THE BIG SHOES OF LITTLE BEAR:
THE PUBLICATION HISTORY, EMERGENCE, AND LITERARY POTENTIAL OF THE
EASY READER

by

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ABSTRACT

Despite incredible sales success, popularity, and a fifty year history, easy readers are one of the most neglected forms of children’s literature. Called everything from “the poor stepchild of the more glamorous picture book or children’s novel” to “literary flotsam,” easy readers are too-often regarded as insubstantial, superficial, sub-par literature.

This thesis provides the first comprehensive, theoretically grounded examination of easy readers and endeavors to prove that a surprising complexity lurks beneath the easy reader’s decodable surface. In order to illuminate both extra-textual and textual complexity, easy readers are treated generically and examined using the contemporary genre theories of Amy Devitt and Adena Rosmarin. This thesis ultimately unearths a heretofore unexplored complexity in the easy reader’s publication history and generic emergence, and finds that the easy reader genre has literary potential and can accommodate works of artistic merit.
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*In easy reader style...*

Shannon wrote a big paper.

Sometimes the big paper made
Shannon say “Blah.”

Sometimes the big paper felt
like a thirsty tick.

Shannon was lucky.

She had people around.

These people did
not say “Blah.”

These people had tick spray.

Shannon gives many thanks to
Margot. She had to listen
to Shannon ramble about the
big paper for months and months.
Shannon also says a big thank you to
Judi and Theresa
for reading the rambling.

Thanks to all the easy reader characters in my life. In particular, I would like to thank Bonzilla, my own *Vanity Fox* reading mother, and Andrea, my own dependable Houndsley who happily rid herself of her MLA handbook so I could use it. And thanks to Jonathan, who is always the optimistic Frog to my catastrophizing Toad.
1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Origins of Interest

Fox liked to show off
for the girls.

“Oh, my!” said the girls.

One day Fox showed off just
a little too much.

“Look out!” cried the girls.

“Look out!” (Marshall, Fox on the Job 3-4)

Strange as it may sound out of context, the above excerpt has kept me laughing for approximately eighteen years. Like Arnold Lobel, “I grab a shot of. . . Marshall” whenever I feel a bout of gloom approaching (Lobel, “A Good Picture Book” 75). I have also instinctively gravitated towards the work of Lobel himself (Frog and Toad series, Owl at Home, Uncle Elephant, Mouse books), Else Holmelund Minarik (Little Bear series), Esther Averill (The Fire Cat and Cat Club series), Betsy Cromer Byars (Golly Sisters series) and Russell Hoban (Frances books). As any teacher, librarian, critic, or six-year-old child could point out, these books are best known as “easy readers.”

Throughout the process of researching and writing this thesis, I have tried desperately to remember how I learned to read. Unfortunately, all I can seem to recall from my primary grade education is a strong dislike for handwriting. I do, however, clearly remember spending countless hours at the public library, sitting contentedly in front of the easy reader bookshelf. I remember feeling a delicious satisfaction with these books; they were just as funny and entertaining as the “grown-up” chapter books I could not yet manage, but they also
had the same calming uniformity as my Beatrix Potter collection. Although they all had
similar spines, dimensions, and leaded type, I was always delighted to find that each offered
a decidedly different reading experience. Certainly, Little Bear would never sass back like
Fox, and Frances and Thelma would never form a bond as deep as Frog and Toad’s.

For a lack of a better word, I have always found something in these easy reader
texts. No matter my age, mood, or circumstances, these deceptively simple books have
seemed to adapt, change, and grow with me. I copiously traced pictures from the Fox series
at age seven, and at eighteen, was sure to pack a copy of Fox All Week before traveling to
Quebec for a language study. When I entered the Master of Arts in Children’s Literature
Program, I was excited to finally have the chance to study my beloved easy reader friends.
However, I immediately made a very unnerving discovery. I was alone in my desire to get to
know these books better, and study them from an academic perspective; it was just Frog and
Toad…and me.

In my first attempt to research easy readers, I was mystified that endless database,
index, bibliography, and library catalogue searches left me with nothing more than brief
mentions or scattered paragraphs on the subject. I unknowingly formed the crude rationale of
my present research when I imploringly asked the Education Librarian, “How can there be so
little information on books that are in virtually every library and have sold millions of
copies?” I suppose I was lucky that the origins of my current study came to me in the most
desirably academic fashion; I noticed a big, gaping hole in the literature that I was incredibly
eager to fill.
1.2 Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of my research is to provide the first in-depth, theoretically grounded study of the fictional easy reader. This comprehensive study includes an examination of the publication history of the easy reader, the emergence of the easy reader genre, and a close reading of a textual sample spanning the last fifty years. The rationale behind my research is three-fold.

First, easy readers have enjoyed immense popularity and sales success. As HarperCollins Children’s Books editorial director, Robert Warren, says of the publisher’s “I Can Read” imprint, “it’s a $100 million brand for us” (Maughan 40). Easy readers also pepper Publishers Weekly’s 2001 list of all-time best-selling children’s books; various titles from the Little Bear, Frog and Toad, and Amelia Bedelia series made the top two hundred in the paperback category (Roback et al.). In fact, despite her deficiency at cleaning houses, Amelia Bedelia holds numbers 131, 138, 141, 161, and 163 on the list. Three of the books in this study’s research sample, Little Bear, Frog and Toad are Friends, and Frog and Toad Together hold spots number 123, 174, and 205, respectively, selling a combined total of 5,392,619 copies. Yet despite this massive success, easy readers rarely receive any sort of attention, be it academic or otherwise. Although some academics may discount popular appeal as motivation for research, this facet is recognized as part of the rationale for the current study.

Easy readers also warrant analysis because of their seminal role in the American children’s literature canon. No less vital than picture book or novel protagonists, characters like Frog and Toad, Little Bear, Danny and his dinosaur, Frances the Badger, and Amelia Bedelia exemplify the easy reader’s lasting power in the world of children’s books. Furthermore, it is worth noting that many celebrated authors such as Russell Hoban, James
Howe, Jean Little, and Cynthia Rylant have created easy readers. Surely a genre containing so many canonical characters and critically acclaimed writers is worthy of an in-depth examination.

Finally, this study is propelled by my desire to re-shape the popular perception of the easy reader. Commenting on the inferiority with which scholars often treat children’s literature, Peter Hunt’s assertion is especially applicable to easy readers;

Several things have militated against [children’s literature’s] academic acceptance, as well as against a high standard of study outside academia…The first of these is the unexamined assumption that what is written for children must necessarily be simple – as though writing for juveniles were the literary equivalent of juvenilia (20-21).

More than other forms of children’s literature, easy readers are often regarded as uncomplicated or “unliterary,” perhaps as a result of their decodability; critics too often assume that an easily decodable surface must reflect an underbelly lacking in literary depth. Summing up the easy reader’s predicament, Anastasia Suen analogizes, “the easy reader has often been viewed as the poor stepchild of the more glamorous picture book or children’s novel” (Suen 56). George Shannon affirms Suen’s sentiments, saying that many consider the easy reader “a gussied-up basal reader” (Shannon 28), while Nancy Palmer says that “librarians label (and libel) them” (Palmer 36). David C. Davis, in a scathing appraisal of easy readers, says that their publication is a “problem equal to the Asiatic overpopulation” (Davis 679).

Taking these comments into consideration, the third aim of this study is best (if not colloquially) described as an attempt to revoke the genre’s bastard status. I find it chronically puzzling that a genre selling millions of copies, bearing canonized characters, and
attracting some of the continent's best authors should be regarded as sub-par to other forms of children's literature. In an attempt to assuage assumptions of artless simplicity, I will illuminate the texts' depth by treating easy readers as one generically-bound group. It is important to clarify that I will use the term "easy reader" as a generic marker rather than a superficial indicator of decodability.

1.3 Research Statement

The research statement that will guide the study is as follows: A surprising complexity lurks beneath the decodable surface of the easy reader. This complexity in history, emergence, and literary depth is best illuminated when easy readers are examined generically using contemporary genre theory.

It is crucial here to differentiate between examining texts generically and asserting generic membership. When scholars examine texts generically, they essentially choose a lens through which to analyze a group of texts. Just like a slide will look different under the various lenses of a microscope, texts will function differently under different generic lenses. For instance, although the texts in this study are examined under the generic lens of "easy reader," they could also be reasonably examined under other generic lenses such as "fable" or "comedy." While the term "lens" is one of my own creation, contemporary genre theorists use similar terms; for instance, as I discuss in detail in Chapter Three, Adena Rosmarin calls genres "tools" and John Frow discusses the different generic "performances" that a text can enact.

On the other hand, if this thesis was concerned with asserting generic membership, I would analyze a group of texts and come up with a list of membership criteria; in the case of easy readers, this would likely include form and design elements such as leading, a maximum
number of lines per page, etc. This approach is in accordance with older schools of genre theory wherein the focus is on creating mutually exclusive categories for texts.

This thesis, rather than asserting that easy readers are a genre and prescribing tenants of generic membership, asserts that the texts are most fruitfully studied as if they belonged to the easy reader genre. In other words, I ask the question, “What happens when we treat the label ‘easy reader’ as an indicator of genre rather than an indicator of decodability?” As I assert in my research statement, I believe that the answer to this question is a heretofore unacknowledged and unexplored complexity in the texts’ publication history, emergence, and literary depth. This stands in stark contrast to proving that easy readers are a genre; indeed, if this constituted the aims of my research, I would spend most of this thesis counting line numbers and trying to justify the inclusion or exclusion of certain texts within the genre.

I chose to base my research statement around unearthing complexity because I felt it most fitting to the subject matter, and most conducive to filling a gap in the scholarship. Philip Nel, in his in-depth easy reader examination entitled The Annotated Cat, has a similar research aim. He writes in his introduction, “Reading The Cat in the Hat and The Cat in the Hat Comes Back with all of this additional information, we can gain a deeper, more complex appreciation of the books themselves and of the man who wrote them. This, at least, is my goal” (Nel 17). The main difference here is that my research statement is firmly grounded in contemporary genre studies, while Nel loosely grounds his research in a variety of approaches. This is likely because my research is presented as part of an academic thesis, while Nel’s work is part of a book with a substantially more generalized audience.
1.4 “Easy Reader” as Genre

I have asserted that I will use the term “easy reader” as a generic marker rather than an indicator of decodability. In other words, this thesis treats individual easy reader texts as if they belonged to the Easy Reader genre. Although this study is not concerned with defining membership criteria, it is important to clarify what I mean by the term “easy reader” or what it means to “treat easy readers generically.” In response, it is perhaps most useful to first explore what the easy reader is not.

Simply put, most critics carelessly categorize the easy reader or confuse it with other forms of children’s literature or educational texts. However, in From Cover to Cover: Evaluating and Reviewing Children’s Books, Kathleen T. Horning laudably separates the easy reader from some of its close cousins including the picture book, the transitional book, and the basal reader. Of the first she says, “…most picture books, since they are intended to be read aloud to children, are written at a reading level much higher than that of a child in first grade” (Horning 121). In contrast, easy readers are specifically created for independent reading, a skill typically achieved by the end of first grade. Horning then differentiates easy readers from transitional books, defining the latter as “third grade books” or first chapter books (125). Thus, transitional books fill the gap between the easy reader and the chapter book (Horning cites Ann Cameron’s The Stories Julian Tells as an exemplary transitional text, but some more current examples are Megan McDonald’s Judy Moody series and Dav Pilkey’s Captain Underpants books). Finally, Horning asserts that easy readers should also not be confused with basal readers. In comparison to these educational texts, Horning says that easy readers are actually “intended as supplementary reading” (127) to the basal. Only when children begin to grasp the skills learned in their classroom basals can they venture into the trade book market with easy readers.
While Horning effectively differentiates the easy reader from its close literary cousins, her narrow definition is sadly representative of popular thought. Like the majority of critics and scholars, Horning’s definition revolves around facets of form and/or design. She defines easy readers as “…books that are expressly written for children who are learning to read, which use simple vocabulary, large type face, and short sentences” (121). Most other critics’ definitions mirror Horning’s with a sole focus on technical aspects like font and syntax.

In contrast, Elizabeth Guilfoile, author of *Books for Beginning Readers*, represents a small group emphasizing content in their definitions of easy readers. Guilfoile defines quality easy readers as “Books with memorable characters and situations; stories with action, suspense, and climax” (1). She goes on to discuss the importance of literary content, asserting that “These books are written as are books for older children and adults – not built around vocabulary to be mastered; they have plot, idea, theme…” (3). Similarly, in “Books for Beginning Readers: An Appraisal,” Leland B. Jacobs asserts the importance of the easy reader’s literary qualities. He defines easy readers as “books that he [the child] can read on his own, primarily for enjoyment; books that delight his imagination; that amuse him; that inform him; that, in some essential ways, are at his level of development and accomplishment” (Jacobs 515). Indeed, Jacobs and Guilfoile offer a much needed counterpoint to critics like Horning who only focus on form and design. Thus, when this thesis considers texts generically as easy readers, it means that the individual texts are being examined as if they belonged to a group of *literature produced by trade publishers primarily for the enjoyment of newly independent child readers*.

While “easy reader” will be used throughout this thesis, other critics and authors have used slightly different terminology. For example, Horning points out the popular usage of
"easy readers, beginning readers, or simply readers," (121) while author/illustrators Arnold Lobel and James Marshall use "early reader" and "easy-to-read book" respectively. The current choice to use "easy reader" is merely one of personal preference and in no way implies an effortless creative process or simplicity of the finished product.

1.5 Overview and Scope

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two gathers and evaluates all the available literature on easy readers. While obviously providing context and showing how my research will fill gaps in the scholarship, Chapter Two also represents the results of my search for resources. The Literature Review is useful in its own right because it represents the first ever compilation and evaluation of scholarship on easy readers.

Chapter Three establishes the theoretical frame for this thesis. Here I elaborate on how I use the term "genre," the general status of contemporary genre studies, and the specific theories that will guide ensuing chapters. I also explain why genre theory is the most fitting approach to prove the validity of my research statement.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six comprise the body of this thesis. These chapters, in addition to adhering to the research statement and illuminating previously unexplored complexity in the easy reader, also contribute to the existing scholarship in many substantial ways. Chapter Four, for instance, establishes the publication history of the easy reader. While this may seem like a glaringly straightforward task, a review of the existing literature reveals that no comprehensive history of the easy reader currently exists. Many primary and secondary sources contain valuable information on the history of the easy reader, but surprisingly, this information has not yet been synthesized. In order to expand on the current scholarship, I will gather the fragments from a variety of primary and secondary sources to
establish a complete historical narrative. Beyond listing a few dates or titles, my historical narrative will reconstruct all the details gleaned from sources that are currently used superficially, if not ignored.

Perhaps because no comprehensive historical picture exists, no one has examined the factors leading to the publication of easy readers, or why easy readers emerged when they did. While some critics may assert one or two factors of emergence, contemporary genre theory allows scholars to weigh the impact of a plethora of factors when examining the birth of a genre. Therefore, I use genre theory in Chapter Five to determine the main factors that sparked the emergence of the easy reader. Far from emerging by pure happenstance, easy readers were the result of a complex web of interdependent historical and cultural factors. It is useful to think of Chapter Five as a theoretical application to the publication history established in Chapter Four.

The close reading in Chapter Six will also be grounded in contemporary genre theory. A representative sample containing twenty texts, and spanning fifty years, will be subject to examination. The purpose of the close reading is to prove that the sample can function as complex works of literature, and subsequently, that the easy reader genre has literary potential. The close reading will also prove the paradoxical nature of easy readers, or how they can comprise a simultaneously flexible and stable genre. This analysis will significantly differ from its predecessors because of its depth and theoretical frame.

Essentially, this study examines easy readers out of the child’s hands. While studies of children sometimes accompany studies of children’s literature, this research does not consider children’s use of and response to the sample, or the potential educational uses of easy readers. Admittedly, this may make educators, librarians, caregivers, and anyone who works with children and books immediately skeptical. They may ask, “How can you
separate an easy reader from its reader?" Since this will be the first in-depth examination on the topic, it seems logical to first undertake research focusing solely on the texts. Once the history, emergence, and the literary potential of the easy reader is established, other research can undertake aspects of reader response, educational usage, etc. Indeed, the conclusion of this thesis offers recommendations for future research on easy readers that involves children.

Readers should also note that references to illustrations will only be made in passing. Since the field of children's book illustration theory is currently so rich and complex, an examination of the interplay between words and pictures in easy readers goes beyond the scope of this project.

In sum, this study aims to build a foundation for others to either build upon or renovate as they see fit. Since no definitive work currently exists, it is admittedly impossible to cover every aspect worthy of attention in this inaugural study. Thus, aspects of audience/reader response, educational usage, and illustration must regrettably be left for another project. However, it is my hope that illuminating the true complexity of easy readers will provide the first stepping stone for much-needed future research.
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview

This Literature Review provides a context for the ensuing research, critically appraises the available literature, and reveals the fruits of a long, sometimes frustrating, hunt for scholarship. Establishing a context for this study is admittedly difficult for two reasons. First, there is a real paucity of literature. Despite the popularity and brisk sales figures of many easy reader titles, scholarship is scarce, and is often hidden in sources dealing with other topics. What material does exist is usually in dire need of expansion, clarification, or updating. Much of the richest, most relevant information I could find on easy readers dates back decades to the time of the genre’s emergence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. During this time several scholars and educators were concerned with evaluating easy readers as the books represented a never-before-seen form of children’s literature. Unfortunately, this brief burst of critical interest seems to have faded into obscurity.

The unique problem of defining the easy reader creates a second difficulty in organizing this section. Although easy readers are produced by trade publishers, the books cater to an audience in a specific educational stage: newly literate children who have just begun to read independently. While this study will not examine easy readers as educational tools, it is worthwhile to contrast the worlds of educational and trade book publishing to show how vastly the production of easy readers differs from basal or textbook production. A thorough evaluation of scholarship dealing explicitly with easy readers will follow and comprise the bulk of this Chapter.
2.2 Education and Trade Book Publishing

A comparison of easy reader and basal production is beneficial for two reasons. First, it differentiates basals and easy readers from one another. This section will show how education and trade book publishing differ in the areas of authorship, pre-publication research, and profit margins. Second, and perhaps more important, readers will hopefully come to appreciate the process behind creating an easy reader. Indeed, simplicity in decodability should not be confused with simplicity in production.

To begin, both publishing worlds share one rather gloomy similarity; they are dominated by a handful of massive conglomerates. In a very critical appraisal of textbook publishing, Gilbert F. Sewall cites Pearson, McGraw-Hill, Reed Elsevier, and Houghton Mifflin, as the overlords of educational book production. Taking a substantially more neutral stance, Jeanne Chall and James R. Squire report, “…the same publishers have generally dominated the basal reading market for the past quarter century” (123). Just as Sewall criticizes corporate domination, so too does Daniel Hade in his controversial article on children’s trade publishing, “Storytelling: Are publishers changing the way children read?” Hade writes, “…the mergers of the past decade have left the bulk of children’s book publishing in the select few hands of large houses: HarperCollins, Penguin Putnam, Random House, Simon & Schuster, Scholastic, Houghton Mifflin” (510). Interestingly enough, Bennett Cerf predicted this phenomenon in 1960 when he said, “It is my belief that within the next few years, some five or six great publishing companies will dominate the publishing scene, much the way that a handful of companies today dominate steel, automobiles and other truly big industries” (Cerf, “Bennett Cerf” 478-479).

This similarity aside, basals and easy readers are produced very differently. Take, for example, the authorship behind the two types of texts. Sewall says that “Field
representatives, sales forces, market researchers, product managers, and editorial directors help determine the content of a textbook” (499). Rudolf Flesch, in a decidedly more abrasive, opinionated tone, specifically discusses the authorship of basals;

…the stupendous and frighteningly idiotic work of concocting this stuff can only be done by tireless teamwork of many educational drudges. But if the textbook house put only the drudges on the title page, that wouldn’t look impressive enough to beat the competition. So there has to be a “senior author” – someone with a national reputation who teaches how to teach reading at one of the major universities. (Flesch 7)

In the production of a trade book, however, a much smaller group contributes to the final product. For instance, a 1957 Publishers Weekly article detailing the production of Little Bear said, “Basic format for the series was established by Ursula Nordstrom, director of Harper’s Department of Books for Boys and Girls, John Rynerson, Harper designer, and Mr. Sendak, the illustrator” (“Books in the Making” 74). Smaller teams give trade book authors and illustrators more input than they would ever receive in the educational world, and also make it easier to determine exactly who is responsible for the book’s content.

Basal publishers must also direct the majority of their resources to research newly-accepted practices, and meet the demands of American textbook adoption committees. Chall and Squire say that “the development of a total reading program can require up to five years prior to publication,” and cite “research and field testing” as one of the leading production costs (124). While many easy reader publishers employ educational consultants, the process is not nearly as arduous; after all, easy readers function firstly as literature, and secondly as reading instruction tools. As Robert Warren of HarperCollins says, “We create the series [“I Can Read”] on a book-by-book basis…Our focus is to promote the pleasures and rewards of
reading; we’re not here to teach reading” (Maughan 41). Even so, “Books in the Making” reported that Harper conducted “small-scale research” by using focus groups of six and seven-year-old children when creating Little Bear (73). Thus, while the research behind a basal program is very extensive, easy reader publishers heed the advice of experts in moderation; as Shannon Maughan writes, “When it comes to developing a beginning/early reader series, the majority of publishing houses rely on a combination of editorial vision and educational expertise” (41). This “editorial vision,” as best exemplified by Ursula Nordstrom in the creation of Little Bear, helps define easy readers as trade books.

Profit is a surprisingly perilous precipice for basal publishers. Chall and Squire say that, due to costs of research, development, and testing, the average educational publisher receives only a 9% profit margin (after taxes) on a basal system (124). This low return also means that smaller educational publishers cannot afford to create basals. Gilbert F. Sewall laments this fact, opining that the “entry barriers to educational publishing are formidable” (499). While the notion of a “bestseller” in the educational world does not typically exist, there are at least two exceptions to the rule: Chall and Squire cite the 122 million copies sold of the McGuffey Eclectic Reader, and the 200 million Americans that learned to read from William S. Grey’s Dick and Jane series (122). By comparison, trade publishing is a considerable gamble, but one theoretically open to any writer or artist. Although publishers run the risk of acquiring a book that does poorly, the pay-offs for a successful title or series can be astronomical. In 1997, “total sales of I Can Read Books ha[d] topped the 40-million-copy-mark” (Lodge 33).

As readers may have sensed by this point, the literature on both publishing worlds varies substantially in tone. Both Gilbert F. Sewall, a critic of educational publishing, and Daniel Hade, a critic of children’s trade book publishing, view the current state of affairs
rather negatively and hold an unmistakable disdain for mammoth publishers. By contrast, Chall and Squire maintain a neutral, relatively unbiased tone in their comprehensive article, “The Publishing Industry and Textbooks.” Standing opposite from Sewall and Hade on the continuum is Anita Silvey, former editor-in-chief of *The Horn Book Magazine*. Silvey is largely optimistic and maintains that every generation of critics prophesies the demise of the publishing industry. She asserts that, “with the passage of time, the weak, ill-advised, or quick-dollar books fade, and only the gems...endure and stand as an emblem of their era” (38). This certainly holds true for easy readers, as only the best have survived over the past five decades.

Readers can now hopefully better appreciate both the differences between easy readers and basals, and the process behind creating an easy reader. Although easy readers seem to constantly balance “editorial vision and educational expertise,” a review of the literature proves that the former always outweighs the latter. Truly, there is more magic than mechanics dominating the creation of easy readers.

All literature discussed from this point onwards deals explicitly with easy readers. The literature is roughly organized according to subject, and examines five different facets of easy reader scholarship. The following also represents the fruits of an ongoing search for information. As no annotated bibliographies exist on the topic, and most database searches are an exercise in trial and error, those interested in pursuing further research will hopefully benefit from the following sections.
2.3 Easy Readers in the Classroom

2.3.1 Scholarship

Unlike other forms of children’s literature such as board books or picture books, easy readers require an audience with a firm foundation in literacy, and an ability to decode and comprehend words independently. As such, I combed any education article I could find on the topics of reading instruction and independent reading that I felt might possibly mention easy readers. After a substantial amount of reading and scanning bibliographies, I was left with only a handful of articles that mentioned easy readers. Disappointingly, most of these were not theoretically grounded, which is why I label this sub-section “scholarship” instead of “research.” In an article in the second volume of the *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, authors Hiebert and Mesmer say, “We use the word *scholarship* rather than *research* because theoretical frameworks…are conspicuously absent” (406).

