BOOKS *That Build* CHARACTER

A Guide to Teaching Your Child Moral Values Through Stories

WILLIAM KILPATRICK *and*
GREGORY *and* SUZANNE M. WOLFE
FOREWORD BY DR. ROBERT COLES

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A MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOUNDATION BOOK

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For Crystal, Heather, and Christopher—W. K.
For Magdalen, Helena, and Charles—G. W. & S.M.W.

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Foreword

Days into my years as a medical intern (an exhausting, demanding, scary time when young men and women keep learning, night and day, how much they have to learn), I was on the hospital pediatric service, working with children who had leukemia. We had no drugs then that saved such seriously endangered lives, only blood and more blood to offer those boys and girls, so unlucky through the dread action of an inscrutable fate, as they all well understood. In that regard, I recall the first child I had to "transfuse," a verb I kept hearing all the time—a nine-year-old girl who had more than an inkling that she'd never celebrate another birthday. When I had gotten her latest pint of blood suitably going into her right leg (her arms had ceased being useful in that respect: over-used veins), she gave me a smile, even as I visibly relaxed (one more tough job done). I prepared to leave, mouthed some piety I've long forgotten. But she snapped me out of the complacency I'd learned to summon as protection (Lord, the terrible tragedies in that ward, bed after bed of them!) by asking me this, "How many more bottles will you be giving me?" Quickly, I said I didn't know—thinking she was trying to pin me down as to the details of a therapeutic regimen. But she had a much broader, larger perspective, as I quickly discovered. "I mean, before I die."

Of course, I hastened to reassure her—but she had scant patience with my evasive platitudes. When they'd been uttered, she countered with this, "I'll never get to ten. Ten is two digits, Daddy [an engineer] keeps saying. But I hope before this leukemia wins, I can win." Needless to say, I wondered what

she had in mind—this resort to a kind of military imagery, so I thought. She clearly was inviting me, indirectly, to pursue the matter, and I did—I asked her which victories she had in mind. She told me right off, "I'd like to be good, so people would say: 'she was a good girl.'" My response, of course, was all to predictable, well intentioned, and yes, sincere: she *was* "good," so I kept noticing. But she begged to disagree, "I'm all right here; I'm even good, here. But before this [illness], I was a 'hellion.'" Who in the world told her that, I wondered aloud, and was told: her mom and her dad, both. On what basis, I wanted to know. She was ready with a list that made me wonder whether she was exaggerating wildly, dramatically, a consequence of her state of mind as she struggled with a (then) fatal illness. After all, I'd heard other such afflicted children hype things up as they remembered what had been, and came to terms with what wouldn't ever be. But the next day her dad and mom confirmed her self-description, and her mom added this, a remark so pointed, and surprising I believe I recall it virtually word for word over three decades later, "She tells us she wants to prove herself a really good person before she dies, and she asks us for help [in becoming so]."

There followed, of course, a discussion among the three of us as to the "meaning" of this, and the best response—not that I knew what to say, to recommend. I was not then a husband or a father, and I had no training yet in child psychiatry and had exactly two weeks' experience in a pediatric rotation. Unfortunately, I had a certain narrowness of vision that came with my situation at the time, and so I kept trying to interpret the girl's self-appointed ambition or purpose as an idiosyncratic response to a quite dreadful disease that was, alas, nearing its culmination. But the mother, having heard me muse and ramble in the above over-all direction, suddenly took issue with me (with herself, actually, as I'd been hearing her: a hitherto quizzical, perplexed posture), and the result was this surprising comment, again not to be forgotten by me, "We live a lifetime trying to find out *how* to live—and this is her last chance to do that for herself." As I well recall, the girl died a month or so later (I was just moving to another service, another ward), but during those few weeks her parents and she read and read,

CHAPTER 1

Imagination: The Heart's Best Guide

WHEN HER TWO-YEAR-OLD sister began to cry over a missing stuffed bear, Crystal, age four, declared, "She wants her Dogger," and proceeded to offer one of her own stuffed animals as a substitute. *Dogger* is a story about a boy who loses his worn, stuffed dog, and about his older sister, Bella, who trades a large and beautiful stuffed bear to get Dogger back for him. Crystal, who had heard the story only the night before, was putting into practice the good example set by Bella.

Crystal is a lucky girl. Her mother reads to her. And her mother is selective in what she reads. As a result, Crystal is beginning to develop a picture in her mind of the way things should be, of how people can act when they're at their best.

This book is intended to introduce the reader to books that help youngsters grow in virtue—books like *Dogger.* There is no shortage of such books. In fact, there are thousands of finely crafted stories for children that make honesty, responsibility, and compassion come alive. But they are not always easy to find. Concepts such as virtue, good example, and character have been out of fashion in our society for quite some time, and their absence is reflected in the available guidebooks to children's literature. Although there are many such guides, they all suffer from a common limitation: that is, their focus is almost solely on readability or, worse, on popularity. What is

missing from these guides—what seems to be avoided—is any suggestion that certain books may help to develop character, and that others may not. The distinctive feature of this book, by contrast, is its focus on the moral dimension of reading. We think many parents want books for their children that are not simply a good read but good in the other sense of the word—books that not only capture the imagination, but cultivate the conscience as well.

Such books bestow a double blessing. They provide hours of pure pleasure. They also provide good companions. They introduce your child to friends who are a little older, a little wiser, a little braver. Along with these companions your child gets to ask some tough questions. Is Long John Silver good or bad? Should Beauty keep her promise to Beast? Should Frodo continue on his seemingly doomed mission while there is still a chance to return to the safety of the Shire? These are not easy questions to answer, especially when time is running out or the edge of the cliff is crumbling underfoot, but they are the kind of questions with which we are all confronted sooner or later. And when they come they often come in situations in which we have little time to think or at times when we may be angry, fearful, or just plain exhausted. It's exactly at times like this that the half-forgotten memory of a story can rise to our aid.

