

Chapter 2

Literary Genre

Authors express meaning through literary elements and story structures. Children who are read to and who read gradually learn that stories have recurring structural patterns or conventions that occur again and again in literature for all ages. Thoughtful readers learn through the experience of reading, how authors select, arrange, and structure language to tell stories and poems and give information. Readers who can anticipate the pattern of organization in literature can understand and respond more fully to it, which is not only desirable for the reader, but the author as well. Speaking for many writers, the author of *The Little Prince* says, “I do not want anyone to read my story carelessly. I have suffered too much grief in setting down these memories” (Saint-Exupery, 2005).

One way of anticipating the pattern of organization within a particular work is recognizing the genre to which it belongs. Genre are literary classifications or patterns of fiction. According to Van Vliet (1992), we also include nonfiction genre patterns. Books classified as belonging to a specific genre share common characteristics, which follow the rules of that genre for the plot, characters, settings, tone, mood, and theme (Van Vliet, 1992). For example, the fantasy genre includes literature that has an element of make-believe: perhaps a place where magical things happen, a futuristic time setting, or any other fantastic element the author chooses to invent.

Genre in Children’s Literature

Genre is a French word that means *kind* or *type*. Literary genre are *classifications of literature based on literary form and theme*, works that share

common characteristics or conventions. A literary convention is *an element of form, style, or content that is universal throughout the genre* (Morner and Rausch, 1991). Each genre of literature has such conventions or universals associated with its literary form. For instance, a convention of picture books is the *interaction between illustrations and text*. It is these universal characteristics that permit readers and reviewers to analyze and identify individual books as belonging to a particular genre, a basic step in critically analyzing a book. Once readers know that James Howe's *Bunnacula* is classified as modern fantasy, they expect to find the literary conventions for a fantasy within the book: fantastic elements in the plot, theme, characterization, setting, and style.

Genre Classifications in Children's Literature

The fundamental patterns, conventions, or universals of literature occur repeatedly in all literature, including children's literature. Children's literature is usually classified into one of these genre: picture book, contemporary realistic fiction, historical fiction, modern fantasy, traditional literature, poetry, biography, and nonfiction (informational).

Realistic fiction *contains characters that could be real, settings that could exist, and plots that could happen*, although they are products of an author's imagination rather than actual history or fact. Phyllis Reynolds Naylor's *Shiloh* is realistic fiction about Marty, who likes to practice shooting his rifle in the West Virginia hills. Then he encounters a dog that appears to have been abused and discovers that he would do almost anything to save the dog. Most readers recognize this story could actually happen.

In **historical fiction**, the author tells *a story associated with historical events, characters, incidents, or time periods*. But historical setting alone is not enough to make the book worthwhile; it has to be a good story as well. Avi's book *The Barn* is set in the Oregon Territory in the year 1855. The authentic historical setting is a

backdrop for this rich story about understanding the various members of the family as well as the protagonist's developing maturity.

Authors of well-written fantasy convince readers to suspend disbelief, so they can believe in the unbelievable for the duration of a story. **Fantasy** is characterized by *one or more imaginary elements*, such as a make-believe world, characters who have magic powers, or imaginary events. Science fiction belongs to the fantasy genre. Writers of science fiction often employ principles of science and physics as yet undiscovered.

Traditional literature is *based on oral tradition*: stories such as *Little Red Riding Hood* have been passed from one generation to the next by word of mouth and not written down until scholars collected them. Among the oral conventions traditional stories share are formulaic beginnings and endings: *once upon a time* and *they lived happily ever after*. The settings are created in a sentence or two and the characters are stereotypes.

The poetry genre includes intense and imaginative literature. **Poetry** strives to *capture the essence of an experience in imaginative language*, as Jack Prelutsky captures the essence of zoo animals in his book *Zoo Doings*. Poetry's rich imagery results in a greater concentration of meaning than is found in prose. Poetry differs visually from other types of literature in that it generally has short lines and is in verse form, often rhyming.

Nonfiction literature is organized and structured around main ideas and supporting details that *present information and explain* in several different styles, such as description, cause and effect, sequential order, comparison, and enumeration. Authors of informational books identify key ideas and themes to grab readers' attention and motivate them to learn more. As nonfiction focuses on actual events, places, people, and facts, authors and illustrators often use photographs and realistic drawings to illustrate these materials. Steve Parker used photographs and drawings to inform readers in *Whales and Dolphins*.

Summary

Genre are classifications of literature, with each member of a classification exhibiting common characteristics. The genre of children's literature includes picture books, traditional literature, fantasy, realistic fiction, historical fiction, poetry and nonfiction literature. All these categories of genre have the same characteristics as adult literature.

