

The Mud Trilogy

A Four-Level Literature
Parent Manual

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The Mud Trilogy

A General Comment

When I began to develop the collection of literature trilogies for the MCT curriculum, I simply imagined arrays of classics illuminated by language arts. I had no thought of writing any novels myself. Circumstances led me to do it, when teachers and parents kept asking for a trilogy for younger readers, and I could not find three right novels to include. Clearly, a trilogy for the youngest readers was important, but I was more than hesitant to put a trilogy of my own beside trilogies of writers like Jack London and H.G. Wells. Who would not be? And yet I wanted to provide little children with a trilogy that possessed the right characterists to help them grow.

One thing led to another. All of the works I considered were either too babyish, or too advanced, or too short, or too something.

Length was one factor. What I wanted was three actual novels—not short stories—that children would

love, that would require solid, extended reading. Real reading has its own positive patience. The best readers often do not want books to end. I wanted books that would require children to continue reading for a long time, chapter after chapter, learning to think of long works as normal and desirable. You learn to love long books by reading long books.

I wanted novels with big words, novels that would inoculate children with the vocabulary that they would find in upper elementary classics such as *Peter Pan* and *The Wind in the Willows*.

I wanted novels that, like Jack London's books, were not just kid stuff—novels that would give children good, strong ideas to think about, novels that were not merely distracting entertainment.

I also wanted books that would present clear relationships to the components of the MCT curriculum, books that would reinforce and illustrate the grammar, vocabulary, and poetics that the children had studied in the curriculum, that would reward their studies, that would present clear connections between these novels and *Grammar Island* and *Sentence Island*, and also bridge forward to *Grammar Town* and *Paragraph Town*. I wanted

books that would illustrate a meaningful relationship between grammar and plot and between paragraph structure and plot.

My goals included poetics. The poetry book at the MCT Island level is *The Music of the Hemispheres*, and I wanted novels that would employ those poetic techniques in the prose paragraphs of a novel. That is, after all, how it works: The great novelists—almost all of them—write poetry also, and certainly read it, and they continue to use those poetic techniques in their novels. Great prose is far more poetic than is commonly understood. In great novels, paragraphs about storms sound stormy. This is obvious, once you notice it, but it is a revelation to anyone who thinks of prose in an inaudible, flat, mechanical way.

I also wanted books that would provide a foundation for the challenging academic experiences of the great world classics such as the Greek and Roman myths, where wondrous things happen, such as human beings taking the form of birds and flying away—enchanting literary phenomena that would help prepare children for the seminal works of Western civilization. Few of us have ever been visited by Athena, but Odysseus was.

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Vocabulary Prestudy:
Ten Classic Words

Here are ten classic words common to all three novels. These words are heavily represented in classic literature for children. In the homeschool setting, take time to study and discuss these before embarking on the novels.

countenance: n. facial expression

“...his normally alert countenance would freeze into a wide-eyed stare...”

The Rescue at Fragment Crag

profound: adj. deep

“...lots of profound discussions...”

The Red Tide

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Quotations for Quote Quizzes

The purpose of these quotations is to promote close reading. For example, if the child has been assigned to read certain chapters, you can read aloud four or five quotations to see if he or she can name the character who is speaking. This practice fosters careful attention to the reading.

The advantage of quote quizzes is that each quote contains only the author's own language and the character's own voice, and this keeps the pedagogy located within the text, rather than turning it into a schooly experience. It does no damage to the spell of the story.

What I have always done is to read out the quotations at the beginning of the lesson. If I am going to read four quotations, I have the child number one through four on a sheet of paper, and then I read the quotations in spirited character voice. The child has only to write

down the name of each character. When we are finished, we talk about each quotation—simple, but strong.

The Rescue at Fragment Crag

The numbers indicate the chapters from which the quote was taken.

1. Mud! Get it! Get it!
- Fidget

 2. Eet EEET eet EEET eet MEEP eet CHIRP
- Click

 2. Wwaaaiiiiiitttt ffffffffoooooorrrrrrrr meeeeee.
- Turner Turtle

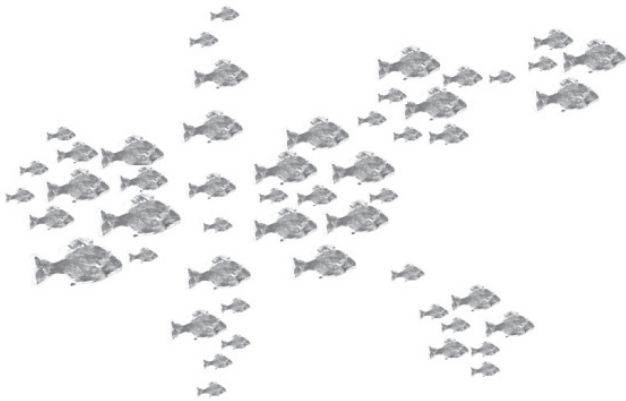
 2. Mack, you have to track the actions of the fragments and fractions and stack them in racks, exactly.
- Clack
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Discussion Questions

These questions are designed to promote open-ended discussions—explorations—more than to discover a right answer. Most important questions are not what is called *convergent*; they do not have exact right answers, and so none of the questions here will be of the sort that cause the child to look in the book to find the answers and copy them onto paper. Rather, the child will have to talk, to think about the animals and their decisions, and to assert ideas and conclusions of his or her own.

Some of the questions for the second and third novels are cumulative, meaning that some of the questions ask the child to make comparisons or contrasts between the novels. These kinds of questions lead to larger ideas: What important themes do you see in both books or in all three books?



Questions for
The Rescue at Fragment Crag

Here is a bank of questions that you can choose from to create an atmosphere of inquiry into the stories. Just choose the questions you like; there is no expectation that you must do them all. You might sometimes give the child a choice; for example, you could present the child with three questions and ask him or her to choose one to discuss.

1. Which of the animals in this story do you think is most trustworthy? Why?
 2. Why do you think that Baldwin had such an antipathy (dislike) for Mud? Why Mud, and not another animal?
 3. Explain in some detail why you think that Baldwin changes his attitude toward Mud. What accounts for the change?
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