading (Veatch).

Yes, there are lessons to be learned from the writing of Beverly Cleary. She has provided us with a perspective we in education frequently overlook, insight from the child.

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Readers of *Alice*: My Children, Meg Murry, and Harriet M. Welsch

by Virginia L. Wolf

For years I have observed critics, students, and children express their dislike of the *Alice* books or, to be more specific, their discomfort about their nightmarish meaninglessness. In my experience, this discomfort is the response of the majority of readers. On the other hand, there are the fans of *Alice*, including my daughter, Niña. She and my son, David, first raised for me the question of why people (especially children) respond as they do to the *Alice* books. David would never let me read these books to him. I tried—always to have him stop me because he was frightened or disturbed in some other way. To my knowledge, he has never read them. In contrast, Niña insisted that I read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* when I thought that she was too young, and she wanted it and *Through the Looking-Glass* read over and over again throughout her early childhood. She persisted in her fascination with these books until well after she was able to read them on her own.

I have posited many explanations for the differences in my children's responses to these books, and I have been guilty of generalizing my understanding of their differing responses to all children--tenuous and clearly partial as this understanding has always been. In other words, I have used my understanding of David's response to explain why children dislike the *Alice* books and my understanding of Niña's response to explain why children like them. I have believed that those who are not readers of *Alice* are sensitive, imaginative, and easily frightened, that they are dependent on others for their security, that they are often at the mercy of rather strong emotions, and that they are more often boys than girls. I have thought of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* as books most often read by demanding, aggressive, adventurous, self-assured, independent, intellectual, curious girls. If all of my assumptions were correct, then, clearly, very few children would be readers of *Alice*. This understanding served me well for many years.

Then last semester, as I was teaching Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* and Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, I began to question this understanding when I noticed for the first time, after studying these novels for years, that both Harriet and Meg have read *Alice*. The evidence in L'Engle's novel is that Mrs. Who's slow disappearance, her glasses fading last, reminds Meg of the Cheshire Cat and that she thinks the man rushing out of a building on Camazotz is like the White Rabbit. In Fitzhugh's novel, Harriet chants "The Walrus and the Carpenter" with Ole Golly on the night that the nurse decides to leave her position with the Welsches. Certainly, one could easily overlook these brief allusions to *Alice*.

In any case, it would never have occurred to me to compare these two characters or books, or to compare the two books with *Alice*, until I saw the evidence that Harriet and Meg are readers of *Alice* and until I had read Hamida Bosmajian's "*Harriet the Spy*: Nonsense and Sense." Then I realized that the structure of *Harriet the Spy* and *A Wrinkle in Time* is very like that of the *Alice* books. Both books confront their heroines with worlds that make no sense to them. Both girls are, in other words, alienated—alone and unhappy, often among confusing, inadequate, unsympathetic strangers. Indeed, *Harriet the Spy* and *A Wrinkle in Time* are both about their heroines' journeys among characters and through places very much like those found in Wonderland or through the Looking Glass, and each ends, like the *Alice* books, with the heroine's assertion of her own individuality.

There are, in fact, many surprising similarities between L'Engle's and Fitzhugh's novels. Both of their protagonists like tomatoes on their sandwiches. Each has a room at the top of the house. Like Mrs. Who, Ole Golly quotes all the time, and their quotations are important to an understanding of the novels. Both books include one atypical boy, who in each case is the boyfriend, but who does not rescue the heroine. And, most importantly, both girls learn that love is the solution to their alienation. Harriet begins to learn to empathize with her friends and to use writing to put love in the world. Meg learns that her love for Charles Wallace makes her different from It and allows her to rescue her baby brother from It's evil hold over him. What's more, they both learn the importance of love on their own without the help of their respective families or boyfriends. Both have as guidance only the advice of wise women, very like the mythological figures, the fairy godmothers or goddesses of folklore, who often assist young initiates through their passage to adulthood. Harriet has Ole Golly; Meg has Mrs. Whatsit, Mrs. Who, Mrs. Which, and Auntie Beast. Finally, both novels are *bildungromans*. They are growing up stories, focused on the critical point of transition into adulthood—that point at which each girl willingly takes responsibility for her own actions and renounces her expectation that someone else will and should take care of her.

Clearly, recognizing and exploring the many similarities enriched my understanding of and appreciation for Alice, Meg, and Harriet and the novels about them. But equally important, the process made me rethink my understanding of *Alice's* readership. Harriet could be a reader of *Alice*, but Meg violated my preconceived notion of what such a person would be like. Why would an insecure, angry, frightened, disturbed misfit like Meg Murry be a reader of *Alice*? Does she differ at all from my sense of a person who would not want to read *Alice*? What evidence does *A Wrinkle in Time* provide that would explain why she is a reader of *Alice*? I was strongly inclined to reject the evidence and to see Meg's obvious familiarity with *Alice* as a flaw in L'Engle's characterization of her. But I also wondered if, despite Harriet's and Meg's differences, their similarities might convince me that they both could be readers of *Alice*.

I recalled Harriet's need for certainty and control, for example, her reliance on Ole Golly, her many routines, and her nearly obsessive insistence on her own sense of the truth. Harriet is no less dependent than Meg. The difference is that

from page 132:

"Cleary is uniquely perceptive, both in her ability to enter a child's mind, and in her ability to write about home and school life."

"Ramona is described as "quietly humorous and immediately real."

"Ramona comes to school with three attributes that should lead to successful encounters with the printed word: She is eager to learn, she has extensive verbal ability, and she has a background with some literary works

"Ramona is learning to read. The material that stimulates her, though, does not come from school. Rather, Ramona [is] learning to read from newspapers, signs, and cartons"