

30 Brave Minutes Transcript Episode 65

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"Persistence Shining Through:" Reading Southern Children's Literature with Dr. Laura Hakala

Dr. Richard Gay

Welcome to 30 Brave Minutes, a podcast of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. In 30 Brave Minutes, we'll give you something interesting to think about. I'm Richard Gay, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and with me are Dr. Ashley Allen and Dr. Joanna Hersey. Joining us today is Dr. Laura Hakala from English, Theater, and World Languages, our topic for today is 19th Century children's literature in the South. Now get ready for 30 Brave Minutes.

Dr. Hakala, tell us a bit about yourself and your interest in this topic?

Dr. Laura Hakala

Sure, I grew up in the South, I grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, and I was told all kinds of interesting things about being Southern, but I didn't really realize it was an identity until I was an adult looking back, and I just remember whenever I was going through a tough time or something difficult, my mom would always say to me, you descended from strong Southern women, therefore, you're a strong Southern woman, and that's just kind of like been this mantra that stayed with me, especially through graduate school and the trials of starting a career and everything. So I went to college in Jacksonville, Jacksonville University, and then, throughout graduate school, with my master's degree at Georgia Southern, and my PhD at USM, Southern Mississippi. When it came time for me, to kind of figure out what I wanted to study, I was always just kind of thinking about my childhood, and these things I were told about being Southern, and sometimes that conflicted with a lot of what I was told in class, I was raised in, a lot of ways, a very conservative family with some very outdated ideas that I had to reckon with, as I was becoming a scholar and getting exposed to new ideas, which is a process I think a lot of our students go through as well. So I wrote my master's thesis on *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, and I really studied gender issues in that book, and then I was in my PhD program at Southern Mississippi, I was kind of debating, do I want to continue that project for my dissertation or not, and then I ended up in this Civil War Literature class, and it was honestly, like, you know, I won't go into details, but it was like a really dark period of my life. I was like, having a lot of

problems, lot of mental health problems, and I was in this class, and I knew I wanted to study children's literature, but we were all studying adult literature in the class, and so I was fortunate that the school where I went to, we have one of the best children's literature archives in the country, the De Grummond Children's Literature Collection. So, I went there just out of curiosity, and I was, like, I wonder if there's any children's books written during the Civil War, and I found one, this periodical called *Burkes Weekly for Boys and Girls* that have been published in 1867, but still in denial that the Civil War was over [laughs], and kind of still kind of that 'South will rise again' mindset, and it was published in Georgia and, I mean, everything kind of went from there, all the pieces fell together, and I don't think it's a coincidence that, during this really dark time for me grew this idea, that really launched my dissertation, and my career, and my publications. So I often tell students that, that, like, hey, you never know what good things are going to come, like, during really dark periods.

Dr. Ashley B. Allen

I wanted to just ask what's one of the most surprising things that you've seen, or come across about Southern girlhood?

Dr. Laura Hakala

There's a couple things. One was that, especially looking at older texts like 19th century children's books, a lot of the Southern girls are allowed to be tomboys, and they're allowed to kind of cross these gender lines and these gender barriers in ways that maybe stories about girls in other regions are seen, it's seen as more, they're criticized, more for doing it. Whereas in the South, I think, just by nature of the landscape, and I just, I think, honestly, because of the heat, like, especially in the time before air conditioning, you couldn't be inside. You just had to be outside. I mean, there's all these examples in these books of girls climbing trees, and playing on vines, and going fishing, and doing things that, like, in a classic book, like *Little Women*, they're not doing, or even when they do do it, like, there's that famous scene in *Little Women* where Jo goes ice skating with Laurie, like it turns really dangerous, and her sister almost dies, and it's seen as this, like, oh, you're acting like a boy you shouldn't do that, but in these Southern books, the girls are allowed to do that, and so that was surprising to me, because it also correlated with the way I was raised. Like, I was raised, like, oh, it doesn't matter if you're a girly-girl or not, like you're outside doing things, you're climbing trees, you're fishing, you're hunting, you're doing all this.

Dr. Richard Gay

I'm curious if there's something distinctly American as opposed to British in some of these characters?

