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Children's Literature Certificate Program

Pitt Pioneers: or, How Our Faculty Helped Establish Children's Literature and Childhood Studies in the Academy

by Marah Gubar and Anna Redcay
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We offer so many courses in children's literature and culture at Pitt that you might be tempted to assume that children's books, movies, music, games, and toys have always been taken seriously as subjects of academic study. Unfortunately, this is by no means true. For the better part of the twentieth century, scholars who specialized in children's literature faced significant opposition and even ridicule for daring to study what was dismissively referred to as "kiddie lit" (Clark xi-14, 48-76). Only after a long, hard fight did institutions of higher learning begin to accept that child-oriented art should be taken seriously as art.

Even today, colleges and universities do not routinely offer students the opportunity to study with professors who specialize in children's literature and culture. To have multiple scholars working in this area, as we do at Pitt, is a rare and wonderful thing. As the following history will show, Pitt is and has always been at the forefront of the ongoing effort to persuade the academy and the wider world that children's literature and culture are worthy of serious attention and sustained analysis.

Innovators in English Studies

If you ask an English professor when the serious study of children's literature began, chances are she would point to the early 1970s. That's when a group of scholars led by Dr. Francelia Butler at the University of Connecticut and Dr. Anne Devereux Jordan at Western Michigan University—both English professors—banded together in an effort to make children's literature studies a respectable subarea within literary studies (Gay 4-5). In 1972, Butler founded the first academic journal devoted to publishing articles on this subject, tellingly entitled *Children's Literature: The Great Excluded*. One year later, she and Jordan spearheaded the creation of the [Children's Literature Association \(ChLA\)](http://www.childlitassn.org/) (<http://www.childlitassn.org/>), still the leading professional organization in the United States for children's literature scholars. ChLA held its first annual conference on UConn's campus in 1974.

For these reasons, Butler's home institution asserts on its website that "children's literature as a site of academic

study was founded at the University of Connecticut. In the late 1960s...Butler was the first English professor to teach children's literature courses at any university in the United States." While UConn has good reason to be proud of Butler's contributions to the field, other college professors had already begun teaching and writing about children's literature before she arrived on the scene.



Pitt English Professor Emily G. Irvine. Photograph courtesy of University Archives, University of Pittsburgh

Way back in 1933, for instance, a Pitt English instructor named Emily G. Irvine started teaching a class called "Child Literature." A 1919 graduate of Mount Holyoke College, Irvine earned her PhD from Pitt before becoming an assistant professor of English; by the time she retired in the mid-1960s, she had attained the status of full professor, an unusual accomplishment for a woman during this era.

Irvine's original course description for "Child Literature" explains that "this course concerns itself with such literature—prose and poetry—as may enter into the world of the child during his first six years. Students in this course are expected to show literary taste, abstract standards of criticism, and an ability to write clearly and simply." Though aimed primarily at students planning to become elementary school educators, "Child Literature" was offered through the English department and taught by its faculty, principally Irvine, Dorothy Miller, and Betty Ann Stroup.

Some version of this course has been offered by the Pitt English department ever since Irvine introduced it. In the 1950s, its title was changed to "Literature for Children" and its scope expanded to encompass "the best literature for children from kindergarten through the ninth grade," from nursery rhymes and folk tales to modern poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Around 1971, a companion course entitled "Literature for Adolescents" was introduced. In 1973, "Writing for Children" was taught by Margery Gulbransen, a creative writer who wrote historical fiction for young readers and children's plays produced by the Pittsburgh Playhouse and other local theatres.

An internal English department report from 1978 notes that the enrollment for children's literature courses "was considerably larger than that for any other category of 100-level courses." Children's literature, the report concludes, "is an extremely strong area." In the 1980s, the department began adding more offerings in this area, and the two original courses were re-categorized as "popular culture" (rather than "service") courses. Today, the equivalent courses are known as "Childhood's Books" and "Representing Adolescence." As in the past, a significant proportion of the students who take these classes hope to become educators or work with children in some other capacity.

