

“CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING LEARNING RESOURCES”

(based on the Toronto District School Board document:
The Selection and Approval of Learning Resources)

As applied to:

Assessment of a book to be considered for a whole class “novel study”

Novel:

Merlin's Candles

Synopsis:

Twelve-year-old Michael Halsey thinks his life is normal until he discovers that his 6th grade science teacher is really Merlin the Magician from the days of King Arthur, and that beautiful but deadly Morgan Le Fay has travelled through time to destroy them both.

MERLIN'S CANDLES

Author: L.B. MacDonald

Publisher: InterCurriculum Fiction, Markham, 2003

Details: 198 pages. ISBN 0-9731031-3-2.

For further information: contact InterCurriculum Fiction at (506) 849-3748.

OVERVIEW

With *Merlin's Candles*, L.B. MacDonald has updated the timeless legend of King Arthur and peppered it with Ontario Curriculum elements from grades 4 through 8. Although written at a grade-6 reading level, proficient readers in grades 4 and 5 — as well as readers in grades 7 and 8 — will find the novel exciting and educational.

When considering this novel for inclusion in the classroom, a teacher can focus on one or all of the following features: 1) the author's command of literary archetypes, 2) the unobtrusive weaving of curriculum elements from which integrated lessons may be drawn, and 3) a fast-paced adventure story of magic and inspiration.

LEARNING CRITERIA

The Toronto District School Board's "Criteria for Assessing Learning Resources" (see Appendix B) can be applied to this novel in the following ways:

1) Appropriateness to Program

The novel provides extensive, detailed support for the curriculum in grades 4 through 8 for Language Arts, Science and Technology, Social Studies/ History/ Geography, and Mathematics (see Appendix A for strands and topics).

Merlin's Candles can also be an effective support for a literacy program that targets boys' reading skills — as its genre (fantasy/adventure) is popular among young male readers. Girls will benefit from the opportunity to address topics in Science and Technology through a Language base.

The story itself is appropriate for the previously listed grades as it is structured to fit the literary framework of the first book of an Arthurian Trilogy (e.g., the tutelage of Arthur by Merlin) — in the novel, Michael Halsey's grade 6 science teacher turns out to be Merlin the Magician; they have a great adventure fleeing from Morgan Le Fay; and emerge victorious as Excalibur is presented to the 12-year-old hero at the end.

Merlin's Candles also supports the principles of the Equity policies of the most school boards. This novel has the potential to focus classroom discussions on the issue of race discrimination through its assertion that leadership and courage are features of individual character not (dominant) cultural heritage.

2) Suitability for Students

This novel's fast-paced writing style and short chapter lengths should easily sustain the interest of young readers while enriching their learning experiences through a myriad of integrated lesson opportunities and related reading assignments.

The level of jeopardy in the story is appropriate to the maturity of the students in the target grades and is often presented within real-life events (a house fire, a hike through a provincial park). The story is relevant to students lives in-so-much as it touches upon every child's aspirations for their own future.

The potential for a “novel study” to address a variety of learning styles is vast. *Merlin’s Candles* provides a rich resource from which a teacher can create activities based on visual presentations, hands-on experiments, problem solving skills, group interaction, individual reflection, and further reading, research, and writing assignments.

3) Nature and Degree of Bias

While the characters in *Merlin’s Candles* do not represent a cross-section of classes, they do incorporate different races and genders. The main character, Michael, is Black. Also, the female characters are each presented as strong, intelligent and decisive individuals. The novel attempts to address some social and economic issues through its presentation of the character “Trevor” (the “bully” through whose actions Michael begins to critically examine himself and his world).

Without a doubt, the novel addresses issues from a variety of perspectives. In fact, it is precisely this “different-view-point” examination technique that Merlin employs most often to “teach” Michael.

The novel contains no “controversial” issues — except for its anti-discriminatory main theme that ANYONE can be the next King Arthur. However, since the “Arthur” character is a boy, teachers may wish to open class discussions to the question of a female “King Arthur”. Students may enjoy the exercise of predicting what female characters may emerge in a sequel (since the “Arthurian” legend has been traditionally structured in three parts — students could be encouraged to research and suggest what traditional characters might be presented as female).

However, as teachers, it is important to consider the novel’s appeal to boys as a literacy tool — the fact that the main character is a boy is valuable.

4) Canadian Content and Publication

Merlin's Candles is written by a Canadian author and published in Canada. It is set On Vancouver Island and presents a compelling location for the second half of its story within the old growth coastal rain forest areas of Strathcona Provincial Park.

5) Quality of Visual and Physical Format

The novel is oversized and printed in a clean, easy-to-read type font. It contains a brief description of the legend of King Arthur vs. the possible historical accuracy of the tale at the back of the book. It also provides a list of resources for further reading in its bibliography.

6) Cost and Durability

The blackline master version of the novel is currently available only through the author for review and discussion purposes. The novel has been available in the retail marketplace in perfect-bound book form since 2003.

Further information and copies of the novel and supporting materials may be obtained by contacting: InterCurriculum Fiction at merlinscandles@gmail.com or by telephone to (506) 849-3748.