Dr. Laura Hakala

When we look at 19th century children's literature, especially girls, there's a lot of scholars who've studied how there's more tomboys in American children's literature. So, I think that feature of the Southern books from that time period, and even into the 20th century with characters like Scout Finch in *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, and a lot of scholars have looked at it as, like, this American sense of independence, and kind of this frontier impulse to kind of break some of those gender barriers and be transgressive, and so in a lot of ways it is, yes, American, but I do think with some of these works that I've studied, and I've looked at, certainly the racial complexities, and how kind of gender and race are intertwined in a way, that I think is distinctly Southern, especially in the 19th century books, and even into the 20th century as well.

Dr. Ashley B. Allen

Well, I was just wondering, I mean, there's definitely this, obviously I'm from the South too, you know, and just this perspective that the South is less cultured. Do you know what I mean? And sort of a lower status or class, and so I wonder if that plays into this perception that women could go out and do these tomboyish things, because they weren't held to, like more of these, like, class or culture standards.

Dr. Laura Hakala

That that's something my students bring up a lot when I teach this, because I think they've experienced that stereotype of like, I'm Southern, so I sound less educated, less intelligent. I mean, I know, like, I, for instance, when I was in college, I actively worked to lose some of my Southern pronunciations of words, because I was so tired of people making fun of me over it, and that interestingly, I mean, I'm thinking through in my head, I don't see that as much come up in a lot of the 19th century books about white characters, but I do think the Southern children's books about black characters that comes up much more.

I'd like to read an excerpt from the book *Floyd's Flowers*, which was a conduct manual published in 1905 specifically for Black children, and it's groundbreaking, because it was one of the first, if not the first, children's book to represent Southern Black children as middle class. It was written by an African-American minister and educator named Silas Floyd, and the whole book really subverts a lot of the Jim Crow era prejudice from

that time, and we read it recently in my Southern Children's Literature Class, and the students really thought that this book was southern, because of the prominence of Christianity in it. So this excerpt comes from a short story in the book called "Mary and Her Dolls," and it resists the racist stereotypes of the time period because it portrays a Black girl not like the stereotypes of the time, which were very animalistic, but this Black girl is very intelligent, and she has complex thoughts, and emotions, and desires, so she is much more realistic, and here is this excerpt where a young girl Mary is talking to her father, the Reverend Dr. Smithson.

"Mary," said Dr. Smithson, looking thoughtfully at his little daughter, "I have a little girl in my Sunday School class who hasn't a single doll, I thought you might like to give her one of yours. You could spare one couldn't you?" "Oh Papa, I couldn't! Not a one!" exclaimed Mary. "Not one, when this poor little girl hasn't any?" "Oh Papa, I love my dolls so, how could I give them away?" "You'd have four left, wouldn't that be enough?" Mary thought a long while before speaking. She looked distressed. "Papa," she said at last, "Mrs. Grant was over here the other day, and she said that she wished you and Mama would give me to her, because she didn't have any little girl of her own. You've got five children yourself Papa, but would you give any of them away, just because you would have four left?" Dr. Smithson took his little daughter in his arms and kissed her. "No, dear," he said, "Papa wouldn't give any one of his children away. You may keep all of your dollies and we'll think of some other way to help poor Hattie." The next morning Mary said, "Papa, I have thought it all out for Hattie. You know I have been saving up a little money to buy me a little iron bank, but I can wait for that. I have saved up fifty cents. Don't you think that will be enough to buy a nice little dolly for Hattie and let me keep my babies?" Dr. Smithson knew that Mary had long been planning for the bank, so he asked, "are you quite sure that you want to spend your money in this way?" "Yes, Papa, I'm very sure," said Mary with a smile, though there was a hint of sadness in her eyes. Dr. Smithson and Mary bought Hattie a pretty doll. Hattie was overjoyed when she saw it. Mary went back home glad that her Papa had understood how she loved her dolls, and glad to find that not one of her beloved children was missing."

Dr. Joanna Hersey

I love it, I can see why your students love that, it's so interesting.

Dr. Richard Gay

I was just going to ask Dr. Hakala if she could talk to us a bit about how she engages her students in her work, because she made reference to them earlier. and I was curious how she interacts with her students and this very interesting topic.

