

Great Books for Girls? A Case Study of American Children's Novels

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Introduction

The past ten years have seen a marked increase in politicized discussions of what children read. Annotated bibliographies of "multicultural" books for children have been published and debated by educators and cultural critics, while awards have been established to recognize the literary and cultural value of books written by Black and Hispanic authors. Carol Gilligan's In a Different Voice and Mary Pipher's Reviving Ophelia have drawn attention to the potentially specific needs of girl readers. Titles like Great Books for Girls, Let's Hear it for the Girls, and Once upon a Heroine occupy prominent spaces on bookstore and library shelves, parenting magazines discuss the importance of providing girls with strong role models, while feminist organizations and web sites discuss the merits of feminist books for young readers. Teachers who want to provide students with books that are empowering to girls also debate, in professional settings and in online communities, which books might accomplish these goals. Thousands of American children's books are published every year, though. Which of these books should qualify as feminist and be emphasized in classrooms and school libraries? And where do these books come from? What do they have in common?

In this case study, I compare two children's novels which are similar - in terms of their authorship, their narrative form, their content, their setting, and their literary status - but that were written exactly fifty years apart during very different periods of American history. Feminist literary scholars argue that modern feminist fiction emerged during the 1970s, as a response to and component of second wave feminist political activity (Foster and Simons 1995; Hogeland 1998; Lauret 1994). While this may be true of fiction written for adult audiences - a question not taken up here - I hope to add to the discussion by showing that feminist novels written for children existed well prior to the late-twentieth-century eruption of second wave feminism. In other words, not only contemporary books take into account what modern girls might want or need to read; books published much earlier in the 20th century should not be overlooked.

This paper analyzes two books from the list of Newbery Medal winning children's books; the first won the prestigious award in 1930 and the second was awarded the medal in 1980, exactly fifty years later. These two texts bookend a much larger sample of children's novels, as this paper is a piece of a larger dissertation project. Using both literary and sociological concepts in order to explore and refine definitions of feminist texts, and providing a social history of their production and of children's book publishing more generally, this paper makes connections between the novels' feminist content and production. This paper does not make a causal argument about feminism and children's books, as much as it suggests that theoretically-informed definitions of "feminist" books might be applied to children's novels in order to surface the important work of early children's book editors and to illustrate how educators might identify "great" books for girls to read.

Despite its limited generalizability, the case study method seems to be the best way of analyzing a change in the content of children's novels over time (Reinharz 1992). A case study can yield rich and detailed data on specific literary sites that are difficult to obtain from broader surveys. The two children's novels analyzed here are not meant to be seen as necessarily representative of other books published at the same time, but are being used to analyze how competing definitions of a feminist novel might apply to children's texts and how specific production contexts might have differently influenced the feminism of each. This paper argues for a shift in current understandings of feminist texts, and has two principal theoretical strengths; it complicates sociological traditions of textual feminism, and locates connections between production conditions and feminism.

Feminist Novels for Children?

Discussion of feminism and fiction tend to focus exclusively on books intended for an adult audience. For well over a hundred years, however, novels have been written for children; indeed, preeminent nineteenth century women writers (like Louisa May Alcott) wrote almost exclusively for children because publishers of adult fiction would not consider their work. Writing for children, however, does not take place in a separate publishing world nor is it a completely separate form of creative production. It is, rather, a branch of literary practice influenced by the same political and cultural movements as is serious adult fiction (Foster and Simons 1995). For this reason, it is both possible and critical to investigate the possibility that feminist social movements could affect children's books.

The categorization of "feminist" novels remains a highly contested process. What can or should be included under the rubric of "feminist fiction"? Is it fiction written by women, or for women, or both? Is it fiction about a specific topic related to feminist political agendas or cultural observations, or is it an oppositional cultural practice of writing and reading? Does it precede and foreshadow, or instead follow and interpret, feminist social movements? A feminist children's novel is recognized by different groups of people by virtue of different sets of criteria. The authors of books that list and describe books 'for strong girls' or that 'girls will love' often focus on books with strong female protagonists and books that resist obviously gendered stereotypes (Dodson 1988; Bauermeister and Smith 1997).