Out of all the material I consulted on reading and reading instruction texts, only one article meaningfully considered the historical place of easy readers. “Children’s literature and reading instruction: Past, present, and future,” offered the most comprehensive, inclusive perspective on trade books in education and made specific references to easy readers. Martinez and McGee’s article lists eight factors that they believe contributed to the rise of trade books and the demise of basals, and one factor is especially relevant to this study. Discussing a factor they label “Changes in the world of children’s literature,” the researchers note the appearance of “books to sustain and expand beginning readers” (161). They go on to say that “the number of easy picture books with literary merit written by well known children’s authors such as James Marshall, Cynthia Rylant, and Betsy Byars dramatically increased,” and this increase contributed to the shift from basals to trade books. This
observation is especially refreshing since easy readers are usually referred to obliquely, if at all, in literature on reading instruction texts.

The first study that I could find looking specifically at easy readers in the classroom took place in 1959 at Rutgers University. The study was entitled “Trade Books for Beginning Readers” and appeared in a 1960 issue of Wilson Library Bulletin. Describing the research problem, Martha Olson Condit writes, “It has been difficult to determine the books which are suitable for this [beginning] reader since no tested bibliography of such materials has appeared recently” (284). In answer to the problem, Condit and her researchers endeavored “to identify those trade books which can be read independently by the first and second grade reader who has normal interests and no special reading problem” (284). 769 easy reader titles from 61 publishers formed the basis of the research sample. Researchers evaluated the books for child interest, “literary and artistic merit,” and formal/design features; they also rated the books according to the Spache formula for readability before placing the books in a school library for children to read and evaluate. The study concluded with an argument for more quality texts for newly independent readers: “The fact that 769 titles were considered for this bibliography with a resulting list of 151 meeting the criteria points up the great dearth of material” (285).

Since Condit’s study took place almost fifty years ago, it is obviously in dire need of updating. While the current plethora of easy readers may not allow a contemporary replication, a research-based bibliography or content analysis of easy reader titles is certainly needed. As readers will see in Section 2.4 of this Literature Review, many current easy reader bibliographies are based solely on the author’s recommendations and provide only the most basic plot synopses. In comparison, the annotations in “Trade Books for Beginning Readers” contain thoughtful, critical evaluation.
In 1962, the National Council of Teachers of English came out with a 73 page publication authored by Elizabeth Guilfoile entitled *Books for Beginning Readers*. While not based in formal research methodology, *Books for Beginning Readers* establishes a bibliography of recommended texts and employs selection criteria “based on readability, in terms of both form and interest” (vi). Similar to Condit, Guilfoile also addresses the scarcity of titles saying that “The list tends to be inclusive rather than selective because the need for these books, so long apparent, has only begun to be met” (v). Unlike other annotated bibliographies, *Books for Beginning Readers* discusses 320 titles in the context of sections on design features, themes, and educational concerns.

My only criticism of *Books for Beginning Readers* is its age. Unlike Condit’s study, which maintains a comparatively timeless, neutral tone, Guilfoile uses some cringe-worthy terminology that betrays a 1962 publication date. For example, when discussing a book on careers in the airline industry, Guilfoile writes, “*I Want to Be an Airline Hostess*...could be interesting reading for older, educationally retarded girls” (6). In an admittedly humorous instance, Guilfoile earnestly points out that some beginning books are “developed in terms of the now actually anticipated plans for conquering space” (29).

With the exception of some now-archaic statements, *Books for Beginning Readers* was considerably progressive in its definition of easy readers, and is especially noteworthy for referencing pre-1957 texts. Although three quarters of the annotated titles were published after 1957 (or after the seminal publications of *The Cat in the Hat* and *Little Bear*) Guilfoile mentions several titles published between 1950 and 1957, and a handful of titles published before 1950. The inclusion of early titles shows that Guilfoile was not seduced by the new easy reader format characterized by white space, large font, and leading. Instead, she was firstly concerned with issues of content and reader interest. As she laudably asserts, “story
and fact value, manner of telling, and illustration take precedence over language control and physical make-up. What the reader desires must come first" (6).

Unlike Guilfoile and Condit’s studies, which were mainly concerned with creating comprehensive bibliographies, David H. Russell’s “An Evaluation of Some Easy-to-Read Trade Books for Children” examines only ten titles. Published in 1961, Russell’s study did not have any particularly significant findings. Russell analyzed ten easy readers “on the basis of a subjective description of content and estimate of attractiveness and interest, an objective comparison of vocabulary, a rating by the Spache Readability Formula, and comments on the books by groups of first and second-grade children and their teachers” (475). In truth, Russell’s study is nothing more than a small-scale replication of Condit’s 1959 work. In the end, Russell came to the rather uninspired conclusion that “trade books labeled ‘easy-to-read’ vary considerably in difficulty and in quality” and that his evaluation methods “may be helpful to a curriculum group or a library committee who have the responsibility for determining book purchases” (482).

Unlike the three previous studies, wherein researchers were concerned specifically with easy readers, William A. Jenkins’ “The Future of Children’s Books” takes stock of all forms of children’s literature and publishing. Appearing in the May 1965 issue of Elementary English, Jenkins claims that his study “provide[s] comments about the field of which librarians and teachers should be aware” (502). Jenkins’ survey of children’s book editors yields some interesting results that are relevant to this study of easy readers.

Discussing his methodology, Jenkins says, “The study is based on a questionnaire which was sent to 121 publishers listed as working in the children’s and juvenile field in the 1962-63 Literary Market Place. Fifty questionnaires were returned to the writer, forty-four of which were completed” (502). Of the forty-four respondents, twenty-five noticed an
increase in purchases of “Easy-to-Read Beginning Readers” and ten stated that their biggest areas of growth were in “Easy-to-Read Beginning Readers” (504). This was second only to science books, which sixteen publishers cited as their biggest area of increase. Furthermore, Jenkins reported that twenty-seven editors predicted a rise in the future publication of easy readers (509). Although Jenkins’ claims may have had implications for teachers and librarians of the 1960s, his findings are now more valuable as historical statistics, and as such, will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

Leland B. Jacobs’ “Books for Beginning Readers: An Appraisal” is not methodologically grounded like the previous four studies. Instead, Jacobs’ 1960 Education article is best described as an opinion piece targeted at educators. Pausing to evaluate the easy reader trend, Jacobs asks “Must everyone get onto this band wagon, even though he has only a ten-cent horn to toot? Is haste making waste? Is the teacher so eager to have such material that he is being delighted at the expense of being critical and discriminative?” (515) Jacobs offers thoughtful, astute answers to these questions by establishing a three point evaluation criteria that educators can use when selecting easy readers. First, he asserts that controlled vocabulary should emerge naturally out of the subject matter, and not be mechanically dominated by a word list. Second, he says that the content of an easy reader should treat its audience as beginners in the printed word, but not as “beginners in experiences” (516). Finally, Jacobs argues against repetitive “Come, come, look, look” craftsmanship saying that it “dull[s] the child’s sensitivity to what is beautiful” (517). He concludes his article by saying that the easy reader trend could “become a tidal wave, filling classrooms with…literary flotsam” or “a stream of new reading material that invites the young child…to taste the full pleasures of reading” (517). Jacobs’ editorial is one of the
most well-rounded articles on easy readers in the classroom, primarily because it considers
the intangible, aesthetic facets of readability.

Jumping forward several decades, Barbara Peterson touches on the role of easy
readers in the Reading Recovery program in “Selecting Books for Beginning Readers.”
Peterson states that easy readers usually receive a readability level between sixteen and
twenty on the Reading Recovery scale (twenty is the highest level). The strength of
Peterson’s work lies in her recognition of the flexibility of the Reading Recovery scale, and
in her assertion that easy readers can function as legitimate literature. She says, “The
language is literary and the illustrations enhance the story but seldom provide clues to
specific words in the text…the characters are fictional personalities and episodes develop
around fanciful, imaginative events” (Peterson 143). Peterson’s stance on easy readers is
considerably more accurate and refreshing than the following implications in Ardith Davis
Cole and Kathleen J. Brown’s educational research.

In a case study published in the March 1998 issue of The Reading Teacher, Ardith
Davis Cole discusses how easy readers can benefit struggling students in a literature-based
classroom. Cole labels easy readers “basal-like texts” or “beginner-oriented texts” (490) and
ultimately concludes that the books should be used alongside so-called “aesthetically-
constructed texts” or books that do not have “high-frequency, controlled vocabulary;
simplistic sentence structures, strategic placement of sentence junctures,” etc. However, in
the process of advocating the use of easy readers in the classroom, Cole ultimately demeans
the books by asserting that they “are stripped of complexity” (496). While this may be true
from a decodability standpoint, Cole implies that all easy readers are aesthetically
substandard. This is an unfair, unsubstantiated generalization. Cole’s assertions are
especially perplexing considering that she includes easy readers like Owl at Home, Fox Be
Nimble, and Three by the Sea in her list of “beginner-oriented texts.” These three texts have all received positive reviews and have been enthusiastically endorsed on many recommended reading lists. Furthermore, Cole herself admits that these three texts all contain illustrations that extend the meaning of the prose. Although the intention of this study may have been to advocate the use of easy readers in the classroom, Cole’s article only feeds two pervasive stereotypes; first, that easy readers are merely glorified basals, and second, that they are not as aesthetically valuable as other forms of literature.

In her 2000 study published in The Reading Teacher, Kathleen J. Brown examines the place of easy readers in textual scaffolding. Brown defines textual scaffolding as “using particular types of text at particular times in readers’ development...to support their progress” (293). Using interviews and case studies, Brown develops a hierarchy of texts that educators can use to propel children forward to independent reading. Her hierarchy, supposedly based on considerations of accessibility and complexity, is displayed in the following figure:

Figure 2.1 – Brown’s Scaffolding Hierarchy of Beginning Reading Texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authentic Literature (Least Accessible and Most Complex)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Easy Readers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decodable Text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitional Text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple Predictable Text (Most Accessible and Least Complex)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unfortunately, accessibility and complexity are not the only considerations defining the hierarchy. Like Cole, Brown implies that her hierarchy is based on the “literariness” or
artistic quality of the texts, with Authentic Literature being the most literary, and Simple Predictable Text being the least literary. She asserts that, "In contrast [to the texts on lower rungs of the hierarchy], authors of authentic literature and nonfiction are not bound by accessibility constraints. They are free to craft sentences and choose words that meet their literary and artistic goals" (295). A statement like this ultimately has two very negative implications. First, it implies that the easy reader format limits the artistic goals of the author; second, it implies that easy readers are literally sub-par since they sit one rung below "authentic literature." Brown goes on to quote teachers who claim that easy readers pale in value when compared to "authentic" literature.

While Brown's assertions on the benefits of textual scaffolding are valid, her implications regarding the literary merit of easy readers are misleading and potentially harmful. They are misleading because, as Chapter Six of this study will prove, easy readers can have literary merit. Brown's assertions are potentially harmful because children should always feel as if they are engaging with authentic literature. Attitudes like Brown's can foster feelings of resentment in beginning readers if they think they are reading "baby books," or texts designed for those too inexperienced for "real" books.

2.3.2 Classroom Resources

Thankfully, resources advocating the classroom use of specific easy reader titles argue against the implications of Cole and Brown's studies. These resources are targeted specifically at practicing educators and treat easy readers as literary entities worthy of classroom study and exploration. Perhaps the best example is Ellen Geist and Ellen Tarlow's *Teaching with Favorite Arnold Lobel Books*. Geist and Tarlow claim that Lobel's books "have an underlying richness and sophistication that make them particularly satisfying to
reread and explore” (4). This resource attempts to engage children by asking questions grounded in reader response theory. Some of the questions are surprisingly thoughtful, and have the potential to illuminate the subtle beauty of the series. For instance, one of the questions relating to the final story in *Days with Frog and Toad* reads: “What does being alone together mean?” (36)

Cynthia Holzschuher’s book-length classroom resource on James Marshall contains a multitude of activities ranging from basic comprehension questions to aesthetic reader response activities. The book lists activities for twenty James Marshall titles including the easy readers *Fox All Week, Fox on the Job, Fox Outfoxed*, and *Fox on Stage*. Holzschuher provides well over a dozen classroom suggestions for each book, and her suggestions are commendable because of their direct relation to the text. For example, in reference to *Fox All Week*, one activity reads “Have each student design a wild tie that Fox would enjoy wearing to visit Grannie” (Holzschuher 25). Since this prompt demands a good understanding of Fox’s penchant for extravagant costumes, it is not a generic activity that could easily be applied to another text.

The only fault of the resource is the illustrations included on the class handouts. Since the publisher could obviously not secure the rights to Marshall’s actual drawings, another illustrator was enlisted to draw Fox, Louise, and the rest of the series’ characters. Unfortunately, these characters have absolutely no resemblance to those in the books and stand in stark contrast to Marshall’s brilliantly understated, comic line drawings. Since Marshall’s style is completely unique and responsible for a good portion of the humor in the books, this omission is worth noting.

In her resource article, “Interpreting Idioms,” Carol Wolchock focuses on the *Amelia Bedelia* series. Amelia’s bumbling character comes from her misunderstanding of idiomatic
language and Wolchock’s activity suggestions meaningfully consider this attribute. Not only can students identify examples of idioms in the *Amelia Bedelia* series, they can also assume the maid’s mind set in order to extend learning beyond the text. After Wolchock gave students unfamiliar idiomatic examples, she “asked them to imagine how Amelia Bedelia would deal with these idioms if she were presented with them” (614).

Like Wolchock, Rita Roth uses reader response theory to guide her teaching recommendations. Roth’s article, “On Beyond Zebra with Dr. Seuss,” is unique because of the author’s recognition of an all-too-common bias. Roth admits to a time when she considered Seuss’ work unliterary, and asserts that “Some children’s literature specialists do not see beyond rhyme schemes that admittedly can be taken as trite and contrived, thus closing the door to possibilities that grow out of the rich content of Geisel’s work” (214). In specific reference to *The Cat in the Hat (TCITH)* and *The Cat in the Hat Came Back*, Roth opines that the books present a “promisingly empowered world of imagination” that teachers can use to help children form a “critical literacy,” or the ability to make connections between the written world and real life (222).

Although it is not a teacher resource, Brian Alderson’s 1999 editorial, “From Hornbook to Hamster-Box: Stasis in the Reading Industry,” sheds an interesting perspective on the use of easy readers in the classroom. Alderson criticizes the reading instruction materials that the English and Welsh governments distribute to schools. He says that many educators colloquially refer to the materials as a toolbox or a “Hamster-box” due to the size and shape of the package they receive, and because “There is everything that the modern teacher needs to bang, screw, or lever the arts of reading and writing into the heads of young children” (239). Particularly relevant to this study, Alderson touches on the role of so-called “unstructured texts” in the classroom (242). He asserts, “The potential of a run of works like
those of Colin McNaughton (or Dr. Seuss, or Quentin Blake, or James Marshall...) to inspire children to want to read has, perhaps fortunately, eluded the creators of the Hamster Box” (ibid). Here, Alderson argues that the banal world of basals and hamster-boxes is most unfit for easy readers bursting with humor and energy. He explains that certain books “should be left in the hands of [those]...who know how to respect good jokes and good stories” (ibid). In other words, Alderson implies that quality easy readers may be compromised if used inappropriately in the classroom.

The available literature on easy readers in the classroom may seem plentiful after reading this section, but the opposite is true. It is certainly a sad state of affairs when the richest scholarship on a topic dates back decades and lacks any kind of theoretical grounding. While classroom resources are in a substantially better state, they could undoubtedly be enriched by current research. Certainly, the paucity of literature becomes much more evident if compared to the vast number of Grade One and Grade Two classrooms likely containing a plethora of easy reader titles.

2.4 Professional Literature on Easy Readers

Professional literature is authored by educators, librarians, and critics and functions as resources for evaluating and selecting easy reader texts. In lieu of conducting research studies, authors of professional literature often draw from their own practical experience.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Kathleen T. Horning offers the most comprehensive criteria for evaluating the easy reader. She devotes an entire chapter to the subject in her book From Cover to Cover and claims that “The success of...easy readers ...is as much dependent on form as it is on content” (127). Despite this assertion of balance, the majority of Horning’s evaluative criteria focus on facets of form or design; this leaves a
palpable gap for reviewers concerned with content issues like plot and characterization. This aside, her chapter on easy readers has to be commended for its attempt to fill a void in children’s book reviewing.

Robin Smith’s *Booklist* article, “Too Easy? Too Hard? Finding the Right Easy Reader” resembles Horning’s work in that it offers evaluative criteria largely defined by formal and design features. In addition, however, she also discusses the importance of leveling; she defines three levels of easy reader difficulty, providing examples for clarification. Smith asserts that librarians and teachers should thoughtfully evaluate easy readers because “The time spent as an emergent reader may be short but it’s important” (R. Smith 1903).

More abundant than publications on evaluative criteria, annotated bibliographies of easy readers serve as resources for professionals with backgrounds in education, librarianship, and academic study. All the annotated bibliographies I found suggested different purposes, despite their apparent sameness.

Anastasia Suen’s short bibliography “15 Classic Easy Readers” appeared in the July 2006 issue of *Book Links*. Since Suen feels that “the easy reader has often been viewed as the poor step-child of the more glamorous picture book or children’s novel,” she created a bibliography for those unaware of the most seminal works (56). Her annotations combine plot synopses with some critical evaluation, and would be most useful to the easy reader neophyte.

Rebecca L. Thomas and Catherine Barr’s book-length bibliography, *Popular Series Fiction for K-6 Readers* is most appropriate for librarians or those purchasing titles. This resource is helpful because it lists many easy reader series titles in publication order. Here, the difference between an easy reader series and an easy reader imprint should be noted; a
series follows the same characters and is written by one author; an imprint, by contrast, is a division of a publishing house encapsulating many series or single titles. Harper’s “I Can Read” is probably the most well-known example of an easy reader imprint.

Serving yet another unique purpose, Barbara Barstow and Judith Riggle’s *Beyond Picture Books* is an annotated bibliography particularly useful for selecting a research sample. The book contains 2495 easy reader titles both in and out of print, and provides complete publication information. Indeed, the vast amount of titles make this the perfect resource from which to draw a random sample for a content analysis or other research project. Threadbare plot summaries comprise the annotations, so the body of the book would not be particularly useful for librarians or educators; however, some could benefit from the book’s various indexes which are organized by theme and publisher.

Perhaps the best piece of professional literature on easy readers is “Winners for beginners,” written by Nancy Palmer and published in *School Library Journal*. The prefatory matter is clever and original, while the annotations are economical, effective, and surprisingly eloquent. For example, Palmer says that Syd Hoff’s *Danny and the Dinosaur* is “Not great literature, but it can’t be beat as a motivator” while Lobel’s *Owl at Home* is told “in utterly simple but extraordinarily expressive language” (37). Annotations like these, which balance information with evaluation, should characterize all professional bibliographies of easy readers. It is also refreshing that Palmer bases her selection criteria on books where “manageable reading level is merely an added asset to their quality or appeal” (36).
2.5 Survey Literature

For the purposes of this study, survey literature is defined as works authored by children’s literature specialists or critics. Two different types of survey literature are discussed in this section. The first type is historical survey literature which is organized chronologically or according to historically constructed periods (i.e. – the “Golden Age”). Easy readers most often appear in survey literature dealing with the 1950s and 1960s, as this was the time of the genre’s emergence. The historical survey literature in this section considers easy readers alongside developments in education, changing social values, and social history. The second type of survey literature generally assesses the current state of the easy reader. Two articles from *Publishers Weekly*, “I Can Read Books Turns 40” and “Readers for early readers” provide excellent contemporary surveys with information on current trends, interviews, statistics, and sales figures.

Dealing first with historical survey literature, both Dora V. Smith and Ruth Hill Viguers look retrospectively at the development of children’s books in the United States. While Smith organizes her exploration by decade, Viguers looks at the period from 1920 to 1967 which she labels “Golden Years and Time of Tumult.” Both Smith and Viguers assert that easy readers emerged as a result of changing educational practices in the mid-twentieth century. Smith says that easy readers were a “fortunate outcome” of “the newly aroused public concern for the teaching of beginning reading and for the expansion of the individual reading beyond textbook materials” (D. Smith 63). Viguers concurs, and says that titles like *The Cat in the Hat* and *Little Bear* “were received with so much delight that the floodgates opened” (Viguers 651). Here, both historical surveys credit educational changes in the mid-1950s with the success of easy readers.
Mary Lystad’s research-based historical survey is unique because of its focus on changing social values. In her extensive content analysis, Lystad examines one thousand titles to determine “social values and social behavior preferred in children’s books over a long time” (1). Easy readers are mentioned in her chapter on 1956-1975, a period she labels with the Seuss quote, “But we can have/Lots of good fun that is funny!” (179). Lystad discusses the presence of social values in children’s books using easy readers as examples. For instance, she writes, “Important during this period [1956-1975] was the institution of leisure, described in 46 percent of the books. Birthdays and dress-up and make-believe were given proper attention, as in Else Minarik’s Little Bear” (191).

In 100 years of children’s books in America: Decade by Decade, Marjorie N. Allen asserts that “the time has come to incorporate children’s literature into the social history of 20th-century America” (xxv). Although Allen believes that “books reflect the decade in which they were written” (xviii), she fails to meaningfully establish relationships between books and social history; for example, historical discussions on the “Red Threat” and “Harnessing the Informational Flood” precede a section on easy readers with no discussion on how, if at all, the two sections are related. Furthermore, her classification schemes are confusing and inconsistent. She classifies the Frog and Toad series as “easy readers,” (219) but mysteriously labels Little Bear and Amelia Bedelia “chapter books” (154, 181).

While retrospective surveys examine easy readers alongside historical developments, contemporary surveys provide valuable information on the current state of a phenomenon. In “I Can Read Books Turns 40,” Sally Lodge traces “the creative development” of the Harper imprint (33). The article appropriately begins with a brief historical survey before considering some more recent changes to “I Can Read” books; Lodge notes that Harper began leveling the imprint in 1992 and added two additional series “My First I Can Read
books" and "I Can Read Chapter Books" in 1996. The article also contains interviews with several I Can Read directors and booksellers.

Perhaps one of the most useful pieces of current literature is Shannon Maughan’s "Readers for early readers." This article is best classified as survey literature because of its broad appeal, and a self-proclaimed audience of "parents, publishers, and booksellers" (Maughan 43). Wider in scope than Lodge's article, which focused only on HarperCollins, Maughan interviews publishing professionals from several houses producing both fictional and non-fictional easy readers. She also considers the role of demographics in the easy reader boom, and examines the role of educational expertise in various series. Surveys like Maughan's are especially useful for researchers since publishers rarely respond to requests for information on profits, copies sold, or editorial policy.

Survey literature, though slightly tricky to classify, is best defined as general appraisals with a historical or contemporary context. While easy readers frequently receive mention in retrospective surveys, they are rarely mentioned in evaluations of the current state of children's literature. Truly, there is a need for more articles like those by Sally Lodge and Shannon Maughan. Since these articles contain valuable, current information on many facets of the easy reader, they will be referenced frequently throughout this study.

2.6  **Historical Sources - Primary and Secondary**

No existing literature takes on the publication history of easy readers as a central matter of inquiry. Instead, fragments of the easy reader's history are scattered throughout many historical sources. While some of the literature on easy readers touches on these sources, it rarely makes productive use of the material. Rather than simply summarizing the content of these historical sources, Chapter Four will use the pertinent details to construct a
historical narrative detailing the publishers, individuals, and dates crucial to the easy reader’s history. In order to contextualize the narrative to follow in Chapter Four, the nature of the sources will be concisely discussed here.

The correspondence of Ursula Nordstrom, legendary Harper and Row editor, is perhaps one of the most useful primary sources to this study. Leonard S. Marcus, an American children’s literature historian, collected, transcribed, and annotated Nordstrom’s correspondence in a 1998 volume entitled *Dear Genius: The Letters of Ursula Nordstrom.* Since Nordstrom created the “I Can Read” imprint, and edited Else Holmelund Minarik’s *Little Bear,* her letters to authors, librarians, and other children’s book professionals offer invaluable insight.