Make Room for the Librarians

Irvine might well have been one of the first English professors in the United States to teach children's literature. But there was another group who had been educating people about children's literature for decades before her arrival at Pitt: namely, librarians. In *Constructing the Canon of Children's Literature* (2004), Anne Lundin observes that the enterprising women who invented the position of children's librarian in the 1890s played a central yet often forgotten role in persuading Americans to regard children's literature as literature, worthy of evaluation and analysis as well as preservation and dissemination. The story of how Pitt came to have a Children's Literature Program—rather than just several courses on this subject—cannot be told without reference to this parallel tradition of advocacy and expertise.

"Children and dogs not allowed" warned signs posted outside reading rooms in America's first free public libraries, established in the early 19th century (Clark 69). Not until 1887 did a librarian take the radical step of setting aside a special space for child patrons; at the Pawtucket (Rhode Island) Public Library, Minerva Sanders pioneered the practice of placing books and magazines within easy reach of children and providing child-sized tables and chairs. (Sadly, we have found no hard evidence for the oft-repeated anecdote that she sawed down the legs of adult-sized

furniture herself.) The first fully separate children's reading room opened at the Brookline (Massachusetts) Public Library in 1891 (Jenkins 128). Others soon followed, including one at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Library in 1896.

Children's librarians began to research and write about children's books as part of their effort to persuade other librarians and the public to provide young people with easy access to literature. Besides writing reports that persuaded the American Library Association (ALA) to establish a child services section in 1900 (Batchelder 71-72), women such as Caroline Hewins and Anne Carroll Moore penned articles, reviews, and books about children's literature, such as Hewins' carefully researched and entertaining essay on "The History of Children's Books," published by the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1888 and still worth reading today for its erudite and inclusive approach to the topic.

Hewins' *Books for the Young* (1882), E. M. Fields' *The Child and His Book* (1892), Harvey Darton's *Children's Books in England* (1932): these and other early monographs focused on children's literature were admittedly "more descriptive than analytical" (Lundin 63), filled with lists of recommended titles and compiled by book collectors and independent scholars as well as librarians. Yet Lundin is surely right to insist that we regard them as groundbreaking forays into the field of children's literature studies—and that we acknowledge the central role that departments of library science and education played in making room for the study of children's literature in higher education (59).

At Pitt, for example, Irvine taught children's literature courses not because she herself was a specialist in the field, but rather as a service to students and faculty in the School of Education. Moreover, faculty in library science—particularly Margaret Hodges and Maggie Kimmel—played an integral role in making Pitt a center for children's literature studies. The roots of library science at Pitt can be traced all the way back to 1901, when Francis Jenkins Olcott, director of the Carnegie Library Children's Department, founded a training academy for children's librarians. After being housed for several decades by the Carnegie Institute (now Carnegie Mellon University), this institution shifted to Pitt in 1962 and evolved into what we now call the School of Information Sciences.

In other words, Pitt's highly-ranked "iSchool" owes its existence to the work of children's librarians. The same can be said of Pitt's Elizabeth Nesbitt Room, which served as a home for our rich archive of children's literature and material related to the history of young people and their books and media. This [special collection](http://pitt.libguides.com/c.php?g=12504&p=66268) (<http://pitt.libguides.com/c.php?g=12504&p=66268>) consists of more than 12,000 items dating from the 1600s to the present day. One of the oldest collections of historical children's literature in the country, it was funded with seed money from Andrew Carnegie himself, with the core of the collection coming from English publisher and bibliophile Charles Welsh (Bleier 100). The distinguished children's librarians Olcott and Elva S. Smith oversaw and expanded the original collection.