Feminist literary critics tend to look for a central heroine or heroines, along with embedded questions of feminine behavior and values as defined by prevailing social system. Their criteria lead them to books that "take women seriously" and "reinsert women into the literary domain" as the narrators and creators of serious literature (Lauret 1994). More recently, feminist literary critics have defined feminist novels as those in which the main character is empowered regardless of gender (Trites 1997). These critics focus on novels written by women, or that focus on female characters or, more recently, on characters whose gender does not get in their way.

Previous sociological studies of children's literature often coded the gender content of stories according to how many girls play active roles and what kinds of occupations their mothers are described as having (Pescosolido, Grauerholz and Milkie 1997; Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada and Ross 1972). These studies are grounded in a liberal feminist focus on individual rights and equal access to opportunity. In these studies, problematically, the depiction of sexism remains on the level of the individual (Hubler 2000). Because it is not linked to justifications of male dominance within our society or to other forms of male dominance, the boys in the texts are just silly boys, not boys whose playground games are supported by and reflective of sexist school practices. As a result, ideologies of appropriate behavior for boys and girls are not portrayed as stemming from a specific material reality.

In their work on legal narratives, sociologists Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey (1998) instead define a subversive story as "a narrative that challenges the taken-for-granted hegemony by making visible and explicit the connections between particular lives and social organization." Their study uncovers the way that stories of resistance - stories that recount and celebrate either a reversal or an exposure of power (Ewick and Silbey 1998) - work to create or inspire social change. Proposing that subversive stories make claims about power and the possibilities of evading it, they advocate a different kind of literary analysis: an analysis of exposed power arrangements within a story.

Based upon their theoretical adjustment, I claim that a feminist story for children will include not only strong role models - following both literary and sociological analyses - but also exposures of power within girls' and women's lives. By creating a way to identify stories that implicate social structures in women's (or girls') subordination, I identify a different way to think about what "counts" as a feminist children's novel and a different way to uncover which children's novels might be especially important for girls (and boys) to read.

The Books and Their Authors

For the purposes of this case study, I have chosen two children's books that each won the Newbery Medal¹ at very different moments in United States' history; Hitty: Her First Hundred Years (Field 1929) was published by Macmillan Press in 1929 and won the Newbery Medal in 1930, and A Gathering of Days: A New England Girl's Journal, 1830-32 (Blos 1979) was published in 1979 by Charles Scribner's Sons and won the Newbery Medal in 1980. These books were written exactly fifty years apart, on both sides of the second wave of the American feminist movement. These two books, coincidentally, have a great deal in common in addition to their having won the most prestigious award in children's literature. Both were written by college-educated white women, both focus on the lives of nineteenth century girls despite having been written and published in the twentieth century, and both take the form of a first-person journal or memoir.

Hitty: Her First Hundred Years was written by Rachel Field and illustrated by her friend Dorothy Lathrop, and contains the memoirs of Hitty, a small doll carved out of a piece of wood in 1830. Rachel Field was born in 1894, spent her childhood in Stockbridge, MA, and was educated at Radcliffe College. As an adult, she spent her summers on Sutton Island - off the coast of Maine - which likely inspired her to begin Hitty's life in Maine and to dedicate the book to the state of Maine. She wrote plays and children's books during the years following her graduation from Radcliffe, and in 1929 published Hitty: Her First Hundred Years (Titzell 1955). Rachel Field was, the following year, the first woman writer to win the Newbery Medal.

A Gathering of Days: A New England Girl's Journal, 1830-32 was written in 1979 by Joan Blos and tells the story of thirteen-year-old Catherine Hall's life on her father's New Hampshire farm in 1830. Like Rachel Field, Joan Blos was deeply involved in the story she wrote about Catherine Hall; she spends her summers in an old farmhouse in Holderness, New Hampshire, and wrote A Gathering of Days about the family who - she imagined - lived in that farmhouse. Joan Blos was born in 1928 in New York City, attended Vassar College, and earned a graduate degree in clinical psychology at The College of the City of New York. She was awarded the Newbery Medal in 1980 for A Gathering of Days: A New England Girl's Journal, 1830-32.

