

# BIG IDEAS in Small Books



PRIME TIME makes sharing  
the humanities family time





by **Helen Clare Taylor**



The PRIME TIME Family Reading Program is an extraordinary literary instructional creation. It transforms low-literacy, disadvantaged families into eager philosophers who deliberate values, ideas, and cultural contexts and who develop acute critical thinking skills. Perhaps even more surprisingly, this transformation happens through the power of children's literature. The PRIME TIME team has selected children's books which are full of humanities content, rich in ideas, questions, and ambiguities about who we are and what we want to be. The task for those of us involved in PRIME TIME is to help these families recognize and find the humanities.

*Louisiana Cultural Vistas* has already published some excellent advice on this in Bob Becker's essay "Agamemnon Among the Bunnies" (Winter 2001), and Michael Sartisky's "It's All Greek to Me" (Spring

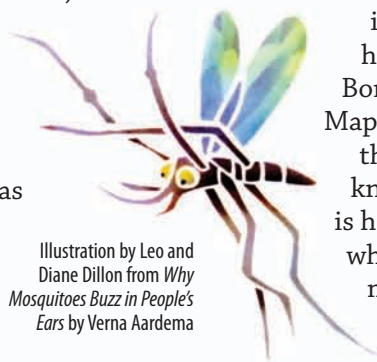


Illustration by Leo and Diane Dillon from *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* by Verna Aardema

2007) both of which are available at [www.leh.org](http://www.leh.org). These accessible but erudite pieces will tell you all about finding the humanities in children's literature, and to add my voice to them seems to imply that those sneaky humanities are hiding out in Tora Bora and that you need Google Maps or at least a good GPS to trap them in their caves. Of course, knowing what the humanities are is helpful. I say this only because when, a few years ago, the LEH gave me a Special Humanities Award, I called my mother, as one does—even in one's forties—to tell her the good news. "I didn't know you were a humanitarian," she said, as if she imagined me normally tripping up old ladies. And so, to prevent my mother from thinking that I has suddenly become the Mother Theresa of Shreveport, I had to explain what



the humanities were and how they were involved with children's literature. After this I can say that I am very qualified to share that information with you. We don't usually associate "kiddie lit," as it was dismissively referred to at my graduate school, with the great ideas, with Socratic dialogue and strenuous philosophical debate. But actually, finding the humanities in children's literature is pretty easy; they're there, everywhere, all around you, and, as in the best fairytales, to find them you only have to ask the right questions.

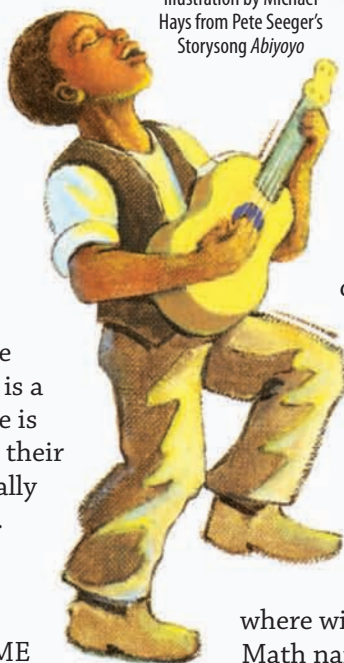
TIME work. We want to debate issues and learn by discussion rather than being told. Talking about stories is one of the best ways to learn about what we believe about ourselves.

Our cultural heritage has been handed down through stories. Socrates, whom I think must have been extraordinarily annoying to be with, used his famous "Allegory of the Cave" as Plato describes it, to explain views on reality and perception. In truth, my students always have difficulty imagining why those people should have been tied up in a cave with other people parading objects behind their backs—but the



I spend my daily life with the humanities. I talk in dusty and over-heated classrooms to bored young people about what Chaucer, Dante, and Jane Austen were really trying to say about the corruption of the Church, the nature of evil, and what kind of bonnet to wear. But no matter how dry my lectures on 14th-century hagiographical modes seem to be, the students always wake up when there is a class discussion about ideas. Everyone is interested in ideas. They want to offer their opinions about whether Hamlet was really mad, and what is wrong with Mr. Darcy. They enjoy debating the meaning of stories and figuring out what their authors wanted us to know. It is this aspect of human nature that makes PRIME

