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SELECTING LITERATURE FOR THE PRESCHOOL CHILD

Special Studies
Ouachita Baptist University

Sharon Kluck
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Although the world of books can be one of fascination and intrigue to any age group, this can be particularly true for the preschooler. During these very impressionable years, books can be used in broadening experiences as well as in combining knowledge and enjoyment to form a book philosophy that will carry over for life. Since building this appreciation of books is so important, the proper tools are necessary in correct sequence. Good literature must be carefully selected to fulfill the need.

In the pursuit of excellence in books for boys and girls there are certain qualities we look for; those of making a child respect books; persuading him that, no matter how hard it may seem to learn, reading is worth the effort; giving him an experience that is worth having and that he might not be able to have for himself; broadening his acquaintance with people by giving him friends he would never know except through books; setting his imagination free; and leading him into the great world of books. All these qualities make for excellence; yet excellence itself cannot be defined. It can only be experienced.¹

Before good literature can be selected for the preschooler, perhaps an explanation of its meaning is necessary. Literature for this group consists of stories which are read and told to the children along with the picture books they enjoy alone. When possible, literary standards are sought even though the psychological values are more important than the literary.² Two safe facts to remember are: "a book is a good book for children only when they enjoy it, a book is a poor book for children. . .if children are unable to read it or are bored by its content."³

In order to select books that will be enjoyable as well as educational, some criteria have been selected to help judge. General content, illustrations and format, appropriateness to the child, style, language, integrity, concepts, and special features are eight solid guidelines in selecting literature for the preschooler.

In selecting books for preschoolers, the children themselves must first be considered. His background, attitudes, abilities, and interests will all be factors in determining his needs. Some research has been done on children's interest in literature. In 1921 Dunn found the surprise plot, repetition, animals, narrativeness, liveliness, and familiar experiences especially appealed to primary children.⁴ Books should not be restricted to their immediate interests, however, because sometimes they are too narrow.

Children need books to widen their horizons, deepen their understandings, and give them broader social insights. They also need books that minister to their merriment or deepen their appreciation of beauty. "Every child should have books in which he can recognize himself, his family, his language, and his life style."⁵ Children need books about other life styles, too. It is equally important for books to offer the children a look at other people, other periods, and other places, as it is to show them a glimpse of themselves.

Books must meet the intellectual needs of the child. Stories and pictures should have a substantial content that is

carefully selected for the various age levels since the development of the child's mind between two and six is so tremendous. A selection must be made so that each age level can understand with the brain as well as hear with the ears and see with the eyes.

In emotional development the graduations from two to six are not so great as they are for intellectual content. This is perhaps due to the fact that certain emotional situations have the same interest for almost any age level when dramatically presented in language that suits the age level. In selecting books for each of the various age levels in the nursery school, we rule out few stories because their emotional themes are too babyish or too old, but many only because the ideas and words used are too simple or too advanced.

The emotional suitability of a story depends upon how much the child can identify himself with the feelings of someone in the story because he had had similar feelings. All children know what it is to be cold, hungry, sleepy, hurt, scared and to feel lost or to get punished. The emotional outcome of the story also determines its suitability. It should turn out in such a fashion that the child can continue his identification, enjoy himself and feel comfortable. If the ending forces him to break off identification, it is not satisfying or suitable.⁶

Consider these questions in judging the appropriateness of a book for a particular group of children:

- Who are the children? Immigrants? Children of immigrants?
- Do they have a regional culture, like the mountaineers of Appalachia, or perhaps a tribal culture, like the Navajos?
- Do their parents have access to books? Do they encourage reading at home?
- Where do the children live? City? Small town? Rural area? Ghetto? Reservation? Apartment building? Single family house??

An overall view of the book's content is a necessary when choosing the right book. In referring to the content of children's books, Paul Hazard said "I like books that remain faithful to the very essence of art; namely, those that offer to children an intuitive and direct way of knowledge, a simple beauty capable of being perceived immediately, arousing in their souls a vibration which will endure all their lives."⁸ The content should be carefully planned to challenge and stimulate thought, resulting in creative activity of some kind. The whole purpose then of any book is to enrich a child's life. The content should be constructed so that this purpose is fulfilled.

