

# PRIME TIME

## FAMILY READING TIME

### *Finding the Humanities in Children's Literature*

Keynote Address by:  
Virginia G. Smith, Executive Director  
Kentucky Humanities Council



When Michael Sartisky first described Louisiana's Prime Time Family Reading Time to me, I will admit that I thought: *children's literature? You want grown-ups to read kids' books?*

The Kentucky Humanities Council had established its own nationally recognized literacy program in 1988 on the premise that adults learning to read need books that are simple in language but written about subjects interesting to *adults*. New Books for New Readers is a national model for offering adult learners an alternative to "baby books" and children's interests. Also, New Books is about Kentucky history, culture, and folklore — unquestionably humanities topics. PRIME TIME's use of children's books seemed to be the antithesis of New Books.

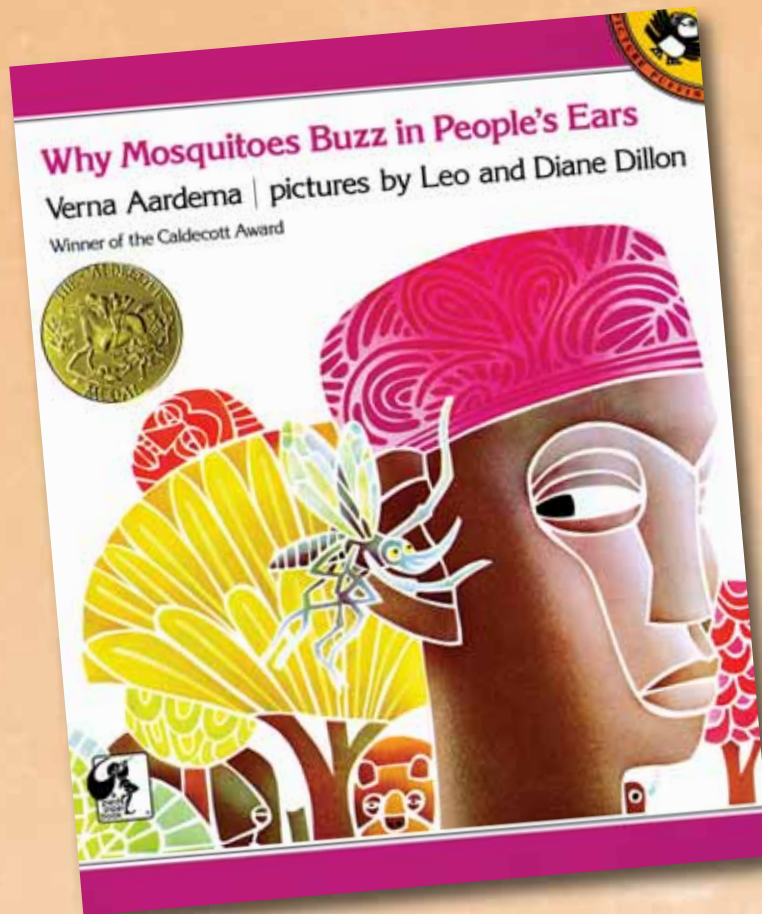
PRIME TIME didn't sound like a *humanities* program either. Sure, it's wonderful for parents to read to their children, but isn't that for *little* children who haven't learned yet to read for themselves? And why would a humanities council want to compete with the hundreds of existing literacy programs OR try to take on teaching parenting? Like Robert Becker, the author of "Agamemnon Among the Bunnies," I thought: *These folks in Louisiana are really working hard to find the humanities for six year olds.*

