

### "Little Miss Muffet" and Other Tales

Bob, a veteran of 20 years of teaching, surveys his class of restless tenth graders, a varied assortment of children very different from the advanced placement students he generally is used to teaching. In the class are hard-working students who hope to go to college, a few students who are struggling to pass their classes, and a few underachieving students who long ago decided to get off the train of the college-prep track.

The students have read a short piece by essayist Russell Baker entitled "Little Miss Muffet" (see Appendix, Activity 1). Baker recasts the familiar fairy tale of the unfortunate Ms. Muffet and the intruding spider by retelling it through a variety of perspectives, for example, from the eyes of a psychiatrist, a teacher, a militarist, a child. The students respond ambivalently to the essay. They are surprised that anything as childish as a nursery rhyme is being introduced by a teacher who has a school-wide reputation for "making you think without making you sweat." Bob arranges the students into groups. Once in their groups, he asks them to select a nursery rhyme and recast it from several occupations or roles. The students do so and come back to class the next day with fanciful results. Here are three examples:

#### "Humpty Dumpty": Prosecuting Attorney's Point of View

This whole incident is obviously a conspiracy. There is no way Mr. Dumpty would just fall off the wall. Being in the fragile state that he was, he would have been extremely cautious while up on that wall. He was obviously distracted by a diversion so he wouldn't notice the suspect creeping up behind him, ready to push him off at just the right moment. It was just an "innocent fall" or so the members of the palace would have you believe. The fact of the matter is, all the king's horses and all the king's men are suspects. They all had a motive. They were sick and tired of the egg getting all the attention. And the fact that they couldn't put Mr. Dumpty back together is very suspicious, since they were all trained in egg life saving. So far, they've come up with an alibi, but it won't hold. There are almost as many holes in their stories as there are in Mr. Dumpty's poor broken body. (Maggie)

#### "There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe": Democrat's Point of View

This is, no doubt, a serious concern of ours in the United States of America. We are no longer living in a middle-class suburban home with a father, mother, two-and-a-half children, and a family pet. This

poor woman needs the federal government's help. With a welfare check every so often, maybe she could feed her children something more nutritious than broth. And she's living in a shoe! What is happening to low-income housing these days? The government should raise some taxes so that she doesn't have to live in a shoe! Something that is so truly heartbreaking is that this poor mother is single and stuck with the burden of the children with no support from the father. We need to catch these absentee fathers and make them pay child support. Welfare not workfare is the answer to all of the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe's problems. (Mandi)

#### "Jack Be Nimble": Fire Chief's Point of View

This is a textbook example of what happens when fire is in the hands of careless children. Children should never play with fire. It's a cardinal rule. Everybody knows that. This isn't play. No, it's much worse than that; fire is not a toy. What we see developing is a blatant disrespect for the animal which is fire. We may be looking at a future arsonist of America. And, what's that candle doing on the floor in the first place? It's a fire hazard, people! (Eric)

When the reading of these new versions of nursery rhymes winds down, Bob reads aloud *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*, by A. Wolf (Scieszka, 1999), a children's book that retells the familiar tale from the point of view of the wolf. It begins: "Everybody knows the story of The Three Little Pigs. Or at least they think they do. But I'll let you in on a little secret. Nobody knows the real story, because nobody has ever heard *my* side of the story." And it ends: "So they jazzed up the story with all of that 'Huff and puff and blow your house down.' And they made me the Big Bad Wolf. That's it. The real story. I was framed."

Amid giggles and chatter, Jessie blurts out what many of his classmates were thinking, "Why did we do this, Mr. B? It was fun, but it seemed pointless."

"We did it to demonstrate one very important point—that the same story, even a simple story such as Little Miss Muffet, can take on very different meaning depending on who is doing the telling. So, when we read, the meaning depends on who's doing the reading. Meanings are constructed. We create meanings that are influenced by who we are and what we are culturally, historically, psychologically, and, in the case of the Baker versions of Miss Muffet, vocationally. If we can construct and change the meaning for something as simple as Little Miss Muffet, can you imagine the changes, the varia-