Teaching *Monkey King*

Featuring: Ben Lathrop, Chenchen Lu, Emily Pearson, and Alex Anderson

[Introductory music]

ALEX ANDERSON: Hello, everyone, and welcome to the second episode of the 2023 Big Read podcast series. I'm Alex Anderson, and today I'm joined by three more wonderful guests, Benjamin Lathrop, Chenchen Lu, and Emily Pearson. Today's episode is entitled "Teaching *Monkey King*," and we'll be discussing potential ways instructors might engage with the novel in the classroom. As always, let's get started by allowing our special guests to introduce themselves. Ben, would you like to get us started with introductions?

BEN LATHROP: Sure. Hi, everyone. My name is Ben Lathrop. I am a third year PhD student in English education, so I'm in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Purdue. Prior to coming here to start the program, I taught high school English for eighteen years. I've never taught *Monkey King*, but I do have some experience teaching sort of epic, journey narratives. My research interests are focused on helping students and teachers deal with mis- and disinformation through critical media literacy lens. And right now I'm working on my prelims.

ALEX: Great. Thanks, Ben. Chenchen, would you like to introduce yourself next?

CHENCHEN LU: Hello. I'm Chenchen, and I'm proud to call China, the place where the *Monkey King*'s story began, my home. Right now, I'm in my third year of working on my PhD in the College of Education [at Purdue]. I'm really into social studies education, especially teaching methods and teacher identity. A few days ago, one of the professors I worked with just published a fancy article called "Charters as Counter Publics: Addressing the Civic Side of Charter Schooling," and I got to help write it. It was such a big honor. As for my own project, I just got some feedback from the reviews last week. Right now, I'm busy making changes. I hope it gets published soon. Thanks for having me on this podcast.

ALEX: Thanks, of course. And last but certainly not least, Emily.

EMILY PEARSON: Hey, Alex, thanks for having us on this podcast. My name is Emily Pearson. I'm a third year PhD student at Purdue in the Literature, Theory, and Culture program in the English department. This is my second year that I've actually gotten to teach a Big Read book in one of my literature courses, and I recently had the wonderful opportunity to teach *Monkey King*. It was the first book my class read this semester, and it got us started on a great foot, so I'm excited to talk about it today.

ALEX: Thank you, everyone, for agreeing to be on the podcast, and, without further ado, let's jump into our discussion questions. So, I'd like to start off just asking our participants: Have you read *Journey to the West* for pleasure, for a class, or both? If you read it for class, what class required it? And how old were you when you read *Journey to the West* for the first time, and do you remember your reactions to it?

BEN: Yeah, this was my first time reading *Monkey King*, so I was forty-five years old when I first read it. I read it for fun, and I read it because it was the Big Read selection. That's why it was on my radar. Otherwise, I probably wouldn't have thought to read it. I had heard of it before the Big Read chose it but just never really had the opportunity to dig into it, so I enjoyed reading it. I kind of read [it] with a combination of traditional reading and audiobook reading. And I really enjoyed the audiobook version; that kind of took me through the middle part of the book. I thought the narration was spot on and pretty funny. Actually, after I listened to part of the audiobook, I thought my fourteen-year-old son would really like this, because he's my youngest son, and he's totally into, like, all the Percy Jackson books, and the audiobook actually kind of reminded me of the Percy Jackson audiobooks. So, I had gotten it on Audible, and I recommended it to him, and, sure enough, I was right. Like, he breezed through the whole thing, finished it long before I did, and he really liked it and found it funny.

ALEX: I'm in that camp, too. This is my first time reading *Journey to the West*. And I also had the traditional reading experience with the paperback but listened to certain episodes on the audiobook. I love the audiobook. I can't recall the name of the reader right now, but, for folks who haven't listened to it, it's one reader who does all of the voices, and it is a really good time.

EMILY: I read it for the first time this spring because it was the Big Read pick, and I wanted to get a head start on things and get ready for the book club. And I did try to rush through it the first time, reading the paperback. I had an afternoon, and I wanted to read the book. And it was cute, but there were moments where I was just very frustrated with *Monkey King* and kind of wishing he would grow up a little bit—especially in the beginning. And then I listened to the audiobook, and it was a completely different experience with the voices and the humor to pause and take the time to, like, listen to the jokes and get them. And I did not want the story to end when I was listening to the audiobook. It got me through a very long drive.

