

Easy Reader Adapted to Easy Reader: How Children's Literature Responds to Prominent
Literacy Practices

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Linda Hutcheon, an authority on literary adaptation, provides in her book *A Theory on Adaptation* many potential reasons for why writers and other creators might choose to engage in adaptation. According to Hutcheon, some adapters are seeking to “gain respectability or increase cultural capital,” (91) or “to cash in on the success of certain” media (88), while others simply have “their own personal reasons” (92) for choosing to adapt a preexisting work into something new. Other researchers' views on the reasoning behind adaptation overlap with Hutcheon's. For example, as Benjamin Lefebvre, a researcher for the University of Winnipeg, Canada's Centre for Research in Young People's Texts and Cultures, reminds us, “In the field of children's literature...the industries that support adaptations...of children's texts are driven at once by financial, artistic, and ideological considerations” (2). These “ideological considerations” (Lefebvre 2) relate to my assertion in this article that ideological advances in one field may incite the need for changes in another.

Like Theresa A. Roberts and Anne Meiring, child development experts of California State University, Sacramento point out, “Interest in teaching reading through the use of children's literature continues to be high in both the research community (Morrow, 1992; Neumann, 1999) and among practitioners (Routman, 1994)” (690). In order to teach reading using children's literature, the literature needs to be “tackle-able” by the students using it. Thus, the fluctuation between prominent literacy practices in elementary classrooms sometimes serves as a catalyst for adaptations of children's literature by way of revision. Far from unprecedented, Alice Low's *The Witch Who Was Afraid of Witches* is an example of this phenomenon, as it

underwent significant revisions through its adaptation from its original 1978 STARBOOKS version to its 1999 *I Can Read!* version with the same title.

The Reading Wars: An Overview

The “Reading Wars” is a phenomenon that has plagued English literacy instruction for over a century. The term applies to the debate over whether the best way to teach children how to read is through the phonics approach (where students break down and sound out words based on the sounds that letters and blends make) or through whole-language instruction (often referred to as look-say, where students learn to read words based on how they look rather than what they are composed of). Opinions began to clash in the mid-nineteenth century when Horace Mann, member of the Board of Education for Massachusetts, publicly “railed against the teaching of the alphabetic code—the idea that letters represented sounds—as an impediment to reading for meaning. Mann excoriated the letters of the alphabet as ‘bloodless, ghostly apparitions,’ and argued that children should first learn to read whole words” (Kim 89). Dominant practice did not begin to so briskly oscillate between phonics and whole language, however, until the mid-twentieth century when literacy scholar William Gray published his 1948 *On Their Own in Reading* which advocated for whole language instruction (Kim 90). Soon after in 1955, literacy scholar Rudolph Flesch published the broadly known *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, in which he asserts that “[t]he obvious answer” to the question of how we should learn to read is “[b]y taking up one symbol after another and learning how to write it and how to recognize it” (Flesch 3). This idea and the rest of *Why Johnny Can’t Read* were embraced for their “back-to-basics” promotion of phonics in the 1950s due to a fear sparked by the Cold War that American education was paling in comparison to Russia’s (Kim 91).

By the 1980s, whole language instruction began again to take the English literacy world by storm; whole language advocates managed to convince state government officials (most notably in California) to “adopt new textbooks that de-emphasized skill instruction and phonics skills” (Kim 98). This ended up being a mistake and led to California’s “reading crisis” in the early 1990s when over half of fourth graders could not read at their target level, which caused yet another new and immediate backing of phonics (Kim 99).

Early Works Responding to Literacy

Children’s literature has certainly been affected by and has responded to the flip-flopping of support for pedagogical literacy practices. An early example is the renowned Dick and Jane series. As Ramona Caponegro, Associate Professor in the English Department at Eastern Michigan University, states in her article about the progression of Early Readers, “Reflecting the growing national trend of teaching reading primarily in classrooms rather than in homes and a rising belief in the child readers’ desires to relate to child characters whose lives were purportedly similar to their own, the Dick and Jane readers were used in many American schools between the 1930s and the 1970s” (20). Additionally, whole language was a prominent method teachers were using during particularly the 1930s and 1940s to teach their students to read (Hempstall 110). Thus, the Dick and Jane series is a perfect example of children’s literature affected by prominent literacy practices. The Dick and Jane series adheres to the whole language approach through its large illustrations depicting exactly what the text underneath them describes, giving readers more context (Maddox and Feng 15, 27-28), and its repetitive use of short words to establish familiarity for easy future recognition (Caponegro 21).