Illustration by Michael Hays from Pete Seeger's *Storysong Abiyoyo*



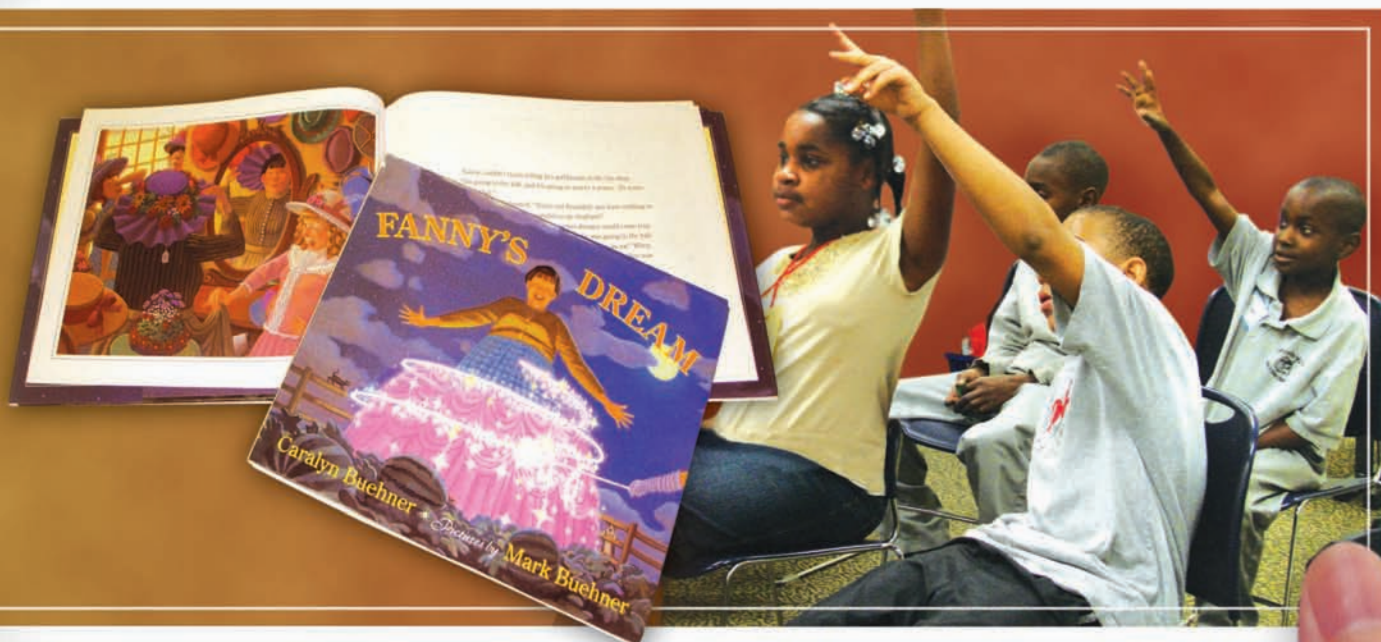
narrative is an analogy used to teach a set of ideas. Similarly, we can think of Christ's little stories of the prodigal son or the vineyard, used as parables for teaching. Aesop's fables dramatize a moral lesson. Stories are our way of sharing wisdom. They give life and dramatic action to ideas without being openly didactic. Even subject matter as baffling as mathematics can be taught using stories. You remember the kind of problem: if a car leaves Chicago at 10 am traveling at a speed of 60 miles an hour and another car leaves Des Moines, travelling at 70 miles an hour, where will they meet—or something like that. Math narratives are somehow not as real to



me as other kinds!

