The Power of Text: What a 19th Century Periodical Taught Me About Reading and the Reader's Response

by Laura Apol

Norman is a thin man with sparse hair and a white handlebar mustache. His wife, Marie, helps him to the door as they welcome me to their cabin on the shores of Lake Pennesseewassee, Maine. It's a small cabin, with wide windows that face the lake and a narrow staircase that goes to the second floor. On one side of the stairs is a chair lift.

After Marie has shown me around the main floor, I climb the stairs while Norman rides up in the lift. He leads me to a room filled with old magazines arranged in careful stacks, covered with plastic. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he begins to uncover the stacks by year: 1897, 1898, 1899. He shows me which issues are his favorites, which contain stories he especially loves.

Norman does this every afternoon . . . sorting, reading, rereading. The magazines are The Youth's Companion, *a popular family periodical published weekly in Boston from 1825 to 1927. Most of the stories that fill the room were written long before Norman was born. He remembers them, though; his grandmother read them to him when he was a child.*

Norman's favorite author is Charles Asbury Stephens, a prolific contributor to The Companion. *Many of Stephens' most popular tales center around his boyhood home, which in his fiction he calls "The Old Squire's Farm." This farm is located near the top of a hill on the shore of Lake Pennesseewassee. On a clear day, you can see it from Norman and Marie's cabin windows.*

It's no accident, this view. Soon after Norman and Marie were married, Norman acted on the dream he'd held since childhood. He took his savings and, although it was the height of the Depression, bought a bus ticket from New Jersey to Norway, Maine. After asking around, he walked the miles outside town to see the farm where Stephens' stories were set. He recognized the places where the boys in the stories chased the bear, where the Old Squire's family made cider, where the cousins had their corn cob fights. Norman stayed in Norway for several weeks. When he left, he had a second dream to replace the first, and years later he and Marie bought land on the lake across from Stephens' boyhood home and built a cabin, there on the shores of Pennesseewassee.

Norman has a huge collection of The Youth's Companion. *Each day he takes an issue, searches for stories by Stephens (for there were many, some unsigned or written under pseudonyms), and reads the worn pages and familiar words. Neither he nor Marie see anything odd about the strength of this passion.*

Norman's passion is a powerful thing; although when I met Norman and Marie, I'd already spent years studying *The Youth's Companion*, Norman and his issues of the magazine still taught me much about reading, the reader's response, and the power of text. For me, though, the story of textual power and the reader's response began long before I met Norman and Marie, or before as a doctoral student I first encountered *The Youth's Companion*.

This is that story. It is the story of how theory is enacted in the life of one reader through a series of stages and shifts, the most startling of which took place when, early in my dissertation research, I encountered the once-popular but now largely forgotten 19th century periodical, *The Youth's Companion*. Some parts of the story are idiosyncratic—understandings I came to late, interactions with literature that were entirely my own. Other parts, though, demonstrate ways response to literature was (and often still is) taught in elementary schools, high schools, and college classes. In that sense, my experiences are not unlike the experiences many students bring with them into literature classes and that educators often reproduce unconsciously in their own teaching.

The value of such a story is that it puts flesh on theories about the reader's response and on beliefs about the nature of literature, readers, and the power of text. Thinking through my journey as a reader, I have come to understand more deeply how I arrived at my own theories and beliefs about literature response, and I have learned much about my assumptions as a reader and a teacher of literature. The process as I present it here is divided into four stages, each exploring a different aspect of my evolving understanding of the power of text: textual purpose, textual promise, textual positioning, and the passion that texts inspire.

