

12-1-1996

Reviews: Professional Materials

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Recommended Citation

Crawford, P. A. (1996). Reviews: Professional Materials. *Reading Horizons*, 37 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol37/iss2/7

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Professional Materials

Should We Burn Babar? Essays on Children's Literature and the Power of Stories. Written by Herbert Kohl. New Press, New York, NY. 1995. US\$18.95, 178 pages.

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In this collection of essays, Herbert Kohl focuses his critical perspective on children's literature. Collectively, these essays beckon readers to view children's literature through a new lens, and to investigate the ideology which undergirds it. Individually, each piece invites readers to examine a different issue related to the power relationships that prevail in both literature and life.

In the first essay, Kohl deconstructs the character of Babar, the beloved elephant king featured in the series of books written by Jean de Brunhoff. Kohl first presents an overview of Babar's life and his evolution from an elephant-centered mindset to a people-centered one; showing how Babar's potential for success in his newfound life is determined by his willingness to turn his back on his old one. In order to flourish in his new world, Babar must not only cease to identify himself with the other elephants, he must literally rule over them. He leaves it for readers to determine a proper response to these books; to consider what type of role they should play in the lives of children.

In another essay, Kohl focuses on Rosa Parks and the way in which her life has typically been depicted in the pages of children's literature. Kohl draws upon a variety of trade books and instructional texts in order to show how Parks has generally been portrayed as a poor, uneducated seamstress who, in an impulsive move, single-handedly took on the entire Montgomery bus system and police force. Kohl juxtaposes this widely held mythology with the lesser known facts surrounding Parks' life, the work of the Montgomery African-American community, and the 1955 bus boycott. By doing so, he illustrates the ways in which many children's authors have not only misrepresented Parks' contributions, but also how, through their omissions, they have effectively erased the role that collective social action played in effecting change in the civil rights movement.

In a third essay, "A Plea for Radical Children's Literature," Kohl asserts that although there has been a proliferation of literature designed to increase young readers' sensitivity to issues, little has been written that actually calls into question the basic values that are part of life in a capitalist society. Kohl lays out a criteria for radical children's literature and issues a plea for more "... books that project the possibility of a decent world for all people" (p. 75).

In these essays, as well as the others included in the text, the author helps readers to look at children's literature in new ways. Kohl illustrates the ways in which stories have the potential to not only inform our thinking, but also to shape our views of the world. *Should We Burn Babar?* is a fascinating and provocative text, which will affirm some readers and incite others, depending on their ideological perspective. It is an accessible work that includes material relevant to teachers, teacher educators, and parents.