"What are the worst things about this course?" The answers to this question on the course evaluation form we use at my university are always pretty much the same: there are too many assignments, and the marking is too hard. But last year, one student in my children’s literature course gave a different answer; according to her, “The professor's attitude was one of an 'intellectual snob.'”

Those are hard words. I told myself the student was just upset about getting lower grades than she wanted. I tried to console myself with comments by other students about how interesting the course was and how terrific the professor was. It didn't work. I had to admit the ugly truth: I AM an intellectual snob.

And, I bet, so are you, if you have the need or the desire to read this journal. What that student considered snobbish had less to do with my personality than with assumptions I share with most teachers of literature, assumptions that are the underpinnings of literary study – indeed, of education in the humanities. These are decidedly nonegalitarian, and might well seem snobbish.

In recent years, theorists of literature have been pointing out exactly how snobbish; the work of deconstructionists and feminists has had the salutary effect of revealing the extent to which all ideas...
about literature have political implications. As Terry Eagleton suggests, literature is less an objective category than a variety of ways of thinking about writing: he concludes not only that “the value-judgments by which it is constituted are historically variable, but that these value-judgments themselves have a close relation to social ideologies. They refer in the end not only to private taste, but to the assumptions by which certain social groups exercise and maintain power over others.”

One of the ways in which professors of English maintain power is by blithely expecting our students to share our own assumptions about literature, and then expressing our horror and penalizing them when they reveal different assumptions. We do so, of course, in the profound faith that our own assumptions are the right ones, and that our students ought to share them; most of us are quite unconscious of the less appetizing political implications of our ideas about literature.

Yet those ideas are political, for they are undeniably snobbish; we don’t notice how much they depend on unspoken judgments of value simply because we tend to share those judgments with each other. Despite our theoretical acceptance of the new critical ideas, most professors of English believe that some works of literature are better than others—richer and more interesting—and that one of the main pleasures of the literary experience is the attempt to understand which ones, and why. We also believe that some ways of responding to and understanding literature are richer, more rewarding, better than others; and we assume that our own ways of responding and understanding are superior to those of at least some of our students—for if they weren’t, what right would we have to be teaching them?

I once took all that for granted; but when I began to teach children’s literature, I discovered I could do so no longer. My students quite clearly did not share my assumptions. While a few of the people who enrol in children’s literature are English majors who enjoy reading and studying literature, most have more immediately practical reasons for taking my courses. Some are working librarians or parents with young children; many are preparing to be teachers or day care workers. Some have not previously studied literature in university, and most will take no other courses in literature. Many of them do not themselves enjoy reading all that much; they often cheerfully tell me that they hate literature and love children.