A 1985 report by the National Commission on Reading declared that reading aloud is the single most important contribution that parents can make toward their child's success in school. We want to go a little further than that. We believe that reading aloud may also be one of the most important contributions parents can make toward developing good character in their children. Why? For several reasons. First, because stories can create an emotional attachment to goodness, a desire to do the right thing. Second, because stories provide a wealth of good examples—the kind of examples that are often missing from a child's day-to-day environment. Third, because stories familiarize youngsters with the codes of conduct they need to know. Finally, because stories help to make sense out of life, help us to cast our own lives as stories. And unless this sense of meaning is acquired at an early age and reinforced as we grow older, there simply is no moral growth.

Why is a book of this nature so crucial now? After all, the importance of reading has long been known. We know that millions of Americans, young and old, are crippled in their daily activities and in their future prospects by poor reading skills. The problems caused by illiteracy are all too evident. But there is a new factor to contend with. We are now faced with another kind of illiteracy—one that may prove even more costly to our society. The new illiteracy is *moral* illiteracy. In addition to the millions who can't read or can't read well, there are millions more who don't know the difference between right and wrong—or don't care.

Across the country, teachers, parents, and police are encountering more and more youngsters who don't really think that stealing or lying or cheating is wrong. Says a fifth-grade teacher quoted in Thomas Lickona's *Educating for Character:*

> About ten years ago I showed my class some moral dilemma film strips. I found they knew right from wrong, even if they didn't always practice it. Now I find more and more of them don't know. They don't think it's wrong to pick up another person's property without their permission or to go into somebody else's desk. They barge between two adults when they're talking and seem to lack manners in general. You want to ask them, "Didn't your mother ever teach you that?"

There is an important sense in which the two kinds of illiteracy—as well as the solutions to them—are connected. One way to help youngsters to know and care about right and wrong is to acquaint them with good books. When we see others from the inside, as we do in stories, when we live with them, and hurt with them, and hope with them, we learn a new respect for people. This was understood by our ancestors. Stories, histories, and myths played an essential role in character education in the past. The Greeks learned about right and wrong from the example of Ulysses and Penelope, and a host of other characters. The Romans learned about virtue and vice from Plutarch's *Lives.* Jews and Christians learned from Bible stories or stories about the lives of prophets, saints, missionaries, and

martyrs. And new research suggests that they were right. In the June 1990 issue of *American Psychologist,* Paul Vitz, a professor at New York University, provides an extensive survey of recent psychological studies, all pointing to "the central importance of stories in developing the moral life." Narrative plots have a powerful influence on us, says Vitz, because we tend to interpret our own lives as stories or narratives. "Indeed," he writes, "it is almost impossible not to think this way."

But why stories? Why not simply explain the difference between right and wrong to your children? Why not supply them with a list of dos and don'ts?

Such explanations are important, of course, but they fail to touch children on the level where it really matters—the level of imagination. Imagination. The word comes from "image"—a mental picture. And these pictures have a way of sticking in our memory and making demands on our conscience long after the explanations have been rubbed thin by the frictions of daily life.

There is just such an image in Lois Lowry's book *Number the Stars,* a story about the Nazi occupation of Denmark. To protect her Jewish friend, a Christian girl tears from her neck a gold chain bearing a Star of David and clenches it in her fist moments before Nazi soldiers arrive. She clenches it so tightly that, by the time the soldiers have left, an impression of the Star of David is imprinted in her palm.

A fourth-grade teacher who had read the book to her class passed on the following story to Lowry. On the day the teacher read that particular chapter, she had brought into the class a chain and a Star of David similar to the one described in the book. As she read the chapter she had the students pass the chain around the class. And while she was reading she noticed that one student after another pressed the star into his or her palm, making an imprint.

And that's the kind of imprint a good story can make on our minds. We need moral propositions and moral principles, but we need images too, because we think more readily in pictures than in propositions. And when a moral principle has the power to move us to action, it is often because it is backed up by a picture or image. As the short story writer Flannery

O'Connor observed, "A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way. . . . You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate."

Stories present us not only with memorable pictures, but with dramas. Through the power of the imagination we become vicarious participants in the story, sharing the hero's or heroine's choices and challenges. We literally "identify" ourselves with our favorite characters, and thus their actions become our actions. In a story we meet characters who have something to learn; otherwise we would not be interested in them. When we first meet the hero, he has not achieved moral perfection or ultimate wisdom. If the story grips us, though, we root for the hero, suffering with him and cheering him on. This imaginative process of participation and identification gives us hope, because we want to believe that in the stories of our lives we too can make the right choices.

Are stories alone sufficient for the task of raising good children? No, of course not. Parents also need to set a good personal example, to encourage good habits, to explain rules, and to enforce them through appropriate discipline. There is no single "magic bullet" approach when it comes to raising children. But we do feel that a reemphasis on storytelling is long past due because, if anything, the power of stories has been vastly underrated in recent decades. The world of books and stories constitutes an enormous but neglected moral resource—a huge treasure house lying largely unused. According to one study, once out of school, nearly 60 percent of adult Americans never read a single book. And even in school there is likely to be a reading gap. Jim Trelease says he was prompted to write *The Read-Aloud Handbook* when he discovered that in many classrooms he visited, the only books children were familiar with were their textbooks.

Why this neglect of books? Part of the reason, again, is that we seem to have forgotten about the power of imagination. We've forgotten that children are motivated far more by what attracts the imagination than by what appeals to reason. We've forgotten that their behavior is shaped to a large extent by the dramas that play in the theaters of their minds.