Stories articulate identity, identify enemies, warn of dangers, and applaud the deeds of heroes. Children's stories dramatize the same conflicts, losses, moral ambiguities, and tough decisions just as much as do the great narratives of literature and religion. Sometimes the setting and characters are more appropriate to a family audience: better to examine Mary Whitcomb's Odd Velvet in her schoolyard than Hamlet in black velvet moping around Elsinore. But the themes are the same. Both explore alienation and identity.

parent. "What's odd?" "Am I odd?" "Yes," said the child emphatically, implying that her mother was often embarrassing, and they began to talk about conformity, fitting in, and social responsibility—all topics which are relevant to school-age children and the parents who help them negotiate their struggles with peer pressure. But the ideas in that discussion were also relevant to a philosophical debate in a college classroom. Many characters in the classics are odd. Heroes and villains have to be different from us or why would we care to read their stories? Oedipus was pretty odd. Christ was



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Another PRIME TIME favorite on this topic is Pete Seeger's *Abiyoyo*. Once during a PRIME TIME discussion, we were examining the characters in that book and the fact that they are ostracized from a village community. A child said that the father in the story was different and that he was "odd." "What do you mean 'odd?'" asked a

odd. So was Jane Eyre. We can talk about the same humanities issues and what they might mean in our daily lives in both children's stories and in the texts on my literature syllabus.

Carolyn Buehner's wonderful story *Fanny's Dream* is one of my favorite texts to present to PRIME TIME families. The book raises questions about gender roles, ambitions, dreams, responsibility to our families, and the perpetuity of the Cinderella myth. In PRIME

TIME, we can talk about that book forever, especially when, in my role as scholar, I always adopt a contrary position to whatever direction the discussion is taking, just so that I can foment and

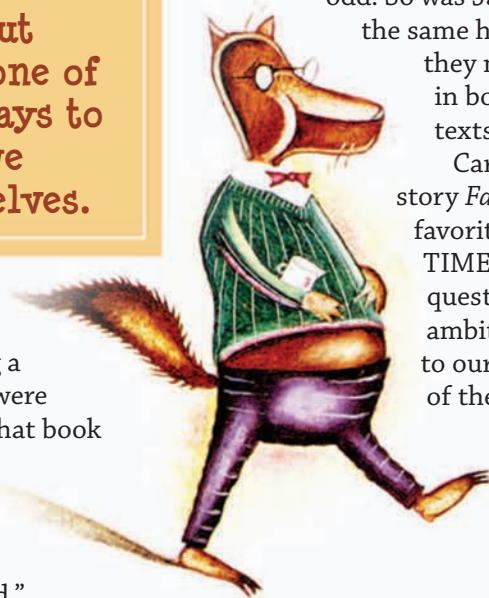


Illustration by Lane Smith from *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka



model respectful disagreement and real debate. PRIME TIME texts like this one are rich and complex; they have been chosen so that they stimulate spirited discussion. Note that it is not just engendering discussion that is the goal of PRIME TIME. Once we find the humanities, once we show the families that ideas are everywhere, then we provide them with a model of how to keep talking to each other and to keep asking questions about books, movies, TV shows, advertising, and whether we like brussels sprouts. It is through stories and discussion that we learn what we think about the world, as we present and defend

our views to others. Sadly, the annoying Socrates got the method right. Talking about ideas helps us learn who we are.

Sometimes this works by turning ideas on their heads. You can do this with children's literature, which, like folktales and myth, creates a magical realism where crazy things happen and animals talk. Another of my favorite texts for PRIME TIME discussion is *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka, which revises the conventional story about the big bad wolf blowing down the house of the unfortunate pigs by narrating those same events from

the wolf's point of view. Our PRIME TIME families, of course, already know the folk tale of the three little pigs and they can easily identify the archetypal villain in the character of the wolf. But in this story the wolf is trying to exonerate himself. How can he do that when we know that wolves and foxes in other folk tales and in other cultures are always bad? What does this tell us, then, about the nature of stereotyping, judging other people without knowing them, and what it means to be "bad" (whether you are a wolf or not). This conversation often leads to our

examining characterizations of wolves and other monsters in modern versions of this story, as well as to "wolf-like" characters in TV and movies. In *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, the wolf justifies

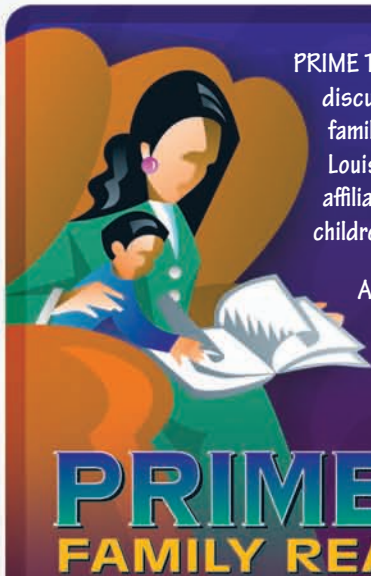


**Stories are our way of sharing wisdom. They give life and dramatic action to ideas without being openly didactic.**

Professional storytellers model read-aloud techniques that parents can use at home with their children.