While also filling a literary void left between children’s chapter books and the paraliterature that is the primers of the Dick and Jane series, author Gertrude Chandler Warner

revised her original 1924 *The Box-Car Children*, adapting it into the still-popular *The Boxcar Children* in 1942 (Abate 26-27, 29). Although phonics did not resurge as dominant practice until the 1950s, Warner, an advocate of still-prominent phonics instruction herself, took her own advice and developed a book that was written to match the literacy ideology to which she subscribed (Abate 34-35).

Warner, who would become an experienced elementary teacher, published an article “The Return of A, B, C,” in 1921, which made a case for phonics instruction in elementary classrooms. After teaching a boy who was far behind in his learning-to-read process and discovering that the reason for his delay was his previous experiences with whole language instruction, Warner asks, “Why confuse a child’s mind at first with what a letter is arbitrarily called by someone else? Surely it is more sensible to show him what noise to make when he sees it” (Warner and Warner 141). Three years later Warner goes on to publish *The Box-Car Children*. When she watches her book flop in her own classroom, she begins to understand why it has not sprung into popularity: she did not write her book with her own support of phonics instruction in mind, and it was too difficult for her target audience to read independently (Abate 29). In 1942 *The Box-Car Children* became *The Boxcar Children*, the first book in the renowned series still in circulation today. The original was drastically revised, and sweeping phonetic changes occurred. For example, the last name of the children in the book went from “Cordyce” to “Alden.” Michelle Abate, Ohio State University’s Associate Professor of Literature for Children and Young Adults, provides clear support for Warner’s choice:

This substitution could be regarded as puzzling—given that it appears without any real plot motive or clear thematic message—until it is viewed through the lens of creating a text to promote independent reading. The word “Cordyce” is difficult to decipher for

children who are encountering it for the first time, raising linguistic conundrums such as the following: Where do the syllables break and which one is emphasized? Does the “rd” combination function as a consonant cluster? How does the letter “y” operate: is it a vowel or a consonant? Is the second “c” a hard or soft sound? For instance, could the word be correctly pronounced “Cordy-KEH” or “COR-dyke”? By contrast, the two-syllable replacement “Alden” is easy to sound out independently: “All-DEN.” (30-31)

By taking this approach, what Warner did not know is that with *The Boxcar Children* she was paving the way for what would become known as Early Readers (Abate 34).

Easy Readers, like books in the *I Can Read!* series, responded to literacy ideologies, too. The *I Can Read!* series sprung up in 1957 (Caponegro 22) right after *Why Johnny Can't Read* made its popular case for phonics. The repetitiveness and very short words of the first ever book of the *I Can Read!* series, Else Holmelund Minarik's *Little Bear*, was very much so written for whole language learners. This can be seen through the following excerpt from the book: “It is cold. See the snow. See the snow come down. Little Bear said, “Mother Bear, I am cold. See the snow. I want something to put on” (*Little Bear* 12). However, after *Why Johnny Can't Read* had some time to make some ground, later books in the *Little Bear* series, like *Little Bear's Visit*, show signs of evolution: “He liked to put on Grandfather's big hat and say, ‘Look at me!’ And he liked Grandmother's cooking very, very much. He had some bread and jam, cake and cookies, milk and honey, and an apple” (*Little Bear's Visit* 11-12). In this excerpt it is easy to see a reduction in use of a repetitive, whole-language approach, allowing readers instead to use phonics strategies to decode words.