Dr. Laura Hakala

This semester, I'm teaching a class on Southern Children's Literature that's really developed from my research and it's the Senior Seminar class, so, it's the class that English majors have to take, to do and learn advanced research skills for humanities based research, and the kind of end goal is they all produce this project of literature analysis, and so we've spent really like the first two thirds of the class reading a lot of the books that I published on, and researched, and studying them and reading scholarship about them, and a lot of them I think even they thought just the topic of Southern Children's Literature, they thought it would just be, you know, plantations, kind of the moonlight and magnolias myth, and they saw that no, it's really way more complex than that, just like the South is more complex than that. So that's been the primary way I've engaged students in the past and then this semester, I'm also mentoring a student in the REACH program, we together are going to look at this series of textbooks that were published for formerly enslaved children, and they were used in Freedman schools in the South right after the Civil War, and these textbooks were published in the late 1860s, and so I thought this would be a good project to kind of blend history and literature, and we're hoping to produce a website where we can have what's in the textbooks, who was using them, you know, have it on a website so that we can share it with others.

Dr. Richard Gay

Can you tell us a bit about how you access the literature, the children's literature of the periods, because I'm just thinking, I'd love to read some of them myself, and are they, have they been digitized or are they available for public consumption that way? Or do you have to travel to archives to visit to view these?

Laura Hakala

Yeah, now, you can access them digitally. When I was working on my dissertation back in 2013 and 2014, a lot of them had not been digitized and honestly, like, I just, I'm amazed at what has been digitized. I mean, I got things wrong because now there's so much more digitized and we can access more, but at the time, when I first started doing this research, I worked a lot in the archive at Southern Mississippi, the De Grummond archive. I wrote an article on an anti-slavery book that was published in

1862 called *Step by Step, Tidy's Way to Freedom*, and that's been digitized on Project Gutenberg, and it's just amazing how things change the more that becomes digitized.

Dr. Richard Gay

That's affecting lots of different fields as well, I study manuscripts, hand-written books, and so many of them now have been digitized. It's really opening up the field to lots of interesting scholarship, and I love the way it breaks down barriers in terms of who has access to this material, it's great that more and more people can actually look at them, and see themselves in them as you've been describing, but also have the opportunity to investigate them intellectually and to think about them in really engaging ways. So yay digitalization and digital humanities!

Dr. Laura Hakala

And I agree, I think it makes it a lot easier to teach these primary sources, these historical sources, because they're for free online. I mean, in the Southern Children's Literature class, like, our first couple of weeks is just all online information, really helpful.

Dr. Richard Gay

It's a game changer. Now, I have to ask, will you be reading any of these 19th century children's books to your new infant?

Laura Hakala

Oh, good question. Yes and no, so some of them, I would not recommend contemporary children read today, without a whole bunch of context. I mean, I think a lot of them are really kind of just now more suited for scholars, but I think there are some that I would, and some of the picture books I teach, I've already read to her.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

We can link to some of your favorite recommendations too, in the show notes if you have a sense of things that the listeners would like. I think that this conversation is interesting too, because you mentioned before, this sense, that okay, we can be tomboys and we can climb trees, and we can do all that and then it comes to a halt when we have to become marriageable. and though, this sort of, sometimes, we don't think of these books where the girls have to do that as being very feminist. But also, we're recording this in the summer of the Barbie movie, which is another thing that sometimes doesn't feel very feminist, but many of us that grew up with these kinds of things in our childhood, felt them as empowering and that's been wonderful with the

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discourse about the Barbie movie too, is that some of us feel like they were ways to act out possible at future agendas, and even though it's not Southern, it's reminding me of things like *Anne of Green Gables*, where we have lots of tomboy aspects, this is set in Canada, but that she becomes a feminist character, going out and getting an education, and she does get married to the end, spoiler alert [laughs], but it's still a very independent, strong, young woman and young adult, and are there other examples in the literature that you can point to where we do see, maybe mixed, sort of, oddly together with the must-get-married narrative, where you see the strength of the women coming through as they go into puberty and into adulthood?

Dr. Laura Hakala

Yeah, well, I mean, this is not a Southern example, but I think the best example is *Little Women*, which also Greta Gerwig who did the Barbie movie, did the movie version of *Little Women*, we see, I mean, I think that's one of the main ones, and I teach that book all the time in my Women's Literature classes, and students love it, because I think they love the rebellious spirit of Jo and how she rejects her first marriage offer of Laurie, and she waits to choose Professor Bhaer who she actually loves, and so I think especially the 19th century, even though girls were expected to grow up and get married, we see them trying to delay in as much as possible, as an act of resistance, so, like, you mentioned, *Anne of Green Gables*, she does get married, but it's like several books into the series, so, like, it's not like, she turns eighteen and gets married immediately, she becomes a teacher, and becomes a writer, and kind of does these other things, and I'm thinking in a lot of the southern books that I look at, especially 19th century ones, we don't see the girls grow up as much. So that's kind of this, kind of strange feature of the southern books, the adult Southern woman is kind of vague and mysterious, like, even the mothers aren't really there, so much more complicated in the South.