The other reason for the neglect is television. "Television,"

kinder, wiser. And who can resist the attractions of Sir Percy Blakeney, the Scarlet Pimpernel, as he carries off his bold exploits with coolness, wit, and charm? After reading *The Scarlet Pimpernel,* one young teenager of our acquaintance was so caught up by its exuberant spirit that he went about the house for the next week reciting Sir Percy's catchy poem about the Pimpernel:

> *We seek him here, we seek him there*
> *Those Frenchies seek him everywhere.*
> *Is he in heaven? Is he in hell?*
> *That damned, elusive Pimpernel.*

Stories, then, because of their hold on the imagination, can help to create an emotional attachment to goodness. If other things are in place, that emotional attraction can then grow into a real commitment to goodness. The dramatic nature of stories enables us to "rehearse" moral decisions, strengthening our solidarity with the good. But if the desire to do right is not developed at an early age our other efforts to teach values to children won't bear much fruit.

What prevents parents from taking steps in this direction? Curiously, one of the biggest obstacles is a sense of fate. Curious, because we were long ago supposed to have emerged from a belief in fate. Nevertheless, it's there. Instead of doing something to break the media's stranglehold on our children, we take an attitude similar to that of primitive people who, in the face of famine or plague or flood, could only throw up their hands and say "The gods are angry" or some such formula. It's the same with us. Too many adults, when they see the pervasive influence of popular culture, tend to throw up their hands and say "What can you do?" Like the parents in the old story, we watch helplessly as today's pied pipers lead our children off in all the wrong directions. Although we live in a modern age we have succumbed to an old myth: the myth of the powerless individual against an all-powerful force.

Not that thinking mythically is a bad thing. Perhaps if we kept in better touch with the myths and stories of our civiliza-

tion we wouldn't give up so easily. Perhaps we need to refresh our imaginations with stories of individuals who overcame the odds: David defeating Goliath, Horatius holding the Tiber bridge against the foes of Rome, or, perhaps most appropriately for our television-dominated age, Odysseus outwitting Cyclops, the original one-eyed giant.

"How shall a man judge what to do in such times?" asks a character in *The Lord of the Rings*. "As he ever has judged," comes the reply. "Good and evil have not changed. . . . It is man's part to discern them." The more we expose our children to good literature the more they will develop such habits of discernment. Gladys Hunt recounts the following from a phone conversation with her college-age son:

> Am I ever glad we read *That Hideous Strength* together last summer! I found myself in a situation this week in which I felt all the pressures to conform to the group and compromise my values to be part of the inner-ring. Then I remembered that story and the awful mistake it is to play the game that way.

That passage says a lot about literature's power to put the imagination on alert, but there's something else of interest that may have caught your attention. Reading together? A college student? With his family? It seems hard to believe. Hasn't TV made that sort of scenario impossible? Don't we have to resign ourselves to the fact that once adolescence is reached (or sooner) youngsters will retreat into a world of headphones and Nintendo? And won't that be the end of any shared world of ideas?

Not necessarily. In the days before television, reading aloud—from Dickens, from Walter Scott, from treasured poets—was common fare for families. It was also common for favorite books to be passed around among adults and older children. There are many families today who carry on the same practices. And, if anything, their number may now be on the increase, thanks in part to the influence of books like Jim Trelease's *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. Mr. Trelease is not one

who thinks reading aloud is only for children. It's great for adolescents and adults, too, says Trelease:

> Secondary students being read to? Certainly. . . . When my daughter returned from England after a summer studying at Cambridge University, she told me the professors read aloud to literature classes all the time. A year later, I met a Kansas teacher returning from her second straight summer at Oxford University, where she'd been read to regularly. I figure that if it's good enough for Oxford and Cambridge, it's good enough for any junior or senior high school in America.

Why does shared reading work? It works because the right book, read in the right way, brings a thrill of excitement and enchantment. No one who has traveled with Frodo through the land of Mordor in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is likely to complain that the journey is a long one. No one who has stood on the deck of the *Dawn Treader* in the company of Caspian and Reepicheep is likely to regret the experience of listening to C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia.* No child who has trembled in fear with Beauty in the castle of the Beast is ever likely to forget that strange story of love's transforming power.

But how about the adult reader? Isn't reading aloud to children, especially very young children, a bit of a bore? Something done out of a sense of duty? Not at all. Indeed, the adult reader, who can understand all the levels of a story, may have the most fun of all. As Gladys Hunt writes, "They [children] may read the story again years later and find that their experiences in life help them see more. Adults will read the same book and begin to better understand why they loved it as children." Reread some of the better children's books and you may be surprised to discover how adult (in the best sense of the word) they are. You will find it difficult to adopt a condescending attitude toward them. For one thing, the "lesson" may apply as much to you as it does to your child; for another, the writing is often of exceptional quality. Both C. S. Lewis and Isaac Bashevis Singer observed that children are deeply con-

cerned with serious questions, more so than adults may realize; and both men said that they couldn't imagine writing something for children that they themselves would not want to read. "I am almost inclined to set it up as a canon," wrote Lewis, "that a children's story which is only enjoyed by children is a bad children's story." Lewis was of the opinion that no book is worth reading at age ten that is not equally worth reading at age fifty.

If you're a parent, you've got a battle on your hands—a battle with popular culture over your child's imagination. And like every battle this one has moments when it seems impossible to carry on. But it's not all grim, because one of the best ways of empowering your child's imagination is also one of the most enjoyable. The books we've listed are stories of virtue and character, but they are many other things as well. Some of them are hilarious, some mysterious, some adventurous, some heartbreakingly poignant, some a combination of all of these.