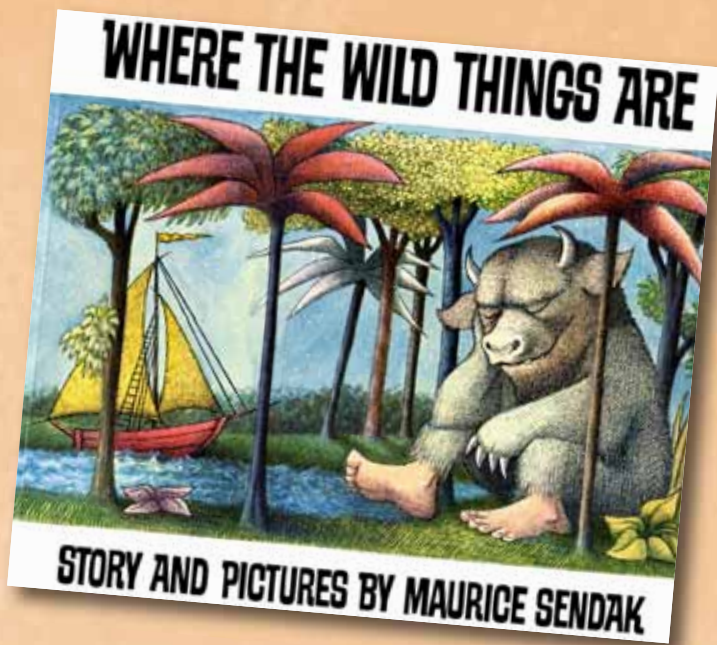
Then I had the opportunity, through Leadership Kentucky, to visit a juvenile detention center in Paducah. A juvenile detention center is a jail for kids. It's very clean, it's brightly lit, and it provides a middle or high school education, exercise, and clean living. But it's jail with no shoelaces for those who reside there, individual bare rooms with only a single shelf for a clean pair of pull-on shorts, and a pretend mirror made of metal glued to the wall. At no time do children walk, sit, or exercise closer than arm's length from each other or engage in unregulated conversation. I wondered: *What will happen to these children with no choices?*

And those kids look just like your kids and my kids.

What happened to get them there? Well, a lot of things contributed to their current status besides not reading. But there's a concept unknown to all of them: that there might be a life based on the rewards of achievable long term goals instead of reactionary, self-destructive, and transitory survival. Of *doing* instead of avoiding being done to. They don't know that they aren't alone or that they aren't the first kids who have had to deal with the timeless issues of humanity: Fairness, for example; Coping; Greed; Determination. These are not issues they had the opportunity to discuss or consider when they were young enough to benefit. No one talked with them about these issues. They learned not to ask questions. What they did learn decidedly was not from reading or meaningful discussion.

After my field trip to the juvenile detention center, I rethought Prime Time Family Reading Time. **Was it possible that the humanities could, in fact, be a vector for both parents and children to live thoughtful lives by learning to talk about the REALLY BIG ISSUES?** Discussing beautifully illustrated stories couldn't be the only solution to successful citizenship, but it could be a





ourselves and to others. We are comfortable reading aloud to our children. We encourage them to do the same.

But imagine a different life: one that makes even grocery shopping a fearful experience. You can't follow preparation directions, and the picture may not tell you the truth about what's in that box or can – is there hamburger in that Hamburger Helper? You can't help your children with their homework, and having never seen you reading, they have no reason to think you value it much. What you know is what you see, and if you can't read well, you are not likely to see much of the world outside of the televised version.

There are 400,000 people in Kentucky who are functionally illiterate. Sixteen percent of Kentucky's population with young children have an annual household income of less than \$15,000. Of those families, seven percent live in deep poverty on \$7,500 per year. Although there have been improvements in the last few years, twenty-five percent of Kentucky's adults still do not have a high school education—one in every four. There are few options for these people to change their lives for the better, and the chance is overwhelmingly good that their children, though not necessarily guaranteed candidates for a juvenile detention center, will inherit their illiteracy. They, too, will not own a car, live in a safe neighborhood, or rise above the poverty level.

Figures provided by Louisiana indicate that ninety-nine percent of the families enrolled in PRIME TIME stay enrolled through the program. PRIME TIME, they report and we agree, changes the way parents talk with their children. Children show an eighty percent increase in reading books. Libraries become friendly, familiar places. Parents and children enjoy improved self-confidence, and both improve their education.

Still, PRIME TIME ideally targets just twenty families per participating library, and it's a big investment of time and resources. We're asking all PRIME TIME team members to work very hard.

Can PRIME TIME make a difference? Or is it another example of laboring large and reaping small? And does the *content* amount to drive-by humanities? For both the children and their families, and not surprisingly, for the librarians, scholars, and story tellers who are involved as well, **PRIME TIME does change lives because it focuses on families, the most basic of institutions.** One changed parent affects the culture of a whole family network, perhaps extending to sixteen adults. What changes? It is an intellectual change of great import because trained parents now expect to find more than a flat meaning in any story. They look for layers of meaning, and they develop ways of talking about

great start. In this case, the books clearly would have to be books for children.

We take for granted the foundation of democracy: a literate populace where anyone can learn anything. There are no secrets for those who care to read. As literate people, we can not imagine a home without books, and we can't remember when we were too young to go to the library. We read things and we talk to people about what we read. At home. At work. Even in the checkout line at the grocery. We're comfortable with the fact that someone else may not agree with what we both have read. We assume that what we think about a story is of value to





what they find or expect to find. They *share* this experience with their children with a new sense of confidence and purpose. These habits of the mind constitute the center of the humanities.