The Bible and The Bee Book: Textual power as purpose

I was born into a family and community that never doubted the power of text. The town I grew up in was strongly religious and homogeneous; I attended church schools from elementary age through college. Within that context, text had inherent power and an unambiguous purpose: to carry a message, to tell the truth. Texts were evaluated on the message they carried; they were either clearly "good" or they were clearly "bad." It wasn't hard to

My experience of textual purpose gave me a way to recognize the ways texts intersect with my life–what is sometimes thought of as personal response.

tell the difference. It also wasn't hard to tell as a reader what the proper response to such a text ought to be: Readers were expected to learn what a "good" story was trying to teach, and then to conform to the message and the purpose of the text. "Bad" stories were to be avoided by readers, rejected out of hand.

The primary "good" text of my childhood was *The Bible*—a holy book, infallible, unquestionable. There were other "good" texts as well—texts that were often interpreted by more knowledgeable "others": pastors, teachers, parents, or other adults. I learned early on to trust other people's understandings of the texts that mattered in my life, and as a reader to give myself over to their power, responding to these good books and good interpretations uncritically, identifying the intersection between my life and the messages of the texts, and living my life by the lessons they taught.

Some of the "good" books of my childhood included collections of Bible stories that finished with a clear moral or message. From Daniel I learned not to be afraid, from Jacob I learned to tell the truth, from Abraham I learned to trust, from Esther I learned to take risks. Always the lesson was straightforward and explicit—something that as a reader I could take from the text and apply to my present-day, child life.

There were other stories in my childhood that were also intended to teach—stories in which calamity was averted, evil was punished, and good won out. The most memorable of these childhood stories were found in a collection called *The Bee Book*, a book I have tried to track down in adulthood but which I have never been able to find (my parents' copy has no cover, author, publisher, or date). *The Bee Book* had stories that were intended to guide young readers: Bee Honest, Bee Loyal, Bee Respectful. The characters in the stories encountered "the sting of the bee" when they behaved in ways that disregarded these lessons; tragic results inevitably ensued. For example, Bee Helpful was the story of Alfred, an only child. He was selfish, and although his mother was ill he could only think of his own desires. One day, Alfred and a friend wanted to go fishing. While she packed his lunch, Alfred's sick mother asked him to help with a little work around the house before he left; he refused, getting sulky at the thought. He did not listen to the buzzing bee that told him, "Help your mother, help your mother," and instead took off for the creek. When Alfred returned home with his string of trout, he saw that the dishes were done, the kitchen was swept, and his mother was resting on the couch.

Textual promise is the scholarly knowledge of structure and genre I bring to a text–literary response.

However, she did not answer Alfred's calls, and when he touched her hand, it was icy-cold. His mother was dead! And, the story concludes, "all his life, poor Alfred felt the sting of the bee that had buzzed about him on that summer morning. What hurt him most deeply was that he would never again have a chance to help his frail little mother who had done so much for him."

Within these stories—stories with a clear lesson and an unambiguous purpose—there is little room for an authentic reader's response; the text is scripted, as is the desired response on the part of the reader. And that is what I learned about text as a young reader: It said what it meant; it was good or it was bad; it was true or it was not; it was written for a purpose; and "good" readers went along with the text's purpose, matched the text to their life (or their life to the text), and learned what they were intended to learn. To my child self, texts were powerful indeed, and as a result I quickly developed into an avid and competent, though entirely uncritical, reader. I could find the message in a text, but as a reader I had not yet learned to interact with that message in a discerning or empowered way. Unquestioning obedience or outright rejection were my only strategies for response to the power of text.

Rewards for right answers: Textual power as promise

In high school and college, my understanding of the rules for the reader's response changed, and my relationship to text took a different form. Instead of looking for a lesson or truth in a text, I began to read texts in terms of literary elements: genre, plot, character, setting, style, theme. In my mind, my job as a reader shifted with this new understanding—it was now my task to determine the relative importance of each of the elements, as well as the degree to which a piece of literature fulfilled the expectations that went along with a particular genre or author or time. In this quest, I saw texts as repositories for right answers (though not necessarily models for right living), and those answers had the power to give me a grade and some praise if I got them correct. There was a right answer to be found when a question was asked about the theme of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or character development in *The Catcher in the Rye*, or the historical context of *The Scarlet Letter*, and as a reader, my task was to find those answers (sometimes hidden, sometimes clear) and reproduce them in a paper or on an exam.