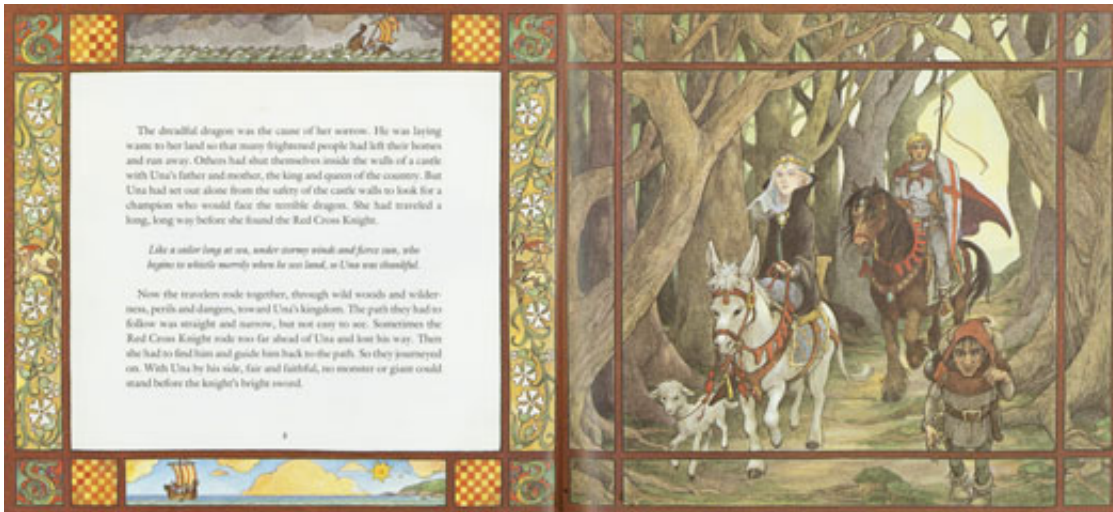
After this collection moved from CMU to Pitt, Margaret Hodges—a library science professor from 1964 to 1978—drew it together in a special room, organized and supplemented it, and named it in honor of Elizabeth Nesbitt, who had been her teacher at the Carnegie Institute when she was earning her Masters in Library Science degree. Inspired by Nesbitt's courses on folktales and storytelling, Hodges became a prolific creative writer, storyteller, and scholar. Beginning in the 1950s, she published more than 40 children's books and performed as a professional storyteller on children's radio and TV shows, including the nationally broadcast WQED show *Tell Me a Story*. Her lively and informative article "Dickens for Children" (1982) appeared in *The Horn Book Magazine*, a popular-press predecessor to Butler's *Children's Literature* that began publication way back in 1924. Hodges also contributed an essay to a groundbreaking special issue of *Library Trends* focused on "The Study and Collecting of Historical Children's Books" (1978).



Margaret (Peggy) Hodges, a Pitt library science professor and creative writer who curated the Nesbitt Collection

After retiring from Pitt, Hodges not only continued to publish, she also carried on supporting and adding to the Nesbitt Collection as part of her tireless campaign "to ensure that future generations of children's literature scholars would have the resource materials they needed" (Barlow). She was aided in this effort by bibliographer Elizabeth Mahoney, a Pitt lecturer who taught library science courses focused on children's literature.

During this time, Hodges also sat in on a graduate course in the English Department that inspired her to write her most celebrated children's book. Reading and discussing Spencer's *The Faerie Queen* in Professor Robert B. Hinman's seminar prompted her to compose *Saint George and the Dragon* (1984). Richly illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman, this picture book won the prestigious Caldecott Medal. It beautifully attests to the fruitfulness of interdisciplinary conversation and collaboration.



A two-page spread from the Caldecott-winning picture book *Saint George and the Dragon* (1984) by Margaret Hodges and Trina Schart Hyman

Childhood Studies *Avant La Lettre*

Three years after Hodges retired, her hard work on behalf of children's literature at Pitt paid off in the form of a full-fledged Children's Literature Program. This undergraduate certificate program was co-created by Maggie Kimmel—a former doctoral student of Hodges—and Carol Billman. Kimmel came to Pitt as an associate professor of library science in 1978. Billman was an assistant professor of English, hired expressly as a specialist in children's literature (a first for the English department).