You will enjoy sharing them with your children. And you will find an added benefit. Just as good stories help to create an emotional bond to goodness, family reading strengthens the family bond. Shared reading draws families together. It provides mutual delight and builds emotional bridges. It establishes intimacy between parent and child in a way that few other activities can match. And this is true whether you read aloud to a younger child, pass along a favorite story to an older reader, or pick up a book a child has recommended to you. If we feel an obligation to get to know our children's friends, then we should also enter their imaginative worlds with enthusiasm and respect.

But how, exactly, do stories do their work? How do they stimulate the moral imagination? How do they catch us up in their net and make us feel a part of some larger enterprise? And how do they do all this without falling into the pit of preachiness?

Read on!

CHAPTER 2

Example and Empathy

HOW DO STORIES help to encourage character? William Bennett gave a good reply to that question in a speech delivered when he was secretary of education:

> Do we want our children to know what honesty means? Then we might teach them about Abe Lincoln walking three miles to return six cents and, conversely, about Aesop's shepherd boy who cried wolf.
>
> Do we want our children to know what courage means? Then we might teach them about Joan of Arc, Horatius at the bridge, Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad.
>
> Do we want them to know about kindness and compassion, and their opposites? Then they should read *A Christmas Carol* and *The Diary of Anne Frank* and, later on, *King Lear*. . . .

Bennett points to two things good stories provide: codes of conduct (honesty, courage, kindness) and good example (Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Tubman, Joan of Arc). Stories acquaint us with the ideals by which people in our society hope to live, and they give examples of people trying to live by those standards.

Marner was miserly. But in these stories there is no doubt about how these people should have acted. Young readers don't need to have heroes of undiluted virtue as long as they are the kind of persons who want to get back on course once they get off it.

In addition to good examples, stories supply codes of conduct. It's a mistake to think children already know these codes, and an even bigger mistake to assume they will discover them on their own. Contrary to some faddish theories that arose in the seventies, children do not have an infallible inner guide. Children have to be socialized in order to behave properly, and they need to be taught right from wrong—not asked to go figure. Fortunately, we don't have to do all the telling ourselves. We can let stories do some of it for us. In Bennett's words they provide "a stock of examples illustrating what we believe to be right and wrong, good and bad." And they are able to convey these lessons in a more engaging form than we can usually muster.

Consider this paragraph from *The Little House on the Prairie:*

> Laura and Mary were up next morning earlier than the sun. They ate their breakfast of cornmeal mush with prairie-hen gravy, and hurried to help Ma wash the dishes.

Helping Ma wash the dishes: children helping their parents is a fairly elementary lesson in responsibility but not a bad one to learn. And not a hard one to swallow, as it is presented here. Notice that not much is made of this helpful behavior. It's passed over quickly and taken for granted. But we all benefit a great deal from the fact that such lessons are reinforced in literature as a matter of course.

It is often remarked that good literature does not moralize, but that is not to say that it does not teach us. In fact, it does. Often the lessons are quite simple ones. In *Pinocchio,* for instance, much is made of obedience to one's parent, of keeping promises, of telling the truth even when it hurts. Because the lessons are so simple, however, there is a tendency to take them

for granted. Teachers assume that parents will attend to the basics, and parents assume that children will learn them in school. We also tend to forget how much repetition is required before basic moral principles sink in. One of the benefits of encouraging a child to read good books is that it saves his parents from doing all the reminding.

Adults also need to be reminded. The basic lessons are not only for children; the same simple truths are the stock of great novels as well. For example, Book Four of *War and Peace* contains a touching scene in which Nicholas Rostov, after losing a huge sum at gambling, must face his father, from whom he has borrowed only the week before. Nicholas, who has promised to borrow no more, is filled with grief over this breach of honor, yet when the time comes he manages to compound his error by affecting a casual attitude:

> "It can't be helped! It happens to everyone!" said the son with a bold, free, and easy tone while in his soul he regarded himself as a worthless scoundrel whose whole life could not atone for his crime. He longed to kiss his father's hand and kneel to beg his forgiveness, but said in a careless and even rude voice, that it happens to everyone!
>
> The old count cast down his eyes on hearing his son's words and began bustling, searching for something.
>
> "Yes, yes," he muttered, "it will be difficult, I fear, difficult to raise . . . happens to everybody. Yes, who has not done it?" And with a furtive glance at his son's face the count went out of the room. . . . Nicholas had been prepared for resistance, but had not at all expected this.
>
> "Papa! Pa-pa!" he called after him, sobbing, "forgive me!" And seizing his father's hand he pressed it to his lips and burst into tears.

The moral lessons brought forward in this scene are not terribly advanced. Nicholas Rostov is an intelligent young man of good education, but he can't master the simple task of refraining from throwing away the family fortune in a card game or the simple duty of offering an immediate apology.

But if right and wrong of this sort are so plain, why does Tol-

stoy trouble us with such scenes? The answer is that it is precisely these "simple" things that most of us have difficulty with. We know these obligations—self-control, respect for parents—but manage to forget them quite easily and need constantly to have our memory refreshed. "In matters of morality," observed Samuel Johnson, "we need not so much to be instructed as to be reminded."

Reread some of the great classics of literature and you will be surprised to find how often the plot revolves around simple moral failings on the one hand, and simple kindnesses on the other. More often than not the protagonists are faced not with thorny ethical dilemmas (of the type that many of today's educators love to throw at students) but rather with temptations of gambling, anger, lust, lying, and thievery. In other words, the "usual suspects." The great authors understood that people are brought low by common problems more often than by extraordinary ones. Likewise, the best of children's literature is concerned not with the latest ethical quandaries but with the perennial problems of growing up.

All this talk about right and wrong in stories is bound to raise some red flags, and perhaps some hackles, too. After all, one of the worst criticisms that can be leveled against a story is the charge of didacticism—that the story tries to teach or preach. Many writers and critics insist that there should be a wall of separation between literature and morality. They argue that the moral in the story always kills the story.