In those years, then, the act of reading was for me something like mining for treasure—the treasure being a definitive reading of the text that could stand (and probably had *already* stood) the test of time. Once again, the text held the answers and the power; this time, though, it promised me a reward (a grade, a word of affirmation, a turn in the class conversation) if I got it right. My response as a reader was to believe the promise, to keep searching until I found the answer that was already there.

Graduate school intensified this type of relationship with text. For the first time, I encountered literary theory, so the number of "right" answers multiplied with each new stance: feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory, Marxist theory, and so on. As a reader, I saw myself as more of a player in the game, selecting the theory and using it as a starting point for my search; however, my basic understanding of my relationship to texts remained largely unchanged. Texts were powerful. They could make my task as a student easy or difficult; they could make my way as a writer troubled or smooth. I knew that eventually they would give me a master's thesis, a doctoral dissertation, and an academic career. I studied "great works," wrote my papers with care, gave the right answers, and reaped the rewards that were promised through the power of texts.

Textual positioning (and the ability to understand how positioning happens, and then to allow or resist it) is my critical response.

Western women in "fact" and "fiction": Textual power as positioning

Near the end of graduate school, my relationship with texts changed again, and once more my understanding of the reader's response changed as well. Although in my graduate coursework I had learned *about* the complex and dynamic relationships between readers and texts—the ways texts act on readers, the ways readers act on texts—it wasn't until I began work with the 19th century periodical, *The Youth's Companion*, that I really experienced this exchange and claimed my own role as a reader in response to a text.

I first heard of *The Youth's Companion* near the end of graduate school, after my coursework was complete. I had chosen to specialize in the field of literature for children, and I was ready to embark on a dissertation about portrayals of prairie women in 19th century children's books. In my preliminary research, I read secondary sources (about the 19th century, gender roles, and the geography of the West); I read primary documents (letters, diaries, historical accounts); I read novels by Bess Streeter Aldrich and Helen Hunt Jackson. Still, I was unable to find an angle I wanted to pursue. . . until a colleague led me to *The Youth's Companion*.

I had never heard of *The Youth's Companion*, but my initial research taught me much about the magazine and helped me conclude that it was indeed an appropriate subject for the work I wanted to do. I learned that *The Youth's Companion* was enormously influential among American children. It was the longest-lived and most popular family magazine in America in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Ranlett, 1963). Its self-proclaimed goal was to "inculcate truth," and in an early issue it carried the following message: "*The Youth's Companion* . . . aims to be the parents' assistant in molding and upbuilding character. Its aim is to make American citizens" (quoted in Harris, 1966, pp. 128-29). Unlike many other publications of the time, *The Companion* directed its emphasis away from an explicitly religious stance toward a stance that was more socially didactic, aiming to create good citizens rather than to save young souls.

While its primary goal was social instruction, *The Youth's Companion* also sought to be entertaining, which helps explain its phenomenal popularity among adults as well as children. At its height in 1901, *The Companion* boasted a circulation of over 500,000 and a readership of well over two million (Ranlett, 1963; Harris, 1966). Distribution maps indicate that subscriptions were delivered to every state in the Union, as well as to what was then known as Indian Territory (Cutts, 1972). Often *The Companion* was the only reading material available to people in rural areas or small towns in the West, and upon occasion the magazine was used in schools as a source of news, information, and literature.

The Companion contained a range of materials: non-fiction, fiction, current events, weekly serials, poetry, puzzles, games, household hints, and more. Many of the most famous writers of the time appeared on the pages of *The Companion*—writers that included Jack London, Kate Chopin, Jules Verne, Theodore Roosevelt, Edith Wharton, Mark Twain, Robert Louis Stevenson, Robert Frost, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott, and, of course, C. A. Stephens (a writer who, at the turn of the century, was hugely popular but who is now almost entirely unknown). Readers were rewarded for procuring new subscriptions to *The Youth's Companion*, and the incentive prizes were published in a catalog that was the model for the Montgomery Ward and Sears & Roebuck mail-order catalogs of later years.