Equally useful are newspaper and journal articles from the mid-1950s to early 1960s. While John Hersey’s 1954 article in *Life* magazine is often directly linked to the emergence of the genre, the publication of *Little Bear* and *The Cat in the Hat* in 1957 sparked a flurry of articles on the easy reader trend.¹

Other relevant primary sources include Leonard S. Marcus’ interviews with Harper editor Susan Hirschman and Harper Director of Library Promotion and Advertising, William C. Morris. Both Hirschman and Morris were long-time Harper employees, and worked for the publisher during the easy reader boom. Their memories of, and anecdotes from, the mid-1950s offer a firsthand perspective of “I Can Read’s” inception. Finally, interviews with the creators of the genre’s most seminal works including Theodor “Dr. Seuss” Geisel (Cott), Arnold Lobel (Natov and DeLuca; Rollin), and James Marshall (Harrigan; Marcus, “James Marshall”) are also valuable for constructing a historical narrative.

In terms of secondary sources, select author biographies contain worthwhile content on the easy reader’s early life. Biographies on Dr. Seuss are particularly useful, not only for the *Cat* content, but also because of Seuss’ editorial role in Random House’s easy reader imprint, Beginner Books (MacDonald; Morgan and Morgan; Nel). In addition to critically examining an author’s work, Twayne’s United States Authors Series provides biographical information, and the volumes on Arnold Lobel (Shannon) and Maurice Sendak (Sonheim) contribute to the historical narrative to be presented in Chapter Four. Finally, some of the historical survey literature mentioned in Section 2.5 will also be considered as useful secondary sources.

### 2.7 Close Readings of Easy Readers

When it comes to the close reading of easy readers, the vast majority of attention has been lavished upon a certain hat-wearing, bipedal feline. In addition to literary critics, the famous Cat in the Hat has been subject to in-depth analyses by psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers. Although this particular book has been showered with attention, other easy readers have not been so lucky. In fact, Seuss aside, I could only locate a handful of close readings concerned with easy readers. Of these, the majority focus on philosophical and literary examinations of Lobel’s *Frog and Toad* series, one focuses on the literary qualities of the *Little Bear* books, and one considers Russell Hoban’s *Frances* books from an epistemological perspective. However, before turning to these readings, a few words must be devoted to Seuss’ anarchical kitty.

While literature abounds on *The Cat in the Hat (TCITH)*, for the sake of scope, only one work will be considered here. Indeed, the essays in Ruth K. MacDonald’s *Dr. Seuss* are
of impeccable quality, and are often cited by Seuss scholars. Even Philip Nel frequently references MacDonald's close reading in his comprehensive *The Annotated Cat*.

MacDonald structures her analysis of *TCITH* in two parts, and looks to both the text and the illustrations to support her assertions. In the first part of her analysis, MacDonald discusses how Seuss’ characterization creates tension and suspense. Below, she eloquently articulates the anxious relationship between the Cat and the fish;

> The opposition of the fish and the Cat creates the tension in the story...The Cat and the fish are linked in combat both by the incompatibility of their species and by the language used to describe them. The cat's formal name is 'The Cat in the Hat,' the proper name indicated by the use of capital letters. The fish, after he falls out of his bowl...is referred to as the 'fish in the pot.' (114)

In the second part of her analysis, MacDonald turns her attention to Seuss’ use of specific linguistic devices, foregrounding instances of repetition, enjambment, polyptoton, and scansion. In reference to repetition, she asserts:

> ...the story must call forth the repetition, a feat which Seuss has carried off admirably, especially in his use of the Cat’s cleanup machine. The device of the machine allows the narrator to recall all the things the Cat has scattered around...Thus, at the end, all the new vocabulary that has been introduced is brought together and repeated. (120)

In sum, MacDonald's work is relevant to this study because of its primary focus on text, and its secondary focus on reading audience and illustrations.

Discussing the meager wordlist he used to create *TCITH*, Dr. Seuss once wrote, “I could have engraved the whole list, personally, on the head of a pin” (qtd. in Nel 171).
Indeed, the head of a pin would allow plenty of room to engrave all of the close readings of easy readers. The scant amount of scholarly attention is in no way proportionate to the vast amount of easy reader titles. Thus, the following five *Frog and Toad*-inspired close readings possess vital roles in the pocket-sized world of scholarly easy reader analysis.

In his book, *What's So Funny?*, Michael Cart discusses several children’s titles famous for scratching funny bones. Cart examines the *Frog and Toad* series in a section on talking-animal humor. He labels Arnold Lobel one of “the greatest practitioners of funny animal fiction,” and says that he is “positively polymath in the varieties of humorous devices at [his] disposal” (Cart 19). Of the many humorous devices he foregrounds in his close reading, Cart’s example of incongruity is especially strong. Discussing a story from *Frog and Toad are Friends* called “The Swim,” Cart says; “A toad in a bathing suit? The idea is incongruously funny. But Lobel takes it another step, adding a dose of that lack of dignity...What is surprising is that Frog joins the others in laughing at Toad” (89-90).

Through close reading, Cart illuminates Lobel’s use of incongruity, and articulates why the end of “The Swim” is so funny. Later, Cart’s analysis strays from his original thesis in order to consider the amphibians’ friendship in relation to C.S. Lewis’ *The Four Loves*. While this section is undoubtedly fascinating, it is Cart’s close reading of humour in easy readers that defines his contribution to the field.

One of the more poorly written analyses in this section is Joseph Stanton’s “Straight Man and Clown in the Picture Books of Arnold Lobel.” A fact Stanton fails to reflect in his title, his essay focuses solely on Lobel’s easy readers: the *Frog and Toad* series, *Owl at Home*, and *Grasshopper on the Road*. The bad title choice is especially puzzling since Stanton introduces his topic with background information on easy readers and Harper’s “I Can Read” imprint; surely he must know the difference between a picture book and an easy
reader. This small quibble aside, Stanton says that Lobel’s protagonists function in “one of three ways: either there is a solitary, highly emotional (one might even say foolish) individual, a solitary reasonable individual, or there are two complementary personalities, one more foolish and the other relatively more reasonable” (Stanton 75). He then predictably asserts that Frog and Toad are in the middle of the continuum because of their complementary personalities. Although Stanton’s thesis is clear, it is not a debatable assertion. Few would argue his characterizations of Frog, Toad, Owl, and Grasshopper. Surprisingly, Stanton’s conclusion would have made a much more provocative thesis: “Perhaps the most surprising aspect of Lobel’s display of basic personality possibilities is the implicit optimism the books convey about even the foolish protagonists” (76). A close textual reading to prove a tone of “implicit optimism” sounds considerably more compelling than a largely descriptive piece on character traits. However, due to the paucity of criticism available, Stanton’s work is included in this Literature Review.

Without a doubt, George Shannon’s work on the Frog and Toad series is the best in existence. In a close reading of both text and pictures in his book, Arnold Lobel, Shannon presents a clear, unique perspective on Lobel’s work. All ten chapters possess an inspiring unity as Shannon consistently re-visits his thesis; Lobel is a pastoralist. Laudably, Frog and Toad receive a whole chapter to themselves which is aptly entitled “Frog and Toad Can Read.” Here, Shannon asserts that “Lobel’s use of the ‘I Can Read’ gave the pastoral genre a renewing journey home. Whether one prefers the term idyll, little pictures, sliver, or vignette, his Frog and Toad stories are the essence of the pastoral’s inner duality and brevity of outer form” (Shannon 87).

In his close reading, Shannon says that the calming forest setting, and the themes of unconditional fraternity and friendship, the selfless giving of gifts, and the use of repetition
are indicative of the pastoral. Shannon introduces readers to “pastoral anaphora,” a term denoting planned repetition, and opines that “Lobel...instinctively used repetition to create a more lyric tone, which contributed to his pastoral voice” (97). Unique arguments like this one are entirely convincing, and Shannon’s comparison of Frog and Toad’s world to Arcadia is supported by well-chosen quotations and illustrations. Truly, George Shannon’s close reading is invaluable for two reasons; first, it sets a standard for literary studies of easy readers. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it exemplifies the rich depths of understanding that the intuitive close reader can reach when examining easy readers.

Unlike the rest of this thesis’ sample, Frog and Toad have been examined in fields outside children’s literature studies, most notably in philosophy and psychology. Philosopher Gareth B. Matthews says that the short story “Cookies” “invites us to reflect on the phenomenon of weakness of will and to join philosophers from Aristotle to the present in trying to understand it” (Matthews, Philosophy 66). Similarly, in their article “Frog and Toad Lose Control,” Kennet and Smith discuss the psychological aspects of “Cookies” with a tiring amount of jargon. In an article featured in the respected gay magazine Christopher Street, Christopher Bram addresses possible homosexual elements in Frog and Toad’s relationship. He bluntly says, “I do not want to entertain that possibility. The scope of the stories seems so much broader...the fervor of their relationship rings true for all childhood friendships” (Bram 61). Thankfully, unlike Matthews, Kennet, and Smith, Bram avoids absurd over-analysis by ignoring possibilities not reasonably suggested by the text.

Accompanying Arnold Lobel in the Twayne’s United States Authors Series, Amy Sonheim’s Maurice Sendak contains some noteworthy work on the Little Bear books. While Sonheim’s analysis primarily focuses on Sendak’s illustrations, she makes some very perceptive comments on the text. Literary analysis relevant to this study takes place in
Sonheim’s second chapter called “Early Illustration: Duets with Krauss, Minarik, and DeJong.”

Although Sonheim takes an eclectic approach to Sendak’s work – “biographical, linguistic, art historical, and genre” (viii) – she also engages in close reading. In particular, she carefully deconstructs Else Holmelund Minarik’s use of repetition in _Little Bear_, and writes that “Minarik thoughtfully works with the required repetition making this limitation artful. She does so in three ways” (36). First, Sonheim says that Minarik “achieves a lyrical rhythm by repeating phrases in the form of appositives and varied patterns.” Sonheim then states that repetition provides humor and also frames the content of the stories. In conclusion, Sonheim asserts that “what could have been redundant prose instead reads as a literary first reader, with varied styles of repetition” (37).

Although not included in the research sample for this thesis, Russell Hoban’s _Frances_ books are some of the most celebrated and well-known easy readers. In _Russell Hoban/Forty Years: Essays on His Writings for Children_, Martin Teitel examines the famous badger books from an epistemological perspective and concludes that “Frances is less a narcissistic infant, and more an articulator of the kinds of knowing that – liberated from the Western straitjacket of rationalism and empiricism – many of us would choose” (Teitel 38). This quote may make Teitel’s close reading seem rather pretentious and over-thought, but the opposite is actually true. He provides specific, textual examples to support his assertions on the badger family’s unique epistemological stance, and offers clear, concise explanations of the philosophical ideas and theory that ground his close reading. The result is a better and more complex understanding of the _Frances_ easy readers, and Teitel’s essay successfully “avoid[s] the classic pitfall of philosophical writing: dissection without revelation” (33).
2.8 Background on Sample Texts

The sample texts selected for close reading comprise four different easy reader series published over the last fifty years. This final section of the Literature Review offers brief summaries of the series, information on origins, and critical reception. Since Little Bear was one of the first easy readers, its origins are inextricably tied to the emergence of the form; as such, the origins of the series will be examined in full detail in Chapter Four. For the most part, the information in this section was gleaned from author interviews, author profiles, and critical appraisals in the forms of book reviews or author studies. The criteria governing the selection of the sample are discussed in Chapter Three.

Little Bear Series

The five installments in the Little Bear series, ranging in publication from 1957 to 1968, are written by Else Holmelund Minarik and illustrated by Maurice Sendak. The series’ main character is, not surprisingly, a little bear aptly possessing the proper name, Little Bear; he is bright, inquisitive, and lucky to have a caring mother who unobtrusively fosters his imagination. Little Bear also has an entourage of motley animal companions; Hen is maternal and easily ruffled, Duck is always part of the gang, Owl is wise yet playful, and Cat revels in good food and good play. All the books in the series, with the exception of A Kiss for Little Bear, contain four short stories.

Minarik’s motivation for writing Little Bear came both from her experience as a teacher and her experience as a mother. After the first book was published, Minarik formed a wonderful working relationship with Sendak and three more books followed. However, as Selma G. Lanes reports, “it is doubtful that the fifth volume would have come into being at all had Sendak not suffered a serious heart attack in the spring of 1967” (Lanes 144). Hearing
of Sendak’s illness spurred Minarik to write the final book in the series, *A Kiss for Little Bear*, which Lanes calls “a curious sort of valentine from Minarik to Sendak” (ibid.). Commenting on the overall character of the *Little Bear* quintet, Sendak remarks, “All heart, no sentiment. Big difference. Lean, clean, tough, dramatic, heartbreaking” (Benzel).

Critics rejoiced at Little Bear’s birth in 1957, and still dole out praise for the ursine protagonist. The series is most often touted as a seminal work, setting a high bar for all the easy readers that followed. In 1968, *Publishers Weekly* celebrated the *Little Bear* series, saying it was “not a member of the Establishment, but established in the hearts of the best people in the world – the children” (qtd. in “Else Holmelund Minarik” 126). The series is also frequently credited for conquering the basal; Lavinia Russ called Little Bear “the smiling scout for an expedition that would save an eager audience from those two horrendous bores, Dick and Jane” (Russ).

Despite praise for the overall series, most reviewers feel discontentment with the final book, *A Kiss for Little Bear*. Barbara Bader calls *Kiss* “a visual overload for an easy reader…not an I Can Read-in-comfort but a brooding picture book” (504), while Kirkus Reviews gave an even more scathing appraisal. Despite some critical disapproval, Selma G. Lanes most accurately sums up *Kiss*, saying, “There is no doubt in the reader’s mind that this is a curtain call for the entire cast – and for the most successful series of easy readers in our time” (145).

**Frog and Toad Series**

In 1970, Arnold Lobel published the first book in an easy reader series that would define his career. From 1970 to 1979, Frog and Toad leapt and bounded through four volumes of short stories revolving around their unshakeable friendship. Well, perhaps it is
more appropriate to say that Frog leapt and bounded, while Toad stayed in bed and said “Blah.” As the only forest inhabitants to wear clothes, Frog and Toad take long walks through the meadow, have long talks by the fire, and do their best to navigate life’s little adventures. Whether Toad is embarrassed by his unflattering swimsuit, or Frog is looking for spring “right around the corner,” these two amphibians never face the world without the comfort of one another.

Discovered by Harper editor Susan Hirschman, Lobel began illustrating books in 1961. A few years later, a family vacation by the water served as the inspiration for the *Frog and Toad* series. The story is best told in the words of Lobel himself:

> And of course I thought about the frogs and the toads and how much I liked them, and I picked up my ballpoint writing pen and I wrote on the notebook, ‘Frog ran up the path to Toad’s house.’ Well, the little stories just seemed to pour right out of me, and after two weeks, I knew somehow that I had come a little bit closer to being the kind of children’s writer that I wanted to be.

*(Lobel, “Frog and Toad: A Short History” 152)*

Critical reception of *Frog and Toad* matches the enthusiasm of *Little Bear*. In fact, some assert that Lobel’s series was the first since *Little Bear* to raise the bar on easy readers. Epitomizing the hearty praise, George Shannon writes that *Frog and Toad are Friends* “brought a new level of quality and resonance of voice to the genre” (85).

**Fox Series**

A mere glance at the series’ protagonist - with lolling tongue, pointed ears, and black pin-dots for eyes – is enough to send young readers into fits of giggles. Fox, an aspiring renaissance man, spends most of his time bemusedly watching his harmless schemes unravel.
Fox’s mom, a yoga-practicing, Vanity Fox-reading single parent, provides love and comfort when not outing her son’s crafty behaviour. Fox’s bushy-tailed little sister, Louise, expresses both suspicion at Fox’s antics and endearing awe for her big brother. A quirky band of secondary characters populate Fox’s world including Raisin, Fox’s comely on-again/off-again flame, and Carmen and Dexter, Fox’s best friends. This interspecies world contains frogs, pigs, bulldogs, rabbits, and of course, foxes, dressed in bits of colorful clothing; typical human pursuits like school, babysitting, and skateboarding occupy the young residents of this animal suburbia throughout nine entertaining books.

Careful readers of the Works Cited section may notice that the first five Fox books feature a mysterious collaborator named “Edward Marshall.” James Marshall came up with the pseudonym “Edward” (his middle name) when he began publishing easy readers with Dial Press. Marshall tells “Edward’s” hilarious story in an interview with Leonard S. Marcus:

One day somebody called me after I’d come back from a long publishing lunch – I was really quite tipsy – and said, ‘Mr. Marshall?’ I said ‘Yeeessss.’ ‘Can you tell us where we can find Edward Marshall?’ And I said ‘Well, he’s very difficult to find...living out there by the crematorium, with those fourteen children.’ I could hear his pencil scratching away! I made up this incredible tale – and it was published, I forget where. (Marcus “James Marshall” 98)

As this anecdote suggests, Marshall himself was an incredibly funny person, both in and out of his books. Although he has not discussed the impetus for the Fox series, he conducted an interview with Stephen Harrigan while working on Fox on the Job. As Harrigan watched him illustrate a scene from the short story “Pizza Time,” Marshall
remarked “Sometimes I look at what I’m doing and think, ‘A grown man, sitting here wondering whether or not to put a fox on a skateboard’” (Harrigan 196). It is also interesting to note the obvious illustrative connections between Fox and another Marshall character of the same species, Rapscallion Jones. It is unclear whether or not one fox served as inspiration for the other.

Plain and simple, the Fox books are uproariously funny and critics often focus on this in their reviews. In specific reference to Fox All Week, a Kirkus reviewer called the book “varyingly humorous, then: not according to formula, not tediously tied to a single trait” (qtd. in “James Marshall” 180). The series has also been praised for providing invigorating, vibrant material for newly independent readers. One reviewer commented that Fox in Love “makes a refreshing change in the usual diet of Reading Schemes which are thought by some to be lacking in imagination if not downright stodgy” (qtd. in “James Marshall” 177).

**Houndsley and Catina Series**

Due to its recent publication, only a small background of literature exists on the *Houndsley and Catina* series, written by James Howe and illustrated by Marie-Louise Gay. At this point there are only two books, *Houndsley and Catina* and *Houndsley and Catina and the Birthday Surprise*. However, a third book, *Houndsley and Catina and the Quiet Time*, is slated for publication on September 9th, 2008. Houndsley, an incredibly sensitive canine, finds a best friend in Catina, an outspoken, vivacious white cat. Although Houndsley enjoys cooking, and Catina gravitates towards more self-involved pursuits, both gain balance from their deep friendship with one another. Unlike the rest of the sample, the *Houndsley and Catina* books are not compendiums of short stories, but continuous narratives divided into chapters.
In “An interview with the author” published by Candlewick Press, Howe intimates that the series’ characters originally inhabited a very different world. He says, “Houndsley was going to be the canine butler and Catina the feline cook for an offstage human writer. It was going to be a droll, dry, veddy British *Upstairs, Downstairs* sort of thing.” Once he sat down to write, a much gentler world emerged; Howe admits, “I was probably influenced by the Frog and Toad books.”

Foregrounding connections to other great friendships in American children’s books, one critic says the series “…resembles the classic James Marshall characters of George and Martha in their patience with each other’s quirks” (Lempke 30). In contrast, one Kirkus reviewer labeled *Houndsley and Catina* “A pleasantly seasoned potboiler.” Regardless, *Houndsley and Catina* won the Association of Booksellers for Children’s E.B. White Read Aloud Award in 2007.

While all the sample texts have won numerous accolades and critical acclaim, no special award for easy readers existed until very recently. In 2004 the American Library Association established the Theodor Seuss Geisel award, a medal honoring books aimed specifically at newly independent readers, and named for the creator of *The Cat in the Hat*. Bestowed for the first time in 2006, the inaugural winner was Cynthia Rylant andSucie Stevenson’s *Henry and Mudge and the Great Grandpas*. Indeed, if this award had been established earlier, there is little doubt that one or more of the sample texts would have earned the honour.

2.9 Conclusion

Readers now hopefully understand the unique state of current easy reader scholarship. While some literature on the topic does exist, it is difficult to locate; there are no definitive
sources on easy readers, and very few even take on the books as a central matter of inquiry. Furthermore, the amount and quality of scholarship is in no way proportionate to the massive amounts of easy readers in classrooms, libraries, and children’s bookshelves. In sum, there is a desperate need for theoretically grounded research that focuses solely on easy readers, and this thesis endeavors to fill at least a small part of this gap. The following Chapter discusses the theoretical frame that will guide this inaugural study on one of the most popular, yet neglected, forms of children’s literature.
3 THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction and Overview

This examination of easy readers is grounded in contemporary genre theory. As I assert in my research statement, the complexity and richness of easy readers is best illuminated when the individual texts are viewed generically, or as members of the easy reader genre. The term “easy reader” is here used as an indicator of genre rather than an indicator of reading level or audience. Specifically, I use the pragmatic genre theories of Amy Devitt and Adena Rosmarin in order to establish complexity in the emergence and literary function of easy reader texts. Although I say that both genre theories are pragmatic, it is important to note that they are pragmatic in slightly different senses. Amy Devitt’s theory of genre, which is particularly conducive to a retrospective or historical examination of easy readers, is pragmatic in the sense that it “treat[s] facts or events systematically, with reference both to their relationship in cause and effect and to the practical conclusions or lessons which they suggest” (“Pragmatic,” def. A.adj 4). In other words, Devitt believes that all genres are effected by multiples factors or “causes.” Thus, I will use Devitt’s theory to determine the factors (or the “causes”) that lead to the emergence of the easy reader.

Adena Rosmarin’s theory of genre is also pragmatic, but in a different sense. Rosmarin believes that genre acts as a lens or critical tool which the scholar uses to “deal with matters in accordance with practical rather than theoretical considerations” (“Pragmatic,” def. A.adj 5). As I will discuss in this chapter, Rosmarin’s “practical consideration” is to use genre as a tool to find literary worth in a group of texts. For Rosmarin, genre studies do not take place in a theoretical vacuum, but exist for the practical (or pragmatic) purpose of establishing literary worth.
This chapter begins by briefly exploring the notion of genre, and differentiating contemporary genre theory from genre theory of the past. Then, I explore Devitt and Rosmarin's theories in detail. Afterwards, I present a rationale for using Devitt and Rosmarin's theories alongside one another in this study of easy readers, and conclude with information on my sample selection criteria. Voices of other genre theorists will be incorporated throughout the chapter.

3.2 Genre and Contemporary Genre Theory

Despite co-existing under the umbrella term of "genre studies," different scholars have different ways of defining genre. As such, it is almost impossible to give one definition that will satisfy all the different perspectives. Genre historian Ralph Cohen highlights just some of the ways genre has been defined by scholars:

Genre has been defined in terms of meter, inner form, intrinsic form, radical of presentation, single traits, family traits, institutions, conventions, contracts, and these have been considered either as universals or as empirical historical groupings. (Cohen 203-204)

For the purposes of this study, the treatment of genre is in accordance with John Frow, who says, "I try to stress that genres are not fixed and pre-given forms by thinking about texts as performances of genres rather than reproductions of a class to which they belong" (Frow 3). Thus, the texts under examination are treated as "performances" of the easy reader genre, rather than "performances" of other genres such as fables or comedies. Although I anticipate that few will argue with my decision to treat the texts generically as easy readers, I defend this decision in Section 3.4.
Just as definitions of genre have shifted over time, so too have the basic principles of genre theory. The three most notable progressions of genre theory are its descriptive nature, its acceptance of difference in generic groupings, and its accommodation of generic change.

Admittedly, genre scholars of the past were rightly criticized for creating rigid, mutually exclusive categories in which to quibble about the strict classifications of literature. While this characterizes genre studies of the past, Paul Hernadi asserts, “the better part of recent genre criticism has tended to be descriptive rather than prescriptive” (Hernadi 8). Devitt concurs, saying that substantial redefinitions have taken place since “the traditional notion of genre that developed after Aristotle… [which] treated genre as a formalistic classification of types and texts” (Devitt, “Integrating” 697).

While past genre scholars prescribed groupings based on similarities, the majority of contemporary scholars assert that a genre study should also consider differences and variations within generic groupings. Adena Rosmarin offers a particularly succinct and useful example of why critics look for difference in her book, The Power of Genre. She says, “by showing us how Moll Flanders is not like Pamela, Rader shows us more clearly what Pamela is like” (Rosmarin 48). In other words, contrasting various texts can be just as fruitful as comparing them. While strict, classificatory genre theory of the past would have seen no reason for examining differences, a contemporary perspective readily accepts difference as part of the nature of genres.

In addition to looking for differences and similarities within and across groupings, most contemporary critics believe that genres shift and change over time. Since new texts are always being written, and others are falling out of favour or consciousness, it seems only natural that the state of a genre should change with the literature. Amy Devitt elaborates on the phenomenon of generic change in her essay, “Integrating Rhetorical and Literary
Theories of Genre” saying, “Were genre to be defined as static categorization or static textual features, genre would hold little significance for today’s theorists, whether from literature or rhetoric-composition” (699). Devitt believes that genres are dynamic and “are not the static conserver of traditional form that the old definition of genre might imply” (Writing Genres 136).

