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Between the Pages

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A tall, mischievous cat in a tall, striped hat. A place where wild things gnash their terrible teeth. Using only his purple crayon, a boy draws himself into and out of an adventure. These are all big tales and big hits with their smaller-sized audience – and with scholars alike.

“Children’s literature is the most important literature that we read,” said Philip Nel, university distinguished professor and director of the children’s literature program at Kansas State University. “We read these stories at a time when we’re impressionable and when we’re still in the process of figuring out who we are. Everything in those books has the potential to shape who we become.”

Crockett Johnson’s story of the little boy, “Harold and the Purple Crayon,” inspired Nel to major in English, earn a doctorate and become a professor and one of the leading scholars in children’s literature.

Serious reading

“The field of children’s literature has gained more respectability than it used to have,” Nel said. “True, there are still people who look at children’s literature as somehow lesser because it’s written for people with less height and less experience. But it can be rich, complex material. Good children’s books are literature. Good picture books are portable art galleries.”

According to Nel, children’s literature encompasses a range of possible subjects and genres, from the nonsense of Lewis Carroll’s “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” to the realism of Walter Dean Myers’ “Fallen Angels,” the fantasy of J.K. Rowling’s “Harry Potter” and the dark surrealism of Chris Van Allsburg’s “The Mysteries of Harris Burdick.” Nearly as many types of literature for children are available as types of literature for grown-ups, he said.

Less than a year after Kansas State University established a children’s literature academic track in 2007, enrollment in the program matched the enrollment numbers in the English department’s four other master’s degree tracks.

The program revolves around seven full-time faculty members, four of whom are internationally recognized scholars in children’s literature. Their expertise includes Dr. Seuss; the “Harry Potter” series; Crockett Johnson; Louisa May Alcott’s “Little Women”; British fantasy; “The Secret Garden”; “The Adventures of Tintin”; novels about orphan girls; and science fiction.

“In terms of the depth of knowledge, insight and academic reputation that each member brings to the program, the children’s literature program at Kansas State University offers a comprehensive program in the advanced study of children’s literature,” Nel said.

The faculty and students study the form, themes and historical context of literature for young readers.

In addition to scholarly journals and books, classes use the university’s Juvenile Literature Collection, which contains more than 4,400 books. An additional 1,000 works are in the library’s special collections, including works by L. Frank Baum, author of “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz,” and Alcott.

“Writing children’s books is not something that anybody can do,” Nel said. “It’s a skill, an art and a difficult process. It requires smaller and fewer words and has to immediately engage young readers. That requires a lot of talent and skill to pull off. It’s a serious profession and a serious art.”

By Greg Tammen, Communications and Marketing