Reflection Paper: *The Story of Ferdinand*

Leigh S. Moynihan

Resources for Children
INFO 683-900
Professor Belinha De Abreu
05.21.11
I certify that:

This paper/project/exam is entirely my own work.

I have not quoted the words of any other person from a printed source or a website without indicating what has been quoted and providing an appropriate citation.

I have not submitted this paper/project/exam to satisfy the requirements of any other course.

Signature: Leigh S. Moynihan

Date: May 21, 2011
When I was young, I had a hard time making friends because I preferred to read books in my favorite armchair at home. I was not a typical little girl that liked to play with Barbies or have My Little Pony play dates. It was not until kindergarten that I realized how difficult it was for me to relate to my classmates who preferred watching Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles on television over trying to make out the words in Dr. Seuss books. Before I started school, I never realized I was unusual and had no reason to feel badly about myself for whom or for how different I was from everybody else. Kindergarten changed all that. I was teased for wanting to read during recess and I distinctly remember a group of boys that relentlessly tried to steal my books to hide them in the mulch of the jungle gym.

You may be asking yourself what this has to do with a children’s resource that made a lasting impression on me during my childhood. The memorable children’s resource of my childhood came into play about a month into kindergarten when I told my mother, to her extreme alarm, that I hated school during what she describes as, “… a hyperventilating nervous breakdown fit for a five year old”. As I told her how much the other kids hated me and how much I hated myself, she was reminded of a book she had read as a young girl that helped her accept herself for who she was, as unique as she was.

This book was The Story of Ferdinand. The afternoon of my breakdown and my mother’s reminder of the red book about a bull, we drove the thirty minutes to my grandmother’s house to look through boxes of old books in her crawlspace. When we found The Story of Ferdinand, my mom read the book to me before crawling out of the tiny, damp room. Ferdinand is a story about an oddball bull that prefers to sit amongst the aroma of flowers under his favorite cork tree while his peers butt heads and behave
like normal little bulls should. As Ferdinand grows up in the Spanish countryside, his passive behavior for a bull continues all the way to the bull ring of Madrid where instead of fighting the matador, he sits and admires the decorative flowers in the hair of the female spectators. Due to his unaggressive nature, Ferdinand is returned to his sanctuary under the cork tree to live his life without adapting to what others expect of him but rather according to what makes him happy. Although I do not remember exactly what my mother said to me after we finished the book in my grandmother’s crawlspace, the story of the exceptional bull and his strength to remain true to who he was has stayed with me to this day.

I believe that *The Story of Ferdinand* resonated with me as a child because the protagonist is so different from his peers yet is simultaneously perfectly happy with himself for who he is, even though society rejects his uniqueness. When I first read about the flower sniffing bull with my mom, I was beginning to realize how different I was from my classmates and reacted to my individuality by hating who I was. Ferdinand taught me how to accept and love myself no matter what other people expected or thought of me. My connection to Ferdinand and his story went so far that whenever I felt rejected or alone amongst my peers, I would draw my rendition of Ferdinand sitting under his cork tree on whatever piece of paper I could find, whether it be in a textbook or spiral notebook. In my mind, if Ferdinand was different and accepted himself regardless, then I could too. In a way Ferdinand was my literary friend, thus filling my emotional need to have friends that did not tease me and be accepted by them unconditionally.

Developmentally, *The Story of Ferdinand* addressed the crisis I experienced through my lack of self-acceptance and extreme insecurity. In addition to being an avid
reader at an early age, I was also a very stubborn child that typically allowed words of wisdom from my mom go in one ear and out the other much to her frustration and dismay. My mom knew that she could have verbally told me in her own words the life lesson of self-acceptance that is depicted in *The Story of Ferdinand*. Lucky for me, she decided it best to let me read the words of author Munro Leaf and let him *show* me through the story what I developmentally needed to grasp in order to accept myself and be a happy child.

On an intellectual level, this children’s resource taught me the value of literature as a developmental and emotional tool. Before Ferdinand, I read books because they were either already in my house, were given to me be my parents, or because the cover of the book was appealing. Instead of judging books by their covers or accepting what was placed in front of me, my emotional and developmental connection to Ferdinand’s story caused me to choose new books based on content and how they related to my life. I began to browse the library and look for books based on what was occurring in my own world in order to relate to them. Through a connection with the character Ferdinand, I began my intellectual pathway toward reading books based on content rather than visual pleasantries.