3.3 Amy Devitt

Now that readers have a better grasp of the definition of genre and contemporary genre theory, the specific theorists can be explored. Amy Devitt asserts that her rhetorical-based genre theory, with its consideration of multiple factors, can be applied to both literary and rhetorical texts:

In some ways, such a functional, rhetorical, and social view of genre, based largely on the study of discourse operating in a pragmatic world, seems foreign to an understanding of literary genres, works of art whose functions often seem either obvious or irrelevant...But this social and rhetorical theory of genre, drawing heavily from the questions, issues, and objects of study of rhetoric...offers new insights into the traditional literary genres. (“Integrating” 698)

The veracity of a rhetorical-based genre theory bringing “new insight” to literary texts will be evident in Chapter Five of this thesis. Here, the application of Devitt’s theory to the easy reader’s publication history will bring some much-needed insight to the texts’ emergence.

Discussion the history and formation of genres, Devitt says that scholars should explore “the complexity of genre’s relationship to historical antecedents, changing contexts,
and individuals’ choices” (Writing Genres 123). Using genre studies conducted by other scholars as evidence, Devitt proves that these three factors effect all genres, albeit in varying degrees. While the effects of these factors can be explored in the present, they can also be explored in the context of a genre’s birth. Rather than offering a one-dimensional account of emergence, Devitt’s theory allows scholars to discover a multitude of contributing factors under the three categories of antecedent texts, social context, and the impact of individuals. Thus, only when easy readers are viewed as a genre, and subsequently examined using Devitt’s genre theory, can the true complexity of the texts’ emergence be revealed.

It is important to understand the complexity of the easy reader genre’s emergence because, as Devitt says, “Genres have long been seen metaphorically as having lives; being born, growing, and sometimes dying...scholarly histories of specific genres abound” (88). However, no such scholarly history on easy readers currently exists. In the past, scholars and historians have only offered superficial explanations of emergence, and their explorations were never theoretically framed. Thus, after the easy reader’s publication history is narrated in Chapter Four of this thesis, Chapter Five will consider the narrative through Devitt’s theoretical lens in order to pinpoint specific factors of emergence and illuminate the complexity of the process.

At this point, is important to note that Devitt’s genre theory will largely be used to examine the history and emergence of easy readers. However, as I will discuss later in this chapter, Devitt’s theory will also play a role in the close reading to take place in Chapter Six. In addition to offering insight into the emergence of genres, Devitt’s theory also helps illuminate a paradox that makes a genre like easy readers successful and long-lasting.
3.4 Adena Rosmarin

Moving away from the theory that will frame the historical discussion in Chapter Five, readers are now asked to shift their attention to Adena Rosmarin’s theory, which will shape the close reading in Chapter Six. Adena Rosmarin believes that “genre is most usefully defined as a tool of critical explanation, as our most powerful and reasoned way of justifying the value we place or would place on a literary text” (49). In contrast to Devitt, who views genre as the product of many different historical, cultural, and societal factors, Rosmarin views genre as a tool that critics can use to help articulate literary worth; she does not believe that genre is inherent in a text, or that a text can only be examined as belonging to one genre. She asserts, “a genre is chosen or defined...to serve a pragmatic end. It is meant to solve a critical problem, a problem that typically involves justifying the literary text’s acknowledged but seemingly inexplicable value” (49-50). In other words, Rosmarin’s theory asks the question, “How valuable is this [text] when explained in terms of this genre?” (49).

For Rosmarin, the ultimate aim of a genre study is to prove the literary worth of texts, or more specifically, “show them to be more artful and more profound than they have seemed in the readings already recorded in their interpretive history” (57). This is a most fitting purpose for Chapter Six’s close reading since most of the texts’ “interpretive history” (or the past critical writing on the texts) has failed to note the literary value of the deceptively simple books. Conversely, the critics and reviewers who do state the literary potential of the genre fail to provide any textual evidence to support their claim, never mind an intensive close reading.

Perhaps one of the most controversial aspects of Rosmarin’s theory is the amount of power she gives to literary critics, allowing them to assume any generic lens of their
choosing in their analyses. She discusses the issue of generic application in the following quotation:

Which genre we choose is accordingly a question not of intrinsic rightness but of pragmatic purpose: What is our suasive goal? The answer traditionally and currently given by our discipline is readily at hand: to make a reasoned sense of the text and, what is in effect the same, to justify or raise its value. (56-57)

Since the generic lens is chosen to meet the critic’s needs, and not the inherent qualities of the texts, Rosmarin gives the critic utmost responsibility and power. Some critics find this troubling. John Frow, for instance, says that “we cannot conclude, as Rosmarin’s nominalist argument would seem to suggest, that interpreters have license to read whatever generic form they please into a text” (Frow 109). Indeed, Rosmarin’s theory would technically allow a critic to apply the generic lens of “domestic tragedy” to an analysis of a dog food commercial, or “science fiction” to an analysis of a soap opera.

While this seems to set the stage for some bizarre critical applications, readers can rest assured that the generic application of “easy reader” is well-suited to the present study. In fact, readers need only to glance at the Literature Review to confirm that there is no argument amongst publishers, reviewers, and educators as to the existence of the label, “easy reader.” Furthermore, beyond just employing the “easy reader” label, a vast majority of material in the Literature Review explicitly refers to easy readers as comprising a full-fledged genre. For example, George Shannon uses the term “genre” repeatedly in his discussion of Arnold Lobel’s easy readers and Nancy Palmer discusses the “genre’s special requirements” (Palmer 36). Thus, I do not take advantage of the freedom in Rosmarin’s theory by applying the “easy reader” lens in my analysis.
It is also worth noting that all the texts in the sample self-identify as belonging to a group of “easy readers” (although the terminology varies slightly from book to book). The books self-identify as easy readers through their “paratext,” or the words that sit “outside” the actual story or narrative. Genre scholar John Frow defines paratext as “Blurbs, dedications and inscriptions, epigraphs, prefaces, and postfaces; internal titles, tables of contents, running heads, notes, publicity materials — all of these seek to orient the reader towards an expectation of the kind of thing this is” (Frow 105). For example, the paperback copy of *Days with Frog and Toad* self-identifies as an easy reader because it contains paratextual information on levelling, tips for parents on how to help their children through the reading process, a brief description of the “I Can Read” imprint, and a list of other titles that newly independent readers can enjoy. Thus, the paratext, in addition to the critical acceptance and generic use of the term “easy reader,” justifies my decision to assume the generic lens.

In conclusion, Rosmarin’s theory is best-suited to this study of easy readers because it helps articulate “seemingly inexplicable value” (Rosmarin 50). The pragmatic aim of explicating literary value helps fill a gap in the current scholarship, and re-shape popular thought about easy readers.

### 3.5 Rationale

As readers have seen, Devitt and Rosmarin do not fully agree in their conceptions of genre. The present section explores this theoretical discrepancy, and argues that the chosen theories actually share a surprising similarity, and are most conducive to proving this thesis’ research statement.

Amy Devitt explicitly takes issue with Rosmarin’s theory and shows particular concern for the amount of responsibility that Rosmarin imparts to the critic. She says,
“defining genre as a critical tool makes the critic all-powerful” (“Integrating” 702). John Frow agrees with Devitt, calling Rosmarin’s philosophy “a radical statement of...dependence on genre schemata on our [critics’] uses and interpretations of texts” (Frow 102). Devitt goes on to assert that “the critic and her aim to justify literary value are not the only powerful participants in genres; the aims of the writers and the needs of the cultural context must also be taken into account” (“Integrating” 703). Admittedly, Rosmarin does not pay enough attention to extra-textual considerations like cultural context. While this would be problematic if I were only considering Rosmarin’s perspective, my incorporation of Devitt’s perspective seems to assuage the problem of the all-powerful critic; after all, Chapters Four and Five of this thesis are solely concerned with situational, cultural, and historical factors. As such, a balance is struck between the two perspectives and the analysis becomes substantially more well-rounded than if only one theory was employed.

Further remedying the seeming disconnect, Devitt admits that there are times when the literary critic should assume a more prominent role in a genre study. She writes, “Of course, that privileging of the critic makes sense for scholars of literature who are most concerned to contribute to the literary critic’s interpretative range” (703). Since part of this thesis’ aim is to contribute to the existing “interpretative range” (or what Rosmarin labels the “interpretive history”) of easy readers, my use of Rosmarin’s theory seems more justified than it would in an analysis of an oft-examined genre.

While Devitt and Rosmarin disagree on the power of the critic, this ends up being a comparatively small discrepancy. Surprisingly, both make very similar arguments on the fundamentally paradoxical nature of genre. First, Rosmarin asserts that critics must simultaneously view the texts in a generic grouping as both similar and different. She compares the critic’s task to that of a metaphor, a literary device that defines a thing both by
what it is and what it is not; the critic is responsible for “displaying both the extensiveness of his metaphor’s power, showing how it subsumes surprisingly many poems [or texts], and its intensiveness, showing how it unfolds a given poem [or text] in surprising detail” (47).

Instead of using the words “difference” and “similarity” to describe the paradox of genre, Devitt uses the terms “flexibility” and “stability.” She says,

As genres change, they need to maintain both stability and flexibility –
stability to ensure that the genre continues to fulfill its necessary functions,
flexibility to ensure that individuals can adapt the genre to their particular situations and their changing circumstances. (Writing Genres 135)

Really, Devitt’s paradoxical definition of genre is not so different from Rosmarin’s; this becomes especially obvious when one considers that flexibility is defined by an accommodation of difference, while stability is typically achieved through sameness or the reoccurrence of similar incidents. While Devitt asserts that an effective genre balances flexibility and stability, Rosmarin asserts that an effective genre has to contain texts that are both similar to, and different from one another.

In addition to illuminating literary depth, the close reading in Chapter Six will prove how Devitt and Rosmarin’s similarly paradoxical statements operate in easy readers. For now, however, readers hopefully see that the two theories employed in this thesis are actually allied in their paradoxical notions of genre. This does not negate the theorists’ dispute on the role of the critic, but an agreement on the fundamental nature of genre ultimately ensures that the two theories are compatible enough to use in the same analysis. Rosmarin and Devitt’s theories effectively unite to illuminate complexity in both historical emergence and literary depth.
3.6 Sample Selection Criteria

In the 1964 edition of *Children and Books*, May Hill Arbuthnot chose not to list easy readers in her “Trends in Children’s Books Today” section. She justified her decision by declaring that easy readers were essentially primers and, more importantly, had not “stood the test of time and usage” (Arbuthnot 48). Over forty years later, easy readers have most certainly stood the test of time, and there is no shortage of texts for selecting a research sample. Shannon Maughan writes, “Today there are enough of these series to warrant their own patch of real estate in most bookstores” (40). Indeed, Barbara Barstow and Judith Riggle list almost 300 different easy reader series in their book-length annotated bibliography, *Beyond Picture Books*.

The sample of easy readers will be subject to a close reading in Chapter Six of this thesis. Following Rosmarin’s theory, I am examining a sample in order to show that the easy reader genre is capable of producing texts that are “more artful and more profound than they have seemed in the readings already recorded in their interpretive history” (Rosmarin 57). In other words, I hope to prove that the easy reader genre is capable of more literary depth than scholars have ever recognized. In order to select a sample most conducive to literary analysis, I adhered to the following criteria:

- The text had to be published by a trade publisher
- The text had to be a work of fiction identified by the publisher as an easy reader
- The text had to be written without a vocabulary or word list
- The text had to be part of a series with at least one other installment of the series available for evaluation
- The series had to each roughly represent one decade from 1957-2007
- Each text had to be generally well-received by critics
The chosen sample represents four series and a total of 20 easy readers:

- **Little Bear series** – written by Else Holmelund Minarik and illustrated by Maurice Sendak (5 texts): 1957 – 1968

- **Frog and Toad series** – written and illustrated by Arnold Lobel (4 texts): 1970 – 1979


As to the first criterion, the sample represents three trade publishers: Harper & Row (now HarperCollins), Puffin Books (an imprint of Penguin), and Candlewick Press.

Secondly, all cover and jacket material clearly indicate that the books are part of easy reader imprints. The **Little Bear** and **Frog and Toad** series are identified as “I Can Read” books, the **Fox** books are identified as “Puffin Easy-to-Read” books, and the **Houndsley and Catina** books belong to the “Candlewick Sparks” line of easy readers.

Since the sample will be subject to an intensive close reading, I wanted to select books most conducive to a literary analysis, and therefore written with the least amount of linguistic restrictions. As such, I consulted interviews to ensure that vocabulary lists were not used to create any of the texts. In reference to the **Little Bear** series and the beginnings of the “I Can Read” imprint, former Harper editor Susan Hirschman says “we did not have what textbook people sometimes call a ‘controlled vocabulary.’ We had common sense” (Marcus, “An Interview with Susan Hirschman,” 164). When interviewer Lucy Rollin asked Arnold

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2 Thanks to the beginning of the **Little Bear** television series in 1995 (produced by Nickelodeon) there has been a surge of new titles featuring the charismatic cub. However, these books are part of an entirely new publishing endeavour, a series called “Maurice Sendak’s Little Bear.” My search revealed that at least twenty-four of these books were published between 2002 and 2004. None of them are actually illustrated by Sendak. In an interview with New Hampshire Public Radio, Minarik said “The stories were drawn from the videos” and “I wrote possibly one out of every four of the TV stories.” Since it is unclear how much influence Minarik has had over the new **Little Bear** books, and because these titles seem to have originated solely out of the television series, they are not considered here as part of the sample.
Lobel if he used a vocabulary list in any of his “I Can Read” books, Lobel replied, “Harper’s would never dream of that. I have total freedom, and the only harness is that I am aware as I work that I’m doing a reader. If there are words I can’t find a comfortable substitute for, I’ll put a big word in” (Rollin 193). Likewise, when discussing the Candlewick Sparks imprint, editorial director Liz Bicknell says, “We’re not using controlled vocabulary” (Bean).

Although I could not find any information absolutely confirming that James Marshall did not use a vocabulary list in his Fox books, the inclusion of words like “neighbor,” “handsome,” “cigars,” “underpants,” and “hog-wild” implies that he did not. Furthermore, interviews with editors Phyllis Fogelman and Regina Hayes suggest that using a word list would not have been congruent with Marshall’s writing style.

In addition, since most easy readers range between 600 and 2000 words, I looked for books that were part of a series in order to maximize the amount of text for analysis. Series trace the same group of characters throughout several short stories, making it easier to verify the presence and continuity of patterns in language, characterization, etc. I also felt that a selection of series spanning the last fifty years could ultimately strengthen the validity of my argument; I did not want my conclusions to be attributed to a style of easy reader indicative of a certain time period. Finally, I consulted the vast majority of all the reviews for the sample, and found that all the books were well-received by critics, if not highly recommended. Again, I felt that books reviewed positively in authoritative publications like The Horn Book Magazine and Publishers Weekly would be more likely to contain literary depth than books that received poor reviews. When originals of the reviews were difficult to locate, I consulted author entries in the Children’s Literature Review. This is a valuable print resource that often provides full text reviews from a variety of respected publications.
Although I have been engaging with easy readers since the moment I could decode, and I have a fairly firm grasp on the various series in print, I did not just rely on my own knowledge in the sample selection. I also consulted professional resources, such as Rebecca L. Thomas and Catherine Barr’s *Popular Series Fiction for K-6 Readers: A Reading and Selection Guide* which was particularly helpful. This comprehensive resource gives a good synopsis of many easy reader series, as well as listing all titles and publication dates. I also looked at recommended lists of easy readers in various professional publications (Palmer; R. Smith; Suen; Lempke) in addition to Barstow and Riggle’s comprehensive annotated bibliography featuring 2495 easy reader titles.
4 ENTER ONE LITTLE BEAR AND ONE BIG CAT: THE
PUBLICATION HISTORY OF THE EASY READER

4.1 Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, genre theorist Amy Devitt believes that “Genres have long been seen metaphorically as having lives; being born, growing, and sometimes dying” (Writing Genres 88). This chapter establishes a historical narrative of the events surrounding the birth of the easy reader genre. Much of the existing scholarship implies that the easy reader’s birth was relatively neat and tidy; The Cat in the Hat and Little Bear were published in 1957, these books marked the beginning of a new kind of literature, and many books followed. However, an examination of numerous primary and secondary sources suggests a much more complex series of events. In fact, it can be argued that no children’s literature scholar, critic, or historian has yet to synthesize all of the historical information, or, to use Devitt’s terminology, relay a complete account of the easy reader’s birth. This chapter endeavors to fill this crucial gap in the scholarship by enlisting historical sources that the vast majority of critics have either used selectively, or completely ignored. It is important to note that this historical examination focuses only on American sources and works of literature.

To be fair, those who have written on easy readers in the past may have simply been unaware of the available information. I discovered many of the most useful sources in bibliographies of antiquated, out-of-print children’s literature surveys, and some by pure happenstance while reading interviews and articles on seemingly unrelated topics. Not only are sources difficult to locate, they usually contain only bits and pieces of relevant information. As a result of this “scattered” history, the following narrative references many different sources and may seem choppy at times; clarity and flow is admittedly one of the
biggest challenges in synthesizing small bits of information from approximately two dozen sources.

For the sake of organization, the following narrative is roughly organized around the often-cited easy reader birth year of 1957. The first section examines some pre-1957 calls for better beginning reading material, and considers the possibility that easy readers existed as early as 1906. The second section briefly examines the historical climate of 1957 before looking in detail at the publication history of both *The Cat in the Hat* and *Little Bear*. The third and final section considers critics’ responses to the easy reader trend in the years directly following 1957, and looks at how the trend expanded into the 1960s. In sum, this chapter synthesizes information from a wide variety of historical sources and, more importantly, illuminates many aspects of the easy reader’s publication history that critics have frequently misinterpreted or overlooked.

### 4.2 Pre-1957

In a retrospective *Horn Book* article, Ursula Nordstrom said, “the fifties saw much original and experimental publishing. New paths were found and followed” (Nordstrom 708). Indeed, before the publication of what are often cited as the first easy readers, two very important critics were calling for “new paths” to be taken in books for beginning readers.

The mid-1950s marked a time of intense debate over reading instruction in the United States. Theodor Geisel accurately referred to the debates as the “tremendous ruckus going on about the reading problems of American school kids” (qtd. in Nel 171). While this “tremendous ruckus” was over many facets of reading instruction, one main concern was the literary quality of primers. In a 1954 *Life* magazine article, John Hersey expressed nothing short of disgust for the current state of instructional texts. He wrote:
Little boys trying to learn to read in Fairfield witness a lone boy named Tom condemned to play endlessly, and with unnatural control of his manners, with two syrupy girls, Betty and Susan. This frightful life that poor Tom leads is bound up inextricably with the crucial first stages of reading. (147)

Rudolf Flesch echoed this sentiment in his 1955 publication, _Why Johnny Can’t Read_. Although Flesch’s main purpose was to champion phonics, he also argued that trade publishers failed to create beginning reading material that children could enjoy independently. At one point, Flesch recounts a school meeting he attended, and a mother who asked, “Why is it…that my two boys, who are in first and second grade, never bring home any library books that they can read themselves?” Flesch describes the school librarians’ response;

There wasn’t much the librarian could say in answer to that question. She just didn’t have any such books in her library, she said. Publishers didn’t put out any books simple enough for first and second-graders to read alone. Sorry, but that lady and her husband would just have to go on reading aloud to their boys. (79)

Flesch goes on to lambaste primers, or the only books he believed young children could decode and comprehend independently. He says, “These little somethings are not stories. They are artificial sequences of words – meaningless, stupid, totally uninteresting to a six-year-old child or anyone else” (84). Flesch’s tone remains critical and blunt throughout his book, and at times borders on the extreme; Geisel effectively parodied Flesch’s radical calls for change in a 1957 _New York Times_ essay, “How Orlo Got His Book.” Since Flesch’s _Why Johnny Can’t Read_ was published in 1955, and Hersey’s _Life_ article came out in 1954,
this suggests that the demand for higher-quality early reading material began at least three years before 1957, or the year that the first easy readers were published.

However, some critics opine that easy readers existed well before even Hersey or Flesch’s publications. New York Times reviewer Ellen Buell claims that two books, Ruth Tensen’s *Come to the Zoo* and Mabel La Rue’s *Tiny Toosey’s Birthday* “beguile[d] the tedium of beginning readers” and were pioneers of the easy reader genre. The two books Buell refers to are now out of print, but *Come to the Zoo* was originally published in 1948 by Chicago, Reilly, & Lee Co., while *Tiny Toosey’s Birthday* was published in 1950 by Houghton Mifflin. Interestingly, I noted that the cover of *Come to the Zoo* reads “An Easy-to-Read Photograph Book for Children,” and the cover of *Tiny Toosey’s Birthday* boasts large, leaded font reminiscent of the contemporary easy reader’s design.

Similarly, in *Books for Beginning Readers*, Elizabeth Guilfoile includes a relatively long list of books published before 1957 (and in some cases, before 1950) that she classifies as easy readers; she says, “While the production of beginning books is presently a deliberate movement, good stories have been told for many years to satisfy some of the needs of beginning readers” (6). In total, Guilfoile lists twenty easy readers with pre-1950 publication dates. The earliest book that she labels an easy reader is Madge A. Bigham’s *Merry Animal Tales*, published in 1906.

Holding perhaps the strongest opinion about the easy reader’s origin, David C. Davis asserts that the *Here and Now Storybook* (1921) by Lucy Sprague Mitchell marked “the advent of the simple factual child experience book” (Davis 677). He expands on his claim, saying:
These early writers [he lists Sprague Mitchell, Margaret Wise Brown and several others] were the trail blazers who controlled the length of the sentence, stressed the repetition of words and phrases, and in general, blended picture writing with a minimum of alphabetical texts for the beginner reader. (677)

Together, Buell, Guilfoile, and Davis mention almost two dozen pre-1950 titles that they believe qualify as easy readers. While Chapter Five will debate the veracity of these claims, it is puzzling that none of the easy reader scholarship has ever considered, let alone mentioned, these assertions on the possible pre-1957 birth of the easy reader. Thus, it can be argued that contemporary critics have either ignored, or been unaware of the historical evidence suggesting that the roots of the easy reader may run farther back than 1957, and even 1950.

4.3 1957

Before discussing the seminal easy reader publications of 1957, it is worthwhile for readers to generally understand the climate of the time. As previously discussed, Margaret K. McElderry labels the period “the Why-Johnny-Can’t-Read era. A great debate over theories of teaching reading arose” (McElderry 89). However, in addition to the furor over reading instruction epitomized by the likes of John Hersey and Rudolf Flesch, many other cultural and social developments were taking place. Notably, the post-World War II baby boom meant the creation of more young readers than ever before. Philip Nel summarizes the statistics in The Annotated Cat;

In 1952, women in the United States gave birth to 3.9 million children. Those children turned five in 1957, the year The Cat in the Hat came out. In 1957,
the peak year of the baby boom, 29.1 million children were in kindergarten and elementary school. (Nel 10)

Indeed, the effects of the baby boom were still being felt in 1964 when there were 60 million children under the age of fourteen in the United States ("He Makes C-A-T" 72).

In addition to the baby boom, Americans were also feeling the effects of Russian space advancement when Russia launched the first of several Sputnik missions on October 4, 1957. A December 1957 Time magazine article entitled “The Grinch & Co.” succinctly sums up the popular interest in Russia’s achievement; “This year the totniks are going mad for Sputniks” (76). While the direct influence of Sputnik on the emergence of easy readers will be discussed in Chapter Five, readers need only presently note the technological progress as part of the historical climate of 1957. Because in the midst of the space race, the heated debates over beginning reading material, and a never-before seen population explosion, a book emerged that many would call the first easy reader in American children’s literature history: The Cat in the Hat.