Most vital to the content is the theme which reveals the author's purpose in writing the story. It should have sound moral and ethical principles as well as one which appeals to the interest of the particular age group. Animal stories are one of the most enticing baits to the preschooler. Stories about animal heroes, either pets or wild creatures, are exceedingly popular. The animal hero ordinarily has some unusual competence or achieves some special success which

makes his vulnerability at the hands of master or hunter all the more heart-rendering. Such stories call forth the young reader's desire to nurture and protect, and this is one of the values of the well-written animal tale for children.⁹

Along with the realistic view is the one of friendly animals and their young having experiences that children might have themselves. Marjorie Flack's Ask Mr. Bear is a good example of delightful humor with a simple plot. Buttons by Tom Robinson and Robert McCloskey's Make Way for Ducklings are also excellent books on animals.

Themes of love and achievement are found in stories about family life. This realistic fiction also acquaints the child with a wider world than the city suburbs or regional groups of our own country. Books begin to take the reader back in time and to introduce him to family life in other countries.

Most children of pre-school age are intrigued by books about buses, trucks, steam shovels, boats, trains, fire trucks, planes, and space ships. These can be realistic picture books or fanciful tales with dramatic plot. Almost all of Virginia Lee Burton's books are concerned with personified machinery or inanimate objects. Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel, Kathy and the Big Snow, and The Little House are three examples.

Along with an appealing theme there must be an exciting plot or plan of the story. The preschooler is ready for

stories with an interesting sequence, suspense, climax, and satisfying ending. In a well constructed plot, the sequence of events is the logical and natural development of the actions and decisions of the characters in given situations. The plot should be credible, one that rings true. In literature written for children, the story should develop through detailed descriptions or character introspection. Youngsters crave action and suspense in their stories. If suspense or incident is all the story has to offer, however, children will not re-read it for they already know the plot.¹⁰

A convincingly real and lifelike characterization of the people or animals in the story can give it the element children will want to hear repeated. In addition to realism in characterization there should be consistency in its portrayal. The characters should be depicted so that everything they do, think, and say will seem natural and inevitable. Another aspect of sound characterization is growth and development. Not all characters will change, but many are memorable for their personality development. To be truly human they must slowly and convincingly grow and change before the reader's eyes.¹¹

As the story develops its theme and characters, children want to see a visual image of this process. Modern books for children have gone all out for beautiful illustrations and appealing format (shape, size, type, paper, binding, and

general arrangement). Whether it be bright hues, soft pastels, antique-style pictures, or bold modern designs, children are drawn to the illustrations. Strong, vibrant colors seem to appeal to children more than those which are pale, fuzzy, or over-stylized. However, a nursery school staff tested children on their color choices in clothes and in picture books and were surprised to find no conclusive preference for primary colors.¹² On the whole there is some evidence that children do prefer colors to black and white even though many popular books are successfully illustrated in this way. Distortions and unrealistic colors also seem to confuse the child.

Because of the many books on the market today, children are not always exposed to the proper illustrations that will help them to develop good taste in art. "For, as Bertha Mahony says in Illustrators of Children's Books, '...art in children's books is a part of all art, not an isolated special field. In every period the greatest artists have shared in it.'"¹³ Therefore, to gain a proper appreciation of art in the preschool years, the child must find it in his favorite books. Paul Hazard has said this concerning children's illustrations:

. . . And those that provide them with pictures, the kind that they like, pictures chosen from the riches of the world; enchanting pictures that bring release and joy, happiness gained before reality closes in upon them, insurance against the time, all too soon, when there will be nothing but realities.¹⁴

Lynd Ward once made this statement at a meeting of children's librarians. "Pictures extend the story." Included in the pictures are often details not mentioned in the text. Children enjoy putting names with these various objects. "Being visual-minded, children want to see the pictures and pore over details, for it is difficult for them to conjure up images."¹⁵

The details as well as the main subject matter must be clearly visible, particularly for group reading. The younger the child the simpler the outlines must be and the fewer the details. Printing superimposed on pictures can be confusing while distorted and poor photographs can be more unreal looking than line drawings. The primary visual image must be clear and must be developed by the narrative.¹⁶

Being literal, the young child also wants a picture synchronized precisely with the text. Even older children are irked by illustrations that appear before or after the episode they are supposed to represent.