Picture books combine pictures and language or depend entirely on pictures. **Traditional literature** is based on the oral tradition. The stories are spread through word of mouth rather than print. **Fantasy** could not happen in the real world; science fiction is fantasy set in the future. **Realistic fiction** could happen in the contemporary world. **Historical fiction** is set in the past. **Poetry** is intense, imaginative writing in rhythmic language structured in shorter lines and verses. **Nonfiction literature** presents information and explains.

Assignment

Read the excerpt from Aesop's fables for class discussion.

The Stag at the Pool

One summer's day a Stag came to a clear spring to drink. As he bent his head, he saw his image in the clear water. "Ah," he thought, tossing his head proudly, "how very handsome are my antlers." He peered closer, and then said with despair, "But my legs and my feet are another matter! Oh, how weak, how slender they are!"

So absorbed was the Stag in his own image that he did not hear the approach of the Lion until the beast was about to spring. Just in time, however,

the Stag ran away. It seemed as if the Stag would escape his pursuer, for as long as he was on the open plain he was able to outrun the Lion. But then the Stag entered a forest and, in his swift flight, caught his antlers in the branches of the trees. And the more he tried to free himself, the more entangled his antlers became.

In a few moments the Lion was upon him. Too late, the Stag reproached himself: "Woe is me! How I have deceived myself! I scorned the feet which would have saved me and praised the antlers which have caused my downfall. *Too often we despise what we should value most.*"

The Fox Without a Tail

One day a Fox, running through the woods, was caught in a trap. He managed to escape with his life, but lost his handsome bushy tail. Ashamed of the way he now looked, he hid in the forest, where no one could see him.

In this way he passed the days, thinking how could he ever face the other foxes?

Then one day he had an idea. He ran into the clearing where the foxes were gathered and cried loudly, "Look at me, dear friends. Observe that I no longer have my tail! How wonderful it is to be free of all that heavy fur! And see how it improves my appearance! Since all of you are my brothers, I would like you to be as carefree as I am. I myself am ready now to cut off your tails!"

"Brother Fox," said one of the wise old foxes, "tell me, if you had not lost your own tail, would you be so ready to help us get rid of ours? Are you not eager to see us without tails because you know that *misery loves company*?"

The Lion and the Boar

One hot summer's day a Lion and a Boar came to a small well at the same moment. They were both very thirsty, and began at once to argue as to who should be the first to drink. Neither would give in to the other. They were about to come to blows when the Lion looked up and saw some vultures in the sky above them.

"Look!" said the Lion. "Those vultures see us fighting and they are hungry. They are waiting to feed upon the loser."

"Then let us settle our quarrel," said the Boar. "It is better for us to make friends than to become the food of vultures."

"I agree," the Lion said. "*In the face of common danger, small differences are best forgotten.*"

Jupiter and the Bee

The Queen Bee once wished to offer a gift of honey to Jupiter. She collected the freshest honey from her honeycombs and flew with it up to Mount Olympus. The god was so delighted with this gift that he promised to give the Queen Bee anything she asked. "All-powerful Jupiter," said the Queen Bee, "I beg of thee, grant me a sting so that I may kill whoever approaches my hive to steal my honey."

Jupiter was shocked that the Queen Bee would wish to revenge the theft of her honey in this way. But he could not take back his promise. So he said, "You shall have your sting. And when you attack anyone who takes your honey, the wound shall be fatal."

The Queen Bee was about to thank Jupiter. But he held up his hand and continued, "The wound shall be fatal—but only to *you!* Once you use your sting, it shall be torn from you, and you will die from the loss of it.

Thus did the Queen Bee learn that *evil wishes have evil consequences.*

The Fox and the Woodcutter

A Fox was being chased by a pack of hounds. Panting, he ran up to a Woodcutter who was chopping wood outside his hut.

"Please, kind sir," begged the Fox. "Can you help me to hide until the hounds pass by?"

The Woodcutter told him to take shelter in his own hut, and the grateful Fox ran inside and hid in a corner under the window.

A few minutes later the Huntsman rode up with his hounds and asked the Woodcutter if he had seen a Fox.

The Woodcutter replied in a voice loud enough for the Fox to hear: "No, I have not seen a Fox all morning." But even as he spoke, he winked and pointed to the hut where the Fox was hiding. The Huntsman, however, did not understand these gestures and rode off, still pursuing the Fox.

As soon as the Huntsman had gone, the Fox came out of the hut. He started off without a word to the Woodcutter.

"You ungrateful fellow," the Woodcutter called after him. "You owe your life to me, yet you leave without a word of thanks."

"I would have thanked you with all my heart," the Fox replied, "if your deed had been as kind as your words. But your hands made a lie of your speech! So I cannot thank you, for *there is as much mischief in a wink as in a word.*"

The Shepherd Boy and the Wolf

Day after day, a Shepherd Boy tended a flock of sheep in the hills above his village. One day, just to cause some excitement, the Shepherd Boy ran down from the hills shouting, "Wolf! Wolf!"