Mary Margaret (Maggie) Kimmel, a Pitt library science professor and

Together, Kimmel and Billman created a program that was ahead of its time. Recently, children's literature critics have begun expressing interest in the idea of studying children's literature not as a purely literary or textual phenomenon, but from an interdisciplinary perspective that makes room for the study of children as well as books, readers as well as writers (see Meek, Lenzer, Coats, and Gubar). Perhaps, they suggest, scholars who study children's literature should regard themselves as participants in an interdisciplinary field called childhood (or children's) studies. Brooklyn College opened an innovative undergraduate program of this kind in 1991. Rutgers-Camden launched the first U. S. graduate program in this field in 2007. At these institutions, the study of children's literature forms just one part of a broader curriculum that invites students to consider childhood from a variety of perspectives (historical, sociological, biological, and so on).

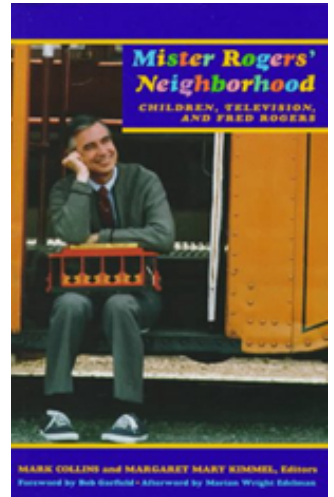
Pitt's Children's Literature Program, created in 1981, was a childhood studies

co-founder of the Children's Literature Program

program *avant la lettre*. The faculty who served on the original steering committee came from an array of disciplines: English, library science, education, speech and theatre arts, psychology, sociology, and the "health related professions." In a

informational pamphlet announcing the creation of the Program, the section entitled "Why Study Children's Literature?" asserts in no uncertain terms that "children's literature is a flourishing interdisciplinary field of study [that] attracts students and scholars from a variety of academic areas," including art history, child psychology, sociology, folklore, and so on. Undergraduates earning a children's literature certificate were thus required not merely to take English classes, but also a library science course and three electives like "Developmental Psychology" or "Sociology of the Family."

Faculty from these disparate fields collaborated not just in the running of the program, but also in their scholarly work and community service. For example, Kimmel teamed up with Mark Collins—a creative writing instructor in the English Department—to edit a collection of essays entitled *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers* (1996). One of the essays included in this volume was by journalist Jeanne Marie Laskas, who would later become the director of Pitt's Creative Writing Program. In it, she relates how deeply Mister Rogers was influenced by Margaret B. McFarland, a distinguished child psychologist who helped to establish the Child Development Program in the psychiatry department in Pitt's School of Medicine. Both McFarland and Kimmel served as consultants to *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. When Kimmel designed a course called "Early Childhood and Media," McFarland volunteered to teach the units focused on child development.



Fred M. Rogers of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and Pitt child psychology professor Margaret B. McFarland

A sign of Kimmel and Billman's commitment to the world outside the "ivory tower" of academia was their institution of a Community Liaison Committee that included several children's librarians, the owner of a local children's bookstore, and the directors of the Pittsburgh Youth Orchestra and the Lovelace [Puppet] Theatre. Members of this committee participated actively in the program. For example, Marilyn Hollinshead, the owner of Pittsburgh's Pinocchio Bookstore, collaborated with Kimmel, Carnegie librarian Amy Kellman, and English department instructor Elizabeth Segel to bring to campus a star-studded array of creative writers, including Cynthia Voigt, Philippa Pearce, David Macaulay, Lois Lowry, and Madeline L'Engle. Committee members hosted the creative writers in their homes and arranged for their students to meet them and ask them

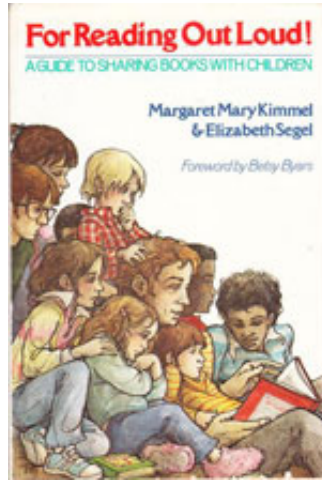
questions about their books.

