

Experiencing Literature: Making Friends With the Classics

... Approach a classic in as many sensory ways as possible

A fresh taste of old Italy from Pinocchio by Carlo Collodi



By Jenny Clendenen Walicek and Becky Clendenen Kimball

Thick, outdated, boring, difficult, and dry.

How do we dispel this notion of the classics and get our kids to read—and love—great books?

You know those stories are jam-packed with just about everything your child needs: historical facts, scientific ideas, character models, vocabulary words, writing skills, and more. But old-fashioned books can intimidate even enthusiastic readers, and you certainly don't want to discourage the reluctant ones. Your goal, after all, is to encourage the joy of reading. You know that when kids read for fun, they learn for life.

What makes reading fun is the same thing that makes anything fun: hands-on experience. Experiential learning has recently been lauded as an overdue trend in math and science, but it's just as

overdue and beneficial in language arts too. Wouldn't you love to watch your kids have those "aha!" moments as they see, touch, smell, taste, hear, and do things they've read about? Great books can and should be great experiences! And anyone, by recreating the sensory aspects of a story, can bring it to life here and now, in a kid-friendly way.

As sisters, our sensory approach to books comes from 40-plus years of such literary experiences. Growing up, the children in our family spontaneously "lived out" our books as friends. We sat down with *Heidi* for a slab of cheese and a wooden salad bowl of milk, scratched out "a bit of earth" behind a rosebush to nurture *The Secret Garden*, staged plays in our tumble-down barn like the *Little Women* did, and buried Mom's jewelry in a pile of

creek mud we dubbed *Treasure Island*. Sharing places, objects, and actions with the books brought them into our own place and time, where they literally became our friends. As adults, we've introduced those old friends to our own children in sensory ways and to hundreds of others through our experiential literature workshops.

Getting to know an old book really is like getting to know a friend. Whether someone makes a friendly or an intimidating first impression, that person's "inside story" can't be taken to heart until we've connected through our senses, by doing the same things together. The more sensory the shared experiences, the more memorable. The more memorable, the more influential. And when it comes to great books, the more influential the better.

How do you encourage these literary friendships and the incidental learning to which they inevitably lead? Here are some proven tips from our years of experience as readers, parents, teachers, and workshop providers:

- *Take the pressure off.* We suggest allowing your kids to read or listen to a level-appropriate version of the book without the pressure of an assignment in mind. Having to remember questions or “look for” something while reading interferes with the visualization and enjoyment of the story. Tell them that you’ll be glad to paraphrase any truly mind-boggling paragraphs, but that the odds are they’ll figure it out well enough themselves if they *just keep reading*.
- *Create an indulgent ambiance.* Help your kids associate reading with comfort and pleasure by letting them read where they’re most relaxed and by playing story-relevant music. If they’ll go for it, evoke the settings they’re

reading about. For instance, *A Little Princess* might be read in a makeshift tent—like an attic—with a muffin. A reading of *Frankenstein* is enhanced by candles and online wind sounds. *Black Beauty* can be read on a blanket on the grass with carrots and apples at hand. You get the picture!

- *Hold out the reward of a sensory experience of the story.* Tell your kids that when they have finished the book (or chapter or other milestone) you’ll be “making it real” together by seeing, touching, hearing, smelling, and tasting some of the elements of the story. Take your own notes on the book, writing down the names of interesting objects, vocabulary, historical references, and allusions. Do a little bit of research and collect some props. Plan a relevant activity or two. Whatever piques your interest will likely have piqued theirs, and you’ll end up having knowledge-sharing conversations about the fascinating, confusing, exciting, heart-wrenching, frustrating, inspiring parts of the book.

- *Experience the book firsthand and engage with its characters.* When the book has been read or the milestone has been reached, nurture the developing friendship by having a “play date” with the story. Make it real and *fun* for your kids through a combination of places, props, projects, and activities. As your kids’ eyes and smiles widen at the scents, tastes, and sounds of things they’ve just read about, your teachable moments will appear.

