

R.S. Mellette takes on Common Core for *Billy Bobble Makes A Magic Wand*

Dear Teachers –

I've taken a good hard look at Common Core, and from an artist's point of view, it's not a big deal. Any work of art – Literary, Visual, Theatrical, Musical, or Dance – can be assessed by the Common Core Standards. Personally, I'm excited by the opportunity since I don't write with specific age groups in mind. Sure, Billy and Suzy are 12-years-old, but some of the Billy Bobble series will require kids and adults to do research if they are interested in the details of the discussions of quantum mechanics, DNA, and the other subjects that come up in the telling of their stories.

Here's a case in point: My publisher, Matt Sinclair, questioned my use of the word "quench" in a section about the Hadron Super Collider. He was only aware of the word being used in relation to thirst, but in quantum mechanics it refers to a break in the magnetic field that contains the particles being accelerated to nearly the speed of light.

Looking at the Craft and Structure section of Common Core, item 4: *Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze specific word choices shape meaning and tone.*

I think you'll find the Billy Bobble series will offer easy, fun, ways to meet Common Core standards. To prove it, using Common Core guidelines, I have taken a test on my own book.

I hope I get an A.

Dear Kids –

Forget all of that stuff I just told the teachers. I didn't write Billy Bobble to be a textbook. I wrote it just for fun. I hope no one *makes* you read any of my books. Nothing takes the fun out of a book like a teacher saying you have to read it, and not ever book that's called a "classic" is actually good. Don't believe me? Track down Mark Twain's review of *The Last of the Mohicans*. It's hilarious!

Speaking of hilarious, I am about to take a test on my own book. If you've read *Billy Bobble Makes A Magic Wand*, then you can be the teacher. Feel free to grade my test and turn it in to your teacher.

I hope I get an A.

The following questions are from California Common Core State Standards English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. I've pulled literary questions from Grades 6-8.

1. **Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.**

I'll just pick one small part of the book to talk about, defining magic.

Early on, Suzy says to Detective Danner:

*"Okay, if you want to get all Arthur C. Clarke on me: 'Technology advanced to the point of being indistinguishable from magic' -- which for you would probably be a cell phone."*

Later, Billy says:

*"That definition doesn't entirely work. If it's technology advanced enough to be indistinguishable from magic, what is the technology doing to make it appear to be magic?"*

When Harry Potter was written, the idea of being able to get a message to a person anytime, no matter where they were, via an owl was magic. That was magic in the 1990s, but now we have texting. What was once magic is now technology.

Billy goes on to answer his own question:

*"Let's say that magic is..." He let go of my arm and started walking in the wrong direction. "...seemingly unrelated cause and effect."*

"Cause and Effect" is a basic principle of science. It's also something that doesn't entirely work in Quantum Mechanics, at least not in a way that scientists have figured out yet. So Billy is saying that magic is something that happens in a non-scientific way, but because he knows quantum physics, he sees a possible workaround. This is the start of his adventure.

2. **Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.**

Okay, last part first. I'm not writing a summary. I'm pulling rank. I wrote the book. I wrote the query letters to find an agent. I wrote several summaries and I hate it. I'm old, and there are a few privileges of age. One of them is, that I don't have to write a summary if I don't want to, so there! Anyone under 30, doesn't have an excuse. Sorry.

Themes. There are many themes in *Billy Bobble Makes A Magic Wand*. I'll take just one – multiple worlds.

When I search the manuscript on "world," MS Word tells me "That shows up a lot!" Starting early:

*Obviously, Mom wasn't accustomed to seeing her sweet, straight-A, multiple-scholarship-contender daughter acting like a street kid. This was a whole new world for both of them.*

In Suzy's deposition, she says:

*I got a smirk from the soldier on duty at the Army base's gate. Having a top general for a father meant I lived in two completely different worlds. On base and off. Off, I was like every other kid. On, I was part of the royal family. We got the best housing the government had to offer – even if*

*Dad was rarely home to enjoy it – and I got forty-three thousand loyal soldiers looking out for me. Not always a plus.*

*Billy had been enough a part of my on-base life to seamlessly move from one world to the other.*

He will move from the Quantum World to ours with a few seams along the way.

And later:

*Of the two Bobble brothers, Peter was the one who knew the world of criminal justice.*

There are 113 uses of "world," so I won't list them all here. The most obvious is the difference between our world and the Quantum World, but clearly I'm making a point about how we all live in different worlds and that we must follow the rules in the world we're in.

**If you're looking for another theme, I'd suggest imagination.**

3. Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.

Is this like a summary? Maybe not.