Well, then, what about didacticism? Can a story teach the moral norms without being moralistic? Can it avoid sounding like a sermon? The answer in both instances is "Yes, it can," but before making that case, let us issue some disclaimers.

We don't think fiction, whether for adults or children, ought to hit us over the head with a blunt moral. We don't think writers should write primarily out of a moral intent. A storyteller is, preeminently, a person who has a story to tell. Those who are primarily concerned about morals and only secondarily about art would probably be more effective as policemen or judges or professors of ethics. Some of the best children's stories are an interesting blend of morality and amorality because they were not consciously created with any lesson in mind:

they grew out of a picture in the author's mind, or they were written to please a son or daughter or young friend, or they were written to please the child in the author. If Robert Louis Stevenson had a moral in mind when he wrote *Treasure Island* he might have taken care to make Long John Silver a less engaging character. What is the lesson of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* except to stay away from rabbit holes? The author tells us it has "no moral." Likewise, we would be hard pressed to find any clear moral in the old fairy tales before they were tidied up by later writers; many of them, as literary critic Humphrey Carpenter points out, "occupy a moral no-man's land." Moreover, the imagination works in mysterious ways. Many writers say that their stories take on a life and shape of their own. Given these considerations it's not surprising that books written with the conscious intent of improving the young reader are not, in the main, either well written or effective. Anyone looking for a MORAL in bold letters will be disappointed in much of children's literature.

On the other hand, we also want to avoid the other extreme of suggesting, as is now fashionable, that good writers never have a moral in the back of their heads. We think it evident that many writers for children do. Aesop's fables and *Pilgrim's Progress* are clear examples of moral tales that are also part of the canon of classic stories. But so, in a somewhat different vein, are *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels.* And the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen, unlike those of the Brothers Grimm, always have a clear moral structure. The same is true of Oscar Wilde's stories for children: "The Selfish Giant," for example, is a conscious parable on the theme of charity. Leo Tolstoy, who is generally considered to be among the greatest of novelists, wrote fables for children that are obviously instructional in intent (see *The Lion and the Puppy,* page 98, in our book list), yet powerful and moving.

Contemporary writers for children tend to disavow moral intent. Katherine Paterson, for example, was once annoyed by a reporter who asked, "What is your philosophy of writing for children? Isn't there some moral you want to get across to them?" She replied, "I'm trying to write for my readers the best story, the truest story of which I am capable." This is a good an-

tidote for those with simplistic notions about stories and morals. Yet, at the same time her answer suggests an overriding sense of responsibility to her audience, as well as an obligation to be truthful. Her answer is shot through with the language of morality. Likewise, if we look into any one of her many fine stories, we are not left with an impression of moral neutrality. In practice most good writers for children, while they are concerned with being truthful, are also concerned with the impact their books will have on their readers, just as most good parents, whatever their views on censorship, tend to buy their children books by A. A. Milne and Mark Twain rather than books by the Marquis de Sade. The children's writer, after all, has a responsibility to children as well as to art.

We cannot mention Twain in this context without also mentioning his famous preface to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* In it he cautioned that "persons attempting to find a moral" in his story would be "banished." Twain, as usual, was joking. In fact there are many morals to be drawn from *Huckleberry Finn.* But Twain gets away with his joke because his morals are never preachy. When they are present they flow naturally from the story. We never feel that our arm is being twisted. Instead we are caught up in the life, adventures, and qualms of conscience of a very real boy.

It is this true-to-life element that prevents moral fiction from becoming didactic. The didactic writer has a bunch of precepts to impart, and he invents a narrative to string them together. He is not particularly interested in the plot or the characters, only in the message. It is quite the opposite with true moral fiction. In fact, the codes of conduct inherent in such stories may not even be spelled out. Learning them is more a matter of learning by immersion into the culture of the book at hand—the same way we learn the rules of our own culture. Thus C. S. Lewis remarks of Mr. Badger in *The Wind in the Willows* ("that extraordinary amalgam of high rank, coarse manners, gruffness, shyness, and goodness") that "The child who has once met Mr. Badger has ever afterwards in its bones a knowledge of humanity and of English social history which it could not get in any other way."

Something similar could be said of the child who has read

CHAPTER 3

Transport: Seeing with Myriad Eyes

IN *THE INNOCENTS ABROAD* Mark Twain writes, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness . . . broad, wholesome, charitable views cannot be acquired by vegetating in one's little corner of earth."

It's the same with books. Like travel they broaden the mind. They give us a bigger picture of the world and its inhabitants. While sitting safely at home we get to meet people in different lands and different centuries. We can have the sensation of experiencing life at sea with the crew of the *Pequod* or the dangers of battle along with The Shining Company, or we can share the fervor of love felt by Romeo and Juliet. Most important, we get to meet people of different types. One result is that we become better judges of character. By meeting certain character types in stories we are better prepared for the day when we will meet that type in person. A young reader who has met Mr. Toad in *The Wind in the Willows* is less likely to be taken in by that peculiar blend of recklessness and charisma when he encounters it in a real person. An adolescent girl who has read Jane Austen is better prepared for the fact that dashing and handsome young men often turn out to be liars and fakes. A reader who has encountered Madame Defarge in *A Tale of Two Cities* will have grasped the unpleasant but important

knowledge that some people in this world are thoroughly ruthless. A young person who reads widely gets more than the pleasure of plot and setting; he or she gets an introductory course in character studies.

But acquaintance with a wide variety of "types," important as it is, is only the beginning. With some of the characters we meet in stories, we form a much deeper relationship than acquaintance. We enter imaginatively into their lives. We form a bond of empathy and even identity. And psychologists tell us that no other factor is more crucial to moral development than empathy. The ability to see and feel things as others see and feel them is the key that unlocks our prison house of self-absorption.