These two novels have more in common with each other than the oddly similar circumstances of their authors' lives and summertime influences. Both tell the stories of girls' lives from the point of view of the female protagonist; Catherine Hall writes her own journal in A Gathering of Days, and Hitty writes her own memoirs from a desk in an antique shop. Both tell the story of New England life in the nineteenth century. Both won the admiration of readers and librarians alike, enough to win the Newbery Medal. Both follow in the literary tradition of domestic realism, describing the homes, family arrangements, and daily lives of girls and women in the Victorian era; Catherine writes about keeping house for her widowed father and younger sister, while Hitty - as a doll, belonging to a girl, who spends most of her time at home - tells stories about households and families. Despite these overwhelming similarities, however, the two books portray different types of narrators and uniquely describe their social worlds. While a summary cannot capture either book's complexity, it can illustrate how these two texts differently complicate their narratives of girls' lives.

Questions of Moral Responsibility in a Gathering of Days

Catherine Hall, the protagonist and "author" of A Gathering of Days, offers her journal to readers and through it we learn about her life in New England in 1830. She lives with her father and sister, her mother is dead, and she is responsible for most of the household tasks and duties her adult mother would have performed. Her journal describes both the mundane chores of farm life - the tasks involved in quilt making, for example - and the year's most difficult and confusing events. The text describes nineteenth century New Hampshire farm life in vivid and primarily domestic contexts. Catherine writes often of winter landscapes, kitchen chores, and items of clothing that

she admires or needs to mend. She writes, as well, about the people around her: her own interactions with her neighbors and best friend, her schoolmates' interactions with their teacher, her sister's encounters with her father, her father's with his new bride.

Catherine is most often described - both by herself and by others, though the comments of others are self-reported, as she is writing her journal - as resourceful and responsible in her home. The first time she includes in her journal a comment about herself, she writes,

When I could wait no longer, having earlier raised the pot from the fire but was still scorching threatened, I ventured to invite our guest and soon set out a pleasant meal, Uncle Jack joining gladly. Later Father praised me direct, saying that I was a pride and a comfort, and added directly after that, "There's many a grown woman here would not do as well." I shall not forget his words and am resolved that for all my days I shall assay such tasks and virtues as may sustain his comfort and pride. (Blos 1979: 8)

Further, Catherine's journal contains descriptions of what it means to be a responsible young woman. She learns, over the course of the fifteen months she is writing in her journal, that girls are different from boys because they can't earn a living on their own, because they are responsible for keeping their family's home safe and warm, because they are delicate and emotional, because they are caring and maternal. Catherine struggles with these responsibilities, but feels it her moral duty to fulfill them. From the opening days of Catherine's journal, it is clear that moral responsibility is a trait valued in the text. Catherine sets the story in motion by describing the morning's sermon and her desire to "train myself to want to do what I am asked to do" (6). Other characters, too, are shown to be concerned with moral responsibility: her father speaks often of moral and religious lessons; her teacher engages in abolitionist work.

The speaker in A Gathering of Days, Catherine Hall, is a first-person narrator who reports from her own subjective point of view events that she has experienced or heard about; she, like many protagonists in children's literature (Foster and Simons 1995), is a protagonist-narrator. As a result, her descriptions of her home and school and friends and fears permit us, as readers, to feel as though we are really learning about her. Her readers come to know her as a girl learning how morality and gender and historical context intersect in her rural nineteenth century life. She does not struggle against gender constraints as much as she resists local attitudes about justice.

Adventures and Reflections in Hitty: Her First Hundred Years

Unlike Catherine's journals in A Gathering of Days, which fall squarely within the tradition of domestic realism, Hitty's memoirs contain the written accounts of a very small doll. The idea that Hitty writes her memoirs from atop a desk in an antique shop, having lived over a hundred years with different human owners around the world, requires a different kind of imagination than does Catherine's story. Like Catherine Hall, though, Hitty describes life in New England in 1830. Her memoirs describe Hitty's travels over a period of more than one hundred years, and document great changes in American history.

