Welcome to Lizard Motel: Children, Stories, and the Mystery of Making Things Up
By Barbara Feinberg


Reviewed by Diane Ravitch

Barbara Feinberg contends that most of the young adult novels that teachers assign to teenagers are dreary, depressing, and didactic. Rather than encouraging impressionable students to read more, these so-called problem novels turn young people into reluctant readers. Furthermore, she holds that the writers’ workshops that have spread like kudzu through American elementary schools, promoted by Lucy Calkins of Teachers College, Columbia University, deaden children’s creativity.

Both claims are akin to bomb throwing, since these practices are high orthodoxy in the world of professional pedagogy. What is her claim to authority? She is not a card-carrying member of the professoriate, nor does she claim to have a doctorate. She apparently is not worried about winning tenure or finding new friends among professors of pedagogy. She offers up some footnotes to document her reading in the professional literature, but she has no social science data and does not claim to be an expert.

Lacking the medals and ribbons that certify professional expertise, she relies instead on demonstrations of her experience and insight. Her book is a memoir that displays her love of language and children and her understanding of how children think. She writes as a mother, but also as the founder of a creative-writing program for children. She listens to her 12-year-old son and his friends as they discuss the novels that their teachers have told them to read over the summer. The boys don’t like them. They seem, in fact, to hate them.

The books that her son, Alex, and his friends are compelled to read are highly regarded by teachers and professors of education. Many come decorated with Newbery medals and endorsements by the American Library Association. They are books known in the field of children’s literature as Young Adult (YA) literature. All are highly realistic, written in a confessional tone, usually in the first-person voice of an angry or alienated teenager. The protagonist deals with traumatic experiences: murder, suicide, the death of a parent or friend, incest, sexual abuse, rape, drugs, abortion, kidnapping, abandonment. Friendly or protective adults are virtually nonexistent; the main character’s mother, writes Feinberg, is dead, missing, or nonfunctional. Children in these novels almost never play. Often they feel guilty for whatever catastrophe befalls them. The books are uniformly humorless, earnest, and depressing. Their message, to the extent that they have one: the world is a nasty and brutish place, and you can depend only on yourself.

What is missing from YA books, says Feinberg, is any recognition of the role that imagination and fantasy play in children’s ways of experiencing life. Instead, the books seem dedicated to shocking children, destroying their fantasies, and giving them a mean dose of reality. One of the children that Feinberg knows said of these books, “They give me a headache in my stomach.” It is as though the authors, the publishers, the teachers, and the professors of education share a bizarre consensus that ordinary children need to be shaken out of their complacency, stripped of their innocence, and frightened by the horrors that the world has in store for them at any moment.

No More Trees in Brooklyn
Feinberg divines similar attitudes in the writers’ workshops, introduced to her daughter’s elementary school by an expert from the Lucy Calkins Writing Project at Teachers College. Under the expert’s guidance, seven-year-old Claire’s class is soon writing and revising their memoirs. The children are taught to record and revise their experiences; no fantasy is permitted, no fiction, no non-sequiturs. Feinberg recoils at what she describes as profound, if mannerly, thought control, in which imagination and fantasy are ruled out of order. She complains: “This is not a

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natural way that children see. One must have traveled to the end of something to be able to have a satisfying backward perspective. This whole enterprise is something adults have imposed. And why? Why is my generation hell-bent on making our children wake from the dream of their childhoods?"

In her own approach to writing and reading, Feinberg is clearly attuned to children's love of making things up, imagining that animals can talk, turning empty boxes into special places for stories that flow from children's daydreams and flights of fancy. As a child, she loved *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Her son and his friends love the *Harry Potter* books. These kinds of novels are unacceptable to the academic proponents of YA literature. They are too removed from the horrors of everyday life. The YA crowd prefers books and activities that encourage self-reflection, self-absorption, that is, narcissism.

The advocates of problem novels would no doubt sneer at Feinberg's right to criticize these novels. After all, what are her credentials? A mother and director of a story-writing program for children. But we may well ask, what are their credentials for foisting these novels of adolescent alienation on an entire generation of American children? They believe that children need to read books that upset them, but on what do they base this claim? There is no social science evidence that children need to cry or be frightened by the books they read. Some of the professoriate embrace the bizarre idea of bibliotherapy, believing that children will feel better about themselves if they read about a child with similar problems (for instance, the child of an alcoholic parent should read about the child of an alcoholic parent). However, these claims are based on assumptions, not evidence. In fact, professors of children's literature and classroom teachers are not qualified to act as therapists for children with social and emotional problems. Nor is there any evidence that reading a book is an appropriate treatment for a deep-seated problem.

What Feinberg nicely exposes is that the entire field of children's literature specialists has bought a flawed bill of goods and has sold it to the nation's teachers. They have persuaded themselves that their job is not to promote excellent literature, but to promote depressing problem novels. In doing so, they seem to be turning young people away from literature in droves. Last year the National Endowment for the Arts issued a report called "Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America," which found that the proportion of young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 who read literature has declined sharply in the past two decades. Perhaps the professors should ask themselves whether their prescriptions have contributed to this unfortunate trend.

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