CHENCHEN: Yeah, great point. When I was in fifth grade, we had this exciting story to study called "Sun Wukong's Three Battles with the White Bone Demon," which is like a side story from the bigger epic. It wasn't just for fun. It was part of our Chinese class. We got into every new word, dug into the characters' personalities, and even did some classroom drama to make the story pop. It was like stepping right into the adventure, but this story wasn't a stranger to me. *Journey to the West* is such a big deal in Chinese culture that, you know, people can watch it on TV in various versions. So, my first taste of *Journey to the West* was this kind of classroom stuff, and my own love for the characters and their legends.

ALEX: Now that we've delved a little bit into your initial experiences and relationship reading *Journey to the West*, are there any episodes that you would be particularly excited to teach? Why do those sections interest you the most? And how might you consider going about teaching those episodes in the classroom?

CHENCHEN: I'm really excited to talk about one part of our book. It's a story of how Sun Wukong battles the White Bone Demon, and you can find it in Chapter 19. This story is interesting because it begins with Monk Tang and his disciples meeting a seemingly nice lady, but—surprise—she turns out to be the White Bone Demon, with the not-so-nice but dark plan

to live forever by eating Monk Tang. So, what makes this part super cool is that Sun Wukong was really clever and figures out a way to defeat the demon. The demon, however, even transforms into different people like an old man and an old woman to trick them. I think even though Sun Wukong is the hero, Monk Tang and Pigsy aren't completely sure they can trust him. Tragically, Monk Tang even abandoned Sun Wukong in the end, and Pigsy, well, he's funny and adds some humor to a story that's usually pretty tense.

BEN: Listening to Chenchen talk about that story reminded me a little bit of one of my favorite things to teach, which is the *Odyssey*. I taught the *Odyssey* for many years to ninth graders, and every time I taught it, I discovered new things. So, there are obviously some similarities and parallels between the two texts. They're both sort of epics. They both tell the story of an epic journey. They both involve some epic heroics. And what Chenchen said about *Monkey King*'s cleverness reminded me of the episode in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus defeats the Cyclops or gets his men out of the Cyclops's cave through his cleverness. And Odysseus's cleverness is one of his most important traits, and he's a very different character from the *Monkey King*, but they do share that in common. So, I think it would be fun to pair these two texts in some way to maybe look at some of the parallel episodes and discuss the similarities and differences. So, that's one of my answers to that question. Also, I asked my son what stood out to him—we were talking about the book recently—and he mentioned the depictions of heaven and hell, which he pointed out are very different from what we're used to in Western mythologies and religions. Of course, the *Odyssey* also has a large section that takes place in the underworld. But I also found these sections about heaven and hell to be really interesting, especially because of the way they satirize government and bureaucracy. I found that very entertaining. I think there's just something really funny about a character like Monkey running into all this heavenly red tape and rebelling against it. And I think it would be fun to focus on the satirical aspects of that with students. And then I also found the end of the novel to be quite satisfying. Like Emily, I got kind of bogged down in the middle when I was reading it because it seemed like there was a lot of repetition in some of the episodes. But I thought it was really fun to see Monkey sort of grudgingly improve and grow as a moral being, especially in the last couple of episodes where he rescues 1,111 little boys from a grizzly fate. And then right after that, he works within heaven's bureaucracy to make it rain in a city that's had years of drought. And he does all this without really losing the essential subversiveness of this character, which I think is really interesting and fun.

ALEX: I love what you said about how these depictions of heaven and hell are often satirical and kind of make it seem like a weird workplace comedy. If anyone is out there shopping for a producer like a realist adaptation of *Journey to the West*, I think having *Journey to the West* as, like, an *Office Space*-style comedy—I would watch that. I'm there; I think that would be hilarious. And I love that you mentioned a pairing, potentially, between the *Odyssey* and *Journey to the West* [laughs], because that is pretty much lifted completely from Emily's syllabus this semester.

BEN: Oh, really? [laughs]

ALEX: Yeah.

BEN: I did not know that, I promise.

ALEX: Emily, do you want to tell us a little bit about your experiences teaching *Journey to the West* in your—it's "Great Narratives," right? In your "Great Narratives" class?