As a result of a contest sponsored by *The Companion* to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus Day in 1892, the Pledge of Allegiance was written and published in the magazine, along with the suggestion that a flag fly over every school in the nation and that students recite the Pledge every morn-

ing before the school day began. Schools around the country followed the suggestion, and the ritual continues in many schools even now, more than a century later. Such was the influence of *The Youth's Companion*.

When as a graduate student I first encountered microfilm copies of *The Youth's Companion*, little scholarship had been devoted to the magazine. The lack of scholarly attention was due in part to the enormous amount of material contained in a hundred years of weekly publication (much of which was not indexed), and because, for scholarly purposes, *The Youth's Companion* was an example of *popular* literature and had therefore escaped the notice and attention of researchers and academics. However, given its huge readership and its considerable influence on American culture in the 19th century, I decided to make the serialized fiction of *The Companion* the subject of my dissertation work. I looked at the construction of gender in serialized stories that were set west of the Mississippi River and published between 1880 and 1910 (the years surrounding the "closing" of the Western frontier). I chose this place and time period because it seemed that issues of gender would be highly contested, given that this was a geography and a time in history in which the strictly enforced gender codes of the 19th century met the reality of the Western wilderness, and where, as a result, gender roles were being explicitly renegotiated (Apol, 2000).

In my reading, however, I discovered that the stories in the magazine did *not* reflect gender role renegotiation. In my earlier study of women's diaries, letter, poems and the like, I had discovered that women in the West defied many of the traditional stereotypes that portrayed pioneer women as passive victims, silent sufferers, or sunbonneted saints. These women's own writings—and the historical accounts written *about* them—revealed instead that they were enthusiastic participants, reliable partners, and successful settlers in the West. In the serials of *The Youth's Companion*, however, I did not find those more powerful images portrayed. Rather, the *Companion* pieces reinforced the rigid gender roles of the 19th century even when primary documents and women's own words consistently called those roles into question (Apol, 2001).

Literature is not innocent–it works to persuade readers of the truth of its own perspective.

These initial encounters with *The Youth's Companion* demonstrated to me for the first time the ways that literature (including and especially children's literature) is not innocent—that it works to persuade readers of the truth of its own perspective, and to *position* those readers in a world the texts (and authors, and publishers) attempt to create. Although for other students of literature this understanding of textual power might have occurred earlier in their careers, for me it represented a genuine epiphany, for I saw something I had not previously seen, given the ways I had been trained to understand text: I saw that the serials were selective in the "realities" they presented, that they only told (only *could* tell) a part of the "truth," and that they positioned readers to accept a particular version of the world.

Recognizing the "constructedness" of the *Youth's Companion* depictions helped me understand that *all* authors, editors, and publishers are selective in the perspectives they promote, the "realities" they create. Therefore, it was a small step from recognizing the positioning of readers as it took place in *The Youth's Companion* to seeing similar positioning taking place in the world of contemporary children's literature. Although much current children's literature is less overtly didactic than were the stories in *The Companion*, even children's literature that claims to be simply "entertaining" carries to young readers a set of values and beliefs that serve as a source of cultural, political, social, and religious education.

Through my work with the 19th century serials in *The Youth's Companion*, then, I began to understand on a deeper level how interactions around text involve readers and writers in the ongoing construction of meaning, with readers bringing experiences to texts, and texts (and authors) bringing cultural values and beliefs to readers. This understanding led me further into questions that active readers need to ask in their literature response—questions that shaped my dissertation and that have continued to fuel my work: *Who is telling the story? What is their stake? How do they position themselves? How do they position their readers? What are the beliefs and assumptions of the author, the text, the readers who come to that text? What is the text asking readers to believe? Where is the text silent, and what does that silence mean?* (Apol, 1998). I began in earnest to explore the power relationships inherent in the acts of reading, writing, and interpreting–power relationships that positioned readers, that invited readers into critical debate with the text, and that therefore differed significantly from the one-way experience of textual power I had witnessed and participated in during my childhood and adolescence.