The townsfolk came running with sticks to chase the Wolf away. All they found was the Shepherd Boy, who laughed at them for their pains.

Seeing how well his trick worked, the Shepherd Boy tried it again the next day. Again he ran down from the hills shouting, "Wolf!" Again the townsfolk ran to his aid in vain.

But the day after, it happened that a Wolf really came. The Shepherd Boy, now truly alarmed, shouted, "Help! Come and help me! The Wolf is killing the sheep!"

But this time the townsfolk said, "He won't fool us again with *that* trick!" They paid no attention to his cries, and the Wolf destroyed the entire flock.

When the people saw what happened to their sheep, they were very angry. "*There is no believing a liar,*" they said, "*even when he speaks the truth!*"

The Farmer and His Sons

An Old Farmer lay on his deathbed. "I would die happy," he thought, "if I could make sure that my sons would take the same good care of the farm as I have done."

He called his two sons to his bedside and said, "My sons, I have not long to live. Listen carefully to what I have to say."

The two young men bent down to catch their father's feeble words. "There is great treasure hidden in the vineyard," he whispered to them. And so saying, the old Farmer died.

The two sons began to hunt for the treasure. With their spades and plows they turned the soil of the land, but they found neither gold nor precious stones.

However, the vines were strengthened by their careful plowing, and began to yield the richest crop of grapes they had ever seen.

The oldest son turned to his brother and said, "Now I know the treasure of which our dear father spoke. It is our vineyard, which is more precious now than ever."

"Yes," the younger son said. "How wise our father was. He wanted us to learn that *hard work can often yield great riches.*"

The Miller, His Son, and Their Donkey

One hot day a Miller and his son were taking their Donkey to a neighboring fair to sell him. They had not gone far when they met some girls on the road, talking and laughing.

"Look there!" cried one of the girls, pointing at them. "What fools you are to be trudging along this hot road while you could be riding."

So the Miller sat his son upon the Donkey and walked along by his side. Presently they came upon a group of old men who were engaged in serious conversation. One of the men looked up and said, "See that! It just proves what I was saying. No one has any respect for old age any more. Imagine that lazy boy riding while his poor old father walks! Get down, you lazy loafer, and let the old man rest his weary legs."

Hearing this, the Miller made his son dismount and got up on the Donkey's back himself. Thus they continued on their way, the son walking and the old Miller riding, until they met a group of women and children.

"Why, you horrid old man," one of the women cried. "How can you ride upon that Donkey while the poor little lad can hardly keep up with you?"

The Miller gave thought to this, and then picked up his son and placed the boy behind him on the Donkey's back.

The Miller and his son were riding into town when a passing villager called out, "For shame! Surely that Donkey is not your own."

The Miller assured him that it was.

"I never would have thought so by the way the poor beast is loaded. Why, you two fellows do not look sick to me! Surely you are better able to carry that Donkey than the Donkey is to carry both of you!"

So the Miller and his son dismounted. They tied the Donkey's legs together with some cord and strung him over a pole. With the pole across their shoulders, they walked over a bridge that led into town.

The townsfolk had never seen such a funny sight, and they laughed loudly. The noise so frightened the poor animal that he began to wiggle and kick. The cords that bound him snapped, and the Donkey tumbled from the pole into the river.

Sadly the old Miller and his son walked all the way home, thinking, "*When you try to please everyone, you end up by pleasing no one.*"

The Old Woman and the Physician

An old woman who had lost the use of her eyes called in a physician.

“Cure me of my blindness,” the old woman said, “and I will pay you well. But if I remain blind, I will pay you nothing. Do you agree?”

The physician consented to the bargain. He came to her house each week and applied some worthless salve to her eyes. But each time he quietly carried a piece of furniture away with him. This went on until he had stolen all her possessions.

Then the physician gave her a salve that cured her, and the old woman could see again. Now that she had recovered her sight, she saw that her house was bare, and therefore she would pay him nothing.

The physician insisted that she pay him, but the old woman refused. At last the physician took her to court.

The old woman stood before the judge and said, “This man speaks the truth. I did agree to pay him well if I recovered my sight. He agreed I need pay him nothing if I remained blind. Now he says that I am healed. I say I am still blind, for when I lost the use of my eyes my house was filled with fine furniture and goods, yet now I am not able to see any of it!”

The judge settled the case in favor of the old woman, saying, “*Those who are so ready to take what is not their own must be prepared to lose what is theirs.*”

The Hare and the Tortoise

One day the Hare was boasting, as usual, of his amazing speed.

“No one can run faster than I,” he bragged to the other animals. “I’m swifter than the wind. I challenge anyone here to run a race with me.”

None of the animals seemed ready to accept the challenge. “What?” said the Hare. “Will no one dare to race with me?”