EMILY: Yeah, it is "Great Narrative Works." So, *Monkey King* was our first book, and I paired it with the *Odyssey*, which followed next as a unit on epic narratives of a sort. Although they are very different, there's some overlap. Both Monkey and Odysseus are incredibly clever. They're both tricksters. And I thought my students would have a lot to say about that, because to me it seemed, initially, that they had a lot in common, and my students completely disagreed. They wanted me to know that, sure, they're both tricksters, but it's completely different because Odysseus—his motivations for tricking are usually pretty self. . .I don't want to say self-centered because that makes it seem like, you know, it's completely selfish to want to go home, but it is sort of about him. And there's a goal in mind, and it's very calculated. And Monkey is a trickster so often just for the joy of it. He just really is having a wonderful time. And so, to go back to the question about what episode I was particularly excited to teach, I really wanted to focus on the moment when the pilgrims get to the Land of Women and how that is an episode where so many of the norms that we had seen up until that point of women being kidnapped into marriage and held hostage and their filial duty being kind of in jeopardy because of that, it's completely reversed, and our pilgrims find themselves being almost forced into marriage and childbirth. So that's what I was excited about. I didn't get there because my students were so excited to talk about just how funny Monkey and Pigsy and Sandy were when they were just getting into trouble, and one of the scenes that completely captivated them in the beginning, I think, partially because of how irreverent it is, is when Monkey needs Buddha, when he's rebelling against heaven. And Monkey, at that point, has always won the battles and has shown a superior strength, I would say, to everyone he's met and just sort of assumes that that will continue forever. And he tells Buddha, basically, that might is right, and he's going to win and does so by peeing in the Buddha's hand. And for some reason, my students, by and large, thought that was delightful. And it turns out that I didn't really notice it on the first read through. It wasn't particularly what was on my radar, but tricking people with urine was a major theme for Monkey and the other pilgrims that my students were delighted to talk about, again and again.

BEN: I have to just say, hearing Emily talk about the urine humor made me think of what I thought was one of the funniest lines in the book, because—there's a lot of kind of scatological humor—but when Monkey, Pigsy, and Sandy, after they tricked the Daoists into drinking urine, they shove effigies of Daoist immortals into a nearby toilet, and Monkey calls it "The Bureau of Rice Reincarnation," which I thought was really funny. [laughs]

ALEX: Yeah, what's that old joke about Chaucer? Like, he's equally interested in eschatology and scatology? I wonder if there's a similar joke to be made about Wu Cheng'en here. [laughs]

[Transition music]

ALEX: Now that we've talked a little bit about which episodes were perhaps the most attracted to for a pedagogical setting, do you have any ideas as to how you might like to teach those episodes?

EMILY: When I was teaching this, I really wanted to draw attention early on to the fact that it was a translation and an abridgment of *Monkey King*, not the original text. Just because I think—if this is your first introduction to the story—it would be easy to sort of get lost in it and miss some of the historical context and the fact that it's been reinterpreted in so many different ways. And this is one of them. So, I taught the scene where Monkey meets Tripitaka for the first time and [Monkey's] still trapped under the mountain with an unabridged translation of *Monkey King* to show how different it could be in tone and length and the information it conveys. And my students seemed to really enjoy that and then doubled down on the fact that they wanted this translation—they wanted the Lovell. Because one of the things that comes through so clearly with Lovell's translation is just an amazing sense of humor. Everything about the situation that is supposed to be momentous and, like, fated for Monkey—he's been waiting 500 years under a mountain for the right monk to come along and free him, and he can have his redemption—and Monkey's like, "What took you so long? Hurry up, let me out. Hit the right button, and out I'll pop!" And it's just so funny in a way that I think is very tricky to do in a translation, and Lovell managed it really well, and my students responded to that well.

BEN: Yeah, I certainly think how I would approach it would depend on the age of the students, whether we're talking about high school or college students, for instance. I have found that comedy and particularly satire are really challenging to teach, at least at the high school level. At the same time, I can tell you as a long-time high school English teacher, that we tend to choose texts that are really heavy and depressing, and I think it's a good thing to be able to lighten the curriculum a little bit with something more humorous. I tried to do that when I taught a novel called *Wonderful Fool* by Shusaku Endo, which I think has some parallels with the *Monkey King* in terms of the main character being sort of this kind of comic fool. But I wish I'd had this text when I was teaching high school, because I think we could have had a lot of fun with it, and I think it would have been a good way to lighten things up. But it is challenging. I think, a lot of times, high school students miss humor that might be obvious to us. And, of course, if you have to explain something, it's not funny anymore. Also, this is a satire, largely satire of bureaucracy, I think, in some ways, and the younger you are, the less exposure you have to bureaucracy, so the less meaningful that kind of satire would be. But I could definitely see teaching some of those episodes that I referred to earlier—about heaven—for instance, as part of a satire unit, I could see pairing it with other texts, that satirize bureaucracy. I was thinking of the Kafka novels, *The Castle* and *The Trial*. Maybe *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. Alex, you mentioned *Office Space*. I was actually thinking of the TV show *Parks and Recreation*, which does a lot to satirize government bureaucracy, and I think there could be some good opportunities there for those kinds of pairings. The other thing I would do—and I'm thinking of this from a broader perspective than just particular lessons—is I would have students trace the changes in Monkey's character from the beginning of the book to the end. So, for example, like, in defending his rescue of the boys from a demon that he encounters, he says on page 312, "I'm a Buddhist. How could I stand by while these little boys were killed?" And

