

Making One Lesson Count

By Adam Andrews

Here's a fundamental truth about the universe: the homeschool parent never has enough time. Adding the obligations of a classroom teacher to the obligations of a spouse, a parent, a friend, a neighbor and an employee is a crazy idea, and if your decision to attempt this feat in the coming year fills you with fear and trepidation, you are not alone.

There is a solution, however, that effective homeschool teachers rely on every year. In fact, I encourage everyone to try it. It involves being realistic about the demands on your time and setting reachable goals for yourself and your students. When it comes to reading and literature, for example, try calculating the hours you can actually devote to preparation, and figure out exactly how many books you can read, given those hours. Then, simply teach that many books.

Simple, right?

But what if you only have time to read *one* book with your student this year? Should you throw your hands up in despair and enroll him in the local government school?

Well it's up to you, of course, but let me suggest that you might be missing a great opportunity. You would be surprised at how powerful that one lesson can be. In fact, a well-designed discussion of a single story can dramatically affect the way your student reads all other stories for the rest of his life.

This is because a good discussion focuses not only on the content of the book at hand, but also on the structural and stylistic elements that the book shares with every other book in the world. This means that engaging in a good discussion of a single great book can equip a student to grapple with dozens of others unassisted.

Remember the adage, "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day; teach a man to fish and he'll never go hungry?" In a way, a good literature discussion teaches students to fish. By asking thought-provoking questions about the basic elements of fiction, you'll show your students how to think for themselves about any book they read.

Here are a few examples of questions you can ask about any book in the world. In order to demonstrate their effectiveness, I'll answer them for two books at opposite ends of the curriculum: Russell Hoban's *A Bargain for Frances* (written for second graders) and Marjorie Rawlings' Nobel Prize-winning *The Yearling* (written for grownups.)

Who is the protagonist, or main character, and what is he like?

In *A Bargain for Frances*, Frances the badger is innocent and gullible. In *The Yearling*, Jody Baxter is an innocent, selfish, childish and lonely boy.

What does the protagonist want most in this story? Is this desire shared by all people, to some degree? In what way do you, the reader, share this desire?

In *A Bargain for Frances*, Frances wants a china tea set – but she also wants a friendship based on honesty and mutual respect. In *The Yearling*, Jody wants a friend

to ease his loneliness. This desire for true friendship, evident in both stories, is universal and helps us relate to both protagonists.

What is the central conflict in this story, and who or what are the main antagonists? (In other words, why can't the protagonist have what he wants?) What other stories have you read that feature the same type of conflict?

In *A Bargain for Frances*, Frances' own immaturity makes it difficult to have the right kind of friendships, and she must grow up a little before she can find them. In *The Yearling*, too, Jody's immaturity blinds him to the real nature of the world, and the cure for loneliness that it provides. In the end, both protagonists discover that the blessings of maturity are earned by those who embrace its responsibilities.

What changes does the protagonist undergo during this story? Is he humbled or exalted? What causes these changes? Based on your own experience, can you identify with these changes?

Frances learns to take care of herself; through her negotiation with her friend Thelma, she becomes less gullible and wiser to the frailties of human nature. For his part, Jody must eventually leave his childhood behind and become the man of the house, taking on the daily responsibilities of adulthood. Both of these transformations reflect rites of passage that all readers can identify with.

If you had to summarize the main idea of this story in a single word or phrase, what would you choose? What other stories have you read that could be summarized with the same word or phrase?

Both of these stories can be summarized with the phrase *Coming of Age*, a term that also applies to countless other works of literature at every reading level, including *The Odyssey*, *Great Expectations*, *The Bronze Bow* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

How does the setting of this story underscore the author's theme? How is the setting uniquely suited to the author's purpose? (In other words, could this story stress the same theme if the setting were different?)

While the message of *A Bargain for Frances* is not dependent on a particular time and place, *The Yearling* draws much of its power from its setting in the Florida scrub during the late 19th century. The harsh conditions and constant battle with privation and hardship that characterized that time and place are the catalysts that force Jody through the changes that will make him a man.

Does the author use literary devices such as symbolism, metaphor, imagery, allusion or juxtaposition to emphasize the story's themes? How effective are these devices?

Russell Hoban uses rhyme, rhythm and dramatic irony to emphasize Frances's gullibility in *A Bargain for Frances*, while Marjorie Rawlings creates one of American literature's greatest symbols in *The Yearling*. Flag, the young fawn that Jody takes to his heart, dramatically symbolizes youth and innocence. As Jody puts Flag away, forsaking his own childhood forever, readers feel the pain that loss of innocence always brings.

As you can see, the questions listed here are as appropriate for the bedtime story as for the Nobel Prize-winner. Teach your student to ask them of the bedtime story, and

later on he will be able to ask them of the classics himself. The best part is, you can introduce them with the bedtime story in a single lesson! Even if you are pressed for time, there's no need to send your kids away to school.

While we're on the subject, though, take another look at the list above. Can you imagine any of those questions leading naturally into a discussions of worldview assumptions, life-changing decisions, or questions of identity, purpose and meaning?

If so, do you really want a stranger helping your student answer them? Wouldn't you rather teach him how to fish yourself? Once he learns, he'll never go hungry again—even if you only taught him one lesson!

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