The vast majority of children’s literature scholars and historians claim that the impetus for Dr. Seuss’ feline phenomenon can be found in John Hersey’s 1954 Life article, “Why Do Students Bog Down on First R?” Scholars frequently reference the following quotation in which Hersey suggests a remedy for boring basals;

Why should they [beginning readers] not have pictures that widen rather than narrow the associative richness the children give to the words they illustrate – drawings like those of the wonderfully imaginative geniuses among children’s illustrators, Tenniel, Howard Pyle, ‘Dr. Seuss,’ Walt Disney? (148)

Although much of the current literature implies a direct link between John Hersey and Theodor Geisel (or Dr. Seuss), it was William Spaulding, then-editor of Houghton Mifflin’s
Education Division, who acted as a middle man and broached the topic of creating an easy reader with Geisel. The comprehensive biography by Judith and Neil Morgan, *Dr. Seuss and Mr. Geisel*, provides some important details on the oft-neglected exchange. The Morgans report that the first seeds of *The Cat in the Hat* were planted in the spring of 1955, when Geisel saw a peculiar woman on the Houghton Mifflin building's elevator who wore "a leather half-glove and a secret smile" (Morgan and Morgan 153). Even more influential to the Cat's beginnings was a dinner conversation between Geisel and Spaulding:

Spaulding proposed that Ted write and illustrate such a book for six and seven-year-olds who had already mastered the basic mechanics of reading. 'Write me a story that first-graders can't put down!' he challenged. Though more polite than committed, Ted was intrigued with Spaulding's insistence that the book's vocabulary be limited to 225 words, and agreed to take Spaulding's word list home and 'play with it.' (155)

However, Geisel was already working for Random House at the time of Spaulding's challenge. As such, Spaulding had to ask the head of Random House, legendary publisher Bennett Cerf, for permission to commission Geisel to write a primer for Houghton Mifflin. Cerf agreed, under the condition that Random House would publish the trade book edition and Houghton Mifflin would publish the textbook edition (154). As pictured in *The Annotated Cat*, The Random House version was published in its now-classic red, white, and blue color scheme, while the Houghton Mifflin educational edition was published in rather dismal shades of orange and brown (Nel 9).

*The Cat in the Hat* was published on March 1, 1957, and while it obviously found a massively successful audience as a trade book, it never flourished as a textbook or basal. In a June 2, 1958 issue of *Publishers Weekly*, it was reported that *The Cat in the Hat* had sold
over 205,000 copies “with Random House still filling orders at the rate of 2500 copies a week” (“Beginner Books” 117). The article also discussed the formation of the Beginner Books imprint. Started by Geisel, his wife Helen, and Bennett Cerf’s wife Phyllis, Beginner Books emerged directly out of the success of *The Cat in the Hat*, and employed strict word lists in the creation of all their books:

For the Beginner Books editorial board, the initial problem was to systemize and formulate Dr. Seuss’ methods in writing *The Cat in the Hat* so that other authors could be guided in writing books for the line. To this end, Mrs. Cerf and the Geisels culled seven widely-used first-grade reading textbooks and drew up a list of words used in all seven. (117)

Beginner Books was extremely well-received and profitable and was soon bought by Random House. Later, “Phyllis [Cerf] finally bowed out of Beginner Books to start two series of her own: Step-Up Books…and Take-Along Books” (Cerf, *At Random* 155).

While the easy reader scholarship often fails to trace the journey from Hersey’s article to the publication of *The Cat in the Hat* and formation of Beginner Books, it even more frequently fails to note the varied critical reactions to *TCITH*’s publication. A survey of primary sources in the form of reviews and articles from the late 1950s and early 1960s shows that some immediately embraced the book as revolutionary, while others were not as laudatory.

Only nine months after the Cat’s debut *Time* wrote, “Seuss is one of the pioneers in a new children’s field: books for beginning readers” (“The Grinch & Co” 75). Likewise, Ellen Lewis Buell of the *New York Times* wrote, “A year ago last March there appeared a thin, red-white-and-blue volume which immediately made publishing history.” The most notable thing about these comments is not their content, but their timing; *TCITH* was being hailed as
a major breakthrough both for young readers, and for the children's literature world only a short time after it was released.

However, not all critics received *The Cat in the Hat* so warmly, or felt it was revolutionary. As Philip Nel reports, *Horn Book* reviewer Heloise P. Mailloux took issue with the glaring “For Beginning Readers” label on the book’s jacket and cover. David C. Davis gave the book its frostiest appraisal in “What the Cat in the Hat Begat,” an *Elementary English* article published in 1962. Davis labeled *TCITH* a “trade-text,” a term of his own invention denoting a stilted, artless basal masquerading as an authentic piece of literature. Furthermore, he also asserted that “A *Cat in the Hat* has begat something more than a flourishing publishing venture. It has made the profession aware of how easily dead-end paths can be trodden.” Davis feared that such “trade-texts” could eventually take over the children’s book world, and dramatically proclaimed, “Cats are said to have nine lives and with the fertility of these present trade-text cats, bears, rabbits and sundry we fall heir to a problem equal to the Asiatic overpopulation” (Davis 746). Considering Davis’ harsh comments towards the easy reader and his ailurophobic assessment of Seuss’ feline protagonist, it is surprising that “What the Cat in the Hat Begat” is never mentioned in the literature on easy readers, or the Seuss sources.

In “How Orlo Got His Book,” published on November 17, 1957, Seuss implied that creating easy readers was inextricably tied up with the use of a word list; “Since *The Cat* I’ve been trying to invent some easier method. But I am afraid the above procedure [drafting and re-drafting using a word list] will always be par for the course. At least it will be just as long as the course is laid out on a word list” (qtd. in Nel 169). In fact, three months before Seuss made that comment, a book for beginning readers was released that followed no such “course
laid out on a word list.” This book was Little Bear, and it was the other seminal easy reader publication of 1957.

As advertised in the June 1957 issue of The Horn Book Magazine, Little Bear was published as the first “I Can Read” book by Harper & Row on August 21, 1957. But, like the creation of Seuss’ book, Little Bear’s journey to publication was much more complex than most critics describe. Perhaps the best place to begin is the relationship between legendary Harper Children’s Books editor Ursula Nordstrom, and prominent American children’s librarians. Although a fair amount of information is available on Nordstrom, the importance of her relationship with the library world, and its impact on the emergence of easy readers is mentioned very briefly, if ever, in the current scholarship.

Several critics and historians have noted the strong relationships between children’s editors and librarians that flourished in early-to-mid twentieth-century America. As Margaret K. McElderry says, librarians played a substantial role in the formation of children’s publishing; “the librarians urged the designation of special editors whose sole responsibility would be to secure and develop books for young readers. These editors and librarians naturally formed strong friendships of great mutual benefit” (McElderry 86). Time magazine supports McElderry’s claim, remarking that “there appears to be a bond of rare sympathy between them [children’s editors] and such organized groups as the American Library Association” (“The Grinch & Co.” 75). Furthermore, “The Future of Children’s Books,” concluded that “From their [the editors’] responses it is quite clear that librarians’ requests for a book or type of book influence decisions more than teachers’ requests” (Jenkins 504). Ursula Nordstrom was certainly no exception to these claims of strong relationships between editors and librarians. William C. Morris, who was Director of Library Promotion and Advertising at Harper in 1995, conducted an interview with The Horn Book
and discussed his forty years of employment with the publisher. He told interviewer Leonard S. Marcus, “Ursula would go to the ALA conferences on her own – walk the aisles, meet librarians, get ideas for books, and talk about those she was editing. She worked the field” (Marcus, “An Interview with William C. Morris,” 40). Morris also relays what is now a fairly well-known story about the “I Can Read” imprint originating in a library;

Also during the 1950s, Virginia Haviland, the children’s coordinator at the Boston Public Library, told Ursula about the children who came up to her saying: ‘I can read, I can read! What do you have for me?’ Virginia told Ursula that all that the library had for those children were primers – and they were so dull. (40-41)

Many other critics paraphrase this story; for example, Barbara Bader says that Virginia Haviland reportedly told Ursula Nordstrom “that the library stocked readers, deficient as they were, because children liked to show their parents, Look, I can read” (Bader 499). Sally Lodge cites a specific date for the incident, saying that Haviland heard “the triumphant cry of a small boy – ‘I can read! I can read!’…around 1955” (Lodge 33). If Lodge’s 1955 date is accurate, this would mean that Haviland and Nordstrom’s dialogue about new beginning reader fare took place around the same time that Spaulding challenged Seuss to write “a story that first-graders can’t put down” (Morgan and Morgan 154).

Although the anecdote about “I Can Read’s” origins has been told in retrospect by former Harper employees and children’s book scholars, there has never been any historical record to confirm it as fact. However, I discovered a piece of data validating the veracity of the anecdote hidden away in Jenkins’ “The Future of Children’s Books.” The following response to Jenkins’ survey proves that the idea for the “I Can Read” books came from a librarian, likely Virginia Haviland: “Interestingly enough, one editor indicated that his firm
started the ‘I Can Read’ books when they found that public libraries were buying primers from textbook houses” (Jenkins 507). No critic, to my knowledge, has ever cited this piece of evidence before. My finding is particularly significant because, up until now, many critics have treated the story about the formation of “I Can Read” books as a piece of children’s literature myth. However, the data in Jenkins’ study validates this important facet of the “I Can Read” history.

Critics also fail to emphasize that Nordstrom was thinking about the “I Can Read” books before she ever received the Little Bear manuscript. Susan Hirschman worked under Nordstrom until 1964 and says she passed the Little Bear manuscript on to her boss because “I knew that Ursula had been looking for such a book to publish, I knew this was it” (Marcus, “An Interview with Susan Hirschman” 163). Morris tells a similar story, saying “Then, when Else Minarik’s Little Bear came in, Ursula thought, This is it! — and that of course was the beginning of Harper’s ‘I Can Read’ books” (Marcus, “An Interview with William C. Morris” 40-41).

Unlike The Cat in the Hat, which Seuss wrote at the urging of educational publisher William Spaulding, Else Holmelund Minarik’s Little Bear manuscript was unsolicited. In a Horn Book interview, Hirschman recounts the day Minarik first came to Harper & Row;

She said, ‘I’ve written a book that a beginning reader in the middle of first grade can read on his or her own. I know it works because I’ve taught my child and she can read it’...It was verbatim “What Will Little Bear Wear?” [the first short story in Little Bear] After Ursula read it, she waited until Mrs. Minarik had had time to get home and then called her, with me standing by. Ursula asked, ‘Do you have any other Little Bear stories?’ And Else said, ‘Oh, yes!’ And she brought in the rest of what we know as Little Bear.” (163)
Leonard Marcus situates the above incident in a *Dear Genius* footnote, saying that Minarik first brought her manuscript to Harper in September of 1956 (88).

Although several individuals discuss the arrival of the *Little Bear* manuscript secondhand, Minarik herself offers a fascinating, firsthand perspective. In an interview with New Hampshire Public Radio, an invaluable primary source that, to my knowledge, no scholar has ever mentioned or discussed, Minarik reveals that she first tried to submit her *Little Bear* stories to Random House. She recounts, “an editor came out to see me and I didn’t really get her name and I don’t think she got mine, but she said ‘Yes, if you can write about children, we’d be interested’” ("Else Minarik"). The fact that Random House, the publisher that went on to make millions from an anarchical, two-legged cat, refused Minarik’s manuscript on the basis that it did not have a child protagonist is more than a little shocking. Since Random House declined Minarik’s manuscript on the basis of its animal characters, the implication is that Minarik approached the publisher before *The Cat in the Hat* was even in production. Surprisingly, none of the easy reader literature or Seuss scholarship has ever discussed this significant piece of information, or considered the possibility that *Little Bear* could have potentially been conceived and released before *The Cat in the Hat*.

Minarik goes on to say that it was her husband who dropped off the *Little Bear* manuscript at Harper on his way to work; “there were only two editors there, Ursula Nordstrom and Susan Carr [now Hirschman], and they were immediately interested. They said, ‘Well it’s in the wind,’ and apparently it had blown down from Random House” ("Else Minarik"). Minarik obviously did not know that Nordstrom had been waiting for the right easy reader manuscript since her discussion with Virginia Haviland which took place, according to Sally Lodge, some time in 1955.
Meanwhile, Syd Hoff’s manuscript for *Danny and the Dinosaur* had been sitting on Nordstrom’s desk for some time; although it had promise, it did not fit the picture book format. Hirschman says that it was only after Nordstrom identified the *Little Bear* manuscript as an “I Can Read” book “that it suddenly became crystal clear what Hoff’s manuscript was. After that, it seemed so obvious” (Marcus, “An Interview with Susan Hirschman” 164). *Danny and the Dinosaur* became the second “I Can Read” book and was published in 1958, although Hirschman’s comments suggest that Nordstrom actually had the Hoff manuscript before Minarik’s. In any event, in a letter to Maurice Sendak dated June 2, 1972, Nordstrom noted “The day Else Minarik came in with a terribly ugly all blue crayoned dummy containing what is now Chapter One in *Little Bear*” (Marcus, *Dear Genius* 331) as one of her many memories at Harper and Row.

Nordstrom’s correspondence also suggests that a great amount of editorial work went into the production of *Little Bear*. This is just one more facet of the book’s publication that is never discussed. In a letter to Virginia Haviland on May 7, 1957 Nordstrom said, “There is not a comma and not a space between the lines over which we have not worried!” (97)

In a letter to Maurice Sendak, Nordstrom explains Harper’s motive behind publishing “I Can Read” books;

> We did the I Can Read books because children wanted good stories they could read to themselves… [they] were enormous commercial successes, as it happened, and that was very gratifying. But not one of them were done because we thought it would be a smart piece of merchandise or that adults would go for it and give copies to each other, etc. etc. They were all done for children. (155)
While most of the current literature discusses the superficial or lucrative success of easy readers, it does not discuss the passion that creators like Nordstrom had for the books. Since Nordstrom's comments come from a piece of private/personal correspondence, there seems little reason to question her sincerity.

And so, after this complex journey, *The Cat in the Hat* and *Little Bear* were both released in 1957. Since *TCITH* was released in March of 1957, and *Little Bear* was released in August of 1957, it would seem reasonable to assert that Seuss' Cat began the easy reader trend, and Minarik's *Little Bear* followed in the feline's paw prints. On the contrary, critics almost unanimously fail to recognize that both books likely had their beginnings in 1955 and were in production at the same time. Furthermore, primary sources prove that Nordstrom and her Harper team had no inkling that another publisher was also working on an easy reader. Former Harper editor Susan Hirschman says, "What we didn't know when we were preparing *Little Bear* and *Danny and the Dinosaur* for fall 1957 publication was that just a few blocks south of our office, Random House was getting ready to publish the first of its 'Beginner Books,' *The Cat in the Hat*" (Marcus, "An Interview with Susan Hirschman, 164-165).

Nordstrom seems to have intuited that *Little Bear* would always be regarded as second fiddle to *TCITH*. As Marcus writes in his stellar introduction to *Dear Genius*, "Nordstrom's sense of triumph came crashing down...when Random House launched its own somewhat similar series with a Dr. Seuss book" (Marcus, *Dear Genius* xxvi). Shortly before the publication of *Little Bear*, Nordstrom asked the following of Boston Public Library librarian, Virginia Haviland (the same children's book professional who, two years earlier, suggested that Harper publish an easy reader. Haviland went on to have an extraordinary
career as a critic, author, and Director of the Children’s Literature Center at the Library of Congress):

Would you be willing to give us a comment on this book which we would be able to use on the jacket? As you know, *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Seuss has several very impressive endorsements printed on the back of the jacket and we would, of course, like to have our book have the benefit of a few advance comments. (96-97)

While the earlier publication of *TCITH* may have motivated Nordstrom to solicit positive endorsement for the sake of competition, it certainly cannot be argued that *TCITH* motivated Nordstrom to publish *Little Bear* in the first place. Unfortunately, this is exactly what children’s book scholars, historians, and critics imply when they say that *TCITH* was the “first” easy reader. Philip Nel, one of the foremost Seuss scholars is one of the only people to recognize that *Little Bear* “had, of course, been planned prior to the publication of *The Cat in the Hat*” (Nel 10).

Critics also fail to recognize any differences in the creation of *Little Bear* and *TCITH*. As readers of this chapter have discovered, *TCITH* was a solicited manuscript written with a word list, while *Little Bear* was an unsolicited manuscript written without such formal vocabulary restrictions. Only Barbara Bader, in *American Picture Books from Noah’s Ark to the Beast Within* asserts that Beginner Books “were presented as supplementary readers with a controlled vocabulary...there was the underlying difference that I Can Reads were meant less as supplementary readers than as early reading: younger books” (499).

In sum, the historical evidence proves that, while *The Cat in the Hat* was published five months before *Little Bear*, both were really in production simultaneously. The simultaneous production of two innovative books for beginning readers, completely
independent of one another, has to be more than just coincidence. Thus, Chapter Five will consider the variety of factors that combined to spark the emergence of “an essentially new genre in American children’s literature, designed and written for children newly able to read on their own” (Marcus, *Dear Genius* xxvi).

### 4.4 Post-1957

In order to complete this historical narrative of the easy reader’s birth, it is worthwhile to briefly examine early reaction to the new trend, and how the books grew and expanded into the 1960s.

Ruth Hill Viguers remarks in the 1969 edition of *A Critical History of Children’s Literature*, that *TCITH* and *Little Bear* “were received with so much delight that the floodgates opened” (Viguers 651). Several late-1950s and early-1960s critics echo Viguers’ floodgate analogy, and discuss the plethora of easy readers available after 1957. But some historical sources show that, despite the so-called opening of the floodgate, critics felt the demand was still not being met. In 1959, Martha Olson Condit said, “for the first-grade reader and the average second-grade reader, the selection of trade books now available for independent reading is slim” (Condit 285). Elizabeth Guilfoile made a similar statement in 1962; referencing her research-based bibliography she says, “The list tends to be inclusive rather than selective because the need for these books, so long apparent, has only begun to be met” (Guilfoile v).

Others regarded the easy reader trend with suspicion and distaste, even advocating against their publication. As mentioned earlier, David C. Davis labels easy readers “trade texts” and asserts that the books could actually cause children to regress in their reading abilities:
If they [child readers] become attuned to the literary level of a controlled vocabulary and the repetitious simple ideas that can be communicated by it, how can we ever hope that they will seek those trade books which scorn the limited word list and resulting thought patterns? (678-679)

In his survey, William A. Jenkins paraphrases an editor who feared the impact of easy readers on picture book sales. Jenkins says that “An editor decried the fact that his company had a difficult time selling one of their really fine picture books to libraries because the purchasing people couldn’t decide exactly for which grade it should be bought” (507).

Regardless of critics’ love or loathing of easy readers, their success continued to snowball. Discussing the 1960s in a Horn Book article, Ann Durell said that “the sale of children’s trade books boomed, especially... ‘easy-to-read’ titles” (Durell 28). An April 10, 1961 Publishers Weekly article entitled “How Seven Publishers Design Early Readers for Children” reported, “During the last few years, more and more juvenile book publishers have increased their lists of books for beginning and early readers, and several series will be added this spring to the list of those already published” (78). The article lists nine easy reader series that were currently in existence; Harper’s “I Can Read” and “Early I Can Read,” Random House’s “Beginner Books,” Knopf’s “Read Alone Series,” Grosset’s “My Easy-to-Read True Books,” Follet’s “Beginning to Read books,” Holt’s “A Book to Begin On” and “Read it Myself,” and finally, Golden’s “Golden Beginning Readers.” This is quite a substantial number considering that the first easy readers were published only four years prior to the article. By 1967, there were, coincidentally, sixty-seven “I Can Read” titles in print (Exman 282). As Shannon Maughan reports in “Readers for Early Readers,” the late 1960s also brought more competition:
According to Random House v-p and editor-at-large Janet Schulman, the Beginner Books and I Can Read lines, which were both published only in hardcover, ran unopposed in the genre for a number of years. ‘It wasn’t until the late ’60s that Dial Easy-to-read and Macmillan’s Ready to Read programs launched.’ (Maughan 40)

The 1960s also brought some major editorial changes at Harper & Row. These changes would ultimately benefit the expansion of the easy reader genre since at least one former Harper editor would go on to publish successful easy readers. Leonard S. Marcus writes that senior Harper editor, Phyllis Fogelman, left Harper in late 1966 to become editor-in-chief of children’s books at The Dial Press (Marcus, Dear Genius 226). In an interesting twist of fate, Fogelman would end up editing some of James Marshall’s wildly successful Fox books for Dial two decades later. In 1964, Susan Hirschman, the Harper editor who helped discover Else Holmelund Minarik, moved to Macmillan and then went on to form Greenwillow books. Luckily, before leaving Harper, Hirschman discovered Arnold Lobel and commissioned him to illustrate his first book, a “Science I Can Read” title called Red Tag Comes Back. Ursula Nordstrom commented on the movement amongst her editorial team in an August 25th, 1966 letter to Maurice Sendak; “I am beginning to feel like the head of a woman’s training school. Well, at least none of them ever learned anything bad here” (ibid.). Children’s literature historians have never before discussed these lines of lineage in relation to easy readers, but they are certainly relevant. Indeed, a connection like Phyllis Fogelman’s to both Ursula Nordstrom and James Marshall proves that there is much complex and fascinating history for easy reader researchers to uncover.
4.5 Conclusion

Discussing the data of his 1965 study, William A. Jenkins said, “To the question of whether or not there will be an increase in the near future in easy-to-read books, such as The Cat in the Hat, the editors indicated by numbers of twenty-seven to fourteen that there would be such an increase” (509). After over fifty years, and the publication of thousands of easy readers, there is no denying that those twenty-seven children’s book editors were accurate in their prediction. Yet, until now, no scholar has taken on the birth of the easy reader as a central matter of inquiry. The paucity of literature that does discuss the easy reader’s history ignores many useful sources, or distorts them through selective use. Although scholars like Philip Nel and Leonard Marcus have done excellent work on individual books or series, their examinations have largely been mutually exclusive. Nel only devotes one small paragraph to “I Can Read” in The Annotated Cat, and Dr. Seuss and his feline protagonist receive only a brief mention in Dear Genius. This Chapter, in addition to being the first historical examination to synthesize all available primary and secondary sources, also sets the stage for a theoretically grounded analysis of the easy reader’s emergence. Using all the historical data presented here, and the analytic lens of Amy Devitt’s genre theory, the following chapter endeavors to discover why the easy reader emerged at the time that it did.
5  EMERGENCE OF THE EASY READER GENRE

5.1  Introduction

The previous chapter established, among many other things, that two of the United States' most successful publishers *simultaneously* and *independently* created the first easy readers in the mid-1950s. This chapter is grounded in the assertion that this phenomenon was more than just a coincidence and that several complex factors combined to catalyze the first performances of the easy reader genre.

The complexity of the easy readers' emergence is best illuminated when the texts are treated as members of one generic group and examined under the lens of Amy Devitt's genre theory. Specifically, Devitt advocates investigation into "the complexity of genre's relationship to historical antecedents, changing contexts, and individuals' choices" (Writing Genres 123). Her theory is especially inclusive because it combines perspectives from both rhetorical and literary genre studies. This incorporation of perspectives allows for the presence of several emergent factors. As such, this chapter considers the following factors of emergence as suggested by primary and secondary sources: antecedent genres and texts, contextual factors of demographics, changing educational thought, and technology, and individuals such as authors and editors. Chapter Four acts as the foundation of this analysis as it provided a synthesis of historical data not available in any other source.

5.2  Antecedent Genres and Texts

Discussing factors that combine to spark genre emergence, Amy Devitt first asserts that "the existence of prior known genres shape[s] the development of new or newly learned genres" (28). These "prior known genres" are appropriately labeled antecedent genres because their influence is palpable in a new textual grouping. Devitt finds examples of
antecedent genres in several studies by different scholars; for instance, she references a business communication study that cites military orders, advertising circulars, and printed company rules as antecedents to the circular letter (94). She also references a study asserting that the antecedent of the presidential inaugural addresses is epideictic discourse (98). Regardless of the generic grouping under investigation, Devitt asserts that “every genre echoes previous genres in some ways… no genre develops in what was previously a contextual void” (92). Since all new genres have antecedents, it is worth looking for evidence of these in sources on easy readers.

The historical data most strongly points to the basal/primer genre as an antecedent of the easy reader. Before delving into the historical evidence, it is worth noting that Devitt purports the existence of antecedent genres because “no genre responds to a unique situation, with no previously recurring participants or subjects or forums” (92). Obviously, easy readers cater to the same “participants or subjects” as primers/basals: that is, newly independent child readers. Although a shared reading audience alone suggests a generic relationship, this chapter is concerned with determining factors of emergence through application of theory to historical data.