The books of children under six lead a rough life at best and survive only if sturdily made. Children reread their favorites as adults rarely do. If a picture-story is to last through many readings, it should be cloth bound with sturdy covers and firm stitching. Stout books with easy-to-turn pages of substantial, hard-to-tear paper are a comfort to young Children, who like to pore over these books by themselves.

Size is another consideration. For the child under six, most books should be small and light enough to handle by himself. But, oddly enough, he does occasionally enjoy a book that he has to stand over at a table, leaning on his elbows.

The size of the type, the leading (the space between lines), and the number of words to a page are also important. The words should be well spaced and in large enough type to attract the child's eye. Around five years of age he begins associating those symbols with the word meanings and thus begins to read.¹⁷

In selecting a book, follow these suggestions to evaluate the illustrations:

- Can a child who does not yet read enjoy the book for the pictures alone?
- Will a child be able to identify with the situations pictured, or will the pictures make him feel strange and unfamiliar?
- Are there enough pictures?
- Do they complement the story, or do they detract from it?
- Do you think the style suits the story?
- Does the picture illustrate the text on a nearby page?
- Are the illustrations interesting? Attractive? Satisfying?¹⁸

Just as the illustrations attract a young book lover, so does the style of the story. The style of a book refers to the way the author has written it. Good writing style is appropriate to the plot, subject, theme, and characters of the story. Children tend to want action in their stories rather than description or contemplation. This does not mean that

description is eliminated from children's books but suggests an economy of detail. Usually, children do not like a story told in the first person. Because time concepts are difficult for children to grasp, authors of juvenile literature avoid telescoping action or using flashbacks. Children prefer a style of clarity and simplicity. Finally, children demand conversation in their stories. They want the conversations to be natural and not stilted.

Along with the prose style of writing is poetry for children. Children's poetry stems from the same creative impulse that produces poetry for adults. It is poetry children like, whether written specifically for them or not. Because poetry speaks a universal language, the line dividing poetry for children and for grown-ups is less clearly defined, and the area of common enjoyment is even greater than for prose. Because of some idea or some musical quality, poems for adults have often been adopted by children, and much poetry for children is thoroughly enjoyed by adults.²⁰

Small children acquire a love for poetry as naturally as did people of early times, through hearing poems spoken and through learning to say them, almost unconsciously, along with the speaker. Old nursery ditties and ancient ballads were easily remembered and passed on by word of mouth for generations before they achieved the permanency of print and became known as Mother Goose and traditional (or popular)

ballads. These folk rhymes are still important not only because children and youth continue to enjoy them, but because many are skillfully composed, exuberant or dramatic, and lead naturally into modern nonsense verse and narrative poems.

In contrast to folk or traditional poetry, modern poetry for children is the work of one person and has had a set form from the beginning. In recent years there has been a great expansion in subject matter, patterns, and style. The language is informal, spontaneous, and suggestive of a child's idiomatic speech. The ideas seem nearer the child's own world and often capable of being realized in experience. The poets employ varied natural rhythm and depict the whimsical, nonsensical, fanciful, and playful as well as the serious side of childhood.

Selecting books written in a variety of styles will make reading more interesting and enjoyable than it would be if every book had the same style as every other book. Besides poetry, there are varying styles with a different slant. A Certain Small Shepherd is a good narrative while When the Moon Is New provides a surprise ending. Humor is found in The Chili Pepper Children and Angelo the Naughty One. The Snip, Snap, and Snurr books, on the other hand, are filled with action. Repetition of sounds, words, and phrases, rhythmic phrasing, and chronological sequences along with direct quotation, as

found in Knots on a Counting Rope, all add to the variation of style.

Consider these questions:

- What is the style of writing?
- Is the style appropriate to the subject?
- Is the story told from a child's point of view?
- If it isn't, can the child identify with the point of view which is used?
- Is the book too long to be read in one sitting? If it is, is it divided into chapters of appropriate length?
- What was the author's intent? To inform? To entertain?²¹

Because skill in using words is a key factor in learning, and because language is the key element in books, the quality of a book's language is very important. Appreciating the beauty of language is also important. Children are involved with words from birth in the task of learning their meaning and in appreciating the magic of their sounds. Children have an opportunity to continue this growth by learning new words from literature.