Readers are repeatedly shown evidence of Hitty's good humor, sharp wit, and powers of observation. She comments wryly on social conventions, describes her surroundings in great and fond detail, and never takes herself very seriously. When she is left, by mistake, in church after a Sunday service, she describes to her reader where she is (under a pew, next to an illustrated Bible open to a picture of Jonah and the whale), the animals she shares the space with (bats, primarily), her sense of discomfort (due to the winter cold), and then cheerfully comments, "Fortunately for me, Phoebe Preble was not good at keeping secrets. Before the week was out she had confessed her disobedience in taking me to church and had promised to mend her ways if only I could be restored to her" (Field 1928: 12). Hitty is frequently described by the people she meets during her travels as honest, pleasant, lucky, and brave, and her own memories of travels point to the validity of these descriptions. When she finds herself on an island in the South Sea with native people who seem to worship her, she describes the island and the native people,

along with their customs and their treatment of her, and then matter-of-factly comments, "It is rather lonely to be a god for days on end" (Field 1929: 83). She is most often an observer, whose experiences and sensibilities inform the reader's own sense of American history and social development.

The narrator in Hitty: Her First Hundred Years is Hitty herself. Through her memoirs, she is able to speak directly to her readers. She, like Catherine Hall, is a protagonist-narrator. Unlike Catherine Hall, however, Hitty's tone and perspective reveal her to be more adult than child. Although she is 'born' in Maine in 1830, her descriptions and voice are constant throughout the book; she always speaks as an adult observer and social critic. She relies on complicated sentence structures and vocabularies from start to finish, and does not seem to age even while noting the passage of time. Readers come to know her as a consistent source of information, description, humor, and introspection. She notes injustice and discouragement, but remains confident about not only her own abilities but the abilities and talents of the characters around her.

Feminism in a Gathering of Days and Hitty: Her First Hundred Years?

Both of these novels for children present stories by and about strong female heroines. Both novels prioritize questions about feminine behavior and values, as defined by prevailing social systems. Both offer models of desirable womanhood, and both comment on the processes by which girls negotiate both domestic environments and developmental processes. For these reasons, these texts could be considered examples of girls' fiction and included in lists or studies of that literary tradition. This designation does not, however, imply that these are feminist books.

Sociologists who study children's books often quantify the number of strong or active female characters in texts (Pescosolido et al. 1997; Weitzman et al. 1972). These texts, then, contain a great deal of data since both Catherine and Hitty are vibrant, active, strong-willed characters. They are also surrounded by strong women in their respective social worlds: Catherine's stepmother arrives on the farm from the city, and is eager to learn how to accomplish farm chores; Hitty meets girls who disobey their parents and women who travel abroad. These similarities, however, mask important differences between the two protagonists. Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey's (1998) definition of a subversive story, on the other hand, unmasks differences between Catherine and Hitty. They propose that subversive stories make claims about power within social arrangements, and the possibilities of evading that power. Their ideas permit a more nuanced analysis of these texts, since they highlight the importance of stories that describe inequalities within gendered social relationships and that permit readers to think critically about these social relationships.

Catherine's story, although it contains information about the nature of racial oppression and the complexity of morality, does not readily permit a reader to think critically about the nature of gendered social arrangements in nineteenth century America. Catherine writes in her journal that girls in her community did not learn math beyond basic figuring although boys did; that girls are too delicate for certain physical activities; that women whose husbands die need to rely on their families for shelter even though men whose wives die rely on themselves and their daughters. While this information is historically accurate, Catherine's narration does not suggest that she prefers that these norms were any different. Catherine accepts these norms as social facts, and the reader is left with no alternative but to accept them as well.

Hitty's story, on the other hand, both describes and comments on gendered social conventions in a way that makes them visible. The way that she observes change, over time, in American gender arrangements allows readers to consider how these arrangements are social rather than natural. She provides evidence that girls are capable of independent living and driving a car and running a business; that they haven't always done these things has to do with history, rather than ability. That Hitty also travels abroad and within different regions of the United States adds to her ability to provide a useful perspective on inequality and power.

In addition, Hitty judges the people she meets along her travels according to relatively un-gendered criteria; she describes people as cheerful or bossy or stern or old or mischievous, but rarely as ladylike or unfeminine. When one of her human owners, an eight-year-old named Isabella, is confronted by a band of boys waving sticks and demanding her doll, Hitty describes the scene this way:

I could see from this that she had abandoned all hope of help from anyone but herself. Isabella was no coward. I hardly think many girls would have stood up alone against that wild-looking troupe as she did. But of course she was no match for them... I had a [last] glimpse of Isabella standing at the head of the alleyway... Her hat with its red feather lay in at least six different bits, one sleeve was torn off at the shoulder, and the snow was falling on her disheveled hair and flushed face. I never saw anyone look quite so beautiful or quite so furious. (Field 1929: 165)

Hitty's description of Isabella and her struggle against the "wild-looking troupe" of boys does not indicate that Isabella ought to have acted differently according to conventional Victorian standards of behavior for girls. Hitty responds, not in outrage over Isabella's unconventional rage and aggressiveness, but rather by seeming proud of Isabella's strength, independence, and courage.