Chancellor Cummings

This is Chancellor Robin Cummings and I want to thank you for listening to 30 Brave Minutes. Our faculty and students provide expertise, energy, and passion driving our region forward. Our commitment to southeastern North Carolina has never been stronger through our teaching, our research, and our community outreach. I want to encourage you to consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. With your help, we will continue our impact for generations to come. You can donate online at www.uncp.edu/give. Thanks again for listening. Now back for more 30 Brave Minutes.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

Laura share with us the second reading that you've brought for us today.

Dr. Laura Hakala

I'd like to read from *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*, by Mildred Taylor. This is a book I chose partly in honor of Banned Books Week, which was the first week of October, and since it was so recent, I wanted to honor a book that has been banned, and has been censored, and this particular one has several instances of being challenged in the past, but it's very well regarded, it's one of my favorite books, and it won the Newberry Award in 1976, which was the highest honor for a children's book to receive, and it was only the second African-American author to win that award. And, it's a story about a family in Mississippi in the 1930s named the Logans, and they draw strength from each other and from their farm in the face of racial prejudice and oppression, and I chose a particular quote because it particularly demonstrates this deep connection between Southern children and the outdoors, and the land they live on, which is a thread I see in many Southern works of children's literature. So in this particular passage, the protagonist, a young girl named Cassie is talking to her father about their farm.

"I asked him once why he had to go away, why the land was so important. He took my hand and said in his quiet way, 'look out there Cassie girl, all that belongs to you. You ain't never had to live on nobody's place but your own, and long as I live and the family survives, you'll never have to. That's important. You may not understand that now, but one day you will. Then, you'll see."

Dr. Joanna Hersey

That's wonderful thank you.

Dr. Richard Gay

It brought up another question for me as I was listening. like, how do we even define children's literature as we, approach the topic, could you address that a little bit for us please?

Dr. Laura Hakala

Absolutely, and that is something that scholars debated because it is kind of a fluid term, and most children's literature scholars, we use children's literature to refer to books that were marketed specifically to children, so a lot a lot of it comes down to marketing categories. And even now, we have young adult literature, which has only really been a marketing category since the 1960s, so *The Outsiders*, by S.E. Hinton, is

often considered the first young adult book because it was really marketed towards them. Now, prior to that, certainly people who are teenagers were reading books, absolutely. It just didn't always have the same label, and same thing with *Little Women*, like, okay, nowadays older kids are probably reading it, if they're even reading it at all, even though we refer to it as a children's book, even if, you know, like an eight year old is probably not gonna pick up *Little Women* and read it, unless they were weird like me, [laughs] cause I did that. But in the 19th century, there was this huge outgrowth of books that were being marketed to kids, and *Little Women* was one of them, how are the books, are the authors knowingly writing them for kids? Are they being marketed to kids? And then sometimes okay, does that mean adults also read them? Yeah, sure, like, for instance, I think of, love, like, *Twilight*, marketed as a young adult book, tons of adults read it and enjoyed it. So I think there's books that can crossover in terms of readers as well. Even if they were originally marketed in a certain way.

Dr. Richard Gay

I'm really curious about the availability of these books in the periods when they were published. Do we know what the print runs are on these?

Dr. Laura Hakala

And that is something it's hard to get the information, I would love to know that. I mean, that might be something I would have to travel to the archives of the publishing company, and kind of dig through that. I do know, I mentioned the conduct manual *Floyd's Flowers*, that was written for Black kids. I do know that 10,000 copies of that was sold in the first five weeks which, I mean, for 1905, I think that's huge. I think I mean, that was a huge number, so I think it's interesting that not only were the dominant cultural narratives of Jim Crow views and white supremacy, like that's selling, but also *Floyd's Flowers*, which is challenging that narrative, is also selling, in 1905 at the height of the Jim Crow Era.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

And are there, I think we're talking about books for the most part, are there also magazines? I know magazines become a bigger thing in the 19th century?