One of the foremost indicators of a primer genre antecedent is that Geisel used a primer word list from Houghton Mifflin’s education division to write *The Cat in the Hat*; as Geisel says, “I informed a distinguished schoolbook publisher that his worries about kids reading were over forever…He handed me a tiny little list of words…I could have engraved the whole list, personally, on the head of a pin” (qtd. in Nel 171). While no word list was used for *Little Bear*, the idea for the I Can Read series came partially from primers. Readers will remember that Virginia Haviland told Ursula Nordstrom about a gap in her library collection that primers could not adequately fill. In addition to getting part of her I Can Read
inspiration from the gap left by primers, personal correspondence suggests that Nordstrom also considered primer content while overseeing the production of Little Bear. She wrote the following to Else Holmelund Minarik on December 28th, 1956:

Your feeling was that children read about other children in their school primers, and that stories about animals in their own books would be sort of dessert for them... You may be completely right. But we tried Little Bear on one six year old... and he liked it but not so well as his primer because, as he said, he preferred to read about children. (Marcus, Dear Genius 89)

These examples prove that the basal/primer genre left its mark both on the writing process and creative conception of the first easy readers.

Taking the above claim one step further, Elizabeth Guilfoile asserts that primers also had a direct influence on easy reader design. Guilfoile opines that, in terms of “page make-up,” easy readers “are patterned on the school text rather than on picture-book or story-book style” (14). However, a 1957 Publishers Weekly (PW) article entitled “Books in the Making” claims the exact opposite, saying that Harper “sought a format for the [I Can Read] books that would make them comparable in appearance to the more attractive trade juveniles, avoiding some of the deficiencies in design that often mark school readers for early grades” (73). The article goes on to say that Harper chose not to use the Century Schoolbook font “because of its association with ‘schoolbook’ format” (ibid.). Yet, despite these efforts to physically differentiate easy readers from primers, PW notes that Little Bear’s borders are “reminiscent of the nineteenth century readers” (74).

Thus, while some evidence suggests the direct influence of primers, other claims a complete differentiation between the two genres. Fortunately, Devitt’s genre theory accounts for this contradiction. She says, “we know genres by what they are not as well as by what
they are: a text participates in genres that it rejects as well as in those it accepts” (167). In other words, easy readers are related to primers both because of their similarities and because of the fact that they are not primers. Perhaps an example is needed for clarification. In an interview with Jonathan Cott, Dr. Seuss said that he was proud of TCITH “because it had something to do with the death of the Dick and Jane primers” (Cott 25). Yet according to Devitt’s theory (and likely to Seuss’ chagrin), Geisel’s easy reader is actually generically related to primers in two ways; first, Geisel’s use of a primer word list makes the primer genre a direct antecedent of TCITH. Second, Geisel relies on the primer genre to help define his text; “there were a lot of Dick and Jane devotees, and my book was considered too fresh and irreverent” (25). Conscious or not, Geisel creates a relationship between the two genres by virtue of comparing them. Since it was “rebellion against the dull primers [that]…suggested an experiment - The Cat in the Hat,” the easy reader is inextricably tied up with the genre it rebelled against (Viguers 411). The energetic cat and the docile child duo are genetically related both in spite of and because of their differences.

Devitt’s theory on genetic difference also holds true when applied to the other inaugural easy reader, Little Bear. As Nordstrom articulates, Little Bear is seemingly unrelated to primers because of the book’s animal protagonist. However, despite this difference, author Else Holmelund Minarik seems to innately sense the generic relationship between her book and a primer. Minarik feels “that children read about other children in their school primers, and that stories about animals in their own books would be sort of dessert for them” (Marcus, Dear Genius 89). This concept of Little Bear acting as “dessert” both separates and unites the easy reader with the primer; to continue the food analogy, Little Bear is part of the same “meal” as primers even though it belongs to a separate “course.”
Therefore, a theoretical application to the historical data suggests that the primer/basal genre is an antecedent of the easy reader both in spite of, and because of, textual differences.

In addition to primers, some secondary sources assert that other texts influenced the emergence of easy readers. As discussed in Chapter Four, Elizabeth Guilfoile lists twenty pre-1950 titles that she says “anticipat[ed] the beginner book movement” (1). Ellen Buell similarly lists two pre-1950 titles she believes “beguile[d] the tedium of beginning readers” before *The Cat in the Hat*. Although the majority of the books that Guilfoile and Buell mention are long out of print and difficult to find, I managed to locate nine out of the twenty-two pre-1950 titles that they mention. I felt that a brief examination was necessary before commenting on the status of these books as easy reader antecedents.

From a formal/design perspective, four of the nine titles show physical resemblances to the first easy readers. The most notable are Mary Frances Blaisdell’s *Bunny Rabbit’s Diary* and Mabel Guinnip La Rue’s *Tiny Toosey’s Birthday*. With generous leading, large type, and enjambed sentences, these books could certainly qualify as early ancestors of *Little Bear* or *The Cat in the Hat*. The books are organized in small chapters and there are never more than sixteen lines on a page. Unlike the conventional easy reader format of today, however, both *Bunny Rabbit’s* and *Tiny Toosey* are well over one hundred pages. Also similar to the conventional easy reader format, Hardie Gramatky’s *Little Toot* and Hildegarde H. Swift’s *The Little Red Lighthouse and the Great Gray Bridge* contain enjambment and large type, although an absence of leading makes these titles look more like picture books.

The other five books, Margot Austin’s *Peter Churchmouse*, Agnes McCready’s *A Day at School*, Claire Huchet Bishop’s *Five Chinese Brothers*, Madge A. Bigham’s *Merry Animal Tales*, and Ruth M. Tensen’s *Come to the Zoo* do not contain any formal features indicative of the conventional easy reader. *Peter Churchmouse* and *A Day at School* are very
long picture books with over twenty lines per page. *Five Chinese Brothers* also bares a
closer resemblance to the picture book and contains some very challenging phrases like
“extraordinary shells and fantastic algae” and “All the people were assembled on the village
square to witness the execution.” *Merry Animal Tales*, with two hundred pages of text in
standard-size font, is best-described as a chapter book. Appropriate for the third or fourth
grade reader, the book contains complex phrasing and demands better decoding skills than
any of the other pre-1950 texts. A passage like, “But something sorrowful happened one
day, for a great big gray cat came to live in the house on Madison Square; and that was
dreadful news to all the rats, I can tell you” would be inaccessible to newly independent
readers. On the other side of the continuum, *Come to the Zoo* seems much too simple to
qualify as an easy reader. With only 138 words, the text functions merely as captions under
photographs of zoo animals. There is no characterization or plot. Indeed, *I Can Read It
Myself*, an annotated easy reader bibliography published in 1965, says that *Come to the Zoo*
is “a pre-primer style text” (Heller 13).

Interestingly, three of the nine titles contained paratextual information that seemed to
identify them as easy readers. Upon further inspection, however, this information just had
the effect of basalizing the texts. For instance, the last page of *Tiny Toosey’s Birthday* tells
readers that the book was “planned for easy supplementary reading following the completion
of *With Jack and Janet*, the primer in the McKee Reading for Meaning Series.” *Come to the
Zoo* boasts that it contains “a vocabulary of forty-three words, all of which are in the pre-
primers of one of the outstanding basic reading series,” while *Merry Animal Tales* has several
pages of “Suggestions to Teachers” and “Seat Work” following the story. The fact that these
three books were deliberately written with certain basal series or basal criteria in mind
suggests that they were produced as educational resources rather than literary texts.
That being said, the subjects and themes in seven of the nine books would be suitable for easy readers. *Five Chinese Brothers* has a repetitive, snowballing plot, *Little Toot* and *Little Red Lighthouse* feature personified inanimate objects as protagonists, and *Peter Churchmouse*, *Merry Animal Tales*, and *Bunny Rabbit’s Diary* feature mischievous, child-like animals. The animal photography in *Come to the Zoo* is also appropriate to the easy reader; in fact, *Come to the Zoo* seems to be an early precursor to the 2002 easy reader *Critter Sitters* wherein photographs of animals are digitally placed into domestic scenes. However, the banal plots in *Tiny Toosey’s Birthday* and *A Day at School* would likely be considered too flat and uneventful to interest a newly independent reader.

Although some of these books may possess characteristics indicative of the easy reader, it is crucial to note that none of these books, in fact, qualify as easy readers. Amy Devitt explains that new genres are those “that may have had antecedents, but that appear not to have been perceived generically previously” (94). There is no evidence suggesting that any of these nine texts were “perceived generically” as anything more than picture books or chapter books in their time. In other words, none of the books were regarded by publishers, reviewers, or readers as a new generic phenomenon or as belonging to a distinct generic grouping.

The analysis of these titles as easy reader antecedents could be easily expanded to make up an entirely separate project, but the scope of the present chapter must be kept in mind. After a brief examination, I think it is most appropriate to call these titles antecedent *texts* rather than an antecedent *genre*. Since the individual books all relate to easy readers in varying degrees, it would be unsuitable to lump them all together under one generic label. While a more in-depth analysis could possibly unearth a suitable generic label for the titles, it is sufficient here to concisely note their connections to the easy reader genre, and recognize
their presence in the historical sources. This examination of easy reader antecedents, while admittedly small, is the first time the topic has ever been explored.

Similar to Guilfoile and Buell, David C. Davis asserts in his article, “What the Cat in the Hat Begat” that easy readers had antecedents in pre-1957 texts. As Chapter Four iterates, Davis was quite firm in his conviction that easy readers were indebted to books with a “here and now theme,” a motif first introduced in 1921 by Lucy Sprague Mitchell in *The Here and Now Storybook*. Unfortunately, Davis never defines the “here and now theme,” nor does he establish exactly how (if at all) it resonates in the easy reader. Furthermore, while Davis lists a score of prolific authors who supposedly followed in Mitchell’s “here and now” tradition and set the stage for *The Cat in the Hat*, he fails to list any specific titles. It is therefore very difficult to validate Davis’ claims or even examine them in the light of Devitt’s theory. In truth, Davis seems more intent on laying blame for the proliferation of easy readers (or what he considers poor literature) than on proving his assertions about antecedent texts.

To conclude, the historical evidence suggests that the basal/primer genre and a select group of individual titles acted as the generic and textual antecedents of easy readers. Despite any resemblances to pre-existing books, easy readers differ from their antecedents because of generic perception and, as the next section will explore, the unique contextual factors surrounding their birth; as Devitt’s theory asserts, “each genre of course differs significantly from its antecedents, for it fulfills some newly developed purpose...purposes that emerge from the significant cultural changes of the time” (94).

5.3 Contextual Factors

In addition to understanding the role of antecedent texts and genres, Amy Devitt asserts the importance of understanding “…the developing changes in ideologies, situations,
and settings that create the circumstances for a new genre” (93). Examples of contextual factors affecting genre emergence are numerous and could include “various social events as government regulations, train accidents, assassinations, and article and textbook publications” (101). Devitt stresses that “contextual factors range widely, from technological advances to philosophical ideas” (134). The historical sources on easy readers suggest at least two contextual factors that helped the easy reader genre emerge, and one contextual factor that may have helped sustain the genre.

Perhaps one of the most obvious contextual factors to foster the birth of the easy reader genre was the post-World War II baby boom. As cited in the previous chapter, Philip Nel equates Seuss’ success directly with the swell of children born in 1952. When these 3.9 million children turned five-years-old in 1957 they comprised, as Nel asserts, a rich readership for Seuss’ new kind of beginning book. However, to fully capture the demographic context of the time, one must also consider the United States birth statistics from 1950 and 1951. These children would have been six and seven-years-old in 1957, and as such, would have also encompassed the target readership of *The Cat in the Hat* and *Little Bear*. Indeed, an advertisement for *Little Bear* appearing in the June 1957 issue of *The Horn Book* explicitly markets the book to four to eight-year-olds (Little Bear) while a *TCITH* advertisement appearing in an October 1957 issue of *The Horn Book* markets the book to six to nine-year-olds (The Cat in the Hat). The age range in these inaugural advertisements affirms the need to expand on Nel’s findings and consider the American birth statistics of 1950 and 1951 as an important contextual factor.

The National Center for Health Statistics says that there were 3,632,000 births in 1950 and 3,820,000 births in 1951 (“1.1”). When these numbers are combined with the 3,909,000 births from 1952, the result is approximately 11,361,000 five to seven-year old
children in 1957. For the purposes of this generic study, these 11.3 million children represent the perfect demographic climate to receive a new beginning reading genre.

Random House publisher Bennett Cerf confirms the impact of demographics on the success of children's books in his 1960 presentation to the New York Society of Security Analysts. Discussing his company's juvenile division, he focused particularly on Beginner Books and *The Cat in the Hat*, calling the latter "an all-time sensation" (Cerf, "Bennett Cerf" 480). Cerf attributed much of his company's success to an increase in readership, saying, "An important factor in the situation is the population explosion which has already produced millions and millions of extra children. These blessed children have to have books in school and they have to get books to read when they are home" (474-475).

Considering both the statistics and Cerf's comment, it seems reasonable to assert that demographics should be counted as one of the contextual factors that contributed to the easy readers' emergence. After all, if newly independent readers had not been so abundant in 1957, the new genre may have never survived infancy. But demographics represent only one part of the contextual picture. Historical evidence also suggests that changing perspectives in educational thought helped set the stage for the easy reader.

Chapter Four discusses the works of John Hersey and Rudolf Flesch that called for a revolution in beginning reading material. Since both *The Cat in the Hat* and *Little Bear* appeared only two to three years after Hersey and Flesch appealed for more energetic, entertaining readers, it would seem that the two events are causally linked. However, while the influence of reading instruction debates is now clear in retrospect, it seems that contemporaries of the phenomenon did not feel its effects. In his 1965 study, William A. Jenkins asked forty-four editors for their opinion on the debates surrounding reading instruction; "The editors and publishers were asked whether their publishing programs had
been affected by reading controversies which occurred in the past ten years. Twenty-eight indicated that they had not” (507). On the contrary, at least one critical observer came to the opposite conclusion. In her 1963 book, *Fifty years of children’s books: 1910-1960: Trends, Backgrounds and Influences*, Dora V. Smith saw a direct link between shifting educational philosophies and the emergence of easy readers. She argued that the easy reader “had its inception in the newly aroused public concern for the teaching of beginning reading” (D. Smith 63).

This historical disagreement between children’s editors and a children’s literature critic is not particularly problematic. For one thing, the two groups held very different vantage points of the same phenomenon; editors were immersed in the process of creating individual books for individual publishing houses while critics were able to survey the entire landscape. It is also difficult for contemporaries of a generic change to see all the factors that combined to ignite the change. Amy Devitt argues that “only detailed analysis after a generic change has occurred can tease out the various influences and pressures that might have led to a change” (115, emphasis mine). Proving the veracity of Devitt’s statement, a *Horn Book* article published ten years after the editors’ comments agreed with Dora V. Smith and cited a direct link between shifting reading instruction philosophies and the emergence of easy readers; Margaret K. McElderry concluded that the “Why-Johnny-Can’t-Read era” caused a “concern that was reflected by the launching of two new series of books for beginning readers” (89). Therefore, despite one piece of data to the contrary, appeals for engaging beginning reading material helped induce the birth of the easy reader.

When considering shifting educational perspectives and the year 1957, some readers may automatically think of Sputnik, the first of several Russian satellites that was launched on October 4, 1957. Indeed, many children’s literature scholars make mention of the gangly
orb when surveying the late 1950s. Since Devitt lists “technological advances” as a potential contextual factor for emergence, it would seem worthwhile to briefly examine how, if it all, the little orb contributed to the birth of a little bear.

Published respectively in March and August 1957, *The Cat and the Hat* and *Little Bear* were obviously in existence before Sputnik and could not have possibly been influenced by a satellite that had yet to launch. Curiously, the current scholarship on easy readers never explicitly clarifies this fact, and often mixes up the impact of Sputnik with the emergence of easy readers. I believe this happens because scholars tend to confuse their assertions on the emergence of easy readers with assertions on the permanence or “staying power” of the genre; while Sputnik could not have contributed to the birth of the easy reader, historical evidence shows that it likely played a substantial role in its success. As Paul Dickson says in *Sputnik: The Launch of the Space Race*, children born between 1943 and 1960 were “raised on Doctors Spock and Seuss” (231). Arnold Lobel, one of the best and most prolific easy reader authors and illustrators of all time, published his first book, a “Science I Can Read” title in 1961. As he explained in an interview with *The Lion and the Unicorn*, he saw a direct correlation between easy readers, Sputnik, and a booming children’s book business;

I came into publishing in 1960, and the “I Can Read” series got started in 1957, with the publication of the *Little Bear* series… it was the first time anybody had done that and they had been smashingly successful. That was the same time that the Russians launched sputnik…I think that really directly led to this whole emphasis on children’s books. During ’59, ’60, ’61, ’62, the children’s book field suddenly accelerated. We all thought at that time we were turning into nothings. We couldn’t launch things anywhere because our children didn’t read properly in school. (Natov and Deluca 79-80)
An investigation of the factors that contributed to the permanence and stability of the easy reader genre goes beyond the scope of this chapter and warrants its own examination. However, because of the close chronology of events and a previous lack of clarity on the topic, it has been worthwhile to briefly consider Sputnik’s role in the context of easy reader emergence.

5.4 Individuals

While formulating her theory, Amy Devitt considers several studies conducted by different genre scholars. Discussing her conclusions on the role of individuals, she writes, “a closer look at our most detailed studies...reveals significant nuances and suggests that generic change, like all change, is affected by individuals making decisions and acting within those changing contexts” (Writing Genres 110). In other words, without the participation of individuals, demographics and shifting educational perspectives alone could not have elicited the birth of the easy reader.

Out of all the factors listed above, the majority of critical attention has focused on the individuals who played a part in the creation of the first easy readers. Unfortunately, the current scholarship lacks connectedness and integration. Philip Nel, the Morgans, and Ruth K. MacDonald have done a laudable job of examining the individuals involved with The Cat in the Hat, and Leonard S. Marcus has done the same for the individuals involved with Little Bear. Yet as the narrative in Chapter Four demonstrated, there was much chronological overlap between the two texts. As such, it seems most appropriate to examine all the individuals in one analysis. While the individuals affiliated with Random House and Harper may have been competitors from a business standpoint, they were all unknowingly working together towards a common end - to bring forth a new children’s genre. Therefore, this
section focuses on the impact of all involved individuals and does not limit its focus to only one publisher.

In her theory, Devitt asserts the importance “of particular individual’s actions.” She lists four different types of individual action that effect genres, and this analysis finds the presence of all four types in the easy reader’s emergence. First, Devitt says that “individuals may popularize social changes that lead to generic changes” (*Writing Genres* 110). This type of impact seems most applicable to John Hersey and Rudolf Flesch. These two educational critics inadvertently contributed to the emergence of easy readers by arguing for more entertaining and engaging beginning reading fare; as described in Chapter Four, Hersey pondered the uninspired illustrations in primers (*Hersey* 148), while Flesch bemoaned the “word-method-reader idiom, a language to be found solely and exclusively in the books manufactured for use with and on American school children” (*Flesch* 84). Comments like these popularized the notion of higher-quality reading material for youngsters, which, in turn, set the stage for easy readers.

Although I argue that Hersey and Flesch did not consciously contribute to the beginnings of the easy reader genre, it seems that Ted Geisel would disagree. In an essay for the *Chicago Tribune*, Geisel implies that Hersey explicitly asked him to create a new kind of beginner book. Geisel says, “Somebody...John Hersey...casually suggested in an article in *Life* that I was the type of writer who should write a first grade reader” (qtd. in *Nel* 171). However, a close examination of Hersey’s words proves no such thing. While Hersey did mention Geisel in his famous article, it was in reference to Geisel’s illustrative abilities, and not his potential as a generic innovator;

Why should they [beginning readers] not have pictures that widen rather than narrow the associative richness the children give to the words they illustrate –
drawings like those of the wonderfully imaginative geniuses among children's illustrators, Tenniel, Howard Pyle, 'Dr. Seuss,' Walt Disney? (Hersey 148)

Hersey's words certainly prove that he had an integral role in popularizing the notion of new reading fare, but they do not represent a conscious, deliberate call to Seuss to create a new kind of book. Instead, Seuss and Houghton Mifflin publisher William Spaulding would be the ones to make a conscious, deliberate contribution to the world of beginning reading.

Unlike Hersey and Flesch, who made unconscious generic contributions through their social commentaries, William Spaulding and Ted Geisel consciously set out to have a generic impact. Their actions are best described by Devitt's second type of individual contribution, wherein "individual[s] may adapt a genre to suit his or her personality or personal philosophy" (110).

As Chapter Four recounts, William Spaulding was the person who asked Geisel to write an innovative book for newly independent readers. The Morgans say in Dr. Seuss and Mr. Geisel, "Spaulding was zealous in his conviction that a lively new kind of primer could arrest growing illiteracy among children" (Morgan and Morgan 153). Spaulding impacted the emergence of the easy reader because of his personal philosophy that primers could be adapted into more engaging fare. When Geisel accepted Spaulding's challenge, he too was making a conscious attempt to adapt the primer genre into a lively new text. Indeed, a 1956 letter that Geisel wrote to Random House proves that he was quite conscious of the potential impact of his new book; "we've got a possibility of making a tremendous noise in the noisy discussion of Why Johnny Can't Read...if Houghton Mifflin Is right, we'll be plumb in the middle of a great educational controversy" (qtd. in Nel 8). Although Philip Nel attributes Geisel's positive predictions to confidence, it also seems reasonable to attribute them to consciousness. Geisel seems to have known that he would make a substantial generic impact
by tinkering with a standardized educational text. As the content of several primary sources show, Geisel usually discusses *The Cat in the Hat* in the context of primers.\(^3\) Armed with an awareness of the unrest with Dick and Jane and Spaulding’s challenge, Seuss made the conscious decision to adapt and change the primer genre to suit his exuberant style and to prove that much joy could be found in the likes of “reading material cooked up to contain 287 words, each repeated 26 times” (Flesch 128).

Unlike Seuss and Spaulding, who consciously adapted the primer to fit their personal philosophy, Ursula Nordstrom and Virginia Haviland “pursue[d] a philosophy or a system that lead to generic change” (Devitt 110). Their belief was that newly independent readers should have quality literature to read, not that the primer genre could be de-throned by a new kind of text. Haviland, who later became one of America’s most influential children’s librarians, originally contacted Nordstrom because she saw a gap in her collection; there was nothing for new readers to engage with independently for the sake of pleasure. Believing strongly that even the youngest readers deserved a quality literary experience, Haviland stated “We must all recognize that factors other than word count...contribute to making a book easy to read” (qtd. in K. Smith 746). Nordstrom’s personal philosophy seems to be in accordance with Haviland’s as she says, “We did the I CAN READ books because children wanted good stories they could read to themselves” (Marcus, *Dear Genius* 155). In a memorial article, Mary Stolz confirms Nordstrom’s philosophy as she writes “I Can Read books, to make beginning readers want to. Those were Ursula’s fancy, made fact by her persistence” (Stolz 49). Rather than soliciting manuscripts in a specific format, it seems as if Harper editorial staff just waited for the right piece to come to them. This would explain why

\(^3\) Seuss discusses the banal, repetitive nature of primers and Dick and Jane in the *New York Times* essay, “How Orlo Got His Book,” the *Chicago Tribune* essay, “My Hassle with the First Grade Language” (both published in 1957), and in an interview with Jonathan Cott.
editor Susan Hirschman reports thinking, “I knew this was it” when the Little Bear manuscript arrived (Marcus, “An Interview with Susan Hirschman” 163). In other words, Hirschman knew that the manuscript “was it” because it was in accordance with Nordstrom’s philosophy of “good books which children love” (Marcus, Dear Genius 157).

At this point, readers have seen three ways in which individuals impacted the emergence of easy readers; John Hersey and Rudolf Flesch purported social change that was conducive to generic change, William Spaulding and Ted Geisel altered the primer genre to suit their personal aims, and Ursula Nordstrom and Virginia Haviland adhered to a philosophy that lead to one of the first easy reader manuscripts. Fourth and finally, Devitt asserts that “some individuals may not intentionally be affecting the genres; they may not even be aware that their actions have any effect on the genres” (110). This best describes the kind of impact Else Holmelund Minarik had when she submitted her unsolicited manuscript “What Will Little Bear Wear?”

Minarik’s work with children as a Grade One teacher inspired her to write accessible stories for her students. She says, “If I had not taught I would never have written books like these. I would have written other books, but not books like these” (“Else Minarik”). Discussing the genesis of Little Bear, Minarik does not mention primers, word lists, or any larger generic impact that she foresaw her book having. Instead, she implies that the vocabulary in her book was merely a result of her daily exposure to youngsters; she says with some humour, “I was very used to 70 words and I was quite happy with them” (ibid.). Thus, Minarik’s manuscript was not the result of a conscious effort to effect generic change. Rather, it resulted organically out of her exposure and interaction with the reading audience.