This story starts in the middle. That's called *in medias res* by people who want to show off that they know fancy literary terms. I did that because I wanted to tell the reader, "We are going to get to some exciting stuff!" right at the beginning. Then I could take the time to build the story. I put a lot of questions in the reader's head at the beginning, then slowly answer them up until the end of Part One.

I broke it into parts because I change the point of view so drastically. Part one is almost entirely from Suzy's first person view. After that, I change to third person mostly from Billy's POV. I need third person because there will be times when I have to jump ahead of Billy and Suzy to establish a scene before the magic happens – like when Billy appears in General Quinofski's office.

I call part one, the Peter Parker section because it reminds me of the first episode of Spiderman from before he is bitten by the radioactive spider.

**A good game to play would be to write down the questions you have at the end of each chapter. When they are answered, go back and make a note of where the answer is.**

4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama.

I love alliteration! You will find it all over anything I write. I also prefer dialogue to long descriptive paragraphs. In writing dialogue, I try to establish each character's voice, so you don't need a lot of "he said / she said." The voice means vocabulary choices and rhythms. Those rhythms will change depending on who is talking to whom.

For example: Suzy is upset in the very first scene of the book, so she's not talking to Detective Danner in the polite fashion that her mother expects. Because of that, I can use dialogue to reveal not only character, but the immediacy of the need to find Billy.

**Billy Bobble is a fun book to read like a screenplay. Assign characters to different kids. Have adults play the adults where possible. Make sure you also cast a narrator – who would be the stage manager in theater, or the first Assistant Director on a film crew.**

5. **Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.**

There are a few sentences that summarize *Billy Bobble Makes A Magic Wand* in my mind.

The Teacher tells Billy, "*E = mc<sup>2</sup> is no longer the most powerful force in the universe. Your wand is.*" That clearly states what Billy has done. Einstein's equation created the nuclear age, and changed physics, and the world, forever.

*"The explosion of a super nova can go completely unnoticed in the Quantum World," said Fame, "but one little boy's nightmare can rip it apart."* Here we learn the power of a child's imagination, which is a major theme throughout the book.

If you're looking more, check into how Robert Oppenheimer's name keeps popping up.

**A good test question for teachers, or extra credit for kids, would be, "Compare Billy and Suzy to Robert Oppenheimer and the Manhattan Project." That will work for Science and History classes and is très Common Core.**

6. **Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.**

Point of view is huge for a novelist, and it's something I struggled with in writing *Billy Bobble*. I initially wrote the whole thing in 3<sup>rd</sup> person from Billy and Suzy's point of view, but that wasn't working. Suzy clearly had to be the narrator of her own story in part one. Knowing that I would then have to switch to 3<sup>rd</sup> person once her story was done, I made sure to keep 3<sup>rd</sup> person sections. Whenever we go into the interrogation room, the POV shifts. This lays the groundwork for the complete shift in part two.

**The question for the reader is, does it work?**

7. Compare and contrast the experience of reading a story, drama, or poem to listening to or viewing an audio, video, or live version of the text, including contrasting what they “see” and “hear” when reading the text to what they perceive when they listen or watch.

My background is theatre and television and my training is in acting, so my writing is always dependent on dialogue. I work hard to put the characters in the reader's head by what they say and do, rather than long descriptions. I have written a television series version of *Billy Bobble Makes A Magic Wand*, and the adaptation was pretty easy. I think, because the story is open-ended, it could make a good TV series.

One of the tricks to creating a good TV series is to have characters that can naturally lead the writer into many different stories.

**A good question for anyone interested in TV or book series would be, "What kind of story can each of the supporting characters lead Billy and Suzy into?"**

8. Trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.

This question isn't in the literature section of the Common Core outline, but Billy and Suzy are both very much into the scientific method, so I thought I would include it.

Good science fiction starts with established science and then does a little sleight of hand. The less "fiction" in science-fiction the better, I think. Here's a good example:

Fame has asked Billy what the observer effect is. Billy says:

*"The observer effect states that the act of observing a particle changes its properties."*

That's real science. Fame then says:

*"That's what you humans think, but in fact, the particle doesn't exist until you decide there should be one to observe."*

That's something I made up.

**Readers might have fun going through to separate real science from sleight of hand. I think you'll be surprised how much real science is in the book.**

9. Compare and contrast texts in different forms or genres (e.g., stories and poems; historical novels and fantasy stories) in terms of their approaches to similar themes and topics.

This is actually something I do throughout the book. There are time travel references to *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*. Fame first shows up in a similar guise to a character from *A Wrinkle In Time*.

In fact, I wrote the book because I got tired of seeing witches, wizards, vampires, etc. in the Sci-Fi section of bookstores.

**I think readers might be able to make a good comparison to any book about kids and magic, especially with regard to science.**

That's it! How did I do?