story because his audience kept laughing. Tales tend to form a chain: one person’s story about New Year’s Eve evokes from the next person yet another story about New Year’s Eve. All these reactions show how storytelling becomes a reciprocal exchange between tellers and listeners.

Splicing

Michael Wood

An introductory exercise on literary influence and adaptation.

Genre: fiction, especially novels
Course Level: introductory
Student Difficulty: easy
Teacher Preparation: medium
Class Size: small to medium
Semester Time: any
Writing Component: none
Close Reading: medium
Estimated Time: 20 to 25 minutes

EXERCISE

Play the following game with your students: The night before class, choose two novels that share some connection. The novels might be from the same genre, for example, or they might include a similar character type, or make use of a particular kind of plot point or theme, or use language in a similar way: two novels, in other words, that make you say, even if only briefly, “Oh, this reminds me of that other novel.” (They don’t need to be novels on your current syllabus, but they can be.)

From each novel, select a few short excerpts that you might normally show to students side by side as evidence of the similarity between the texts. Now splice the excerpts from each novel together. You can simply alternate bits if you like, or you can splice them more creatively (half a line here, half a line there). Try to maintain narrative sense; try not to let the seams show. You don’t have to use every word or even every sentence. (What you don’t include will ultimately be as instructive as what you do include.)

In class, give the students a copy of this new passage. Tell them it is a hybrid—a text made up of actual phrases or sentences from two different
novels. You can tell them the titles of the novels if you wish; for a higher degree of difficulty, keep that a secret. Now play the game: ask them to try to take the passage apart by identifying, as best they can, which pieces come from which text. You can have them do this individually or in small groups. (The arguments in small groups can be lively.) When everyone is ready—ten minutes is generally enough time for a short passage—ask each person or group to describe how and why they split up the passage the way they did. Once everyone has had a chance to weigh in, produce the original excerpts and let them see exactly which pieces came from which texts. Let them also see—and reflect on—which pieces you didn’t splice together. Could those pieces have been spliced in just as easily? Why or why not?

REFLECTIONS

It has been said that there are only six or seven stories in the world—all other stories are variants upon them. This game gets students thinking about often quite subtle narrative questions—in particular, how literary texts adapt, repeat, and rewrite each other.

I first used this exercise in an introductory survey course on the reading of fiction, from Homer’s *The Odyssey* to the present day. Texts included *The Arabian Nights*, Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times*, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, and a number of others, and one particular section was devoted to literary influence and intertextuality: Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours* as a revision of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a supplement to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. I spliced certain sentences from J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* into the text of *Jane Eyre*, as follows:

His mother had taken him home for a month or two, on account of his delicate health. In her opinion there was no finer boy anywhere. He hated exercise—unless of course it involved punching somebody. He was large and stout for his age, with a dingy and unwholesome skin. He gorged himself habitually at table, which made him bilious and gave him a dim and bleared eye and flabby cheeks. He had thick blond hair that lay smoothly on his thick, fat head. He bullied and punished me; not two or three times in the week, not once or twice in the day, but continually. He spent some minutes thrusting out his tongue as far as he could without damaging the roots.

Here are the source passages:

The Dursleys had a small son called Dudley and in their opinion there was no finer boy anywhere. . . . [They] didn’t want their son mixing with a child like that.
Nearly ten years had passed... Dudley was very fat and hated exercise—unless of course it involved punching somebody. Dudley’s favorite punching bag was Harry. Dudley was about four times bigger than he was. Harry wore round glasses held together with a lot of Scotch tape because of all the times Dudley had punched him on the nose. Dudley had a large pink face, not much neck, small, watery blue eyes, and thick blond hair that lay smoothly on his thick, fat head. Aunt Petunia often said that Dudley looked like an angel—Harry often said that Dudley looked like a pig in a wig.

—Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*

His mother had taken him home for a month or two, ‘on account of his delicate health.’

[He was] large and stout for his age, with a dingy and unwholesome skin. He gorged himself habitually at table, which made him bilious and gave him a dim and bleared eye and flabby cheeks. The master affirmed that he would do very well if he had fewer cakes. He bullied and punished me; not two or three times in the week, not once or twice in the day, but continually. He spent some minutes thrusting out his tongue as far as he could without damaging the roots.

—Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

Student groups were quick to spy the recurring figure of the spoiled bully—in both cases the son of the family our orphan hero/heroine has come to live with. Some groups even guessed, correctly, the identities of the two novels I had commingled together, more at first from the composite character portrait of the bully than anything else, such as narrative point of view, tone of voice, irony, diction, recognizable metaphors or tricks of syntax, and so on. And that’s when things got more interesting: How is it exactly that these two novels, from two different centuries, speak so well to one another? And what kind of “story” can be said to emerge from this act of irreverent coupling?

When we reconvened, conversation turned immediately to the subject of literary influence. Students concluded that the important thing was not just that Rowling had read *Jane Eyre*, which she certainly had, but that both Brontë and Rowling are working interestingly with a stereotype, involving readers in what they already know and what they want from such a story. They liked the “new” story the spliced version presented, noting how the sentences slip seamlessly from one book into another, and also the way sentences I did not include matched other sentences so well: “delicate health” / “no finer boy”; “large and stout” / “very fat”; “dim and bleared eye” / “small,
watery blue eyes”; “flabby cheeks” / “pink face.” The interest in intertextuality, we finally concluded, is not, as it may at first seem, in what looks like copying, but in shared use of material.

And it is with this thought in mind that the exercise could be developed or adapted to help students think about genre (revenge tragedy, the epic, the western, the sentimental romance); about the way individual texts can talk to each other across genres; about many of the basic building blocks of character and narrative. You can use the exercise to teach plot or theme or character or language, depending on your needs and interests. You can even use it to teach style (most style exercises focus on stylistic differences between writers; this one plays on their unexpected harmonies). But in each case the point is to put together one or more texts and invite students to take them apart and wonder why the job is so easy or so difficult. And then, with practice, you can ask them to make their own collations from texts they have read for the course.

Is It in Your Body?

Kathryn Bond Stockton

An exercise in recall that helps students think about how—and why—texts get “inside” us.

Genre: fiction
Course Level: intermediate or advanced
Student Difficulty: moderate or hard
Teacher Preparation: low
Class Size: any
Semester Time: any
Writing Component: in class
Close Reading: medium
Estimated Time: 50 to 60 minutes

EXERCISE

Assign a ten- to twenty-page scene from a novel for students to read outside of class. Choose something juicy, even upsetting. Make sure it is rich in detail and word choice. Ideally, it should be interpretively dense—for