Here is a story and comments from a previously participating Kentucky PRIME TIME librarian about one of the sessions at her library:

“One night we needed a man to play Prince Charming in our skit because the guy who had previously agreed to play this part had to work late. Our scholar had developed a good rapport with one of the dads in the group and asked him at the last minute if he would oblige. This guy is raising his 10 yr. old daughter himself, was in a critical accident 2 years ago, never missed a session, and looked like he had been involved with drugs. However, he ended up playing Prince Charming, and his daughter was so proud to see her dad in front of approximately 100 people performing in a skit! We always

referred to him as Prince Charming after that – and he was proud of himself, too! He told us how he and his daughter had scoured the newspaper for the answer to the trivia question each week.”

“As librarians, we developed the best teamwork situation we have ever had. We learned to approach and serve ‘at risk’ patrons in a non-judgmental way, which is very hard to do in a small, rural county. We were struck by the response. Most of (the families) will always be poor and need financial assistance; but that doesn’t mean they don’t love their children or want them to excel in school. Children saw their parents talking and eating with library staff the Prime Time staff. Although this was brought out in our training, I was amazed to see how true it was that children see their parents in a different, respected light in these kinds of situations.”

But back to “Agamemnon Among the Bunnies.” The books, after all, are the core of Prime Time Family Reading Time. Just as New Books for New Readers are simple in language but certainly not simple in concept, really good children’s literature can convey the themes and issues of much more complicated literature: works by Homer, Plato, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Virginia Woolf, Zora Neale Hurston or Robert Penn Warren. The reading list for PRIME TIME is carefully culled from children’s literature that is exemplary in literary skill *and* which addresses important humanities themes and topics. These books are the foundation, then, of both a literacy and a humanities program.

To a boy, imagination is freedom, dreams are freedom, and fantasies are freedom – just as our families will find that **reading is freedom**. Is his quest as noble or eternal as Agamemnon or Achilles or Odysseus? Yes, because in our democratic society we do not necessarily look to kings to model our lives. We see the promise in Everyman and Everywoman. Our literature has evolved as our society has evolved and we see the promise of the oak in every acorn. Like Willie Loman in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, we care about ordinary people, their dreams, their illusions, and their failures. We figure ourselves in those characters and are set free from the confinement of our circumstances. Our heroes are boys and girls: Anglo, Latina, African, Native American, Chinese, men and women of all races and nationalities, sometimes animals too – witness our heroes Seabiscuit and Barbaro.





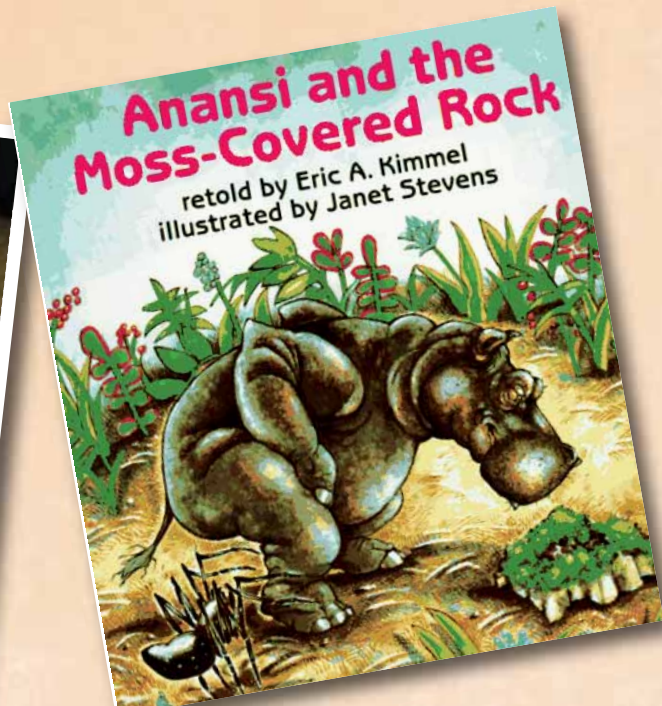
The truth is that Agamemnon wasn't a particularly pleasant fellow to begin with. Just ask his wife, who exacted her own revenge with a less than loving embrace upon his return. Looking at the family history from *her* point of view it is this: Kill your daughter, sail off to war for ten years, engage in a ferocious quarrel with Achilles over sexual rights to the daughter of a local priest, generally rape, murder, and pillage and then.... "Honey, I'm home!" ...What exactly did he expect? Wine and baklava?