The Role of *The Witch Who Was Afraid of Witches*

Popular still today, the *I Can Read!* series is a collection of Easy Readers in a variety of levels of complexity specifically marketed as books intended to aid children in their learning-to-read endeavors. In order to be as marketable as possible, *I Can Read!* books must be accessible by as many children as possible. To maintain the success of the series, when a child sees an *I Can Read!* book, he or she should expect based solely on the “*I Can Read!*” banner on the cover that they will be able to tackle the book independently using the reading strategies he or she has learned in school. Thus, today’s English literacy trend of teachers using aspects of both phonics and whole language in their classrooms (Hempenstall 116) means that children’s literature needs to respond by incorporating into books opportunities for readers to use strategies they may have learned through both whole language and phonics. When Alice Low adapted her original 1978 *The Witch Who Was Afraid of Witches* into her 1999 *I Can Read!* version of the book with the same title, she ensured just that.

Additionally, it is essential to note that there is more to literacy than word recognition and decoding; more than whole language and phonics. Grammar plays an important role as well, and because the *I Can Read!* series consists of books children should feel they can “trust” in the way of literacy, it is likely that children will subconsciously view them as models of the style in which they themselves should write. Therefore, in order to maintain the merit of the *I Can Read!* empire, it is imperative that *I Can Read!* books also be accurate representational models of Standard English (SE), which for the purposes of this article refers to the generally accepted rules of “proper” written English. Further, clarity is also critical. If young readers get too bogged down with unnecessary details, their attention will falter and their excitement for reading will not prevail.

For the aforementioned reasons, there are four major categories of revisions *The Witch Who Was Afraid of Witches* underwent during its adaptation into an *I Can Read!* book: grammatical/syntactical revisions, phonetic revisions, revisions for condensation and clarity, and illustrational revisions.

Grammatical/Syntactical Revisions

Grammatical and syntactical revisions serve two main purposes in Low's *The Witch Who Was Afraid of Witches*. The first is to maintain the merit of the Easy Reader series, *I Can Read!*. The second is to ensure students are provided with proper models for writing so that they become familiarized with grammatical and syntactical correctness.

These types of revisions show up in the very first paragraph of the *I Can Read!* version of *The Witch Who Was Afraid of Witches*. In Low's original 1978 version, an excerpt reads: "And she was afraid of witches. Older, bossy, mean witches like her two sisters" (1). The second "sentence" in this excerpt is an incomplete thought and is not a sentence at all. The words are not phonetically difficult and the idea is certainly portrayed clearly, but the excerpt incorrectly models SE. If incomplete sentences are present in books that children know are being given to them to read so that they can learn what proper SE looks like, they may struggle with beginning or continuing to write incomplete sentences themselves. The original punctuation of this excerpt is, therefore, not something that could be present in Low's 1999 adaptation of the book; instead, what we find is the following: "And she was afraid of witches—older, bossy, mean witches like her two sisters" (5). This revision takes care of the incomplete thought; we are presented with a true sentence. Leading up to the now singular period, a subject ("she") and a verb ("was afraid") are both present, along with supporting details this time following a hyphen, after which a complete thought is not necessary.

The same strategy is used again later in the story when Wendy teaches her new friend how witches cackle. In Low's original version, we read the following: "Witches cackle. Like this. *Heh, heh, heh. I'll get you*" (13). In Low's 1999 version, however, to eliminate the incomplete thought, Wendy's comment is revised thusly: "Witches cackle, like this, *Heh, heh, heh. I'll get you*" (20). By replacing the period following "cackle" with a comma, yet another incomplete thought gets eliminated. Since the italics here serve the same purpose as quotation marks, this sentence is now free from errors.

When Wendy reveals her identity as a true witch to Roger, another change must be made. Low originally wrote Wendy's admission as: "Yes, I am a real witch,' Wendy said. 'With my own witch power. I just found that out, and you helped...'" (22). In Low's *I Can Read!* version, Wendy's proclamation reads instead: "Yes, I am a real witch, with my own witch power,' Wendy said. 'I just found that out, and you helped...'" (33). This successfully eradicates an incomplete thought yet again, this time by adding a freestanding prepositional phrase to the preceding adjacent complete sentence.