“I will,” said a quiet voice. It was the Tortoise.

“You!” the Hare exclaimed. “Surely you must be joking. How can *you* hope to win?”

“We shall see,” said the Tortoise calmly. “Let us race.”

It was agreed that they would race through the woods and back. The signal was given, and the Hare hopped out of sight at once, while the Tortoise plodded slowly along.

Soon the Hare was so far ahead of the Tortoise that he stopped to rest on the soft grass. “To think that a Tortoise would want to race with me!” thought the Hare, laughing to himself. “Why I even have time for a nap.” And he curled up on the soft grass and went to sleep.

Meanwhile the Tortoise plodded steadily on—and on and on. After a while he passed the Hare, who was still asleep. Just as the Tortoise came to the finish line, the Hare awoke and saw where the Tortoise was. The Hare made a great leap forward, but it was too late. The Tortoise had won the race.

As the Hare crept away, shamefaced, he heard the animals exclaim, “You won! You won! How did you ever beat the Hare?”

Modestly, the Tortoise told them, “*Slow and steady wins the race.*”

The Lion in Love

In days of old, a Lion fell in love with a Woodsman’s beautiful daughter and asked for her hand in marriage. The Woodsman was unwilling to grant the Lion’s request. Yet he was afraid to anger the King of Beasts.

“Noble Lion,” the Woodsman said, “I am greatly honored by your proposal. But, sir, have you considered my daughter’s fears? Your great teeth and your sharp claws terrify her. Before you can be a suitable bridegroom for my daughter, you must let me cut off your claws and take out your teeth.”

The Lion was too deeply in love to protest. So he consented, and the deed was done.

The Lion then demanded that the woodsman’s daughter become his bride at once. But the Woodsman was no longer afraid of the Lion, for the great beast now had neither teeth nor claws.

With his heavy club the Woodsman set upon the Lion and drove him into the forest.

“Alas!” cried the Lion, *“Now I know that those in love really take leave of their senses.”*

The Frogs Who Desired a King

The Frogs were happy all day long playing in their marshy swamp. They splashed and jumped without a care in the world. But one day a few of the Frogs began to think there was something wrong with their easy way of life.

They said, “We should have a King. Then he would tell us what to do.”

The Frogs made this request of Jupiter. He laughed at them and said, “Very well, you sillies! Here is your King!” And he threw down a log.

At first the Frogs were terrified at the great splash the log made, and they hid amid the tall rushes. Then one by one they swam up to it, touched it, climbed on it, and jumped up and down to their heart’s content.

“This King does not move!” the Frogs complained to Jupiter. “We want a real King, one who will really rule over us.”

Jupiter was angered at the stupidity of the Frogs. “Very well, I will send you a King who *does* move.” And he sent them a Stork who at once began to gobble up the Frogs.

“Save us, Jupiter,” cried the Frogs, as they tried to escape from the Stork.

“No,” said Jupiter scornfully. “You will have to make the best of what you asked for, since you were not content to *let well enough alone*.”

The Goose With the Golden Eggs

One morning a Farmer was astonished to discover that his Goose had laid an egg of solid gold. He seized the precious egg, ran into the house, and with trembling hands showed it to his wife. “Look, my wife,” he said, “we are rich!” Then the Farmer took the golden egg to market and sold it for a good price. The next morning the goose again laid a golden egg, and the Farmer sold that too for much money. Every day thereafter the Farmer found in the barnyard an egg of purest gold. One by one he sold the eggs and soon became a very rich man. But the richer he became, the more money he wanted.

One day he thought, “Why must I be content with only one golden egg a day? If I kill the goose and cut her open, I can take all the treasure at once!”

Whereupon he seized his ax and killed the goose—but alas, there was no gold at all inside.

“Foolish man!” cried his wife. “If only you had understood that *those who are greedy for too much sometimes lose all*.”

The Wolf and the Crane

Once when a Wolf was eating supper, a bone stuck in his throat. Almost choking to death, the Wolf begged a Crane to put her head into his throat and draw out the bone. "I will reward you generously," the Wolf promised.

It took the Crane only a few minutes to pull out the bone. But when he asked for the reward, the Wolf laughed at him.

"Were you not able to pull your head safely out of my jaw? Is that not payment enough!"

"I should have known," thought the Crane, as he flew off. "*When one serves the wicked, one should expect no reward.*"

(Source: McGovern, Ann. 2005. *Aesop's Fables*. New York: Scholastic Inc., pp 10-33.)

Discussion Questions:

- (1) Who was Aesop?
- (2) What are fables?
- (3) Why did Aesop use animals as his characters?
- (4) Discuss the roles of animals in Aesop's fables.
- (5) Are the characters in Aesop's fables symbolic?
- (6) Do Aesop's fables express universal values?
If so, what are they?
- (7) What is your favorite fable? Give reasons.