Beyond illuminating the various types of impact individuals have on generic change, Devitt’s theory also foregrounds individuals who are not typically given credit for their
contributions. William Spaulding, for example, rarely gets credit in the easy reader scholarship for sharing his personal philosophy with Seuss and encouraging him to throw a loop into the traditional primer. Similarly, Else Holmelund Minarik’s authorial contributions are frequently overshadowed by Geisel and his Seussian empire.

Summing up the impact of individuals, Devitt says, "Deliberate or not, individual decisions not only encourage or inhibit generic change but actively create that change" (Writing Genres 135). The aim is not only to determine who contributed to the emergence of a genre, but to also understand how they created change. While all of the individuals in this section have been previously mentioned and discussed in the easy reader scholarship, the nature of their contributions have never been theoretically considered or integrated into one analysis. In the end, exposing the nature of individuals’ impact helps explain how easy readers emerged, and shows that the emergence extended far beyond the work of two authors.

5.5 Conclusion

As a result of merging both rhetorical and literary perspectives on genre, Devitt’s theory allows investigation into several factors of emergence. Applying the theory to primary and secondary sources on easy readers reveals that the primer/basal genre, disparate antecedent texts, demographics, shifting educational thought, and the various actions of several individuals all combined to spark the emergence of the genre in 1957.

The findings in this chapter are important for two reasons. First, the passage of time can greatly hinder an examination into any genre’s emergence. Devitt says that “the balance within the genre and amongst the genre, culture, and individual appears to be more complex in some large, long-standing genres than others” (120). Since the easy reader genre is
roughly only fifty years old, its history is still relatively accessible to scholars. However, it was crucial to stop and evaluate the beginnings of the easy reader now. Waiting any longer to conduct this analysis could have affected the ability to locate historical data or the veracity of the findings. The emergent factors of some longstanding literary genres like the novel are lost forever in antiquity. Perhaps more importantly, this chapter has proved the innate complexity of the easy reader’s emergence. The genre was not simply born out of a coincidence of imagination, but out of an interrelated web of dependent factors.
6 I CAN READ CLOSELY: A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF A SAMPLE OF EASY READERS

6.1 Introduction

Chapter Five viewed easy readers as members of one generic group and used Devitt’s genre theory both to determine the factors that led to emergence, and also to illuminate the complexity of the process. While this chapter continues to uncover hidden complexities and treat easy readers generically, the focus shifts from an extra-textual to a textual examination. Here, a close reading grounded in Adena Rosmarin’s genre theory will uncover the literary potential of the easy reader genre, and articulate the surprising amount of literary depth hidden in these so-called “simple” books.

First, it is acknowledged that a close reading of easy readers may illicit skepticism from those who do not think the texts are deserving of such intense scholarly scrutiny. As discussed in Chapter 1.2, several critics have commented on the literary illegitimacy of easy readers. David C. Davis’ comments epitomize those that believe the easy reader represents a mediocre mutation of textbook and trade book; “A trade book is designed to meet literary and story standards…yet the standards imposed by the trade-text have no relationship to those literary standards” (Davis 678). Joseph Stanton, while not arguing for the illegitimacy of the books, points out that easy readers “…seldom win the major children’s literature awards because they are usually thought to contain too few words to establish the literary distinction necessary to win the Newbery” (Stanton 75).

There are, however, a handful of critics who assert that easy readers are not slaves to decodability and controlled vocabulary. Elizabeth Guilfoile says that easy readers “are written as are books for older children and adults – not built around vocabulary to be mastered; they have plot, idea, theme…” (Guilfoile 3). Leland B. Jacobs concurs, saying that
the content and plot of an easy reader takes precedence over a word list; "Of course they write with simplicity; of course they write so that words in context are clear. But this is done out of respect for their content, not out of respect for a word list" (Jacobs 516). Furthermore, Jacobs points out that beginning readers should be treated no differently than those who have mastered the skill of decoding. He warns;

If a writer has before him the image of a ‘beginner’ in maturity as well as in reading ability for his audience, he underestimates his reader. Even beginning readers have lived quite a while and have collected considerable experience. They are far from being novices in matters of love, acceptance, security, affection, and approval. (ibid.)

Philip Nel also sees the importance of not writing “down” to beginning readers, asserting that “Seuss...understood that the members of his audience were not lesser people simply because they knew less vocabulary” (Nel 19). Certainly, comments from critics like Guilfoile, Jacobs, and Nel prove that easy readers should not be taken less seriously simply because of the reading ability of their audience.

Since the aim of this chapter is to prove that easy readers have the potential to function as literary works, it is most fitting that the examination should be grounded in Adena Rosmarin’s genre theory. As detailed in Chapter Three, Rosmarin believes that genre is a lens for scholars to use to reach conclusions about literary worth; “the aim is to show them [the texts under examination] to be more artful and more profound than they have seemed in the readings already recorded in their interpretive history” (57). Adhering to Rosmarin’s theory I argue that, in order to see the full literary potential of the sample, the texts must be considered generically as easy readers. Indeed, the books in the sample could also be reasonably examined under the generic lenses of fables, comedies, or
anthropomorphic tales. However, when the sample is analyzed as belonging to the easy reader genre, a genre not commonly recognized for its artistry, a surprising amount of complexity can be found lurking under the decodable surface.

For the sake of scope, the close reading will focus on only one aspect of the texts: repetition. A focus on repetition was chosen for four reasons. First, initial readings found repetition to be the most prominent characteristic of all twenty sample texts. Second, critics rarely fail to note the presence of repetition in the easy reader genre. Amy Sonheim says that “the need for repetition” (36) is one of the main challenges that easy reader authors face, and George Shannon discusses the “genre’s use of repetitive structures, phrases, and words” (Shannon 97). A New York Times book review for Fox Outfoxed also says that “regular words, tactfully repeated” are one of the hallmarks of the easy reader (J. Thomas). Third, a focus on repetition was chosen because of the challenge it offers; many would likely attribute easy reader repetition to the instillation of vocabulary before they would ever consider it a literary or artistic device. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, I chose to focus on repetition because of the fascinating way it operates in the sample. On one hand, repetition functions very differently in each of the series. While it creates a sense of security and comfort in Little Bear, for example, it also creates a sense of formality and decorum in Houndsley and Catina. Yet, despite these differences, repetition also unites the different series by functioning as a humorous device in each and every one of the twenty sample texts. This paradox of repetition is in accordance with Rosmarin who says that “the process is ultimately an unpacking of difference as well…For genre, like metaphor is powerfully persuasive not only because it leads us to perceive similarity but because it leads us to perceive that similarity in the midst of and in spite of difference” (46). She goes on to say that “certain combinations of similarity and difference are more persuasive of literariness
than others, and those that create affinities at once surprising and profound are most persuasive of all” (47). Indeed, I chose repetition as my focus because it offers a combination of difference and similarity that is especially persuasive of literary depth. Ultimately, this display of differences and similarities “creates both the impression of each individual [text’s] literariness, thereby confirming its power to resist generalization, and the impression of an irresistible genre, thereby confirming its power to define difference in the midst of similarity” (47). In other words, this chapter shows that easy readers are different enough from one another to accommodate the unique contributions of individual writers, but similar enough that they can be recognized as members of the same genre.

6.2 The Unique Functions of Repetition

The first part of this close reading looks at how repetition functions differently across the sample texts. For the sake of organization, the sample will be examined in chronological order and according to series, beginning with the five Little Bear books.

As discussed in Chapter 2.7, Sendak scholar Amy Sonheim astutely discusses the function of repetition in Little Bear. She asserts that repetition functions in three ways; it is rhythmic in that it repeats words as appositives or as predictable patterns, it creates humour, and it also acts as a framing device. Sonheim concludes that “what could have been redundant prose instead reads as a literary first reader, with varied styles of repetition” (37). While Sonheim is correct in asserting that repetition functions in a variety of ways, this analysis only focuses on the most prominent function. That is, a close reading of the five Little Bear books shows that repetition establishes a safe, nurturing world for the ursine protagonist.
When Little Bear is alone outside, repetitive phrasing subtly ensures that the curious cub is safe, even in the midst of an imaginary trip to the moon. For instance, when Little Bear searches for an appropriate launch pad for his space flight in the short story “Little Bear Goes to the Moon,” the repetitive use of the adjective “little” assures readers that Little Bear is not about to hurl himself into oblivion. The repetition is emphasized in bold font below:

Little Bear climbed to the top of a hill,
and climbed to the top of a little tree,
a very little tree on the little hill,
and shut his eyes and jumped. (LB 41)⁴

Although the effect is subtle, the repetition of “little” keeps Little Bear safe from the potential harm that a big tree or big hill could bring. This is also reflected in the illustrations, wherein the proportions show that Little Bear is, in fact, almost as big as the tree.

Later in the same story, repetition is again used to establish safe play; the terms “up” and “down” are repeated in tandem to reflect that Little Bear has, in fact, traveled nowhere. The three uses of “down” counter the three uses of “up,” bringing the cub right back to where he started;

I will jump from a good high spot,
far up into the sky,
and fly up, up, up.

Down, down he came with a big plop,
and down the hill he tumbled. (40-42)

⁴ Please consult Appendix A for an alphabetized Key explaining the sample text abbreviations. Due to the size of the sample, this information could not be included in the text.
In addition to safety, repetition also creates a nurturing environment in which Little Bear can grow and mature. Throughout the first book of the series, Mother Bear frequently addresses her son with the capitalized “Little Bear” and the lower case “little bear.” While this may look like a case of straightforward repetition in a hasty reading, a close examination shows that the capitalized version is her son’s proper name, and the lower case version is actually a loving, nurturing term of endearment:

So Mother Bear made something
for Little Bear.

“See, Little Bear,” she said,

“I have something for my little bear.” (LB 12)

In *Father Bear Comes Home*, repetition is similarly used to show reciprocity of nurturing behaviour;

Little Bear ran to Father Bear
and hugged him.

Father Bear hugged Little Bear. (*FBCH* 32)

While it would undoubtedly suffice to simply say that Little Bear hugged his father, the repetition, in addition to the obvious function of instilling vocabulary, establishes a reciprocal exchange of affection and the nurturing environment of the Bear household.

In truth, many critics and reviewers have pointed out the safe, nurturing world that Little Bear inhabits. Marjorie N. Allen’s comments aptly summarize the typical critical response; she writes that *Little Bear’s* charm lies “in the warm, comfortable portrayal of family life and the subtle communication between child and adult” (Allen 154). However Allen, like most critics and reviewers, fails to explain exactly *how* such an atmosphere is created. While some of it is likely attributed to the content of the plot or the soft shapes and
blue-brown palette of Sendak's illustrations, a close reading proves that repetition also plays a substantial role in defining Little Bear's environment. Establishing a safe, warm tone is repetition's literary function, or purpose beyond teaching vocabulary.

Interestingly, very close readers of the entire Little Bear series will notice that repetition subtly wanes throughout the books. For instance, Mother Bear does not call Little Bear by name as much or use the endearing term "little bear." This decrease in repetition is likely due to the fact that Little Bear is slowly maturing and does not require such a safe, nurturing environment. Indeed, the content of the books does support this hypothesis and suggests the passage of time. In the third book, Little Bear's Friend, Little Bear climbs "a high tree" that allows him a panoramic view of "the wide, wide world" (9). This pales in comparison in both description and illustrative size to the "little" tree in the first book. At the end of Friend, Little Bear also learns how to write, and readers are told that he will attend school in the upcoming fall (59). Furthermore, as Selma G. Lanes perceptively points out, the illustrations in the final book, A Kiss For Little Bear, show a dramatically aged Grandmother Bear (Lanes 145). The fact that repetition wanes while Little Bear grows supports my original finding; that is, that repetition is more plentiful when Little Bear is younger and requires more security and nurturing.

Like the Little Bear series, many critics and reviewers have commented on the beguiling nature of Lobel's Frog and Toad quartet. The New York Times said that the "story has not been sacrificed for simplicity" (Boudreau), and School Library Journal said that "Arnold Lobel's genius is his ability to create a wide range of tones within a simple framework" (Rev. of Days with). While these comments are unquestionably laudatory, they are also somewhat frustratingly vague. What exactly is it about the texts that create such a rewarding literary experience in such an unassuming package? The answer, as this chapter
asserts, is the surprisingly complex function of repetition. Repetition in the *Frog and Toad* books helps establish an intensely intimate bond between two amphibian friends.

First, few would debate that Frog and Toad’s relationship constitutes one of the deepest friendships in children’s literature. Their bond is so close that, at times, they seem two parts of the same entity; even a brief look at the content of the series shows that the two are almost inseparable. Beyond engaging in activities together, the duo even manages to share feelings. In *Frog and Toad Are Friends*, they sit on the porch “feeling sad together” (55) when the mail does not come, and end up “feeling very brave together” in *Frog and Toad Together* after they escape a series of dangerous episodes (51). This tight bond, which is obviously very evident in the content, is also reflected in the books’ repetitive syntax. The amphibians frequently appear together in the same sentence both because Frog and Toad call each other by name and because their names are used as speech indicators. The following demonstrates how naming a character in the midst of dialogue and in a speech indicator causes repetition;

“What are you laughing at, Frog?”

said Toad.

“I am laughing at you, Toad,”

said Frog... (*FTAF* 52)

Here, the friends are addressing each other by name, so pronouns would clearly suffice as speech indicators. In other words, it would be more than adequate to replace “said Toad” or “said Frog” with the simple, and much less redundant “he said.” There is even less of a need for speech indicators when one considers that Frog and Toad are the only named characters in all four books; since the dialogue generally goes back and forth, and the speaker names the listener in his sentence, it is more than clear who is speaking. Beyond helping beginning
readers navigate the dialogue, this repetition functions as a physical, syntactic reminder of the close bond that Frog and Toad share. The two are as united in the repetitive syntax as they are in their adventures. It is as if they cannot bear separation, even by a period or a sentence. Many, many examples of this uniting repetition exist throughout the books. Here is an example from *Frog and Toad Are Friends*, wherein the existence of unnecessary speech indicators becomes abundantly clear;

Frog said, “I wrote
‘Dear Toad, I am glad
that you are my best friend.
Your best friend, Frog.’”

“Oh,” said Toad,

“that makes a very good letter.” (*FTAF* 62-63)

Of course, even the most inexperienced reader could recognize that Frog speaks first in the above example. The subject of the sentence is a friendship letter to Toad, and Toad is the only other character in the story! Although there seems no need for the indicator of “Frog said,” its inclusion unites the two friends in the same sentence, and acts as a physical manifestation or visual reminder of their close bond.

Even when dialogue and speech indicators are absent, Frog and Toad remain united through repetitive syntax. If the plot happens to pull them in separate directions, mirrored phrasing keeps them close to one another;

Frog ran through the woods
so that Toad would not see him.

Toad ran through the high grass
so that Frog would not see him. (*FTAY* 45)
The repetitive or mirrored phrasing ensures that the two remain together, even when they are running around in completely different places. The fact that this syntactical bond will likely go unnoticed by beginning readers is not relevant here. Rather, the finding is significant because it proves that repetition has a function beyond instilling vocabulary or assisting young readers in navigating dialogue. Close reading shows that the repetitive syntax and seemingly redundant use of speech indicators has the literary effect of reflecting the content; syntactic repetition allies with the plot to demonstrate just how deeply the roots of friendship run between Frog and Toad.

Just as repetition subtly wanes in *Little Bear*, so too does it over the course of the *Frog and Toad* series. As the books progress, repetitive speech indicators are replaced with the pronoun “he said,” weakening the syntactical bond that is created when the two names appear together in the same sentence;

Toad was spinning in the dark.

“Come back, Frog,” he shouted.

“I will be lonely!” (FTT 60)

The bold use of “he shouted” foregrounds a situation where readers would normally expect to see the phrase “Toad shouted.” This happens more and more as the series progresses;

Toad leaped over

a snowbank.

“I could not steer the sled

without you, Frog,” he said. (FTAY 11)

This seems to suggest that Frog and Toad’s intense bond begins to weaken as the series progresses. The content of the books seems to support a subtle deterioration. In “The Dream,” the last story in *Frog and Toad Together*, Toad has a dream in which his self-
absorption causes Frog to shrink and evaporate into nothingness. Furthermore, in *Frog and Toad All Year*, Frog seems intent on teaching Toad independence when he falls off the sleigh in “Down the Hill.” In the final book of the series, *Days With Frog and Toad*, Toad finishes all his chores only to choose going to back to bed over spending time with his best friend. In the book’s final story, appropriately entitled “Alone,” Frog explicitly tells Toad “I want to be alone” (*DWFT* 52). Even though Frog spends his alone time thinking about how wonderful his life is, his actions are incongruent with the rest of the series, wherein the two spend every waking minute together. For what it is worth, Lobel himself has even commented on the turn in Frog and Toad’s friendship. In an interview with Lucy Rollin, Lobel was asked why he stopped writing the *Frog and Toad* books; he replied, “it…occurred to me, when I was doing the last one, that there was a certain cruelty in the relationship, in Frog being the controlling one and Toad being controlled” (Rollin 192).

The final line of the entire series reads, “They were two close friends/ sitting alone together” (*DWFT* 64). Clearly, there is no repetition and Frog and Toad’s names are never mentioned. While this could imply that the friendship has grown farther apart than ever, it could also imply a complete and total unity; the two are bonded so tightly that it is not fitting to address them using two, separate names. Perhaps, then, the times that Frog and Toad’s bond weakens in both content and repetition are only fleeting. However, these moments still prove the depth of the series. Without noting these times of unity and separation, which are foregrounded by a presence or lack of repetition, the books could read as nothing more than a collection of banal anecdotes about two anthropomorphized friends. Instead, a close reading of the repetition offers an explanation of the “previously inexplicable literary fullness” that many critics and reviewers have noted in *Frog and Toad* (Rosmarin 25).
Although a focus on repetitive speech indicators is fitting for a close reading of *Frog and Toad*, it is not appropriate for the next group of books under examination, the *Fox* series by James Marshall. Unlike *Frog and Toad*, where the vast majority of the action takes place between two characters, the *Fox* books feature a substantially larger cast. In fact, forty-four different characters populate the series with an average of eleven characters interacting in one book. As such, repetitive speech indicators are necessary for organization.

Thus far, the function of repetition has differed in two easy reader series. Repetition helped establish a safe, nurturing atmosphere in *Little Bear*, and a constant bond of friendship in *Frog and Toad*. Repetition functions differently yet again in the *Fox* series where it helps establish a non-verbal family dynamic between Fox, Mom, and baby sister Louise. Establishing a family dynamic in the *Fox* books is especially challenging because of the large ensemble cast.

Before delving into the close reading, even first-time readers of the *Fox* books will recognize that, despite regular conflict, there is much love between Fox, Mom, and Louise. When Fox is rendered blind by a tree costume he must wear in a school production, Louise maternally leads him down the sidewalk proclaiming, “You were the best tree in the whole play” (*FAS* 22). In *Fox All Week*, Louise endearingly dons a paper nurse cap and serves pie to Fox in his sick bed. Furthermore, even when Fox calls her Halloween costume “dumb,” Louise pleadingly peers up at him through the tiny holes in her massive pumpkin costume. Regardless of any declarations to the contrary, Fox also cares deeply for Louise. He frantically runs to the police station and to the hospital when he thinks that Louise has been turned into a real pumpkin on Halloween. Mom, of course, loves both her children and even manages to care for Fox in the midst of his schemes. When Louise pulls the pumpkin prank on Halloween, Mom helps Fox rebuild his sense of dignity;
“I wasn’t really fooled,” said Fox.

“I was just playing along.”

“You’re so smart,” said Mom. (FOF 48)

However, despite these instances of open affection, the Fox family depends on a cycle of unspoken communication. Perhaps the largest piece of evidence supporting this assertion is the repetition of the Fox family “look” which all three family members frequently exchange. Mom (her proper name) seems to have pioneered the look as she is the first to use it in the inaugural book of the series, *Fox and His Friends;*

“But today you must take care of

little Louise,” said Mom.

“You’re joking,” said Fox.

“I am *not* joking,” said Mom.

And she gave Fox a look.

“Come on, Louise,” said Fox. (FHF 5)

For the most part, Mom seems to use the look for disciplinary purposes. It proves to be quite effective since Fox obeys his mother immediately after receiving the look. Later in *Fox and His Friends,* Mom upgrades her stare to “serious” after Fox blatantly refuses to take his sister swimming;

“Then you will take Louise,”

said Mom.

“No,” said Fox.

Mom gave Fox a serious look.

“You will take Louise,”

she said.
“Get your suit, Louise,” said Fox. \textit{(FHF 26-28)}

By the second book of the series, Mom’s challenging stares have been repeated enough that they are a matter of convention; as the narrator says, “Mom gave Fox one of her looks” \textit{(FIL 8-9)}. On a side note, while Mom’s repeated looks are an obvious act of effective non-verbal communication, their brevity also functions particularly well in the easy reader. Since long mother-son arguments cannot be accommodated by the space restrictions of the genre, the looks quickly and effectively establish conflict and resolution. Beyond acting as a tried-and-true disciplinary measure for Mom, the look also functions as a non-verbal communication tool for little Louise. Rather than employing the look for discipline, however, Louise makes a point of peering at Fox when he acts like a lothario. Louise often finds herself mixed up in Fox’s love triangles, and she uses “the look” whenever girls are around. The following scene from \textit{Fox In Love} provides a perfect example of Louise’s “look,” and takes place after Mom forces Fox away from the television to take Louise to the park;

\begin{quote}
    “You are sweet to bring your little sister to the park,”
\end{quote}

said Raisin.

\begin{quote}
    “I love to do it,” said Fox.
\end{quote}

Louise gave Fox a look.

\begin{quote}
    “This is more fun than TV,”
\end{quote}

said Raisin.

\begin{quote}
    “Oh, yes,” said Fox.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
    “I never watch TV.”
\end{quote}

Louise gave Fox another look. \textit{(FIL 15-16)}
Here, the repetition of the look also creates a substantial amount of sub-text; Fox is lying, Raisin takes Fox’s words literally, and Louise demonstrates through her “look” that she understands both sides of the conversation. The situation reoccurs in *Fox All Week*, when Fox puts up a struggle about having to wear a tie to visit Grannie Fox. When Mom finally manages to get the tie on her son (the illustration shows her literally pinning him down), Fox and Louise set out to Grannie’s house and meet “a pretty fox” on the way;

“What a cute tie,”
said the pretty fox.

“I always wear ties,” said Fox.

Louise gave Fox a look. (*FAW* 40)

Louise’s look strengthens the Fox family dynamic for two reasons. First, Louise presumably inherited the technique from her mother. While she will repeat Mom’s behaviour, she will also modify it to meet her own needs of silently communicating with her brother. Second, the look adds a dimension of complexity to the sibling relationship between Fox and Louise. Louise loves her brother enough not to embarrass him in front of his many female interests, but she is not prepared to hide her knowledge of his schemes.

Not surprisingly, Fox also uses the family’s trademark communication tool. Like Louise, he uses the look when girls are around and he is unable to say what is actually on his mind. After he first meets Raisin in the park, Fox becomes quite keen on taking his little sister out. When Louise refuses to accompany Fox, he bribes her into submission with an onion-laden hot dog. This ends up putting Fox in a position where he must wordlessly communicate with his sister;

“There’s Raisin,” said Louise.

“Hello,” said Raisin. “I love hot dogs!”
“Oh, dear,” said Fox.

“I just spent my last dime.”

And he gave Louise such a look! (FIL 21)

Here, Fox wordlessly blames his sister for the fact that he cannot buy Raisin a hot dog, in spite of the fact that he was the one who offered Louise the treat in the first place. Ultimately, the repetition of the “look” helps establish a family dynamic based on wordless communication which, in turn, creates a rich sub-text that many would likely not associate with the easy reader genre.

In addition to the look, there are several instances of repetition in the Fox children’s behaviour. For instance, in Fox In Love, Fox says that he cannot take Louise to the park because he is too busy. However, a quick glance at the illustration shows that he is actually just watching television with a soda in his paw (7). The following day, Louise repeats this behaviour when Fox asks her to accompany him to the park. Although she says “I’m too busy,” the illustration shows that she is really just playing with a doll. Close reading of the entire series shows that this repetitive behaviour can even span two books. In Fox on Wheels, Louise has a spill while Fox is babysitting her. Taking advantage of Fox’s guilt, Louise basks in the attention that her “injury” brings;

“Are you feeling better?” said Fox.

“Not much,” said Louise.

“What can I do now?” said Fox.

“Rub my toes,” said Louise.

“Certainly,” said Fox.

“Mmmm,” said Louise.” (FOW 14)
Fox eventually learns that Louise was exaggerating the severity of her condition, and he goes on to pull the same trick in *Fox All Week*. After faking an illness to miss a rainy day at school, Fox shamelessly accepts Mom and Louise's doting concern. Readers will note how similar the following exchange is to the above incident from *Fox on Wheels*;

“Feeling any better?”
said Mom.