Dr. Laura Hakala

Yeah, periodicals, that was, there were tons of them, and that, I mentioned when I was in that Civil War Literature class, I found this periodical, this magazine that was published in 1867, *Burkes Weekly for Boys and Girls*, and so there's there are lots of short stories in these magazines. I know, for instance, that *Burkes Weekly* narrative

printed, casualty reports from Civil War battles, so there's also a lot of nonfiction elements, and, and very kind of open and honest about things that are happening in society, like with the Civil War, for instance.

Dr. Richard Gay

Laura, I know that a lot of your work is on children's literature that, that you argue has a central central role in defining southern identities, can you just sort of give us a sort of a brief synopsis of a Southern identity?

Dr. Laura Hakala

Yeah, one of the things I think is hard when we're talking about southern identity, childhood identities, there isn't just one, there's so many, and that's one thing I try to emphasize on my class that being Southern, and being a Southern child means so many different things. Certainly, Christianity is a large part of that identity type, spending time outdoors in nature, I think if you were to look at, say, the enslaved girl on the plantation, her identity, I think it would be very different, because she, you know, certainly doesn't have as much access to education as the white girl, but I think we see examples in the literature of trying to gain access to education, and I think, like the book *Step by Step*, she gets access, she steals the spelling book that her enslaver had discarded, and she studies it and learns how to read, and so we see this persistence shine through.

Dr. Richard Gay

There's a lot of strength in that right? This desire for education and overcoming adversity.

Dr. Laura Hakala

Yeah, education as a way towards social progress, which I think is something that, I mean, it kind of reminds me of Ashley's question from earlier about the Southern stereotype is being uneducated and uncultured, and I think they're even in the South today, I mean, I think a lot of our students would even say, like, hey, they're at UNCP to get a college degree because that's how they progress in society.

Dr. Ashley B. Allen

Have you done any research with Native American children's literature, or anything like that?

Dr. Laura Hakala

There's a lot, there's a scholar named Debbie Reese who has a website called, I believe it's American Indians and Children's Literature, I mean, it has fantastic resources. Two, there's two Lumbee children's books, that have been self published. Dr. Jane Haladay just recently published an article on those, one is *It's Lumbee Homecoming Y'all* and the other one is *Whoz Ya People*, and both I think were self-published because the writers did not see Lumbee people in children's literature, and they wanted to write these books, so Lumbee kids can see themselves.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

And you brought one more reading, I think, for our listeners today, tell us about that one.

Dr. Laura Hakala

This excerpt comes from a picture book, names *Crossing Bok Chitto*, it was published in 2006 by Choctaw writer Tim Tingle, and it was illustrated by Jeannie Rorex-Bridges, who is Cherokee. This story tells of a Choctaw girl named Martha Tom, who lives in Mississippi, across the river from a plantation, and she helps an enslaved boy named Little Mo, and his family, escape from the plantation, using this secret path through the river, and this river really demonstrates the prominence of nature and outdoor settings for southern children. It demonstrates the importance of interracial friendship, and it also demonstrates that southern childhood is not just black or white, but full of many racial backgrounds. So here's an excerpt where Martha Tom is leading Little Mo across the river on the secret path.

"They soon arrived at the river and it was Martha Tom's turn to lead. She took Little Mo to the path but he couldn't see the stones beneath the muddy water. 'This will be a fun game to play' she thought, she walked five paces back to get a good running start, then left to the river. Little Mo reached out to grab her dress as she flew by, to keep her from drowning. When Martha Tom landed in the river, she stood up! 'Little girl, what kind of witch are you?' Little Mo cried. Martha Tom laughed, 'I'm not any kind of witch, you can do it too, come on!' She took Little Mo by the hand, and together, the two of them went crossing Bok Chitto to the Choctaw side."

Dr. Joanna Hersey

That is so wonderful, thank you so much for bringing those.

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Dr. Ashley Allen

That's awesome, thank you.

Dr. Richard Gay

Well, this is such a rich topic, thank you so much for joining us today for 30 Brave Minutes, I feel like I've learned a lot. I want to spend some time looking at, and reading, some children's books from the 19th century. I think there's something for all of us to learn from those, perhaps identify with. So, thank you so much for joining us.

Dr. Laura Hakala

Oh, thank you for having me.

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