Non-tenure-stream (NTS) instructors in the English department played an integral role in this vibrant community of women working together on behalf of young people and youth culture. Prior to Billman's hiring, children's literature courses in the English department were being taught mostly by NTS instructors such as Segel, Hollinshead, and Joan Friedberg. One of Segel's students was J. D. Stahl, who would go on to become a respected children's literature scholar and the second president of ChLA.

At a time when not all school principals were sold on the value of reading literature to young children, Segel teamed up with Kimmel to write *For Reading Out Loud! A Guide to Sharing Books with Children* (1983). Segel also collaborated with Friedberg to launch "Beginning with Books," an early childhood literacy program that provided free books to Pittsburgh parents and children and raised awareness about the benefits of reading to and with young

children. Kimmel was on the advisory board of "Beginning with Books"; she also served as judge for the ALA's Newbery and Caldecott award competitions.

Adjunct faculty at Pitt today owe a debt to Segel, since she played a key role in persuading Pitt's administration to give health insurance to part-time instructors. She also joined with Margery Gulbranson and Medievalist Mary Elizabeth David—who had co-edited a collection of fairy tales and would later serve as program director—to pressure the English department to devote a tenure-stream line to hiring a children's literature specialist (Billman, as it turned out). Former English department chair Mary Briscoe recalls that it "took some hard work to convince enough people that what was then thought of as 'kiddy lit' was an important area of study." Billman left Pitt a mere three years after she arrived, partly because full departmental support for children's literature studies was slow in coming.



Elizabeth (Betty) Segel and Joan Friedberg, cofounders of the childhood literacy program "Beginning with Books"

"Pruned Down and Branched Out"

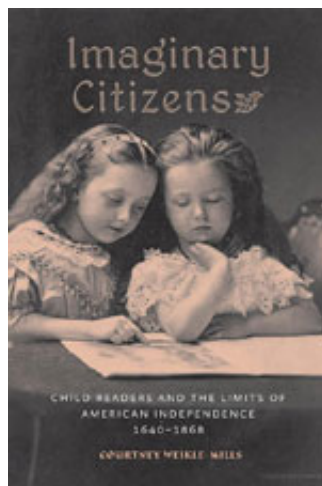
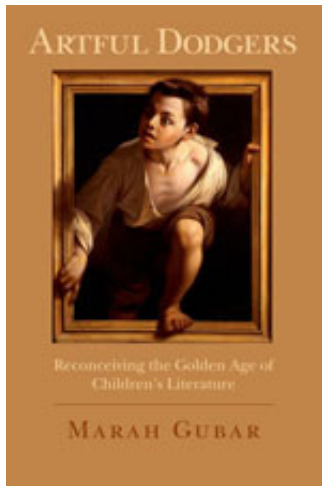
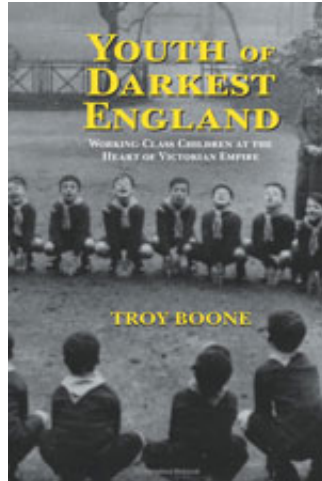
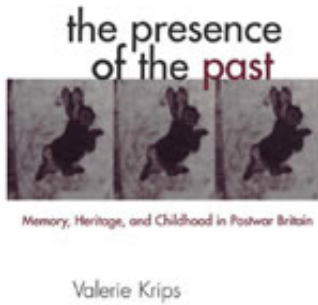
If the early history of our program illustrates the fruitfulness of interdisciplinary collaboration, the later history shows how hard it is to maintain and nurture such connections. Slowly, and for a variety of reasons, the Pitt Children's Literature Program grew less truly interdisciplinary during the 1990s. To begin with, internal English department memos reveal that administrating a program from more than one location was practically difficult. Moreover, because children's literature specialists in English departments were still struggling to be taken seriously, many of them—not just at Pitt, but across the country—felt the need to distance themselves from those involved in teacher and library science training programs (Lundin xiv-xv, 59, 146-48).