Even so it's not an easy thing to do. Children see things from their own perspective, and it takes quite a bit of doing to get them to see things from the point of view of their mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and friends. Even as we grow older it's difficult to get inside the minds of others. For one thing we have our own preoccupations; for another, people don't always let us in.

Reading affords us the opportunity to do what we often can't do in life, to become thoroughly involved in the inner lives of others. The sustained involvement with a character in a story enlarges our sympathies and gives us those "broad, wholesome, charitable views" that are the reward both of travel and of reading. In *Reading for the Love of It,* the Canadian author Michele Landsberg provides a description of her own experience as a young reader:

> I was *inside* those children who stepped back through the magic arch into ancient Egypt, shivering their shiver of apprehension and excitement. And nobody knew (except perhaps my librarian) that while I plodded dutifully to school . . . I was secretly living a hundred other lives.

This secret sharing is not simply the sharing of adventures, but also of ideas, emotions, loyalties, and principles. It's a shared testing of strength and resolve. For the reader it can be an ex-

perience of self-discovery of the kind that occurs only in intimate conversation. Why? Because reading certain books *is* a form of intimate conversation.

You can see that book traveling not only gives us perspective on others but also on ourselves. C. S. Lewis wrote:

> But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.

At one and the same time reading carries us out to others and becomes the mirror by which we discover ourselves more fully, exactly because we have escaped self-concern.

Parents should be aware, however, that while reading is a potentially enlarging experience, it can also have an opposite effect. Many books for children seem to be designed to introduce them to the world of mass marketing rather than to the wider world. Of the twenty best-selling paperback children's books of 1990, almost all were "product" books: nine spin-offs of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, four Baby-Sitters Club books, and two books about the New Kids on the Block.

Such books do have their defenders. One authority even recommends "junky" and "trashy" literature for children as the best route to developing an avid love of reading. Reading has so many benefits, it is argued, that we should be encouraged by any sign of a reading interest—even if it's only on cereal boxes and in comic books. "As long as they're reading something" is the phrase we use to express this faith in reading.

Of course, there is something to this view. And there is something to the related idea that, once started on the reading road, children will almost automatically move on to better books, that they will soon enough graduate from trash to Tolstoy. Sometimes they do. Moreover, comic books, horror stories, mysteries, romances, fantasy, and other types of "drugstore" literature often have a sound moral structure. By and large the child who reads is better off than the child who

only watches television, even if much of that child's reading consists of comics, thrillers, and serials.

But the idea can be carried too far. If—as all the adventure stories suggest—life is full of traps and pitfalls, why shouldn't books be also? One of the traps of mass-market stories is that they encourage youngsters to become fixated at the level of what might be termed "mall culture"—that is, a level of concern that doesn't go beyond changing fashions in clothes, lifestyles, and language.

How do you deal with such fixations? An attitude of "I appreciate the fact that you're reading, but I think you're underestimating yourself" may help to push a child more quickly through this phase. Of course, we tend to think that children who have been exposed to very good literature early on will be more immune to the attractions of "mall" literature.

Another way of handling the problem is to suggest a book in the same genre, only something richer and deeper and truer to life. If your child is hooked on the Baby-Sitters Club at a particular stage in her life it might be fairly futile to try and substitute *Little Women,* but *The Saturdays* might be just the ticket. The doctrine of the all-wise inner child says that such nudging is not necessary, that your child will move on to better stuff when she is ready. But don't count on it. Children can choose only from the alternatives that are available, and unless you provide some assistance they may never know what some of those alternatives are.

Sooner or later your child will come across a genre that encourages especially narrow self-preoccupation. As we all know, the early teen years are a time of introspection and rumination, and there is an entire literature devoted to ensuring that no emotional scab remains unpicked. This is the genre known as the realistic problem novel for young adults—although the readers of these stories are actually in the age range of nine through fourteen. The problem novel may range from stories about acne and unpopularity to stories about divorce, AIDS, and anorexia. The intent of such books is mainly therapeutic: to help a child with a similar problem learn self-acceptance, to let him know that there are other children just like him, with problems and concerns just like his.

Some of these stories, it is true, are thoughtful, well-crafted treatments of the difficulties that confront today's young people. But there are some serious drawbacks to this problem approach. One is the problem of what might be called a trendy didacticism. As Judith Saltman observes in her introduction to *The Riverside Anthology of Children's Literature,* many of the writers in this genre "see books as cures to be prescribed for a given sociological, political, or emotional problem." The problem with so much of this literature, which wants to give children "proper" attitudes about divorce, sex, war, and gender, is the problem that inevitably arises when writers are more interested in messages than in writing: "Some of this determinedly progressive fiction for youth has an eerily Victorian ring to it," writes Michele Landsberg. "Didacticism clangs on every page like an iron bell, heavy, clumsy, reverberant with good intentions."

A second drawback to books in the problem novel genre is that they often don't allow for much moral growth. In these books self-acceptance rather than moral growth is the badge of maturity. For example, the characters in stories like Judy Blume's *Blubber* and *Then Again Maybe I Won't* aren't particularly nice kids. They bully and intimidate other children and make fun of their parents, but there is no suggestion they should mend their ways. The reader is supposed to accept them as they are and, presumably, if the reader shares some of the same faults, he can accept those, too. Children in these stories ruminate about their problem situations, but there is no real soul searching.