Here are just a few examples of sensory ways to encourage the relationship between the reader and the book:

- *Share a meal.* Just about any reference to food can be explored in your own kitchen. For example, re-create a meal from *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* with raisins, biscuits, and jerky. Snack on Gouda cheese and gingerbread as you read *Hans Brinker*. Eat haggis with *Rob Roy* . . . or shortbread.

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Story elements from *The Trumpeter of Krakow* by Eric P. Kelly



Half-baked ideas from *The Phantom Tollbooth* by Norton Juster

- *Find common ground.* Set up in a spot that evokes the setting. You don't have to fly to Barbados to experience *The Tempest*; any beach, creek bank, or even sandbox will re-create the same underfoot "feel." And a rooftop garden's patch of grass would smell and taste as good to *Black Beauty* as his English meadow did!
- *Imitate (as sincere flattery).* Get inspired by something the characters do,

build, sing, or otherwise create. Outfit *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by having the kids wrap each other in medieval foil—er, armor—and hold a runway competition. If you're reading *The Hobbit* (and who isn't?), try figuring out Gollum's speech patterns and talking like him.

- *Meet the "parent."* Use props and activities to share biographical information about the author. Challenge the kids to

decode a hairy-looking Welsh village name like *Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwyll-llantysiliogogoch* while you explain that Tolkien's childhood interest in languages was inspired by Welsh words on railroad cars. Help kids understand what motivated Anna Sewell by showing them a bridle with a curb bit and having them grab the bit while you pull on the reins.

- *Laugh together!* Give each child a highly undesirable object and ask them to play the "Glad Game" like *Pollyanna* did. Have *A Little Princess* write a proper "thank you" note to the awful Miss Minchin. Smell stinky things, such as the liniment that *Anne of Green Gables*



Island textures from The Tempest by William Shakespeare



Earthy elements of The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett

Where to Find It

Looking for links to help you "sensorize" a great book? Here are some of our online go-to resources:

- **bookdrum.com**
Beautiful book-specific pictures, videos, maps, and music
- **youtube.com**
Craft directions, reenactments, music, dramatic clips, and location travelogues
- **freesound.org** sound effects
All noises, from airplanes to zippers!
- **allaboutbirds.org**
Images, birdcalls, and info from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology
- **wikipedia.org**
Images and information about . . . everything (check original sources)!
- **amazon.com**
Samples of music from the book, or CDs and MP3s to purchase
- **ebay.com**
Unique props and inexpensive craft supplies
- **freecycle.org**
Old magazines for collages and hard-to find props
- **worldmarket.com**
International food, candies, and cultural props
- Fan sites and sites devoted to the author, the author's birthplace, the book, and the book's setting

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should have recognized or a “corpse plant” that smells like the trolls’ lair in *The Hobbit*.

- *Be good listeners.* Open kids’ ears and minds to the sounds of the book’s setting and cultures. Learn an Icelandic greeting, drum along to Zulu music, hear a broad Yorkshire accent, sing sea shanties, listen to arias and steam organs and lyres—you can download just about any sound in the world.

The opportunities for immersion are endless. The point is to approach a classic in as many sensory ways as possible so your kids can connect, not just with the book but with the timeless, real life that book is about. The pleasure of that connection is what helps children love great books. And, through that love of great books, they learn for life. 📖