As a result of these factors, English department faculty at Pitt took over the running of the program and discouraged library and information science faculty from teaching in it. The required library science "core" course was dropped, and all of the links to local businesses and arts organizations that Kimmel and others had forged dissolved. This constriction of focus was partly the result of changing tenure and promotions norms that placed a high premium on scholarly publications and little value on the kind of community outreach that had led women such as Hodges and Kimmel to be honored as Distinguished Daughters of Pennsylvania.

Yet if the scope of the program shrank in the 1990s and 2000s, in many other ways it grew in strength, garnering a national reputation as an excellent place to study children's literature. As enrollments for children's literature courses continued to rise, the English department and upper administration at Pitt supported the program strongly, ultimately committing three tenure-stream lines to children's literature specialists.

Valerie Krips, who replaced Billman, created a brilliantly successful gateway course to the program called "Children and Culture," as well as a theoretically rigorous "capstone" course. Under her directorship, the program expanded; first Troy Boone and then Marah Gubar were hired, making the program a sterling place to study Victorian and 20th-century British children's literature. When Krips retired, Courtney Weikle-Mills joined the department as an assistant professor and quickly earned high regard as a specialist in early American children's literature. Throughout this period, faculty published a steady stream of well-regarded essays and monographs while successfully mentoring

undergraduate and graduate students interested in writing about children's literature and culture.



By 2010, Pitt faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates had won every major writing and research prize offered by the National Children's Literature Association, from the Carol Gay Award for undergraduate writing to the Graduate Student Essay Award to the ChLA Article and Book Awards.

English PhD students specializing in children's literature began getting jobs at highly esteemed children's literature programs and writing books based on their Pitt dissertations. For example, Nathalie op de Beeck (Pitt PhD 2003) got an assistant professorship at Illinois State and won the 2012 ChLA Book Award for a monograph based on her Pitt dissertation. She is now a tenured associate professor and director of the children's literature minor at Pacific Lutheran University. Other successful graduate alumni include Anastasia Ulanowicz (Pitt PhD 2006) and Alexandra Valint (Pitt PhD 2012)—hired to tenure-stream positions at the University of Florida and the University of Southern Mississippi, respectively—and picture book specialist A. Robin Hoffman (Pitt PhD 2012), recipient of a three-year postdoctoral fellowship at the Yale Center for British Art.

In the past, NTS faculty in the English department continued to play a key role in the running of the program and the creation of a lively intellectual community. Lori Campbell authored two monographs on fantastic fiction and founded the Fantasy Studies Fellowship, a popular reading group for undergraduates. Amy Murray Twynning and Anna Redcay taught many of the Program's "core" courses and helped administer writing contests and other special events, such as

a *Harry Potter* conference.

Trying to reassure her guardian Marilla that "I'm not a bit changed—not really," the college-bound heroine of L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) insists, "I'm only just pruned down and branched out" (276). The same claim could be made about the Pitt Children's Literature Program during this time, since its increasingly narrow focus helped to engender much growth and many scholarly successes.

And yet, the loss of true interdisciplinarity had serious costs, too. As the ties between different departments dissolved, the history of the Children's Literature Program was forgotten. Only by accident did Gubar—who began directing the program in 2006—meet and get to know Kimmel, who had recently retired, and whose role in founding the program had been erased from the collective memory. While interviewing Kimmel for this essay, Gubar learned that the iSchool had closed the Nesbitt Room; Kimmel did not know at that point what had happened to the collection of rare children's books. Fortunately, it had been kept intact and integrated into Special Collections at Hillman Library. But this incident illustrates how disconnected the Children's Literature Program had become from the school that helped to found it.

