

May 23, 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

I have been asked to write a letter in support of Ms. Lita Barrie for teaching positions in Children's/Fantasy Literature and Film, and I am happy to oblige. Ms. Barrie taught as an adjunct writing instructor in the English Department at California State University, Los Angeles from 1996 to 2011. Although an accomplished writer and critic herself, she is not, by her own acknowledgment, a trained compositionist, and yet she performed exceptionally well as a writing instructor, particularly in developing her students' critical thinking and cultural reading skills.

As a senior member of our department, I had served on the Part-Time Instructors Review Committee and so was aware of her background as a professional writer and art critic and of her interest in fantasy literature, film, and aesthetic and psychoanalytic theory. Therefore, when I became Chair in 2005 and needed an instructor to teach a large-lecture section of a children's literature course, I asked her to accept the assignment, confident that she was well qualified even though she had not taught this specific subject before. When created in the 60s this course was aimed more at school-librarians needing to know what readings they should recommend for what age groups, but it has evolved as the discipline has evolved into a serious literary study, focusing on the ways fantasy and other forms of children's literature participates in the formation of social and cultural values and human personality. This was precisely Ms. Barrie's approach and strength. She taught the course with great passion and skill, was evaluated highly in the student opinion surveys, and in subsequent quarters the enrollment rose to nearly a hundred students, something fairly rare in our department.

As a result of her success in teaching our primary children's literature course, she developed a proposal to teach a course in Children's Literature and Film, from *Alice in Wonderland* to *Pan's Labyrinth*. At that point I had entered the CSU early retirement program and was no longer Department Chair, but the reasons for its not being offered had to do with controlling the number of elective offerings in our highly structured English-major curriculum to assure that they would make. The proposal itself was very impressive and interesting. Her approach was to apply feminist and psychoanalytic theory to the reading such classic fairy/fantasy tales as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as to movie adaptations of these and film-fantasies such as *Pan's Labyrinth*. Her aim was not only to enrich students' understanding of these classics of children's/fantasy literature,

but also to explore ways they and their adaptations are often structured by different socio-political agendas. Given the appeal of both the literature and the films, and the significance of fear-engendered fantasies in our post-911 world, the course promised to be both attractive and important to today's students. But, it is difficult for even the most exciting elective courses to be successful at a campus where so many of the students transfer with such large numbers of units that they have almost no free electives left. This may be why Ms. Barrie sought to offer the course where students are freer and more inclined to follow their intellectual interests. I do know from many conversations that we had about this course and children's literature generally, that she would bring an extraordinary passion, commitment, and intellectual sophistication to teaching it, which would, in turn, energize her students. I wish that there had been better prospects for offering such a course on our own campus.

Finally, in addition to being an excellent instructor, Ms. Barrie is also a gracious and engaging colleague. I have always enjoyed our conversations because they set me to thinking: about literature, about film, about the world we live in. I recommend her highly, without reservations.

Sincerely,

John Cleman, Professor Emeritus
Department of English
California State University, Los Angeles