For a contrast, look at the children in Mildred D. Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry,* a Newbery Medal novel about an African-American family living in the South in the 1930s. Stacey Logan knows he shouldn't be at the Wallace store; he has promised his mother that he won't go near that place of gambling and violence. But his score with T. J. has to be settled. When Mr. Morrison, a family friend, finds the boys fighting, Stacey is sure that he is in deep trouble. But Mr. Morrison says he won't tell Stacey's mother. The story is told by Stacey's sister Cassie.

seem set on removing this element of transport. Let's hope they don't succeed. The danger facing children's literature does not come from the ogres and villains that haunt the pages of fairy tales and adventure stories; the danger lies, rather, in the continued proliferation of normless books that cater to anxiety and self-absorption, and have nothing to teach about life except, perhaps, that whatever happens is okay. The danger is not that such books lead to a life of crime, but to a life of boredom, selfishness, and limited horizons.

Fortunately, there is no shortage of stories of another sort: books that challenge, thrill, and excite, and awaken young readers to the potential drama of life, especially to the drama of a life lived in obedience to the highest ideals. Such books have something better to offer than therapeutic reassurance. Like true friends they encourage us to be our best selves.

CHAPTER 4

Worlds of Meaning

"WE TURN TO fiction for some slight hint about the story in life we live," observed Robert Penn Warren. Media theorist Neil Postman elaborates on this idea:

> Human beings require stories to give meaning to the facts of existence . . . ever since we can remember, all of us have been telling ourselves stories about ourselves, composing life-giving autobiographies of which we are the heroes and heroines. If our stories are coherent and plausible and have continuity, they will help us to understand why we are here, and what we need to pay attention to and what we may ignore.

Stories, in short, help to make sense out of our lives. There is a wonderful example of this in the film version of *Captains Courageous,* Rudyard Kipling's tale of life aboard the Gloucester fishing schooners. The story concerns a spoiled rich boy who, on a transatlantic voyage, falls overboard in the vicinity of the Grand Banks, is rescued by a fisherman named Manuel, then taken aboard the *We're Here* and put to work alongside the men. Except that he won't work. The boy, Harvey Cheyne, is self-centered, lazy, and manipulative. He doesn't understand concepts such as loyalty and hard work because he has no framework within which they make any sense. His transforma-

tion into a better and infinitely more likable boy comes about largely through the influence of Manuel, who not only possesses admirable qualities of character but is also a fine storyteller. Manuel tells stories about his father, about the sea, about the songs he sings. In one memorable scene he relates his life to those of the Twelve Apostles, who were also fishermen. Their story is the larger one within which his own life story makes sense.

A plot. A purpose. A sense that our struggles and sufferings have meaning. The supreme gift of stories is their reassurance that these can be found. By giving us a larger vision a story may help us find meaning in experiences that might otherwise seem chaotic or pointless. Because there are many more things that don't make sense to them, children need this reassurance every bit as much as adults. If you've ever wondered why a child wants to hear the same story over and over, night after night, here is part of the reason.

Of course, the stories we read don't have to be the same stories we live. We've already suggested why that isn't necessarily a good idea. The important thing about good literature, whether set in the twentieth century or the second, is that it opens our eyes to the significance of our own dramas and helps us to find continuities and connections we might otherwise miss.

Stories also help make sense of morality. How well do motives for virtuous behavior hold up without the sense that there is something like a plot to our lives? Not well at all. If life is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," then it doesn't really matter how one behaves. But to feel that one has been given a role to play in a meaningful story, and that one has the chance of acting one's part well—that is a considerable source of motivation.

The perfect cinematic example is the film *It's a Wonderful Life.* A man on the point of suicide finds renewed hope when he discovers (courtesy of an angelic revelation) that the story of his life makes a great deal more sense than he imagined. The fact that year after year this fifty-year-old classic consistently polls as one of the best-loved films suggests that its theme strikes close to home. A very different film, *Casablanca,* con-

veys, though in more subtle ways, a similar theme. The cynical and self-concerned Rick Blaine manages to transcend his bitterness because he has caught sight of a larger vision. When, near the story's conclusion, he says that "the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill o' beans in this crazy world," he means precisely that it is *not* a crazy world.

One of the duties adults have toward children is to teach them that the world is not a crazy place. A child needs the security of knowing that he lives in an ordered world. As Michele Landsberg points out, the attractiveness of order is part of the appeal of such classic stories as *Madeline* (twelve girls in two straight lines) and *The Story About Ping* (the duck who wanders away from the ordered existence of his family). The need for order may also account for the ambivalence children feel about *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.* Far from being the favorite children's book of all time, as some suppose, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a book that commonly upsets young children. Humphrey Carpenter, in an essay on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* writes that "many adults retain vague memories of being somehow frightened by the *Alice* books in childhood to the extent of positively disliking them." Why? Partly because *Alice's Adventures* comes closer to upsetting the idea of a natural moral ordering than any other book written for children. Nothing happens in a normal way in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.* Alice grows abnormally small (almost to the point of annihilation) and then abnormally large, babies change suddenly into pigs, and all the rules are utterly relative—subject to change without notice. Along with undermining notions of normality, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* attacks the sense of meaning itself. The universe that Lewis Carroll creates is a meaningless universe. All rules are arbitrary, and life is a Mad Tea-Party in which we are all condemned to the endless repetition of pointless activities. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* which can be a delight to an adult or an older child with a secure sense of the way things connect, can be a shock to a younger child who is trying to find those connections.

What kind of stories are we recommending? Any and all kinds as long as they are animated by a sense of moral order.

What does that mean? In the case of fairy tales, it means that evil is punished, virtue is rewarded, things are set straight, effort pays off, and riddles are solved. In novels, of course, whether realistic or fantastic, the moral order is not always upheld so decisively and permanently. An outstanding writer crafts a novel in such a way as to draw the reader into the process of discriminating between appearance and reality, since the wrong choices are often dressed up to look like the right ones. Even tragedies assert the reality of a moral order in the face of human failure to live up to that order.

