

by Ravay Snow

My Path to Hildegarde: Children's books and fighting policy doublespeak

When I was a kid, I loved to read more than anything else I did. That is still the case today. I read all sorts of books, for all sorts of reasons. It's a real thrill for me to go into a bookstore and to get reacquainted with my earliest friends, like Robert the Rose Horse and George and Martha. Toni Morrison, Anne Lamott, good old Bill Shakespeare—I hold all of them in the highest regard, along with Dav Pilkey. These books and authors all have helped to make me better, more empathetic, and more self-reliant. I want more kids to have that kind of relationship with reading.

Recently, my brother and I started our own publishing company. We specialize in great children's stories—stories with clear writing, dynamic characters, and excellent illustrations. Why? Because those were the things that we loved about books when we were growing up—the qualities that hooked us on reading for the sheer joy of reading. Last winter, Snowbound Press published my first picture book, *Hildegarde and the Great Green Shirt Factory*, which has been selling steadily in Colorado and California, getting great customer reviews and acquiring a fan base. We have two more titles scheduled for publication this year.

I wrote and illustrated the story of Hildegarde, who is a creative little sheep. She works in a factory sewing identical green shirts all day. Hildegarde likes things that are unique, and when she tries to



make her own shirt special, her boss is totally hostile and demeaning. How she eventually solves this problem is the heart of the story.

All sorts of people have received the book positively! Although the age range is nominally from 3-7, I've included enough ambitious vocabulary (fuchsia, inconspicuous) to challenge older readers and enough humor to earn parents' appreciation. (For example, at one point, Mr. Arno, Hildegarde's nasty boss, goes to the Hoof and Mouth Conference!)

Parents tell me that the bright illustrations

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engage very young children too. They also say (with somewhat less enthusiasm) that their kids are insisting on wearing bright and odd combinations of clothing to school because they're "like Hildegarde." "I'm my own person!" they say—and traipse out the door wearing mismatched shoes. I'm also seeing an interesting trend of women who initially buy the book for young children in their families—and then return to buy additional copies for themselves or their sisters or their grown daughters. The book's message, which supports individual endeavor and creativity, seems to translate across age groups.

This type of Orwellian language use is called "doublespeak," and is defined as "deliberately ambiguous or evasive language; any language that pretends to communicate but actually does not."

Obviously, I'm very happy about this warm welcome. It is exactly what I would have hoped for, given my own persistent love for characters from great children's books. And it's happening because the book is written clearly and honestly. Yes, my own story shares certain elements with Hildegarde's. There is a model for the Great Green Shirt Factory in my life, and, unfortunately, several models for Mr. Arno. But I think that most of us can relate to Hildegarde's experiences and we hope that we too can come through them relatively unscathed.

I must admit, however, that the honesty and clarity of language in this book makes me so proud, because this is something different from my previous writing. Why? Well, although I had started out

as a writer and an artist, I took a detour some time ago. I listened to my brain instead of my heart. And my brain whispered constantly about security. I followed my brain through a Ph.D. and a career in education research and policy analysis. And what I finally realized, after more than a decade, is that education research and policy analysis thrive on ambiguous and complex writing. This is especially the case in my areas of expertise—standards-based reforms and assessment and accountability policy. Clarity and honesty are not encouraged.

Establishing a word's meaning is the most essential component in reading—hence the importance of learning new vocabulary to build reading comprehension. As readers, we need to understand a number of possible definitions for a particular word, so we can judge the one(s) that apply in a particular context. When we cannot identify a word's meaning, there is no true communication.

Sometimes we get confused about a word's meaning because we do not reference the correct word. For example, I remember when I was 10 or 11 years old, reading in the backseat on a family road trip. (I did this so much that I didn't even get carsick anymore.) Suddenly I came across a word I'd never seen before.

"Mom," I asked, frowning. "What's a pinnacle?" I had to sound it out.

There was a very uncomfortable silence from the front seat. My father stared intently at the road and pretended to be deaf. Finally, my mother cleared her throat and gave it a shot. "Well, honey... it's...well, it's a male reproductive organ."

What? That did not make sense at all! There was no way the Swiss Family Robinson was going to get off that island floating on...

Oh. THAT was the word she thought I meant.

So I said, "No, no. Not THAT." And I spelled the word out for her. I later found out that a "pinnacle" is a light ship—which made a lot more sense in the context of the story.

Such honest confusions about meaning are

relatively harmless. But there is a more deliberate type of confusion caused by propaganda—in which common words are used, but their meanings are unclear. This type of Orwellian language use is called “doublespeak,” and is defined as “deliberately ambiguous or evasive language; any language that pretends to communicate but actually does not.” (<http://www.newspeakdictionary.com>) Although policy-makers would deny it, this type of propagandist language forms the heart of policy talk. The language of research is less amenable to doublespeak, although its reliance on jargon, passive voice, and convoluted sentence structure tend to obscure meaning, as well.