then, in helping the citizens suffering from drought shortly after that, he follows the rules of the bureaucracy. He negotiates with the Jade Emperor [and] encourages the prefect responsible for the drought to take responsibility and show some piety. I think it's hard to imagine Monkey at the beginning of the novel doing those things, and I think students could sort of relate to this whole journey, this character development because I think sometimes the system just seems so ridiculous that we just want to say, like, screw it, burn it all to the ground. But as Monkey grows, he sees that he can be more effective at helping other people if he works within the system. And I think that could make for some interesting discussions. And then finally, I wanted to mention something that Chenchen said earlier. He said when he was in fifth grade, one of the things they did with this novel was, I think he said, bringing it to life through some drama or performance activities, and that was always one of my favorite things to do as a teacher, so I could see having a lot of fun with doing some performance-based activities with this novel.

CHENCHEN: Great. Ben, that's a good point. I think most of the stories have been taught with a focus on Chinese language and culture, but I believe it can also have some relevance in the U.S. educational setting with an emphasis on heroism and recognition. To make this happen, I plan to use inquiry-based teaching methods that encourage investigation. First off, we'll start our learning adventure with a question that will make you think, “someone still be a hero, even if no one recognizes them?” This question is designed to help students get thinking and talking about the complexities of heroism and recognition. As we go through our lessons, probably we will mix in various social studies topics. We will dive into history to better understand the story’s cultural and historical background. We’ll explore civics to figure out how heroes impact society and how their recognition can influence what the community believes in and stand for. And we’ll use geography to help us picture where all this is happening. I’ll also encourage students to find information in the story and from other sources to build well-rounded views on whether unrecognized heroes are still heroes. We'll see how understanding “heroes” in such a way can help us become a responsible citizen who wants to make a positive difference in our communities and beyond.

ALEX: Y’all are pitching so many excellent ideas here about inquiry-based investigation in the classroom, characterization through, like, the archetype of the hero, using secondary source research. Chenchen, I love the idea of using geography, too, to kind of physically place that for students. I think if we don't take the time to develop some of that context, it might not click intrinsically with students, right? So I think taking time to get through those details is really helpful. And also, Ben, I would not go back to high school for most anything, but I think I would go back to high school to take your satire unit in your literature class. [laughs] That sounds very cool. I can only imagine how thrilled students would be with reading a couple of episodes or even the entire novel of Lovell’s adaptation of *Journey to the West* and also watching an episode of *Parks and Rec* side-by-side for the comparison there. I think that would be so generative. And thinking about how students would pit Leslie Knope with Sun Wukong—I’m imagining the whiteboard mind map that would result from that, and it's so delightful. [laughs] I love that idea.

[Transition music]

ALEX: In the first episode of this year's Big Read podcast series, our guests discussed Gene Luen Yang's 2006 graphic novel *American Born Chinese* as well as Kelvin Yu's 2023 Disney+ series of the same name. These texts are just two examples of the many adaptations of *Journey to the West*. If you were to teach the novel paired with an adaptation, what kind of adaptation might you choose, and what might be some benefits of teaching *Journey to the West* alongside that particular adaptation?

EMILY: I can jump in here. I chose to teach *Monkey King*—not alongside *American Born Chinese* because we didn't have enough time to add a full graphic novel—but alongside just a few panels from *American Born Chinese*. And I asked my students to analyze visually what's happening, how the story is being told in panels and in visual form (rather than in normal text), what they gained from that, what they lost from it. They really enjoyed the panels, I think, typically when I was showing them more chaotic moments in the text, and were able to point out how *American Born Chinese* shows the sheer volume of insanity that's happening at moments when Monkey is fighting multiple demons in many ways and always seeming to outsmart and out-battle them. And in that class I had my students use the last few minutes of class to create panels from scenes that they got to choose from *Monkey King* and then share it with the class. And a good many of them did, once again, choose moments of urine humor, but the panels were hilarious, and they chose many wonderful moments, and I think it was one of the ways that my students really dug into just how funny this story is and how chaotic and how the joy is sort of in that mess, even as monkey progresses to becoming a much better and more thoughtful person, he's still sort of just living life with a lot of *joie di vivre*.