As I grew from a kindergartener to a high schooler, *The Story of Ferdinand* became similar to a security blanket. My interpretation of the story has remained relatively the same as it did when I first started school. The only new aspect of the story I recognized later on was how much strength and perseverance it takes for Ferdinand to be himself and love himself for the bull he is. I acquired this additional interpretation of the story as an adult because I was not as strong and true to myself as I was when a child.
Even as an adult woman today, at times I still feel twinges of insecurity as well as a lack of self-acceptance and love for who I am. Sometimes I am weak and give into these feelings. By reminding myself of the extraordinary bull during times of personal struggle and acceptance, I have overcome many of my insecurities and have also been able to cope with numerous situations in which I found myself to be socially awkward or different.

An example of this is my first year of college, a year I once again struggled to accept myself for the school-loving bookworm that I am, as socially abnormal and “uncool” as this may be. During that first semester, I was not as strong as Ferdinand and tried to be someone I was not; someone who enjoyed staying out late at frat parties in order to make friends in the socially acceptable way. I am fortunate that it only took me a semester to realize that I was not being true to who I was and was therefore miserable faking the image I thought was normal for a college student. Ferdinand’s story must have been reverberating somewhere in the back of my mind because I realized one fall night that I truly had no interest doing anything other than staying in with a mug of hot chocolate to read a book in my dorm room.

Although I was dismissed by my new Greek “friends” for suddenly rejecting their lifestyle, I was back to doing what made me happy, made me who I was. By re-acknowledging and accepting myself once again as Ferdinand exemplifies, I once again became my happy nerd self and made some lifelong, amazing geek friends along the way in college and beyond. I have come to believe that all of us privately experience these feelings of self-doubt and lack of self-acceptance periodically in some form or the other.
Thus, Ferdinand’s ability to be and love himself is a universal lesson that fills various developmental, emotional, and intellectual needs for all, regardless of age.

In order to determine whether or not this book would make a strong impression on children in today’s world, an evaluation of the resource and its success as an enduring picture book according to Hearne’s five parallels is necessary. Hearne states that, “In enduring picture books, elements of graphic art and elements of narrative art parallel one another not only in content and style—a standard criterion—but also in basic form so that text and illustration share structural components” (1998, pg. 32). *The Story of Ferdinand* consists of very basic black and white sketches as illustrations that parallel an equally basic plot structure (pg.32). Illustrations of Ferdinand are always, “Broadly outlined…” (pg. 32) while illustrations of his bull peers are drawn with less detail and attention, thus fulfilling parallel number two. In two particular instances swift storyline action occurs and *The Story of Ferdinand* successfully satisfies parallel number four, “Linear movement parallels fast narrative action” (pg. 32). These two instances include the illustrations of the young bulls fighting each other to show off to the visitor’s from Madrid and Ferdinand’s reaction to being stung by a bee and thus causing the men from Madrid to erroneously pick him to fight the matador. The final enduring parallel seen in Ferdinand is the, “…use of white space on a visual plane…” (pg. 32) since there is an abundant use of white space both on pages with text and pages with illustration.

Unfortunately, a lack of primary colors does not allow the illustrations to, “…parallel primary emotions and themes” (pg. 32). Since this attribute is parallel number three, *The Story of Ferdinand* does not satisfy all five parallels of enduring picture books according to Hearne. Children of today expect to read picture books with colored
illustrations. A black and white picture book may not hold a strong and lasting impression for the current and future generations of children. Although this may be the case, *The Story of Ferdinand* is still successful as a book about the journey of a unique bull that becomes a journey of personal acceptance for young readers (pg. 33). Hearne states that, “…enduring picture books exemplify the unity of medium and message. Not only are the books about journeys, but they are journeys. Each book is a journey, and each set of illustrations is a thirty-two-page journey” (pg. 33). It is my hope that children today can look past the lack of colored illustrations in *The Story of Ferdinand* and embrace it for the many enduring qualities that it does possess and master.

I sincerely hope to one day share *The Story of Ferdinand* with my own children when the unavoidable human trait of self-doubt establishes itself within their lives. This book had such a lasting impact that I studied abroad in Spain my senior year of high school, went on to study Spanish literature in college, and majored in Spanish. Although I can’t expect Ferdinand’s story to grab hold of my children as it captured me, I do anticipate reminding them of the bull’s journey if they are ever bullied for being who they are or find themselves despising their uniqueness. In a world of conformity, Ferdinand teaches us to proudly fly our freak flags without hesitating in a subtle, memorable, and enduring way that is relatable to all ages and generations.
References
