Research Process Essay

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What started out as a seemingly hopeless and endlessly frustrating research paper eventually turned into one of the most rewarding things I have ever written. As part of a comprehensive analysis of some aspect of children’s literature, this research paper was intended to help create connections between all of the important concepts we had learned up until mid-semester. Dr. Wadsworth allowed the class to choose a non-canonical piece of children’s literature and then analyze some aspect of it in relation to the major themes and concepts developed in class. Due to my studies in three other classes that semester which focused on perceptions of race, I decided to focus on racism and its relation to children’s literature.

My first task was to decide which primary text I would use to drive my research paper. I began by looking through Raynor Memorial Library’s online Research Guides, specifically by searching the Course Guide for ENGL 4710. This provided me with over two dozen possible resources that were pre-approved by my professor; this validity encouraged me to choose my primary source from among them instead of looking on another search engine or database. After briefly looking through each source and discovering what was offered, I focused my attention on a website called *The Tar Baby and the Tomahawk: Race and Ethnic Images in American’s Children’s Literature, 1880-1939*. This site, created by the University of Nebraska Lincoln and Washington University in St. Louis, provided several primary sources that would work for my paper. On a whim, I focused on the section titled “Jim Crow Children’s Literature” and a story called *The Hole Book* by Peter Newell.

It was not long before I regretted choosing this book. To this day, I have not been able to find even one secondary source that analyzes the book. This is especially shocking considering the extremely offensive and stereotypical images and language found throughout the text. I had never written a research paper before that did not have a single secondary source which I could base my analysis off of. In the past, my research papers would take the ideas and analysis of others and use them to support my own thesis. This paper stumped me; how could I write about a book that had never been analyzed by anyone before? I decided that, given the lack of secondary sources that directly referenced *The Hole Book*, I would use secondary sources that provided the historical background and information necessary for me to support my own analysis.

I decided that a comprehensive history lesson was necessary for me to be able to know which secondary sources would best support the claims I would make during the research paper. I found *The Hole Book* under the heading “Jim Crow Children’s Literature,” and decided that Jim Crow Laws and the time period during which they existed would be an excellent start. Due to the fact that much of the historical information I was looking for would be easy to find on the internet, I decided to use both MARQCAT and Google. Although books would have been useful, I doubted whether they would provide information that was not just as easily accessed from my
computer; I was looking for facts instead of analysis and have found that the internet is better for facts while books provided better analysis.

My search yielded many articles and websites. Before deciding that I would use a website, I would make sure that the historical information could be found and verified on other websites. Aside from one source, which was an online legal dictionary, all of the sources I used had the “.edu” domain, which I find more trustworthy than websites with the “.com” domain. There were many sources I chose not to use, such as those that simply gave me enough background information to understand the sources that I did use which referenced Jim Crow laws. I also looked at several articles about immigration; I was going to include analysis on the many racial stereotypes made throughout the novel but decided that I needed to narrow the scope of my research in order to be within the guidelines and requirements set by Dr. Wadsworth.

When I finally finished writing my paper and completing the bibliography in MLA format at the end, I was left feeling extremely satisfied with both my writing and my process. I had never written something that relied so heavily upon my own thoughts and analysis. It challenged me to truly think about what I was seeing, instead of simply reading about what other people had seen. It also challenged me to think outside of the box to find secondary sources that I could use to support my analysis, instead of simply giving me the analysis I wanted. All of the ideas in my paper are my own and I simply supported them with what I learned about the historical context of the time period during which the children’s book was written.

Although this was a research paper and it depended upon both the primary and secondary sources that I had to research, it also relied less heavily on research than most of my papers in the past. Instead of doing research on what other writers have said, I was doing research to support what I was going to say. I’m proud to be able to say that as far as I’ve been able to find, I am the only person who has ever completed research or analysis on The Hole Book. Writing it enabled me to take the term “research” and think about it in a much different light. Research is not always looking at the analysis of other people and using it to support your thesis; it can also be developing a thesis, analyzing a primary source, and using secondary sources to research the information necessary to support your own original thoughts and analysis.