Phonetic Revisions

In order for children to be able to decode words independently in the *I Can Read!* Level 4 version of *The Witch Who Was Afraid of Witches*, there were some words that needed to be swapped out of the 1978 version in lieu of more phonetically favorable ones in the revised version. For example, when Wendy realizes she can fly on her friend's old kitchen broomstick, her excitement dissipates in Low's original text when she proclaims, "...Except I don't know any spells" (17). In Low's 1999 version, though, Wendy instead complains, "...But I still don't know any spells" (27). "Except" is a difficult word to decode for the same reason "Cordyce," former family name of the Aldens in *The Boxcar Children*, is difficult; the "C" in the middle of

both words could be easily confused as a hard “C” as in “cat” rather than a soft “C” as in “ice.” “But,” on the other hand, is pronounced entirely phonetically.

Another example of a phonetic change in the two versions of the book is in the scene in which Wendy names the witches’ brew ingredient her oldest sister is the best at obtaining. In Low’s original version, Wendy’s oldest sister is best at getting “frogs’ tongues,” (2) whereas Polly is best at finding “frogs’ toes” in the *I Can Read!* version (6). “Tongues” is phonetically puzzling; readers’ may immediately jump to thinking in terms of the rule that an “E” at the end of a word often makes the previous vowel say its name. In this case, the reader would incorrectly pronounce the word “TON-gyoos.” However, following the exact same rule about an “E” calling for preceding vowels to say their names, readers would be able to accurately decode the pronunciation of “toes,” which sheds light on the reasoning behind Low’s revision.

Revisions for Condensation and Clarity

In Easy Readers like *I Can Read!* books—more recent editions of which are intended to be perfect combinations of usability for students used to either phonics or whole language approaches to reading (or both)—it is imperative that the story keeps children’s attention for the purpose of the book to be achieved. For this reason, the *I Can Read!* version of *The Witch Who Was Afraid of Witches* needed to be free of unnecessarily lengthy passages that held back the brisk progression of the storyline. Take the following excerpt from Low’s 1978 version for example:

“Take me with you,” Wendy begged when her oldest sister was going to the sassafras grove.

But her oldest sister always said, “You’re too young. You don’t even have the right kind of wood in your broomstick. No wonder you can hardly take off. You’ll never learn. Really, Wendy, you don’t know anything.”

Wendy wanted to say, “Of course I don’t. How can I learn if you won’t show me?”

But she was afraid to talk back to her oldest sister. (3)

There is a lot going on in the above excerpt; for one thing, the phrase “oldest sister” is used three times in a matter of sentences, with nothing else to distinguish her oldest sister from any other sister Wendy might have. Additionally, this is a brief conversation between sisters that took nine entire sentences to convey, which would take a child (especially one struggling through the book in the first place) a considerable amount of time to read. In the 1999 version of *The Witch Who Was Afraid of Witches*, Low revised the excerpt thusly: “One day, Polly was going to the sassafras grove. ‘Take me with you,’ Wendy begged. Polly said, ‘You’re too young. You don’t even have the right kind of wood in your broomstick. You don’t know anything, and you’ll never learn’” (6). Low was able to communicate the exact same conversation between sisters in twenty-three fewer words with this revision. She named Wendy’s oldest sister, providing clarity for her readers that will be especially helpful in deciphering which witch is which in the next pages when Wendy’s middle sister is introduced. Low continued in succeeding pages the trend of providing clarity through the naming of characters when she named Wendy’s middle sister, who became “Wog,” as well as Wendy’s trick-or-treating ghost friend, who became “Roger.” In the above passage, Low also shortened Polly’s criticism of Wendy without sacrificing the cruelty of Polly’s words, and she eliminated the direct statement of Wendy’s thoughts and feelings, which, through reading comprehension, young readers should be able to infer anyway. All of

these changes help Low drive the story forward more quickly, allowing young readers to breeze through it at a more appropriate pace.

Of course, while the changes occurring through the revision of *The Witch Who Was Afraid of Witches* are, at surface level, certainly made with readability and representation of SE in mind, the air of condescension that comes with the revised version cannot be ignored. The naming of “Polly” and “Wog” certainly achieved its goal of providing clarity for readers; but there is another symbolic reason for why the older witch sisters were named thusly. Together, Polly and Wog make *pollywog*, another word for a tadpole. These witch sisters are supposed to be frightening and awful, but as is typical of children’s books, readers will expect our heroine Wendy to prevail over her sisters’ ill treatment of her. Wendy’s win is foreshadowed by the sisters being named as two parts of a whole, certainly not as strong independently of the other. Moreover, they are named for a *tadpole*, a much cuter version of what is not yet even a full-fledged disgusting frog. Surely their ugliness will not prevail.