This example, and others like it, illustrates Hitty's conviction that there is no fixed standard by which girls are judged, that courage and justice are more important than gender norms, and that Isabella only lost because she was outnumbered. According to Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey's (1998) definition, *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years* can be seen as a subversive children's book. It describes the ways that social arrangements are gendered, and offers an empowering vision of girls as social actors who (more often than not) determine their own fates. According to my elaboration of their definition, it can also be seen as a feminist children's book.

Production Contexts and Feminist Content

How is it that *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years* is both subversive and feminist, having been written and published forty years before the second wave of the American feminist movement exploded? Why isn't *A Gathering of Days* more subversive, more feminist, since it was written and published after a decade of modern feminist activity? For the answer to these questions, I turn to the history of children's book publishing in the United States and, more specifically, the power and autonomy of women authors and editors during the early years of children's book publishing in this country.

In her research on Nigerian novels, Wendy Griswold (1992) demonstrates that the ideas of individuals in production and distribution systems, along with the arrangements of the systems themselves, greatly affect the specific cultural product that reaches the public. Following Griswold's insight, I believe that changes in children's book publishing organizations can help account for Hitty's feminism and Catherine's lack thereof. Rachel Field published *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years* in 1929, and worked with Louise Seaman at The Macmillan Company to do so. Macmillan was the very first American publishing house to establish a children's department, establishing their children's division in 1918, and Louise Seaman was possibly the most famous, and most highly respected, children's book editor of the day. She had authority and power within her division and within the larger publishing house, and was able to make critical decisions about which children's books The Macmillan Company would publish.

Many historians of children's book publishing have noted that, following Macmillan's example, in practically every case a woman was placed at the head of children's book publishing divisions. The women who were responsible for the early years of children's book production were savvy business women and effective, creative book editors. They were white women who had attended college because they were members of a privileged class. They had power to create books that reflected their identities as independent, well-educated women, and retained that power and

control for the first fifty or so years of children's book publishing (Marcus 1997). Because women were thought to know more about what children would or should read than men, they were left alone in their work as the producers of children's literature.

These early editors of children's novels were, effectively, given both editorial and creative freedom over an entire realm of book production, and the books they published reflect both their identities and their autonomy. Hitty: Her First Hundred Years is a testament to their work and their power; Hitty tells a story that very much reflects the spirit of her production. She is articulate, courageous, privileged, and confident. She is more concerned with commenting on social arrangements than she is with replicating them. Hitty, like her creators, recognizes both fury and beauty and delights in both - despite her identity as a nineteenth century girl.

Catherine Hall's story, on the other hand, was written and published in 1979. Significant changes had taken place within children's book publishing by then, and Catherine's story reflects these organizational changes. By the time Joan Blos wrote *A Gathering of Days*, the first waves of mergers within publishing worlds had taken place and her publishing house was in financial trouble (Tebbel 1981). Joan Blos and her editor had never worked together before (Blos 2002), and they did not have the time, resources, or personal relationship that Rachel Field and Louise Seaman had in 1929.

The mergers of many companies into few have lessened the number of editorial departments. Women are no longer at the head of most children's book divisions - their numbers have dropped since the first waves of mergers began in the 1960s (Marcus 1997). The executives of the corporations that now control children's book publishing tend to focus more exclusively on the bottom line rather than on making a creative or humane contribution to children's literature. There is increasing pressure on editors of children's books to produce little beyond the kinds of books that are likely to achieve wide sales (Hade 2002; Nodelman and Reimer 2003). Joan Blos and her editor collaborated on a vivid, thoughtful text about a girl's experiences of nineteenth century life and morality. It does not constitute a subversive or feminist story, according to Ewick and Silbey's definition or to my own, but its publishing context might not have permitted it to do so.