This new understanding of the positioning power of text and the need for an active and critical response on the part of the reader influenced my teaching as well as my reading and research. In my classes, I noticed that my students (like my earlier reading-self) often did not recognize the ways texts exercised positioning power. Instead, they tended to view texts as reflections of "real" life or they found the justification for textual "truth" within the text itself. Therefore, in teaching, it

became my goal to help students view texts as *constructions*–to gain critical perspective on texts, to learn to "read against" texts (or to consciously choose to accept the versions of reality that texts contain), and to become active responders to literature, deciding when to concede to textual power and when to resist. In this way, I hoped to enable my students to exercise more consciousness and control over their own reading processes.

Textual passion is the response that calls me to action—to do something in the world.

To that end, several years ago I introduced *The Youth's Companion* into my children's literature class after I noticed that my students were unable to recognize the persuasive power in a contemporary young adult novel that dealt with environmental issues (Apol, in press). For the course, I had selected David Klass's 1994 novel, *California Blue*, to use as an example of contemporary realistic fiction. However, I found the solutions to the environmental conflict as proposed by Klass in the novel to be oversimplified and manipulative. Rather than a measured look at the complexities of current environmental issues, I saw the book as unnecessarily dichotomized and intentionally one-sided, for in the face-off between loggers and redwoods, the loggers lost and the redwoods won in simplistic and thoroughly unambiguous ways. Although ideologically I might have agreed with Klass's stance, I also saw clearly the author's agenda and its persuasive and positioning power.

I expected my students to have a similar reaction; however, they came to class enthused about how "realistic" this novel was, convinced that Klass had depicted things "as they are." I pushed them to view the novel as a construction rather than as Truth, but because they agreed with the environmental stance of the story, my students continued to read the outcome of the story as inevitable rather than as a particular value and an ideological position. In order to provide a more distant "place to stand," I brought in a serial from *The Youth's Companion* to serve as a counterpoint to the contemporary text: "Herm and I" by Myron Gibson, published in 1894, exactly a century before Klass's novel. Although in the serial there were many similarities to the contemporary text, there were many differences as well: Bears and beavers were presented as commodities to be harvested, Native Americans were depicted as warring savages, and the land was viewed as a resource for the settlers to possess. These depictions were highly distressing to my students; they considered the *Youth's Companion* text to be blatantly manipulative, steeped in its own blind assumptions and the assumptions of the time.

Reading this historical text, identifying its explicit and implicit values, and recognizing its ideological constructedness helped students recognize the constructedness of the contemporary text as well, for once students could see from the vantage point of a century the manipulations of the *Youth's Companion* text, they were better able to identify the powerful positioning that also took place in the contemporary novel. Suddenly they saw that the authors of *both* texts made choices and assumptions, and that neither text was an unbiased picture of "the way things are." After stepping out of their own historical moment through the reading of the *Youth's Companion* serial, my students could then return to view more accurately the values at work in the contemporary text and their own ideological positions—as well as mine—in regard to the text.

The epiphany my students experienced was much like my own: working with *The Youth's Companion*, they came to recognize the enormous ideological power that texts possess, the ways texts subtly or overtly work to position readers. This understanding was much like my own insight working with *The Companion*. Interacting with a periodical from the 19th century occasioned for me another shift of understanding of textual power and helped me acknowledge the positioning power of text and the necessity of an active and evaluative response on the part of the reader.