“Oh, no,” said Fox.

“I feel much worse.”

“Poor thing,” said Mom. (*FAW* 9)

This repetition in plot does not show a lack of originality or laziness on the part of the author. Rather, this repetition says something about the sibling relationship and depth of the family dynamic; although it is never explicitly discussed in the text, Fox and Louise clearly learn from one another.

Just as the nature and frequency of repetition changes in the *Little Bear* and *Frog and Toad* series, the Fox family “looks” and repetitive behaviour gradually ebb over the course of the nine books. This may be because, as time passes, the Foxes begin to engage in more open and explicit communication. Subtly, the content of the books support this assertion. For instance, by the eighth book, *Fox Outfoxed*, Mom no longer uses her looks for discipline. Instead, she just speaks her mind. When Mom asks Fox to take Louise trick-or-treating, Fox refuses by calling his sister’s rotund pumpkin costume “dumb.” Instead of issuing one of her signature disciplinarian looks, Mom verbally retorts “You’re so mean” (*FOF* 28).

Perhaps taking a cue from her mother, Louise becomes more verbally open with Fox in the series’ final book, *Fox On Stage*. When Fox refuses to let Louise accompany him on his movie shoot, she says “You’re so mean” instead of remaining silent or trying to negotiate a
bribe (FOS 14). This change in the frequency of repetition seems to mark a shift from a non-verbal family dynamic to a more explicit way of communication. In the end, however, a close reading shows that repetition establishes a rich family dynamic and a surprisingly deep subtext in the midst of a huge ensemble cast.

Out of all the series and texts in the sample, the two Houndsley and Catina books use repetition the most sparingly. For instance, instead of repeating actions to establish a routine, the author chooses to use paraphrasing; readers are told that Catina jogs by Houndsley’s house every morning and that the two drink ginger tea and do yoga in the evenings (Birthday 11). This is in contrast to the Frog and Toad books where repetition establishes the amphibians’ routine of drinking tea and walking through the meadow.

Since the Houndsley and Catina series just recently began in 2006, only two books are currently available for analysis. This admittedly makes it more challenging to establish patterns of repetition across the books, and creates the possibility that this close reading may have to be revised upon the release of future titles. In spite of this, a close reading of both Houndsley and Catina and Houndsley and Catina and the Birthday Surprise show that repetition has a clear and fascinating function that once again differs from the rest of the sample. Here, repetition establishes a tone of decorum and formality between the canine and feline friends. This formality may be reflective of the fact that Houndsley and Catina are from traditionally warring species, or of the fact that Houndsley is male and Catina is female. Unlike Frog and Toad, who are both male amphibians, Houndsley and Catina’s cross-gender, cross-species relationship may require more boundaries and etiquette. While Frog and Toad, in one of the more repetitious series of the sample, share a deep enough connection to simply walk into each other’s houses, Houndsley formally asks Catina if she would like to come in (Birthday 8). Furthermore, Catina formally identifies herself when she calls Houndsley on
the telephone saying, "Hello, Houndsley. This is Catina. I am sorry to bother you" (24-25). Considering that the text touts this duo as being best friends, it is more than likely that Houndsley could recognize Catina's voice, and that her formal greeting is a matter of etiquette rather than necessity. The types of repetition in the books support this hypothesis of a somewhat restrained friendship.

First, if Houndsley or Catina should ask the other a question, the respondent usually repeats part of the question in his or her answer. For instance, when Catina asks Houndsley why he is down in the dumps, he repeats her question as part of his reply:

"Are you sad because there are holes in your sweater?" she asked.

Houndsley shook his head again.

"This sweater is very old," he said.

"And moths have to eat, too. I do not feel sad because there are holes in my sweater." (Birthday 3)

This repetition creates a sense of formality. It would have sufficed for Houndsley to have simply said "No" or "That is not why I feel sad." A similar situation happens again only two pages later when Catina asks "Well, then, are you sad because you wish you were doing something else?" to which Houndsley replies, "I am never sad because I wish I were doing something else" (5).

Another kind of repetition further suggests a subtle sense of restraint in the relationship. In both books, Houndsley repeatedly has inner thoughts that are identified by italics. The majority of these thoughts begin with the refrain "Oh, dear" and they usually contain information that Houndsley is keeping from Catina. As such, the repetitive appearance of "Oh, dear" comes to signify a moment of distance between the two friends;
Oh, dear Houndsley thought, Catina is a terrible writer. What am I going to say to her? (HC 8)

This happens again in Birthday when Houndsley worries that Catina is sad, but fails to actually talk to her about it (Birthday 8). This lack of openness would otherwise go unnoticed if it were not foregrounded by the repetitive refrain of “Oh, dear.”

Lastly, the feeling of distance and formality in the friendship is further reflected by Houndsley’s repeatedly docile reaction to even the slightest conflict. His voice consistently gets softer whenever he has to disagree with Catina, or their mutual fowl friend, Bert. This repetition suggests that Houndsley is mindful of the way he interacts with even his closest friends. For example, instead of confronting Catina about her lofty professional ambitions, Houndsley lowers his voice in an attempt not to betray his frustration;

“I did not ask if your book was going to win prizes,” Houndsley said in his soft-as-a-rose-petal voice. “I asked how the writing was going.” (HC 2)

This happens again when Houndsley disagrees with Catina’s appraisal of his culinary abilities;

“You are the best cook,” Catina said.

“I do not need to be the best,” said Houndsley in his soft-as-a-rose-petal voice.

“I just enjoy cooking.” (HC 30)

While this by no means suggests that Houndsley has a secret dislike of Catina, the nature of the repetition does create a sense of formality and distance between the two chums. Unlike
Frog and Toad, who get worked up and emotional around one another without a second thought, Houndsley seems to restrain himself in order to avoid heated moments with his best friend.

While the frequency of repetition changed in varying degrees in the other sample texts, it is impossible to comment on this in a series that has yet to be completed. However, given the richness of the existing texts, it will be very interesting to see if the amount of repetition increases or wanes in future Houndsley and Catina titles.

In conclusion, this portion of the close reading had two purposes. First, it endeavoured to demonstrate how one textual aspect, repetition, can exist in all the texts while functioning differently in each series. Second, it set out to prove that repetition is a literary device, and not just a stilted means of instilling vocabulary. Repetition can create a multitude of different atmospheres, tones, and subtexts, as well as reflect and support developments in the plot and in the lives of the characters. The second portion of this close reading endeavours to prove that repetition, while functioning differently across the sample, also has the paradoxical ability to function similarly in all of the texts.

6.3 The Uniting Function of Repetition

In all four of the sample series, readers will see that repetition is the direct cause of humour. Because this section focuses on similarity rather than difference, it is significantly shorter than the first part of the close reading.

At least two critics have noted the causal connection between repetition and humour in the Little Bear series. Amy Sonheim says that "Minarik repeats parallel actions for humor" (36), while Emily Maxwell says that Mother Bear’s jokes “are in a very low key, sometimes nothing more than tiny variations in the repetitions of a question” (qtd. in “Else
Although Sonheim backs her assertion up with only one textual example, an examination of all five books in the series yields many instances of humorous repetition. In *Father Bear Comes Home*, for instance, Little Bear convinces himself that his father will return from a fishing trip with a mermaid. Despite the fact that Father Bear obviously does not have a mermaid on his person, Little Bear humorously inquires anyway;

“No mermaid?” asked Little Bear.

“No little mermaid?”

“No,” said Father Bear,

“no little mermaid.” (*FBCH* 36)

Father Bear’s repetitive confirmation is humorous because of its specificity. Little Bear is so excited about the prospect of a mermaid that if his Father did not repeat the question verbatim, Little Bear would likely inquire about the possibility of a larger mermaid. In other words, the humour would have been lost if Father Bear had simply replied “No.”

Humour also takes place in the *Little Bear* series when a repetitive pattern is unexpectedly broken. Take, for example, Little Bear’s description of his first meeting with Emily in *Little Bear’s Friend*. Mother Bear is a supportive listener throughout Little Bear’s entire re-telling, but she shows her sense of humour when she deviates from the pattern and gives an unpredictable response;

“I saw a little girl named Emily.

She was lost, so I helped her
to get home.

And now I have a new friend.

Who do you think it is?”

“The little green worm,”
The response is unpredictable because “the little green worm” is a reference from an earlier point in the story. Like the audience, Little Bear also finds this break in the expected repetition humorous. After he laughs at his Mother’s response he says “No...it is Emily. / Emily and I are friends” (26).

Discussing the *Frog and Toad* series, Kathleen Horning says that repetition is “a device that not only makes the text predictable and easy to read but also allows the author to introduce surprising, humorous elements to balance the predictability” (Horning 123). However, even the use of repetitive speech indicators, predictable as they may be, can cause laughter. Readers need only to consider the following example from *Frog and Toad are Friends*:

Toad said, “Frog,

you are looking quite green.”

“But I always look green,”

said Frog. “I am a frog.”

“Today you look very green

even for a frog,” said Toad. (FTAF 16)

Humour arises here from both the double meaning of the word “green” and the repetition. It is quite amusing to read about a frog named Frog discussing his “frogishness” with a toad named Toad.

In another instance from *Frog and Toad All Year*, repetition causes humour through statement of the obvious. In the short story “Christmas Eve,” Toad imagines a variety of tragic, terrifying scenarios when Frog does not arrive on time. Despite the fact that Frog arrives safe, sound, and clearly unharmed, Toad systematically asks him about each scenario;
“You are not at the bottom
of a hole?” asked Toad.

“No,” said Frog.

“You are not lost
in the woods?” asked Toad.

“No,” said Frog.

“You are not being eaten
by a big animal?”
asked Toad.

“No,” said Frog. “Not at all.” (FTAY 63)

Of course, these questions are unnecessary as Frog cannot be in a hole, the woods, or inside
the belly of a big animal if he is standing in front of his best friend. The fact that Toad is too
hysterically addlepated to notice the pointlessness of his questions proves very entertaining
for readers; they realize that Toad is repeatedly asking questions with blindingly obvious
answers.

While repetition is the root of many hilarious moments in the Fox books, one
particularly amusing incident actually spans the last three titles of the series. In Fox Be
Nimble, a very trying babysitting job forces Fox to run after his young charges as they float
away on balloons. In the process of trying to catch the children, Fox has a literal run-in with
his neighbour, an over-sized rabbit;

And he fell right into some mud,
tore his brand-new blue jeans,
tripped and stubbed his toe,
and ran smack into Mrs. O’Hara. (FBN 20-21)
Later in the same book, Louise has an eerily similar accident involving the long-eared
neighbour;

Then she stepped on Fox’s other skate,
bounced down the stairs,
flew right out the front door,
and ran smack into Mrs. O’Hara. (32-33)

Here, repetition causes slapstick humour. The first three lines of the above examples
physically snowball into the punch line, which is ultimately the “smack” into Mrs. O’Hara.

While these two incidents would be funny in their own right, unfortunately for Mrs. O’Hara,
the pattern continues in Fox Outfoxed. When Fox speeds out of control in a boxcar race, luck
would have it that he runs “smack into Mrs. O’Hara’s/ pretty flower garden” (FOF 12). Mrs.
O’Hara, certainly recognizing the repetitious nature of being smacked, looks at Fox and
exclaims “You!” In the final book of the series, Fox On Stage, readers are reminded of the
three collisions. When Fox and the gang go out trick-or-treating, Mrs. O’Hara says “Hello,
Fox…I’d know you anywhere” (FOS 35). The repetition and italic emphasis of the word
“you” serves as an amusing reminder of the physical comedy that ensued in earlier books.

In addition to poor Mrs. O’Hara’s admittedly amusing injuries, there is one instance
of illustrative repetition in the series that is particularly funny. The illustrations have been
removed from this thesis due to copyright restrictions, but can be found on pages thirty and
thirty-two in James Marshall’s Fox on Stage. The removed illustrations show Fox attending
a magic show hosted by Mr. Yee, a compelling white feline magician. Although Fox enters
Mr. Yee’s magic show with a healthy amount of skepticism, he quickly changes his tune after
he participates in an impressive trick involving a floating chair. In fact, Fox dramatically
transforms from a cocky disbeliever to a full-fledged Mr. Yee impersonator. The illustration
shows Fox’s attempt to mimic the magician’s outfit and gestures. Perhaps the most hilarious aspect is the garbage can lid that Fox wears on his head; it seems that this was the closest Fox could come to a Chinese Fisherman hat. Impersonation is really just an attempt at repetition and this example shows how illustrations, in addition to the text, can use repetition to elicit laughter.

As discussed in the first portion of this close reading, repetition is not as prevalent in the *Houndsley and Catina* books. However, there are still notable instances of repetition causing humour. For instance, in the beginning of *Houndsley and Catina*, Catina’s obsession with prizes and fame create an amusing disconnect between her and her canine chum. After declaring “My book will win prizes” and “I will be famous,” Catina eagerly lets Houndsley read her work. Even when he is visibly unimpressed by her masterpiece, Catina still repeats her mantra with the utmost confidence; “Now I know I will be a famous writer!” (*HC* 8). This incongruency, while troubling for Houndsley, is humorous for the reader.

Later in the book, Houndsley enters a cooking contest armed with a winning recipe for three-bean chili. The consistent repetition of “three-bean chili” throughout the chapter is amusing in itself, and creates a sense of ritual or importance around the dish. Furthermore, the repetition also helps foreground the punch line when the contest judges label the dish “no-bean chili.” In just over two hundred words, Houndsley’s oft-mentioned three-bean chili transforms him from a potential prize-winner to a culinary pariah;

“I will never cook again,” he told Catina and Bert.

“Not even for us?” Bert said.

“Maybe for you,” said Houndsley.

“But please do not ask for three-bean chili.” (*HC* 27)
This final mention of three-bean chili serves as an appropriate and amusing ending to a chapter dominated by the repetition of a laughably long recipe.

6.4 Conclusion

Before any of the conclusions in this chapter could be reached, the texts had to be regarded as belonging to the easy reader genre. Only when the texts are viewed generically as easy readers does a focus on repetition suggest itself, and a surprising amount of literary depth and complexity can be discovered. Throughout this chapter, many textual examples have proven that repetition has a deeper, more meaningful function than simply instilling vocabulary. From the sub-textual layers of silent communication in the Fox family, to the unbreakable syntactic bond between Frog and Toad, there is no shortage of material for the literary critic. Since repetition was used as a literary device in all twenty of the sample texts, it is reasonable to conclude that the genre has the potential to produce works of literary and artistic merit. This is not to say that every easy reader is a masterpiece. Rather, this chapter has proven that, contrary to much popular belief, the easy reader genre is able to accommodate rich, complex, literary texts.

This close reading has further proven the literary potential of the genre by showing how a textual sample operates paradoxically. To use Rosmarin’s terminology, I have proven the “extensiveness” of the genre by illuminating repetition’s universal function of causing humour. In other words, I have shown how repetition “subsumes surprisingly many” texts in the easy reader genre. I have also demonstrated the genre’s “intensiveness” by proving how repetition functions differently and “unfolds in a given [text] in surprising detail” (Rosmarin 47). To use Devitt’s terminology, I have shown how the genre can be both flexible and stable through its use of repetition. Devitt says that “this balance between stability and flexibility is
7 CONCLUSION

7.1 Summary

In my original research statement in Chapter One, I set out to prove that a surprising complexity exists beneath the easy reader’s decodable surface. Considering the paucity of literature on easy readers, and the seeming critical and scholarly disinterest in the topic, this was an ambitious assertion that proved challenging to validate. To build the strongest case for the so-called “stepchild” of children’s literature, I analyzed easy readers as a generic group, rather than a series of disparate texts that happen to share an “easy-to-read” or “beginner books” label. Indeed, grounding this thesis in genre studies and genre theory led to several significant conclusions that ultimately proved the validity of my research statement.

First, careful consideration of many neglected and/or ignored primary and secondary sources on easy readers proved that the genre’s publication history is more complex and labyrinthine than any scholar has ever recognized. Specifically, Chapter Four proved that the beginnings of the easy reader genre extended farther back and further beyond the March 1st, 1957 publication of The Cat in the Hat.

Second, a theoretical examination of the publication history, framed by Amy Devitt’s literary-rhetorical genre theory, found that an interdependent web of factors, and not a single causal event, catalyzed the emergence of easy readers. This finding is significant because it offers the most multi-faceted explanation of the genre’s genesis to date. In the past, scholars have only briefly discussed one or two factors of emergence at best, and have never based their conclusions in theory.

Furthermore, a theoretical close reading of twenty texts proved just how complex the easy reader can be when it is examined from a literary perspective. In the hands of its reading audience, the genre is popularly regarded merely as a means of instilling vocabulary
and decoding skills. However, a close reading grounded in Adena Rosmarin's theory proved the literary potential and paradoxical nature of the genre. To conclude, I proved that the easy reader's potential for literary richness and complicity mirrors the complex publication history and emergence of the genre. In other words I illuminated, for the very first time, how the easy reader is both textually and extra-textually complex.

7.2 Contribution to the Existing Scholarship

An absolute dearth of scholarship on easy readers meant that this study did not have to go far to break new ground. Even so, this thesis has made several substantial contributions to the future study of easy readers. The Works Cited alone represents the first compilation of resources on the topic, and includes several valuable articles from the early 1960s that I have not seen cited anywhere else.

Examining these previously ignored resources led to several new, exciting discoveries in this thesis. For example, readers will remember William Jenkins' study, "The Future of Children's Books," wherein the origins of the "I Can Read" series were confirmed. Also, Guilfoile's assertions in Books for Beginning Readers led to a first-time discussion of pre-1950 antecedent texts, while Else Minarik's NPHR interview revealed that the Little Bear manuscripts were actually turned down by Random House before they were accepted by Harper. It is findings like these that make contributions to the field in the most tangible sense.

It is also important to note that this thesis constitutes the first in-depth, theoretically grounded study on easy readers. While a handful of scholars examined the books in the early 1960s, none of these studies were theoretically framed and were largely conducted for the sake of establishing bibliographies of recommended titles.
7.3 Implications of the Study

This thesis also has implications beyond that of filling a gap in the scholarship. Martinez and McGee predict that there will be an increased demand for easy readers with literary merit in their Reading Research Quarterly article, “Children’s literature and reading instruction: Past, present, and future;”

...we would predict that the renewed interest in beginning reading with its calls for decodable text are not likely, in the long run, to move in the direction of the contrived linguistic readers of the 1960s...we expect that editors will seek out writers who can respond in imaginative ways to the needs of early beginning readers. (166)

Their prediction, coupled with this thesis’ finding that the genre can accommodate literary depth, suggests that trade publishers raise their standards, and educators and parents become more discriminating. If publishers aspire to the standard set by this study’s twenty sample texts (and many others that were not discussed here), and consumers are aware of the artistic potential of the genre, then the literary quality of future easy readers can only flourish.

The conclusions of this study also have implications for children’s literature scholars. Unlike the picture book, which has garnered a comparatively large amount of attention and theoretical scrutiny, easy readers are rarely examined in their own right. This needs to change. As this thesis has proven, easy readers constitute a rich topic that is substantial enough to warrant the application of academic methodologies such as close reading. Scholars should not confuse a decodable text with a “simple” text.

While it was not part of the original research statement, this thesis also differentiated easy readers from basals, and helped explain why the texts are constantly confused for one another. As Chapter 5.2 demonstrated, basals/primers are generic antecedents of easy readers
and the two share unavoidable traits by virtue of this relationship. For instance, both share a reading audience and decodable vocabulary. Although this antecedent relationship explains why people may confuse the two texts, it by no means justifies this confusion. Chapter 2.1 discussed the major contrasts in basal and easy reader production and Chapter Six proved that the easy reader genre, unlike basal fare, has literary and artistic potential. Too often, critics, reviewers, and educators fail to note these crucial differences and only discuss the handful of similarities that the texts share. The time has come for easy readers to be discussed in their own right, and not in terms of their long lost basal ancestors.

7.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Since it was impossible to fill every bit of the looming scholarship gap, this study has most certainly left the door open for future research. First, and perhaps most importantly, there is a definite need for further and larger-scale analyses on the literary depth of easy readers. This thesis used the methodology of close reading, and as such, could only reasonably include twenty texts. However, a qualitative content analysis could note the presence of literary devices such as irony, simile, metaphor, polyptoton, foregrounding, etc. in several hundred books. A content analysis could also help determine the types of humor present in easy readers; Michael Cart discusses the "myriad devices of humor" in his book What's So Funny? and lists essential incongruity, frustration of expectation, wit, nonsense, word play, exaggeration, and satire as just some of the types of humour found in children's literature. In addition to determining the presence of such devices, a content analysis allows for the selection of a representative sample and generalizable results. Beyond asserting that the easy reader genre has literary potential, a content analysis could determine how many of the texts actually realize this potential.
While this thesis also exposed the fascinating historical life of easy readers, scope prevented a full investigation into the print culture and development of the genre. From a print culture perspective, one of the most interesting examinations that could take place is a study on the evolution of the easy reader’s paratext. Readers will recall that John Frow defines paratext as “Blurbs, dedications and inscriptions, epigraphs, prefaces, and postfaces; internal titles, tables of contents, running heads, notes, [and] publicity materials” (Frow 105). Just a brief glance at the various editions of several readers displays a vast difference in paratextual content. Some editions have recommendation quotes from experts while others have a leveling system or detailed information for parents. Such a historical examination could help explain the strong paratextual presence in the genre today. Certainly, easy readers contain much more extra-textual information than their picture book or first chapter book cousins.

Another historically-based recommendation for future research is inspired by Amy Devitt’s words on genre case studies. She says that “More detailed historical studies of particular genres confirm the dynamic nature of genres and elaborate the processes by which genres develop and change” (Writing Genres 91). Although this thesis discussed the emergence of the easy reader in depth, scope prevented an examination into the genre’s development and change. It would be very worthwhile to pick up on where this study left off, and pursue a search for factors that sustained the genre. For instance, this thesis mentioned Sputnik as one contextual factor that likely helped the easy reader to flourish.

Finally, this thesis was limited in the sense that it examined easy readers out of the hands of children. While I did not purport that children would be able to perceive the literary depth unearthed in the close reading, it would be very interesting to test this assertion. Are children able to pick up on the use of literary devices in easy readers? Some of my personal
experience with children would suggest so. Volunteering with the One to One Literacy program, I have had the opportunity to work with struggling and emerging readers in Grades Three and Six. One boy that I tutor is in Grade Six and reads at a Grade Two level. While this eleven-year-old boy tries his best not to show any sort of emotion or enjoyment during reading, his reaction to James Marshall’s Fox series have been rather illuminating. In particular, this incredibly reserved boy consistently laughs at the repetition of the Fox family “looks,” and Fox’s repeated catch phrases, “Hot Dog!” and “Rats!” He has even noted that Fox is named after his species while all the other characters have proper names. This boy’s observations imply that children may unconsciously pick up on literary devices in easy readers or, at the very least, that the devices create a fulfilling experience with print.

Indeed, this list of future research projects is surprisingly long for a genre that has been likened to everything from gone-in-a-flash “popcorn,” to surface-dwelling “literary flotsam,” to the artery-clogging predictability of “comfort food,” and, finally, the threat of “the Asiatic overpopulation.” These metaphors have lingered in the popular and scholarly perception of easy readers for far too long. Such comparisons suggest that these books are nothing more than superficial, and even damaging, quick fixes for a momentary craving before the main course of novels. Nothing could be further from the truth. In all facets, both textual and extra-textual, the easy reader hides a fascinating complexity and a surprising literary potential behind a wall of words that even a five-year-old can conquer. Truly, Little Bears can leave very big footprints, and complexity can linger in the simplest, and most unexpected of places.
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APPENDIX: ALPHEBATIZED KEY OF SAMPLE TEXT ABBREVIATIONS

Birthday – Houndsley and Catina and the Birthday Surprise

DWFT – Days With Frog and Toad

FAS – Fox At School

FAW – Fox All Week

FBCH – Father Bear Comes Come

FBN – Fox Be Nimble

FHF – Fox and His Friends

FIL – Fox in Love

FOF – Fox Outfoxed

FOJ – Fox on the Job

FOS – Fox On Stage

FOW – Fox on Wheels

FTAF – Frog and Toad Are Friends

FTAY – Frog and Toad All Year

FTT – Frog and Toad Together

HC – Houndsley and Catina

Kiss – A Kiss for Little Bear

LB – Little Bear

LBF – Little Bear’s Friend

LBV – Little Bear’s Visit