BEN: So, I haven't read *American Born Chinese*, but I had a copy of it in my classroom library, and it was fairly popular. It's kind of on my list as well as the Disney+ adaptation, which Chenchen actually recommended to me, but I haven't gotten around to watching it yet. When I was doing a little reading about *Monkey King* in preparation for this podcast, I came across the little tidbit that *Dragon Ball* is an adaptation of *Monkey King*. And I taught in a high school where about 65% of our students were Southeast Asian, mostly Mung refugee families and some other Southeast Asian groups. But there was, across cultures in my high school, sort of an obsession with Japan, and particularly with anime. We had Japanese classes, and anime books were always the most popular genre—students were always reading anime. So, I'm not at all familiar with anime—I just never got to that point in my teaching career where I became familiar with it—but I know *Dragon Ball* is a really popular series of books and TV shows. So, I think it would be really fun to dig into the *Dragon Ball* adaptation of this book. And I taught a class called "Literature and Performance," and one of the key focuses of the class was on this idea of transformation, which is a little bit different from adaptation. It's when you take a text and you—rather than doing a straight adaptation of it—you transform it into something different. And I think pairing these two texts could work really well to illustrate that.

CHENCHEN: Well, I like Emily and Ben's ideas. It's good to use graphic novels along with their traditional text because it will give students a chance to see things from different points of view. For example, *American Born Chinese* is a modern story that talks about culture and

identity in a diverse way. When we use it alongside the original story, students might see how old stories still matter and shape new ones.

ALEX: I love that notion of older stories shaping new ones, and I think that can bring that relevance to life for high school students, especially, who might have the attitude of, "Oh, why do we read books that were written fifty or even hundreds of years ago?" What I, as a first time reader, really enjoy about Lovell's adaptation is she really wanted to emphasize the multivocality of the text, meaning that she wanted to emphasize all the different characters' voices and kind of make them have distinct personalities. And I think that idea of literature and performance that you mentioned, Ben, and, Emily, what you're saying about asking students to create adaptations of *Journey to the West*—I think not only is that a way to get students actively engaged in the classroom, but it also can really drive home some of those major themes, ideas, and characterizations, I think. That's a really cool idea.

[Transition music]

ALEX: Like so many other centuries-old texts *Journey to the West* emerges from rich literary, cultural, historical, and religious backgrounds. What sort of context or contexts do you think you would need to include in your lesson plans if you were teaching (or if you've already taught) *Journey to the West*? And if you have any ideas about how you would go about presenting that context, I think that could be helpful, too.

BEN: Well, I definitely want my students to know something about the three major religions that sort of converge in the book—Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism—how they're similar, how they're different, in what ways the novel kind of supports them, and in what ways it subverts aspects of them. I think that would be a really interesting discussion. I don't know enough about these three religions myself to have a lot of great ideas about how I would present them, but I think it could be really interesting to have some scholars of these religions come in as guest speakers, and especially if they had some familiarity with this novel, it would be really interesting to hear their perspectives on the story.

EMILY: Yeah, I have to totally agree with that. When I was planning to teach this for the first time, as a reader, I had been so caught up in the satire of bureaucracy that the context I wanted my students to have was a very brief cultural and political understanding of the Ming Dynasty when this story was originally written so that they might pick up on some of the jokes, you know, the civil service exams, why those might be so important in the narrative and the high levels of bureaucracy and what might be happening when those are being critiqued in the book. However, my students were really, really interested in the religious conflict. The Buddhist/Daoist, in particular, conflict—they were incredibly interested in [it], and they wanted more information, and it's not something I'm particularly familiar with. And I wish that I had done a little more research into that before class. But also I have the luxury teaching it this semester of pointing them towards Big Read events and saying, "Hey, there are people who are experts in this, and you can go listen to them. And isn't that so wonderful? I will come, too." And I guess this is sort of just a plug for the Big Read, but it is really, really nice to have that

kind of like community background when you're teaching a book so that you don't have to be an expert in all the things, and you and your students can still learn about it together.