From Brown to Boston to Norway, Maine: Textual power as passion

In my life-long experiences with literature, I never doubted the power of text (although at various stages I revised my understanding of the reader's response to that power): As a child, I recognized the power of purpose; as a young adult, I recognized the power of promise; and finally, as an early scholar and teacher, I recognized the power of positioning.

Each of these were crucial stages in my evolving understanding of the power of text and the reader's response to literature. However, what became for me the most surprising of the stages occurred a few years into my academic career when I received a grant to continue my research on *The Youth's Companion*. I spent two weeks in the Special Collections of the Brown University Library in Providence, Rhode Island, studying bound volumes of *The Youth's Companion* and examining the papers of a scholar of *The Youth's Companion* named Louise Harris.

The trip to Brown brought me face to face with a new iteration of the power of text. Among the Harris papers, I found dozens of letters from readers of the *Youth's Companion*, written to Harris in the 1960s and '70s (half a century after *The Companion* had ceased publication). One woman told how, as a young girl sixty years earlier, she had gotten up in the dark and swept the school each morning before classes began in order to pay for a subscription. One elderly man

told of rushing into a burning building to rescue his issues of *The Youth's Companion*. Another man explained that his father—who was born in 1859 and at the age of five was "bound out" to a family to earn his own keep after his father died of fever in the Union Army—had learned to read from *The Youth's Companion* and enjoyed it even into his old age.

Many people wrote to ask how they could get copies of *The Companion*; many others informed Harris they would never part with their issues during their lifetime, but they would donate them to the Brown University collection after their death. Perhaps the most poignant correspondence was a letter written in a shaky hand, dated twenty-five years earlier: August 15, 1972. The letter began:

> Dear Miss Harris,
>
> I have heard you are working on *The Youth's Companion* and I wonder if you could find something for me. When I was eleven years old, *The Youth's Companion* had a story called "Track's End." I think the author was C.A. Stephens. I read every chapter but the last, as my family moved and my subscription ran out. I have looked for the end of that story for many years. Do you have it? I will be happy to pay for it.

I recognized the title of the serial at once, as had Harris. Her response (she kept carbon copies of all her correspondence) told the letter writer that "Track's End" was written by Hayden Carruth rather than C. A. Stephens, and that it had been published in *The Youth's Companion* in 1897. Harris indicated that she was enclosing a photocopy of the last chapter.

I thought about someone waiting seventy-five years to find out whether young Judson Pitcher survived his long and lonely winter at Track's End—someone *remembering* for all those years that he still wanted to know the ending—and I understood something I'd not known before about the reader's response and the enduring power of text.

In many of Harris' papers I found references to contemporary scholars and friends who at the end of Harris' life were working with copies of *The Youth's Companion* and who lived near C.A. Stephens' home in Norway, Maine. According to information in the files, The Norway Historical Society and the Norway Public Library housed many artifacts of *The Youth's Companion*, and the C.A. Stephens Society (also located in Norway) hosted an annual conference and published papers and books by and about Stephens and *The Companion*. I decided to travel from Providence to Norway to continue my research.

On my trip from Rhode Island to Maine, I stopped in Boston to visit 201 Columbus Avenue—the former home of *The Youth's Companion*. There it was: an impressive old building with lions' heads, giant columns, and the YC insignia over the doors. In recent years, it had been subdivided into offices, eateries, and a furniture store, but I knew which floors had once kept subscription records, which wings had housed the presses and folding machines. I knew the names of the editors and authors who had climbed the wide stairs and ridden the wrought-iron elevator. Though the security guard admitted he didn't know why it is named "The Pledge of Allegiance Building," I knew. It was thrilling for me to walk around the building, inside and out, to see the magazine's motto chiseled over the doorway, along with the year of the founding of the paper: 1825. For the first time, I experienced for myself the power of passion when it came to text, and I knew that I shared that passion with many other readers—most long dead—who read the pages of *The Youth's Companion* and waited each week for another issue to arrive.