PRIME TIME Family Reading Time,<sup>®</sup> a unique six to eight-week humanities-based program of reading, discussion, and storytelling at public libraries and other venues, emphasizes the importance of families reading together to discuss significant cultural and ethical themes. Created in 1991 by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, this statewide family literacy program with national affiliates creates a precondition for all future learning by empowering parents/guardians to help their children enjoy reading and improve their reading abilities.

At the end of 2010, PRIME TIME had completed 1,083 programs throughout the nation, reaching 38,905 participants. Since its inception in 1991, 536 programs have been conducted in Louisiana; reaching over 21,800 participants. Nationally, 547 programs have been completed in other U.S. states and territories, reaching 16,200 participants.

## PRIME TIME FAMILY READING TIME

[www.primetimefamily.org](http://www.primetimefamily.org)

PRIME TIME has been commended for its quality and lauded as a national standard for excellence in humanities programming for children and youth at risk. National awards include The Public Library Association's 2003 Advancement of Literacy Award, The Coming Up Taller Award and The Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize.

his actions by making a claim that pigs are normal wolf food (he compares them to our eating a cheeseburger), and that in eating them he is only being true to his wolf nature. But is it OK to stick to your nature if you are a big, bad wolf? At the end of the story, we see from the illustrations that the newspaper and the reporters are all pigs, anxious to condemn the protagonist and throw him into jail. So our

discussion of this story raises issues such as

justice and fairness, as well as subjectivity—who is telling the story? Who gets to say who is “bad,” or whether an action is “wrong”? What do we do when we have competing notions of justice?

How does this lead to the concept of civil disobedience? What would Gandhi have said about it? I have even heard families make allusions to racial identity and profiling as a subtext



of the story, as the “pigs,” already prejudiced, have demonized the “wolf” as “other.” This is pretty heavy stuff.

And all we do is ask open-ended, non-value-laden questions, respecting all opinions, and especially respecting dissent. It is from difference of opinion that knowledge grows.

I have made several references to the fact that I find the same

humanities issues in my college classroom as I do in the PRIME TIME texts that I explore with families. I don't have to

be convinced of the depth and importance of what we are doing, in terms of the effect on the literacy skills and bonding that has been clearly documented for PRIME TIME families. But PRIME TIME has not only changed its target families. It has changed me. I am a better parent because of PRIME TIME. And I am a better college teacher because of PRIME TIME. I encourage more discussion and Socratic dialogue in my classroom and I am more transparent in telling students what they are learning and why it is important. And, as well as seeing ideas from the great classics in children's literature, I am now actually seeing children's literature in the great classics. PRIME TIME has done a number on my head. Last year, in my