CHENCHEN: I like your ideas. Even though I'm not an expert, you can reach out to Chenchen to seek help. So, when it comes to understanding the history behind the story, we need to talk about the Tang Dynasty, the time when this novel was happening. It's like drawing similarities to the Renaissance period in Europe, where a lot of cool stuff was going on. During the Tang Dynasty, China was pretty stable, and there was a big boom in art, science, and culture, just like the Renaissance in Europe. Something interesting is that the Tang Dynasty played a big part in spreading Buddhism along the Silk Road, which was like a super ancient trade route that connected China to the other parts of the world. In term of the presentation to make this story more exciting, we can use technology like virtual reality (VR) or augmented reality (AR). This can take students on virtual trips to places from the Tang Dynasty. They can walk the Silk Road, explore all the cities, and even visit temples, all without leaving the classroom. This makes history come to life in a fun way. When students step into the virtual world of the Tang Dynasty, they can really understand why it matters to the story of *Journey to the West*.

ALEX: These are all really excellent ideas. I selfishly want to take all of your classes now. I also love the idea of pointing to other sources or experts through local community programs, Emily, like what you're saying with the Big Read. I think that's a great way, not only so that students can learn to do their own research, but also so that they can see, "Oh, there are people who care about this text outside of my classroom." And I think sometimes students need to experience that in order to truly believe it, because we can talk all day long about the importance of narratives and stories, but until they have that kind of experience, they might not really buy into it that much. And then it's so funny, Chenchen, that you say maybe virtual reality is the best way to get students involved in context in a more active way, because that's something that we talked about in the last episode of the podcast, too. I'm imagining, Chenchen, this exercise in class where you have groups of students function as different points on the Silk Road. Like, this is one city in one country; this is one city in another country. And, maybe, in their groups, they're supposed to use virtual reality to get acquainted with what kind of resources they have, where geographically they are, what kind of belief systems dictate their ways of life. I think that would be a phenomenal day in class, and I think that would be so rich and engaging for students as well.

BEN: I think the virtual reality idea is great. I'm not sure, you know, whether every classroom would have access to that. If they don't, another thing we can have students do is sort of come up with a list of topics for them to investigate and then let them sign up in groups for particular topics that interest them. The kinds of topics you could come up with for a text like this are really almost unlimited, you know, finding out about any of the major religions mentioned in the book, researching the Ming Dynasty. . . I was intrigued to read that the stories of Tripitaka were actually inspired by a historical person—a monk in, I think, the sixth century—who actually went on a quest to get Buddhist scriptures and bring them back to China from India. And then, of course, all kinds of legends grew up around that story, as happens in every culture. But, you know, students could investigate that historical figure and kind of the inspiration for

this journey. So, there are all kinds of things that students could do in, like Chenchen mentioned earlier, sort of an inquiry-based approach to this text.

CHENCHEN: Yes, I think Sanzang's primary mission is to journey to India in search of Buddhist scriptures and teachings. His quest is to bring back this sacred text to China to help spread Buddhism and deepen the understanding of Buddhism's philosophy and practice. That's a good idea.

[Transition music]

ALEX: I'm curious how we think different groups of students would react to Julia Lovell's adaptation of *Journey to the West*. Emily has experience teaching this text—what level is your class, Emily, "Great Narratives"? Is it 200-level or 300-level?

EMILY: It's a 200 level-college class, so it's a lot of college freshmen and sophomores, mostly, who are interested in literature because they signed up for the class. I don't think it's necessary for anybody but English majors, and yet, I will say, a lot of my students are not English majors. They signed up for it simply because they wanted time in their schedule to read. Most of them really enjoyed [the novel]. I had a lot of students come up after class and say they were surprised to have a book that was so fun, and, as Ben would say, not depressing as their first read in the class, which in all honesty made me feel a little bad because looking over the rest of the books on my syllabus, there will probably be some tears. But they really enjoyed it. They enjoyed how funny it was. They enjoyed that, even though it had some heavier moments, so much of it was light-hearted and that it was a text that they could just have fun with. And then they read the *Odyssey* and called it a slog. So, I'm guessing that means that *Monkey King* was a fast-paced, exciting read for them.

CHENCHEN: Well, to be honest, I haven't got a chance to teach yet, but I'm really excited about the prospect of working together with language teachers in the U.S. Together, we can create courses that blend English and social studies, which I think could be a great learning experience.