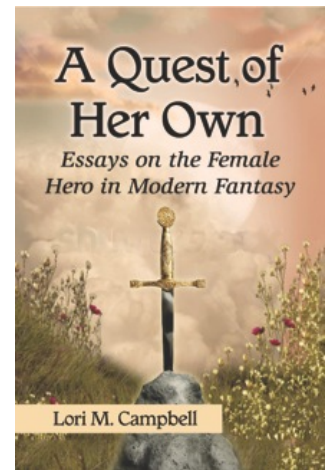
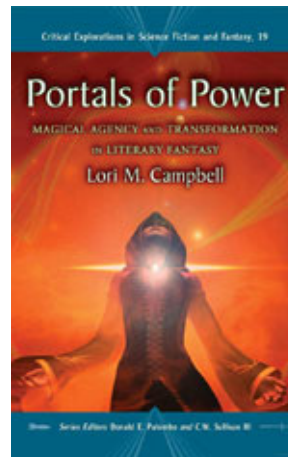
As a result, faculty remained ignorant of the rich institutional resources Pitt had to support children's literature studies. For instance, before Gubar and Redcay began researching the history of the program, we had no idea that the award-winning children's author E. L. Konigsburg had attended Pitt and donated her manuscripts to the Nesbitt Collection. Nor had we known about the extent of the Pitt faculty's involvement in the production (and archiving) of radio and TV shows such as *Tell Me a Story* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Forgetting our foremothers meant that for years we failed to benefit from their institutional and local knowledge, as well as forfeiting the type of mutual collaboration exemplified by their work as community leaders and interdisciplinary collaborators in print, in the classroom, and in Pittsburgh.

Returning to our Roots

Inspired by our newly discovered history as a genuinely interdisciplinary program, Pitt Children's Literature program faculty members have recently recommitted ourselves to making the program more true to its roots. We have begun bringing colleagues from other programs, departments, and schools into our classrooms as guest lecturers and collaborating with them to introduce new child-related courses such as "Youth Film" and "Writing Youth Literature." The latter course is being taught by acclaimed Young Adult (YA) novelist Siobhan Vivian, whose brilliant book *The List* (2012) was recently optioned for television by MTV, with Pittsburgh-born writer Stephen Chbosky set to serve as executive producer. Vivian's connections to publishing and new media are helping our undergraduates get internships and jobs at literary agencies and companies such as Sesame Street Productions, Walt Disney, and Random House.

Partly as a result of these changes, our undergraduate certificate has been steadily growing in popularity. In the 1990s, we gave out 20-30 certificates per year whereas in the 2000s and 2010s we have awarded 40-60 annually. When the English department allotted us another tenure-stream line, we chose to advertise for a specialist in children's literature or childhood studies. Tyler Bickford, a specialist in children's music and contemporary youth culture, joined us in fall 2013 and has already begun building bridges to other departments and schools within the university, including music, sociology, and the School of Information Sciences.

For example, our childhood studies talk series used to feature only literary critics. Recently, however, we have begun



to co-sponsor events with other programs and bring to campus sociologists of childhood, experts in information science, and so on. Following in our foremothers' footsteps, we recently hosted a creative writer at Pitt—award-winning YA novelist E. Lockhart—and invited local librarians as well as students and faculty to attend her reading. To build more ties to local arts organizations, Gubar wrote a program note for the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's performance of David del Tradici's *Final Alice* (1976) and a catalogue essay for the Carnegie Museum's upcoming exhibit on Duane Michals, a Pittsburgh-born artist who frequently features children in his photographs. Special Collections librarian Clare Withers has provided invaluable research and teaching support to us in her role as Children's Literature Library Liaison.

We have also created an e-mail listserv to alert members of the community to local childhood studies events. If you live in or near Pittsburgh and would like to be on it, please e-mail the current program director (listed on the "Faculty" page of this website). If you are a member of a children's literature or childhood studies program at another institution, we hope that you will consider adding a page to your website that sketches out the history of *your* program. If you do, please email the link to our Program Director, who will add it to this page. Returning to our roots has been a richly rewarding experience for us, both personally and professionally—and we urge you to follow suit!

This essay is dedicated with respect, gratitude, and love to the pioneering women who paved the way, including (but not only) Emily G. Irvine, Margaret Hodges, Maggie Kimmel, Carol Billman, Betty Segel, Mary Elizabeth David, and Elizabeth Mahoney.

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