In education, prime examples of doublespeak include “standards-based education” and “accountability.” These words seem to mean different things depending on who says them or what the circumstances are. For instance, “accountability” seems to mean different things depending on who is being held accountable:

If you are a teacher or another educator—you are accountable for how well your students do on state tests, generally administered once a year. Results will be posted and if they are bad, parents will respond by pulling their kids out of your school and you will become the educational equivalent of an “Untouchable.” Your school may eventually be closed. You will also be held accountable for other things like student safety and attendance, but the big thing is that score.

If you are a politician—you are considered as being held accountable if you have been able to get re-elected. How you do that is your own business.

Of course, these are minimal definitions, and part of the difficulty for teachers nowadays is that they hold themselves accountable to higher standards than those measured primarily by the CSAP. What about other things that we want our kids to learn? What about instilling a love of reading in kids? Unfortunately, the school day is all too short for the many things we ask teachers to do.

Doublespeak is the backbone of our consensus-based policy system because it halts the possibility of disagreement over a policy’s specific meanings. On the surface, state and federal policymakers can appear to agree about standards-based education and accountability—so they can pass bipartisan laws. But the only real meaning-makers in education are still local students, parents, teachers and administrators. This holds true in spite of the prescriptive testing policies that have dominated state and federal participation in education for the past few years. The activity at the state and federal levels tend to be a lot of sound and fury—and most of us know what that signifies.

I also think a considered approach to teaching students how to read for meaning is our best protection against the meaninglessness of doublespeak and the institutionalization of stupidity that it encourages.

It does make the task more difficult for teachers, though. It is not easy to negotiate your way through the pressures of the CSAP and still try to show students that, contrary to what they see on the test, reading can be a source of real joy. A friend of mine, a third-grade teacher, tells me that juggling skills instruction has cut into the time she has for nurturing the purity of reading for fun.

She also tells me that she thinks there’s a large middle group of children to whom reading is not easy, and for whom “educators have unintentionally stripped the enjoyment out of it” because they are trying to make sure students are prepared for the test. I am most concerned about losing this middle group of readers. I want more kids to learn to love

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to read, not to view it as a chore because reading instruction is being pushed toward test prep.

I have faith that, given what they need, reading teachers can find viable ways of juggling these demands. I think they can satisfy testing requirements and help kids have fun reading experiences. I also think a considered approach to teaching students how to read for meaning is our best protection against the meaninglessness of doublespeak and the institutionalization of stupidity that it encourages. We can only fight it by insisting on knowing the true meanings of words—and that's up to all of us. It is up to us and



our reading teachers to nurture students who will also insist on meaningful communication. I hope that Hildegarde and I can help.

— *Ravay Snow, Ph.D., is a writer and artist. Her first picture book for children, Hildegarde and the Great Green Shirt Factory, was published by Snowbound Press in late 2003. More information about the company, its book titles, and its education fundraising programs can be found at www.snowboundpress.com. Ravay is also a former English teacher, researcher, and policy analyst who worked at the University of Colorado, McREL, and the Education Commission of the States (ECS) on standards and accountability issues. Her scholarly articles are published under her married name, Ravay Snow-Renner.*

President's Message

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Tammy Langeberg. CCIRA is working toward making its yearly percentage increase required by IRA during 2003 for new IRA and student memberships!

The Colorado Council International Reading Association meets and exceeds the requirements for the IRA Award of Excellence in all categories. I have submitted the necessary paper work to the International Reading Association on March 1, 2004, so CCIRA can be a recipient this year.

I have stated before that knowledgeable and excellent teachers significantly increase opportunities for children to learn. Exemplary teachers provide at-risk students, who often fail, an opportunity to experience success. The U.S. National Reading Panel reported that children are more likely to be successful in school when they have teachers with strong professional preparation who participate in ongoing professional development. CCIRA provides

a vehicle for teachers to be reflective practitioners by engaging in a continuous process of questioning, planning, trying out, and evaluating our own and our students' learning. As members of CCIRA, we should be proud of our achievements, which directly and positively affect literacy in our communities, state, nation and even the world. This is a collective effort of the many committee chairpersons and their members, local council officers, and most especially the 12 members of CCIRA's executive committee. Without all the time and effort these individuals put into this literacy association, we would not be the exemplary literacy organization we are today. I am honored to have served as president of this exemplary professional organization.

Respectfully submitted,
Eddie Ellington
2003-2004 President
Colorado Council International Reading Association