BEN: I'm sort of kicking myself because I know a teacher at McCutcheon High School who taught *Monkey King* to her tenth-grade honor students this year. It was the first book they read, and I had a meeting with her on Zoom on Friday, and I didn't think to ask her about how they reacted to it. I'm curious to know what they thought of it. I think the way high school students would react to this would really depend on how it's taught. I think I could see them really enjoying it and having a lot of fun with it or really finding it sort of tiresome and repetitive. I think it would depend a lot on the teacher's approach, the kinds of activities that were used, the teacher's own level of enthusiasm, or lack thereof, for the text. I think, probably, for the average high school student, asking them to read the whole thing might be a big ask. So I think I might consider teaching portions of this, especially since it is kind of an episodic novel. I don't know that I would require them to read the whole thing, but we might look at some things from the beginning and end of the novel and then some related stories in the middle that sort of illustrate how Monkey is progressing and what kind of character he is and and is becoming.

EMILY: I haven't taught high schoolers, but at least my mostly freshmen and sophomore students at the college level did have some fun with the episodic and repetitive nature of *Monkey King*. In fact, Alex can probably speak to this better than I can because she stepped in and taught for me on one day when my students got to explore the episodic nature of *Monkey King* by writing their own episodes that were new and fresh but also had to reflect what was going on in the book. Alex, do you want to jump in there?

ALEX: Of course, I think about subbing for this day for Emily's class so often, because it was such a delightful experience, and like Emily said, it was an exercise—that Emily designed, to be clear—where students were asked to write their own episode, and some of them were so good. My favorite, I think, was this episode that students wrote where the pilgrims (Sun Wukong, Pigsy, Sandy, and Tripitaka) had to encounter shadow versions of themselves. I can't remember the details, but something happened where their shadows became separate entities from their physical selves. Which of course, you know, from an instructor's perspective, it's like, "Carl Jung has entered the chat," so now let's talk about the shadow self [and] the physical self. So, it was just really fascinating how they latch on to major themes of the text, characterization—but that kind of goes back to what we said about how if you ask students to create adaptations of a text as a means of engaging with it in a more meaningful way, sometimes they can really surprise you and really come up with great examples of that.

BEN: Yeah, I love that idea of having students create an episode. That sounds like a lot of fun and definitely a really great approach to teaching this. And I think, you know, another similar approach might be to have them write an episode that's set in a completely different kind of place and time, right? You know, what might Monkey King be like in high school? How might he interact with his peers and teachers? I think that could be a really fun challenge to encourage students to think about how it might play out in a context that they're familiar with.

EMILY: I was just thinking if I had all the time in the world to teach *Monkey King*, it would be fun to do something similar and play more into the idea of characterization because, as Alex said, the way I ran the exercise—or really the way Alex ran the exercise—was that it did have to stay sort of true to the characterization, true to the plot, true to the setting, and just add another episode. But it would be kind of fun to see what happens if we change one critical element. Well, how different does the story become? For instance, what happens if we change the characterization of major players? Maybe what happens if Tripitaka becomes incredibly brave and daring instead of quivering and falling off his horse whenever there's trouble? Or what happens if Monkey King becomes bitter and depressed instead of rising to the occasion and bringing his can-do spirit to every battle with every demon? And I think we'd get a completely different story. Now I kind of wish I could go back in time and play with it more.

ALEX: In which case, if you were to ask them to relocate the story of *Journey to the West* in a different setting, that lends itself to being taught alongside an adaptation. If you were to do that and you wanted—Ben, like you're suggesting—to prompt students to write about the character of Sun Wukong in a contemporary high school, let's watch an episode of *American Born Chinese* (the Disney+ adaptation) to get an idea of how creative you could be with that experience.

CHENCHEN: In terms of students' reactions, I just want to add one more. Some students might notice that *Journey to the West* has a big impact on things we enjoy today, like video games, movies, and TV shows that might make students even more interested in this story.

[Transition music]

ALEX: To close out our conversation, I'm wondering if our guests have any advice for instructors at any level who want to bring *Journey to the West* into their classroom?

EMILY: My advice with it is so simple: Just have fun with it. It is an incredibly fun and funny text, and students respond well to that, and I think you just have to run with it.