How could I explain the kind of passion *The Youth's Companion* seemed to inspire in its readers? What would make a woman get up to sweep in the dark to earn a subscription to *The Companion*, or a man rush into a burning building to save his copies of the magazine? What would make a man remember for seventy-five years that he needed to know the outcome of a survival tale? What prompted Norman to spend his savings on a bus ticket, or to build a cabin across from the setting of an author's stories?

Certainly *The Youth's Companion* represented an important part of popular culture in the 19th century—a source of reading material that was entertaining (sometimes) and edifying as well, and therefore a powerful force in educating and socializing young people. The stories promoted what was for many readers a desirable view of the world, with traditional values and predictable stances that reiterated rather than challenged the status quo. The magazine provided readers with news, poetry, fiction, and miscellaneous columns in times and places where access to such was rare. And much of the continued passion for the magazine was likely the result of nostalgia, stories remembered with fondness, reading experiences shared by beloved friends and family members, tales that touched the hearts and imaginations of readers in childhood and thus retained an important role in readers' memories as adults.

And what about my own passion, two or even three generations removed, having never seen a copy of the magazine until I was nearing the end of my graduate study? Why would I thrill to turn the pages of old issues or detour into the city to see a building from long ago? For me, there was power not only in the stories I read, but also in the individuals I encountered in the process of my reading. Driving to Providence, to Boston, and then to Maine to gather more information about *The Youth's Companion*, its authors, and its readers introduced me—both literally and figuratively—to the lives of people who had written for, read, studied, and loved a periodical that both reflected and shaped a moment in history.

What, ultimately, provided *The Youth's Companion* with its enduring

power? Passion—the pull of a good story, the way a text can enter a reader's heart and stir feeling that leads to action: the action of sweeping a store in the dark or rushing into a burning house, buying a plot of land with a particular view or thrilling to see an old building decades after the presses have stopped. I learned from this 19th century periodical that texts not only impact their readers through the power of textual purpose, promise, and positioning; they also touch their readers' hearts and ignite their passion—over time, across years—in profound and life-changing ways.

I have learned that children's literature creates a world that readers believe and shapes both individual and national memory.

Conclusion: Textual power and the reader's response

So it is that I have experienced, first-hand, the power of text and the reader's response. Although in this paper I have presented textual purpose, promise, positioning, and passion as a chronological progression in my life, in fact they are more like the rings of the tree, accumulating over time. That means that for me, the power of text and the reader's response are not any *one* of these things, but rather, they are all of them, together.

And they keep growing. Recently, I have recognized that my personal experiences of textual power and response connect to several of the ways we in the field of literature study often talk about the reader's response. In my life, my experience of textual *purpose* gave me a way to recognize the ways texts intersect with my life, what is sometimes thought of as personal response. Textual *promise* is the scholarly knowledge of structure and genre I bring to a text–my literary response. Textual *positioning* (and the ability to understand how positioning happens, and then to allow or resist it) is my critical response. And textual *passion* is the response that calls me to action—to *do* something in the world, even when the doing is a trip to see an old building or to share stories with an elderly man. While at some times and in some circumstances I might favor one response over another in my reading, in fact, they are all strategies I employ, responses I move between.

As teachers of literature, it is easy to intellectualize various aspects of the reader's response, to categorize and characterize our own and others' responses without recalling how we came to them or how we move between them, personally or professionally. It is easy to adopt the in-vogue response-*du-jour*, and to build an activity, a curriculum, and even a professional life around it without seeing its progression in our lives or our history.

Meeting Norman and his worn copies of *The Youth's Companion* moved my understanding of the reader's response out of the realm of theory and into the realm of experience and caused me to re-examine my life-long assumptions about texts, reading, and the reader's response, seeing inside each successive stage a connection to how I currently view—in theoretical terms—literature response. Through my ongoing work with *The Youth's Companion*, I have seen directly how a piece of children's literature can elicit a range of responses and can incite a level of passion and action that impacts generations of readers, long past childhood, far into old age. The American flag still flies over elementary schools in the twenty-first century; children begin each day reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. A woman recalls, half a century later, how she worked early hours to pay for a magazine subscription, and a man still wonders after seventy-five years how a survival story ends. I drive into Boston to visit a building that a century ago housed a periodical that has all but disappeared from study. Norman buys a cabin that looks out over the Old Squire's farm and shares with me the collection of magazines he rereads every day.