The auditory development of children does not vary much with the different age levels of the nursery school. The hearing of a two-year-old is as acute as that of a five-year-old, but the capacity to interpret word sounds is very different. Because it is so difficult to separate the sounds of words from their meaning, we can be misled into thinking that children like the content, when in reality it is just the appealing sound. The point to be made is the simple one that the actual sound of words being spoken is equally

appealing at all ages, though the kinds of words used must vary with the different ages.

Words that sound like their meaning or emotional connotation are appropriate to all ages. Words that repeat themselves with variations are readily enjoyed and fun for children because of their sound rather than their meaning. The rhythm of words in a series, whether in prose or poetry, has pure sound appeal that even the youngest children appreciate.²² Humorous verse, if it is skillfully composed, introduces the child to rhyme, rhythm, and meter and to various types of verse patterns.

Consider these questions in evaluating:

- What kinds of words are used? New? Or familiar to the children? If words are new, do they represent familiar concepts which will help you to explain the new words to the children?
- Does the author use words the children enjoy? Sound and action words?
- Is the vocabulary suitable?
- How can the book be used to develop the children's language abilities?
- Will the book enrich their language experience and add to their ability to express themselves in words?²³

The element of integrity is another important criteria in selecting a children's book. However, it is difficult to define; it is easier to recognize its absence in a story. It is missing from a book that sentimentalizes subjects like sex, death, or religion as well as in one which romanticizes sickness or poverty.

I like books that set in action truths worthy of lasting forever, and of inspiring one's whole inner life; those demonstrating that an unselfish and faithful love always ends by finding its reward, be it only in oneself; how ugly and low are envy, jealousy, and greed; how people who utter only slander and lies end by coughing up vipers and toads whenever they speak. In short, I like books that have the integrity to perpetuate their own faith or truth and justice.²⁴

Even though the general consensus agrees that there is no integrity in a lie, there is much controversy over the use of fantasy for the preschooler. Some authorities feel that the world of fantasy is too confusing since the preschooler is not overly familiar with reality.

Most fairy tales and folk tales are too complicated and involved for very young children. Underlying meanings and symbolism are beyond their comprehension. Of course, there are exceptions such as Hans Anderson's "Thumbelina"... Fair tales about elves, gnomes, giants, disagreeable witches, stepmothers, and godmothers are not appropriate for preschoolers... Learning about the here-and-now world is sufficiently filled with magic, wonder, and surprise, and should be recognized and understood before taking off for fairy land.²⁵

On the other hand, some have emphasized the importance of fairy tales because of the opportunities they offer in creativity and imagination. Still others advocate the therapy of laughter that is often found in modern fantasy.

Fantasy moves from nonsense to serious symbolism. Children need fantasy as a corrective for the too tight literalness that is a frequent product of our mechanistic, science-conscious age. Whether laughter is found in a here-and-now story or in the wildest fantasy, it is so important in our grim days that we should search for it and use it.²⁶

It is up to the one choosing the book to decide whether the text has integrity of presentation, portrayal of real emotions, true to life conflicts, or comprehensible situations. All of these can occur in fantasy as well as in any other good piece of children's literature. In order to properly evaluate a book along these lines, some of the following questions will be of help.

- Is the material in the book presented honestly?
- If the book has strong moral, psychological, or social implications, how are these conveyed?
- Does the author talk down to the young reader?
- Does the book offer healthy attitudes about minority group cultures?
- Is the material authentic?
- Do characters present undesirable behavior as if it were desirable?
- Do the characters appear to be individuals who behave the way real people behave?
- What kinds of relationships between people are depicted?
- What roles are presented in the book?²⁷

Along with entertainment, children's books need to present concepts they can grasp and count on for specific information. There are many available types dealing with cause and effect; role of self image; numbers and measurement; relationships of space, shape, or size; passage of time; order or sequence; contrast and similarity; classification and labeling; humor; environment; man-performed processes; feeling and emotion. Concept books, informational books with pictures designed to explain abstract ideas through comparisons to young children, may include Fast Is Not a Lady Bug by Schlein and Kessler as well as Budney's

A Kiss Is Round. Helen Borten has authored several such as Do You See What I See?; Do You Hear What I Hear?; and Do You Move As I Do?