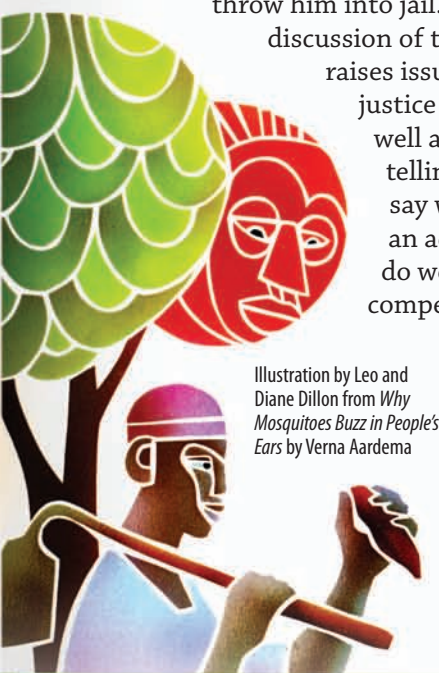


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# • STEMMING THE TIDE •

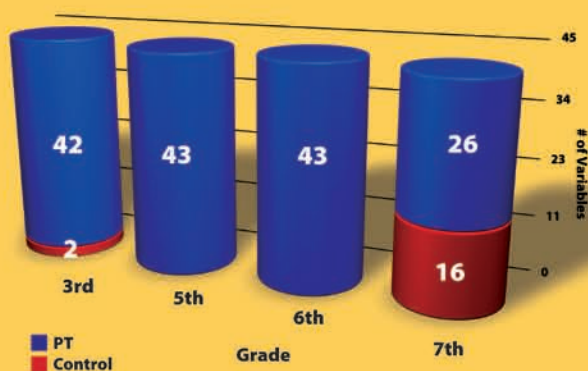
Definitive proof of PRIME TIME's effectiveness and long-term impact on student academic achievement is outlined in the study *Stemming the Tide of Intergenerational Illiteracy: A Ten-Year Impact Study of PRIME TIME FAMILY READING TIME*. The ten-year impact study was completed in 2010 and conducted in collaboration with the West Baton Rouge Parish Schools and Library. Researchers found that PRIME TIME-participant students not only outperformed the control group in the expected areas of English language arts and reading, but also across other subject areas including mathematics, physical science, life science, algebra, number and number relations, geometry, etc. The findings were based on grade 3 through high school performance on iLEAP, and LEAP tests and the Graduate Exit Exam. In other words, PRIME TIME not only impacts reading, it impacts ALL dimensions of learning, or as the LEH has maintained: "creates the precondition for all future learning."

By the end of 2010, PRIME TIME achieved the completion of more than 1,000 programs throughout the nation. Since inception in 1991, 536 programs

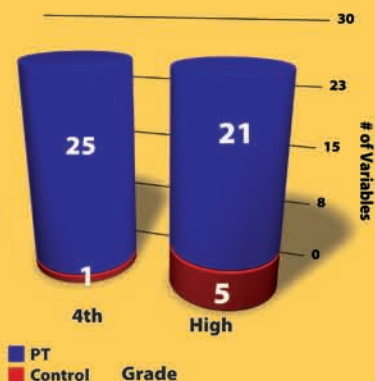


have been conducted in Louisiana, reaching more than 20,000 participants. Nationally, 547 programs have been completed in other U.S. states and territories, reaching nearly 20,000 participants. In total, after 20 years of sustained, outcomes-driven and family-focused programming, 1,083 programs have been conducted with individual participant graduation totaling approximately 40,000.

**iLEAP Performance Ratios:**  
# of Variables PRIME TIME Participants  
Scored Higher vs. Control Group



**LEAP Performance Ratios:**  
# of Variables PRIME TIME Participants  
Scored Higher vs. Control Group





graduate-level medieval studies seminar, we were reading a very serious and influential late classical text, the *Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius, which dates from the fourth century and which was a huge influence on Dante, Chaucer, and Shakespeare. Boethius has been thrown in jail and awaits execution, unjustly, as he feels. He imagines that a beautiful lady, Dame Philosophy, comes to his prison cell and engages him in a Socratic dialogue about the triviality of life, the meaninglessness of material possessions, and the nature of power. As I was discussing this text with my graduate students, I suddenly had an epiphany. "It's a prison narrative," I said. "It's Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. The protagonist imagines himself away from his solitary confinement and creates a fantasy world where his own sense of justice prevails. Just like Max in the story." The graduate students, naturally, wrote all this down.

We actually don't need much help in finding the humanities. We just have to see them for what they are: wonderful, rich, ideas,



Illustration by Mark Buehner from *Fanny's Dream* by Caralyn Buehner



Illustration by Marice Sendak from *Where the Wild Things Are*

glittering all around us in almost every facet of our lives and in the lives of the families who attend a PRIME TIME series. Helping those parents and children find the humanities for themselves is a very great gift that will enrich their lives, as it enriches the lives of those of us lucky enough to work with the LEH and be part of its extraordinary and transformative PRIME TIME program. **LCV**

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