BEN: Yeah, when I was writing up my responses to these questions, that's exactly what I wrote, Emily: Have fun with it. It's a super fun text, especially in this translation. I think, as a teacher, I would want to be careful not to take it too seriously—like, not to take the instruction of it super seriously. I know that there have been various interpretations of it over the centuries, some of which have been much more serious than others, but at least in this translation, I think it really is all about the fun and the subversion and just the goofiness Monkey, in particular, and all the characters. I said this earlier, but I would reiterate to teachers and, in particular, high school teachers, like, don't feel like you have to teach the whole thing. I think, you know, you look at your time and you consider your students and what you know about them, and you may end up choosing sections that you really like and think would appeal to your students. And I think that's totally fine. There's no law saying that you have to teach an entire text, right? Sometimes we get obsessed with that. I would also suggest pairing it with a contemporary text, particularly multimedia text—TV shows, manga, anime—and we've already discussed some of that. And then I would also absolutely recommend using the audiobook for at least some of the instruction and listening to it with kids—not for everything, but this particular audiobook is so much fun. Like, I still have stuck in my head, you know, Monkey saying things like, "Calm down!" and "Recognize me now," right? These are, like, his taglines. He says them all the time, and the voice is just so hilarious, and I think students would really enjoy that and get a kick out of it.

ALEX: That's a pretty spot-on Sun Wukong impression. Truly, for folks who have not listened to the audiobook, the reader's interpretation of Sun Wukong is hilarious. It's a little bratty, it's a little nasally, but it's so fitting for his character.

BEN: Yeah, I mean, I would, I would say it's annoying, except that's clearly how it's supposed to be, right? Like, this character is supposed to get under your skin a little bit but also make you laugh.

ALEX: Ben, you've got to get that impression on the road. Chenchen, what do you think? Any advice for how you would like to see *Journey to the West* taught at any level?

CHENCHEN: I've got a very similar idea for elementary school teachers who want to introduce *Journey to the West* to fifth or sixth graders: Keep it simple. I know there's a lot of important background information to understand before we start this journey, but when you are getting ready to bring the journey into your classroom, it's important to think about how well

your students can read. One smart way to do it is to look for versions of the story that are made just for students like yours. These versions are made to be easy to read with simple words and shorter chapters. That way the story matches what your students can handle. It doesn't just make the material easier to understand, it also keeps your young readers excited and ready to explore the journey even more. So just keep it simple and have fun.

ALEX: That's all really good advice. I think sometimes we do forget to just keep it simple. And I think at any level, students pick up on whether or not instructors are enjoying teaching the texts that they're working with. So, to kind of echo what all of you are saying, the importance of instructors finding little pieces of joy in various aspects of the text and then trying to translate that to the classroom—as you said, Chenchen, much better than I could, how to bring the journey into the classroom.

BEN: Well, and to go back to something we talked about earlier, I think, you know, we who teach English literature, we have a tendency to choose books that are really serious and often depressing, because those seem more profound somehow. A lot of times it feels like they give us more material to discuss. You know, everybody can relate to suffering and trauma of various kinds, right? But on some level I think that's good, and it's important to have those kind of texts, but that doesn't tell the whole story either, right? Like, there's a kind of profoundness in joy and happiness and subversion that, I think, we often don't explore in the English classroom, and a lot of our students are coming to us, you know, with lots of trauma and lots of heavy things happening in their lives, and maybe for some of them, it's helpful to connect with characters who are going through similar things. But I think they also need a break from that. And I think it can be really freeing and profound in a different way to connect students with elements of joy and laughter, and, you know, trickster-ness and subversion, which are just as important, maybe even more important, than the sad and heavy and hard things.

CHENCHEN: Yeah, I agree with you, Ben. *Journey to the West* also teaches us some important lessons about how to become good people. One lesson is about never giving up, even when things are tough. That's called perseverance, I think. Another lesson is about being humble, which means not thinking you are better than others, and it also shows us that we should always try to make ourselves better.

ALEX: Which is a process that can start at any age, so that really drives home the need and the joy, like Ben is saying, of trying to incorporate this text into classes at whatever level instructors are working with.

EMILY: That's true. It could start in an elementary school, or you can wait until you're five hundred years old. It's never too late.

ALEX: Yes, definitely, do the Sun Wukong way—wait till you've been in time out for half a millennium and then decide to do a character rebrand. I love that.

[Transition music]

ALEX: That concludes our conversation for today. Thank you so much to our fabulous guests—Ben, Chenchen, and Emily, it's been a pleasure discussing this topic and this novel with

you three, and I know our listeners will enjoy hearing your thoughts. For the folks at home, if you'd like more information about the Purdue English Big Read, please visit the Big Read section of the Purdue English Department's website, where you'll find an archive of materials about previous Big Read selections as well as the schedule for this fall's remaining Big Read events. Thanks for joining us. This is Alex Anderson with the Big Read podcast.

[Exit music]