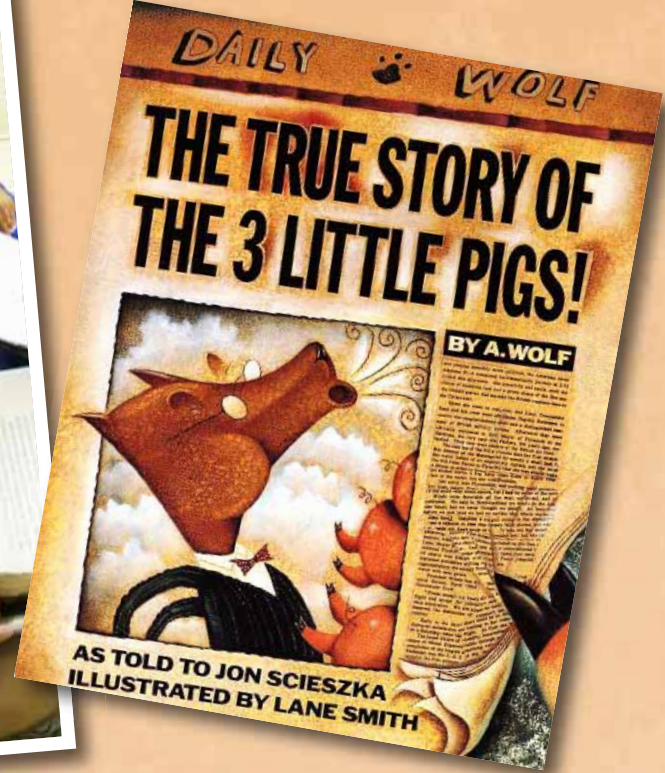
Homer's *Iliad* is full of manly bravery and valor in war, the highest Greek ideal, but some might question so much carnage begun by a single jealous act that compounded itself similarly to the story, *Why Mosquitos Buzz in People's Ears*. That's not even mentioning the greed of Paris, who insists on keeping the stolen Greek queen Helen or the triumph of trickery of that *horse*. Was *that* fair? Trickery... let's see, isn't that how the ant in *Anansi and the Moss Covered Rock* stole the

food of the other animals? And what is the difference between trickery and treachery? Consider the boy Max in *Where the Wild Things Are*, brooding in his room, like Achilles in his tent, then freeing his mind to sail beyond the confines of the mundane into a world where *he*, indeed, is king — the wildest of the wild, the fiercest of the fierce, the master of his domain. Like the wanderings of Odysseus, Max's adventures involve the fiercest monsters. The dangerous, arduous adventures are all worth the effort to achieve the reward of that sweet homecoming for Odysseus, and for Max, his mother's still-warm dinner.

PRIME TIME selections provide us with an opportunity to discuss the things which matter in life itself: fairness, honor, love, dreams, courage, and community. The content isn't always so obvious, as pointed out by Bob Becker, the Louisiana PRIME TIME scholar whose sample questions for each PRIME TIME book are found in the *PRIME TIME Site Manual*. But that's where we come in: librarians who set the stage; community organizers who facilitate involving the families; the storyteller who makes reading a living, breathing experience, and the scholar who elicits thoughtful and challenging discussion.

But if we are going to engage in challenging discussions, why are we reading stories featuring animals as characters, or people from far-away places? You already know. As readers, as book people, you know that it's easier to address a troubling issue by using symbols or surrogates, or the somehow distant instead of real people or people from your own time and place. No one feels as if they are being blamed. Could the Wolf in *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* be telling the truth? Can you believe all you read? Would it be possible to use accurate facts (the pigs *were* dead) to blame someone who just *looked* dangerous? How do you decide what is true? Would you





discuss these questions freely if they were about race relations in your own home town?

What makes PRIME TIME worthwhile is exploring the timeless, sometimes thorny questions these stories offer. They are questions with many answers. A good book is the source of good questions, and good questions engender *good but very different answers*. Many good answers in one place generally mean that the outcome is understanding, thoughtful communication. And if just *one* family becomes stronger, and just *one* library becomes a place of new discovery, have we succeeded? Yes. Books matter, and sharing books is one of

the richest and most rewarding experiences we can have, whether with our own children, or with the families who join us to have what we call: **A real PRIME TIME experience.**

*Michael Sartisky, director of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, the birthplace of PRIME TIME, kindly sent me a copy of his own keynote address. I'm grateful, and I credit him for borrowed paragraphs.*



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