When people ask me what a 19th century magazine has to do with my work in teacher education, and when they wonder how a century-old publication can help me understand and explain to my students what I know about the reader's response to literature, this is what I say: that through my work with *The Youth's Companion*, I have viewed my own reading life and my evolving responses to literature in a new light. I have learned that children's literature does indeed have power with readers, young and old; that it educates and indoctrinates; that it provides perspectives and possibilities. I have learned that children's literature creates a world that readers believe and shapes both individual and national memory.

Most importantly, from my study of *The Youth's Companion* I have learned, firsthand, how children's literature can call forth in readers a powerful response–a personal, literary, critical and active response that is shaped by a text's purpose, its promise, its positioning of readers, and (in its best iteration) the enduring passion that it imparts.

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Laura Apol teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in children's and adolescent literature at Michigan State University. Her research areas include historical children's literature, children's literature and literary theory, and issues of gender in children's literature.

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A Response to "The Power of Text"

by Fatima Shaik

Believing a text may well be the first step in finding a passion for literature–as Laura Apol's clear and candid essay on reader response suggests. When young people are given work that is held out to be true, and when they, in response, accept the images as life's truth, this is perhaps their first recognition of the value in books. Another important stage in the maturation of a reader, as Ms. Apol suggests, is the ability to think beyond the page. Once having realized that literature reflects life, mature readers understand that literature can also distort life. Ms. Apol noted that the image of pioneer women in *The Youth's Companion* went squarely against their actualities. She could note this because we have witnessed a communications revolution–for example, in artifact preservation and research, statistical analysis and interviewing, access and transportation–and we are able to recognize when a story is not based on fact. Yet even in the past, neither publishers nor authors, while being held as quite knowledgeable in some circles, were as omnipotent in some communities, perhaps those written about. I can attest to the expressions of sarcasm and disgust, and the long explanations that took place throughout my formative years when my schoolteacher parents read texts aloud that routinely referred to people of color as "savages." I accepted their assessment as to whether the text contained honest misinformation, opportunistic publishing, or racist propaganda. I made my own assessments later, often depending on whether the story resonated or clashed with my own experiences. Ms. Apol's essay suggests to me this correlation in reader response: When good stories that are said to be true are given to young people and they have no experiences to refute the truths of the stories, young people are touched and learn to love literature. When good stories that are said to be true are given to young people who have experiences to refute the stories' truths, they learn to distrust literature–without proper guidance. The only remedy to distrust is informed discussion and critical thinking. It may need to take place very early for some readers, who may not have the tools for critical thinking themselves, but who see the dissonance. This is what the idea of diversity in publishing is all about. Printing and disseminating work that while broadening children's views, amplifies (not criticizes) their world. Finally, by revisiting *The Youth's Companion*, Ms. Apol may have recognized what communications theorists also have noted: that the dominance of the written word in the 19th century touched many lives. As print spoke with the voice of reason and logic, publication alone gave credence to ideas that were unproven "truths." Consider now that many other media–television, radio, Internet, CDs–preach compelling "truths" as well, and critical thinking is at an all time low. So as Ms. Apol suggested, every voice speaking to children has a point of view. Whether it is to increase enlightenment or create loathing often is inherent in the text. The degree to which the purpose of the text is understood is a complex relationship between meanings and individuals. However, for critical reading to take place, the youngest learners need to be able to trust, above all, the voices of their teachers.

Fatima Shaik, the author of fiction for children and adults, teaches at Saint Peter's College in Jersey City, N.J.