Traditional alphabet and counting books are still considered "first books" for the child. C. B. Fall has written the ABC Book while Fritz Eichenberg has created Ape in a Cape: An Alphabet Book of Odd Animals. Among the counting books are Jeanne-Marie Counts Her Sheep by Francoise and Charlotte Zolotow's One Step, Two...

It is particularly important to find books whose concepts will appeal to boys. One research study disclosed that a ratio of ten boys to one girl develop reading problems as they grow older.²⁸ Punia and the King of the Sharks is a good example of a book with strong masculine appeal.

In selecting concept books ask:

- What concept or concepts does the book present?
- Is it interesting?
- Are the ideas presented in an abstract or concrete way?
- If several concepts are presented, is there one which can be emphasized to avoid confusing the child?
- Will the idea in the book appeal to the child?²⁹

Special features have been added to many books to make them particularly useful in teaching little children and in extending their story time experience to include other kinds of experience. Added interests might include two languages on facing pages; free-standing copies of illustrations, a book-phonograph record combination; filmstrips; teaching

notes; toys that support the story; and suggestions for after-the-story activities.

To evaluate these special features question:

- What is the special feature of the book?
- Will it be of value to the children?
- Will it be fun?
- How can it be used to the best advantage?
- How will it relate to other activities?³⁰

To select a children's book that is suitable to a child, care should be taken to note that it has a good overall content, has proper illustrations and format, uses acceptable style and language with integrity, and provides a helpful concept along with special features. This is an awesome task; yet, it can be done. Literature for the preschooler can lay a foundation for him that will be useful the rest of his life. Books will broaden his outlook and prepare him for an exciting life ahead.

Footnotes

¹Ruth Hill Vignes, Margin For Surprise, about Books, Children, and, Librarians, Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1964, p. 15

²Rhoda Kellogg, Nursery School Guide, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1949, p. 158

³May Hill Arbuthnot, Children and Books, Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1964, p. 2

⁴Fannie W. Dunn, Interest Factors in Primary Reading Material, Contributions to Education, No. 113, New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1921.

⁵Vera John and Tomi Berney, Analysis of Storytelling as a Measure of the Effects of Ethnic Content in Stories: A Study of Negro, Indian, and Spanish-American Children, New York: Yeshiva University, 1967

⁶Kellogg, op. cit., pp. 160-162

⁷Louise Griffin, Books in Preschool: A Guide to Selecting, Purchasing, and Using Children's Books, Urban, Illinois: ERIC Clearinghouse on Early Childhood Education, 1970, p. 3

⁸Paul Hazard, Books, Children, and Men, Boston: The Horn Book, Inc., 1960, p. 42

⁹Arbuthnot, op., cit., p. 22

¹⁰Charlotte S. Huck and Doris A Young, Children's Literature in the Elementary School, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961, p. 16

¹¹Ibid., pp. 17-18

¹²Huck and Young, op. cit., p. 24

¹³Ibid., p. 23

¹⁴Hazard, op. cit., p. 42

¹⁵Vardine Moore, Pre-School Story Hour, New York: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1966, p. 67

- ¹⁶Kellogg, op. cit., p. 162
- ¹⁷Arbuthnot, op. cit., p. 25
- ¹⁸Griffin, op. cit., p. 2
- ¹⁹Huck and Young, op. cit., pp. 19-20
- ²⁰Lillian Hollowell, A Book of Children's Literature,
New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1966, p. 400
- ²¹Griffin, op. cit., pp. 6-7
- ²²Kellogg, op. cit., pp. 158-159
- ²³Griffin, op. cit., pp. 7-8
- ²⁴Hazard, op. cit., p. 45
- ²⁵Moore, op. cit., p. 69
- ²⁶Arbuthnot, op. cit., p. 23
- ²⁷Griffin, op. cit., p. 10
- ²⁸Ibid., pp. 11-12
- ²⁹Ibid., p. 12
- ³⁰Ibid., p. 12

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