Conclusion

Sociologists of literature have argued that books' producers may react to change during times of political or social upheaval by avoiding controversial issues altogether, as Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie (1997) find with regard to racial images in children's books. This theory might help explain why, during a period of enormous feminist activity, the book that won the Newbery Medal in 1980 does not seem to reflect the emergence of the second wave of the American feminist movement when compared to a book published fifty years earlier. 1980 was a year of great social upheaval and of specifically feminist upheaval as the Equal Rights Amendment was debated and radical feminist groups collided with the New Right. Perhaps children's book publishers were eager to avoid texts that made visible challenges to gendered arrangements.

The problem with this pleasantly simple solution is that the year Hitty: Her First Hundred Years won the Newbery Medal was similarly fraught with political upheaval and feminist social change. The Equal Rights Amendment was first proposed in 1923, six years before Hitty was published, and had not yet been ratified in 1929. Women had won the right to vote in 1920, nine years before Hitty's publication, and debates on the status and rights of women were prevalent and animated. In 1929, the year of Hitty's publication, the onset of the Great Depression brought new support to the idea that women's place was in the home and working women were accused of taking jobs away from men. Clearly, this was a period of unrest and change, and questions of women's role, place, and power were being debated in both public and private arenas. The theory that children's book publishers avoid controversial issues during unsettled times does not explain the variation between these two texts, given the similarities between their historical contexts. My analysis demonstrates that the books' different production contexts are better explanations of

their feminist content than is the theory that unsettled times lead publishers to avoid controversial material.

Both Hitty: Her First Hundred Years and A Gathering of Days: A New England Girl's Journal, 1830-32 have been awarded the Newbery Medal by panels of children's librarians, and can therefore be counted among this country's most well respected children's books. Both books are widely available, and both tell introspective, intelligent stories about nineteenth century domestic life. There is something very special about Hitty's story, though. Hitty: Her First Hundred Years was published over seventy years ago, at a time when today's children's grandparents were visiting libraries and reading about Hitty's travels for the first time. Her story is not a modern one, yet there are web sites about her adventures and communities of admirers who make pilgrimages to visit the original doll in a museum in Stockbridge, MA. Replicas of Hitty are bought and sold on eBay³, and twenty-first century fans exchange miniature dress patterns based on descriptions from the book. It is possible that she is simply the most charming doll who ever wrote a memoir. It is also possible, though, that the collaboration between women at a particularly unsettled time early in American children's book publishing's history created a character who reflects modern feminist ideologies.

Educators and librarians who work with children have, over the past decade, been encouraged by academics and parents and even by policy makers to find books that will encourage and empower girls. Different books and articles have been written on the subject, and most include lists of books that girls might enjoy and learn from: books that might somehow help girls take control of their choices, ask questions in class, retain self-confidence and self-esteem. It is important, though, to pay attention to how these books are being chosen and to whether or not they are accomplishing these goals. While most of the books being advocated as 'great for girls' have been published recently, this paper finds that less contemporary children's books might have more to offer today's girls, having been written at a time when powerful women were in charge of children's book publishing.

Notes

1. The American Library Association grants the Newbery Award for the Most Distinguished Contribution to American Literature for Children. Awarded by panels of children's librarians, the Newbery Medal confers upon a book a measure of prestige unlike any other. There is widespread agreement that the Newbery Medal is the giant among children's book awards. It is also the oldest and most respected. One of the implications of winning the Newbery is that it guarantees that a title is kept in print in perpetuity. Consequently, a book published in the 1920's is still available today. While book prizes are a source of endless disagreement, in that there are always other books that might have won, it is clear that the award makes an immense difference to sales, as well as status. One Newbery Medal-winning author remembers, "When I won the Newbery my publisher informed me that traditionally it had a more positive effect on US sales than a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, or even the Nobel Prize for Literature!" (Allen 1998). It is for these reasons that this population of books will serve as my sampling frame.

2. Although I acknowledge the methodological problem that researchers have when they summarize or interpret literary works, I do not think that sociologists of culture should surrender such analyses. Griswold (1992) argues that being methodologically self-conscious should not require avoiding analytic techniques. To take seriously my responsibility in analyzing these two children's books, I have dealt with the problem by comparing my summaries of the books to standard summaries and reviews, by discussing my understanding of the texts with teachers and librarians very familiar with them, and by making clear what my purpose in reading the books is.

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