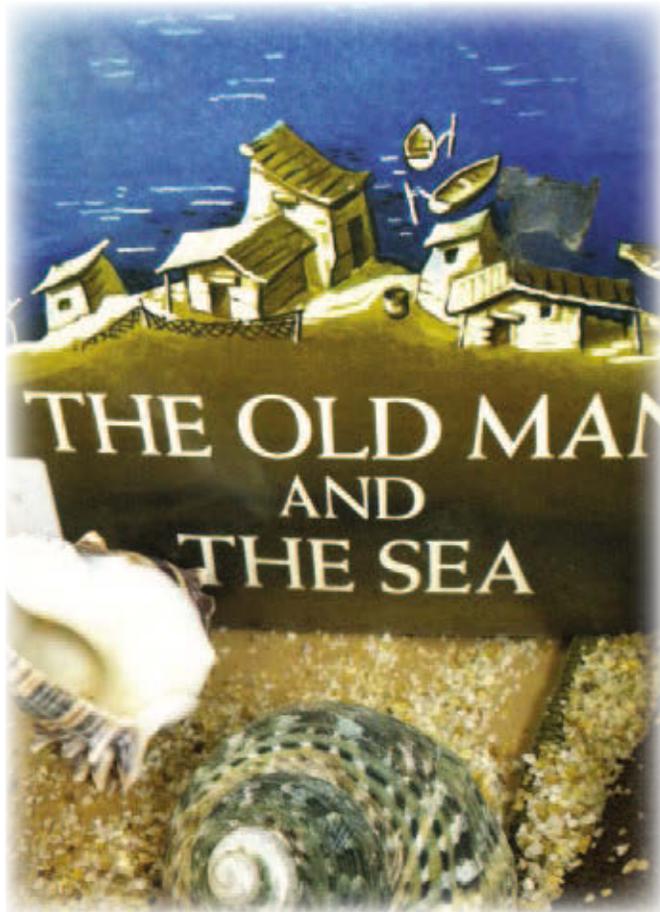


Jenny Clendenen Walicek and Becky Clendenen Walicek are sisters, best friends, and partners in LitWits Workshops. LitWits offers live experiential literature workshops in Santa Cruz, California, and provides downloadable do-it-yourself workshop guides online at www.LitWitsWorkshops.com. Becky and Jenny invite you to stop by their website and pick up free “play date” ideas for more than thirty of their literary friends!

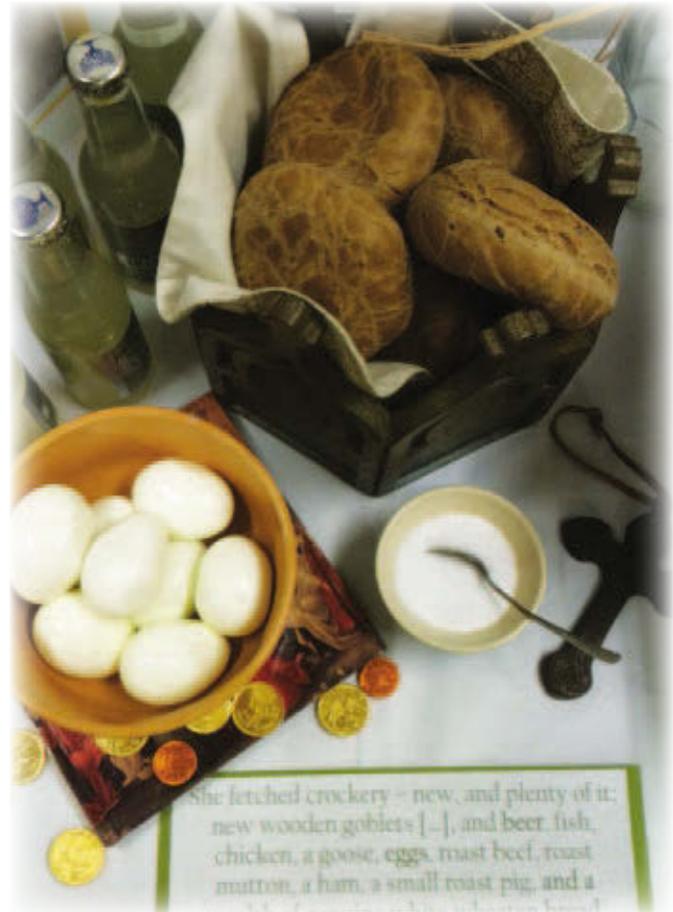
Crossover Subjects in the Classics

The classics are full of non-literary themes you can explore in sensory ways. *The Secret Garden*, for instance, beyond weaving its memorable tale of transformation, also introduces subjects such as these:

- British colonialism
- The biology and effects of cholera
- Class structures in Victorian England
- Horticulture and botany
- Portraiture
- Architecture and formal landscapes
- Weather cycles



Grit and beauty from *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway



Selections from the feast menu in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Mark Twain