Another change that was arguably made for purposes of clarity is the switch in Wendy’s first successful spell from the word “rubbers,” as in “rain boots,” in Low’s original version (18) to “buttons” in her revised text (28). At the surface level, this change was due to the fact that the term “rubbers” had fallen out of fashion by the time *The Witch Who Was Afraid of Witches* was revised. Children still would have understood that “rubbers” was intended to mean “rain boots,” though. An underlying reason for the change, however, is that “rubbers” had by 1999 acquired a less-than-wholesome connotation.

Illustrational Revisions

One important strategy related to learning to read using whole language techniques is resorting to using illustrations as clues for what a word in the text might be if it is not

immediately recognized by sight (Maddox and Feng 15, 27-28). This resulted in certain scenes in the revision of *The Witch Who Was Afraid of Witches* depicting more exactly what the text described rather than fluffing or deviating at all from the text like the illustrations sometimes did in the original version.

For example, in the scene during which Wendy asks her middle sister to teach her how to use a witch's voice, in Low's original book the illustration shows Wendy asking this of her sister while her sister hangs laundry to dry on a clothesline (5). The text has absolutely nothing to do with laundry at all, making the illustration somewhat irrelevant. In Low's revised version, however, when Wendy asks to learn from her sister, the illustration shows her sister sitting in a chair in such a way that she seems to almost be sitting on a throne (8-9). Wendy, seemingly a royal pauper, is greeted in the illustration by a much more condescending facial expression to match her sister's harsh dialogue than she was greeted with in the original version. In this way, the new illustrations have set up a scene that is much more easily attributed to the text.

Another example of a change to help with deciphering words in the text is the scene during which Wendy must put out the fire while her sisters go out scaring people on Halloween. In Low's original version, when Wendy "sat in the dark, shivering," the illustration only showed Wendy wrapped in a blanket (10). "Shivering" is an unusual word that students of the whole language approach may not be familiar with. Low's revised version of the book includes an illustration to help readers decide the meaning of the word: Wendy sits on a stool with her hands on her shoulders, indicating the actual action of shivering (17).

The first time Wendy successfully delivers a spell gets an illustrational upgrade for the benefit of whole language learners as well. The illustration in Low's 1978 version of the book just showed Wendy dancing around with her broomstick while delivering the following spell:

“*Frogs and lizards / Toads and newts / Rubbers, raincoats / Hiking boots. / Turn this ghost / Into a witch. / Presto, change-o / Make a switch*” (18). Some words in the spell, such as “lizards,” “raincoats,” and “hiking” are a bit uncommon and may be unrecognizable to some readers just by sight. To help, the illustrations in Low’s 1999 version include images of a lizard, a raincoat, and hiking boots floating around the italicized words of Wendy’s spell on the page (28).

Conclusion

The “Reading Wars” may not have ever reached a resolution—there are still supporters of both phonics and whole language instruction independently of each other—but the wars *have* fizzled as “teachers...espouse the current orthodoxy, while practising a hybridised approach” (Hempenstall 116) to teaching literacy. This mixed approach to literacy instruction is likely the closest we will ever come to resolving the controversy, which is beneficial for students since the most effective aspects of each approach are now largely being implemented together. This gives students of literacy even more opportunities to become successful readers. In Caponegro’s words, “...the continual quest to make reading instruction more palatable and enjoyable leads to each new stage of the category’s development, [but] innovations in the category do not wholly replace the older works or ideas about literacy instruction and literary appreciation” (14). This makes the Dick and Jane series, *The Boxcar Children*, *Little Bear*, and especially *The Witch Who Was Afraid of Witches*, still relevant to the conversation today about literacy-driven adaptation. It is clear that both utilitarian children’s books as well as books intended for independent reading outside the classroom have been largely affected by and have responded to their audience’s educational experiences for nearly a century. While children’s literature and elementary education are two separate fields entirely, it’s intriguing to discover upon analysis just how significant an impact one can have on the other.

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