Ironically, one of the most satisfying of all story genres is the mystery or the detective story. W. H. Auden explains why in his perceptive essay "The Guilty Vicarage." Murder mysteries satisfy, writes Auden, because they are about order. First you have an ordered and peaceful community. Then you have the crime that disrupts order. And finally, through the intervention of the detective, the restoration of order.

Perhaps this is the reason that the reading of mystery stories is reported to rank among the favorite pastimes of presidents and other world leaders. Perhaps they, especially, need reassurance that there is a structure and order to events. There's no doubt, of course, that mystery stories are also read for escape. But it's an escape from which we can come back with a better perspective on our daily lives. Like the Lord, books work in mysterious ways, and by a strange paradox stories about murder are often the most soothing thing to read. In *Reading for the Love of It,* Michele Landsberg tells how, after the death of her mother in a terrible accident, the only consolation she could find was in reading Swedish detective stories.

If adults need reassurance that life makes sense, so do children and young adults. The number of youngsters who are directly affected by acts of senseless violence is still small, but more and more young people are aware of the possibility of sudden and senseless tragedy. They need plenty of help in understanding that, despite the surrounding chaos, there is still purpose, plot, and meaning. The mystery story can be a real help in this regard because it shows us that although life is mysterious, it is not meaningless. It's a lucky teenager who discovers that the pleasure of reading Agatha Christie or Patricia

preteens have tended to reflect back to them their own limited adolescent or preadolescent world. But in trying to depict the world through the eyes of a teenage protagonist, many authors have succeeded only in conveying the impression that there is nothing more profound in life than the teenage view of things. Young readers deserve to know that there is a grown-up world worth aspiring to, that it is not all phony, and that some things are worth waiting for.

This is not an easy thing for a writer to do. It is far easier to be cynical about the facts of life than it is to invest them with the significance they deserve. But it can be done. Consider two passages from Tolstoy. The first is from the wedding of Kitty and Levin in *Anna Karenina*. It describes Levin's feelings as the full impact of the ancient ceremony comes down on him:

> Levin felt more and more that all his ideas of marriage, all his dreams of how he would order his life, were mere childishness, and that it was something he had not understood hitherto, and now understood less than ever, though it was being performed upon him. The lump in his throat rose higher and higher, tears that would not be checked came into his eyes.

The second is Tolstoy's introduction of Princess Lise in *War and Peace:*

> Everyone brightened at the sight of this pretty young woman, so soon to become a mother, so full of life and health and carrying her burden so lightly. Old men and dull dispirited young ones who looked at her, after being in her company and talking to her a little while, felt as if they too were becoming, like her, full of life and health.

The noted book critic Clifton Fadiman has said that Tolstoy had a "genius for the normal," and these passages are examples of that genius at work. They convey an enormous appreciation for the mysteries and blessings of ordinary life. Of course, *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* are not for youngsters (although some of Tolstoy's stories are); the point is that

today's young people (and many adults) are sorely in need of a picture of life that conveys both depth and normality—or, better, the depth and satisfaction that a morally ordered life can offer (with the qualification that even the most normal life has its share of conflict and contradiction). The things that traditionally were thought to give adult life meaning—love, courtship, marriage, children—have suffered a tremendous trivialization in recent years, largely as a result of television. The consumer of mass entertainment learns that these things are material for jokes and gags without learning much more about them. The fact that some notable exceptions to this rule—*The Waltons, The Little House on the Prairie*—played on TV so well over a long period suggests a certain hunger on the part of youngsters for depictions of these ordinary blessings.

Along with "reality," children also need a diet of normality—not Dick and Jane "normality," but stories in which children take part in a larger cycle of life. A number of recent children's books offer this experience. In *Waiting for Hannah,* a mother recounts for her daughter the preparations the family made for her arrival, including the planting of a morning glory vine, which blossoms on the day Hannah is born. *Yonder,* another picture book, follows the life of a nineteenth-century farmer and his bride as they marry, have children, and eventually see their children marry and start their own families. To mark each important family event, prayers are said and trees are planted. *In My Mother's House,* a collection of verse sung by the Tewa children of Tesuque Pueblo near Sante Fe, celebrates the ordered domestic life of these Native Americans. "In my Mother's house," begins one poem, "there is a fireplace: . . . The fire is always there, . . . / To keep me warm."

Although it plays little part in the lives of television families, religion plays a significant role in the lives of real families. This is reflected in *Hello Amigos!,* a picture book about a Mexican-American family's celebration of a birthday. Frankie, whose birthday is the cause of the celebration, tells how, after the party, "Papa and I walk to our church. He helps me light a candle, and I count my blessings." In *The Happy Funeral* a Chinese-American girl comes to terms with her grandfather's death by participating in family rituals and remembrances. For

middle readers, *All-of-a-Kind Family* depicts the daily life of a Jewish family in the Lower East Side of New York City at the turn of the century.

"Normality" as we are using it here does not mean an allegiance to the status quo or to suburban living, but a recognition of norms that guide and also limit our behavior, a sense of moral fixity in the midst of flux. The Depression years in Mississippi are the setting for *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry,* a story about the Logan family's efforts to teach goodness to their children in the teeth of racism and poverty. In one heart-to-heart talk Mrs. Logan tells her daughter Cassie, "Baby, we have no choice of what color we're born, or who our parents are, or whether we're rich or poor. What we do have is some choice over what we make of our lives once we're here . . . I pray to God you'll make the best of yours."

It is interesting that some of the strongest presentations of ordinary domestic blessings can be found in fantasy stories. *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* is one example. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is another. Despite whatever adventures or misadventures come, there is always time for cakes and teas and fireside chats. Or, at least, time to think of them. In fact, there is a strong suggestion throughout these books that this is what all the trials and perils are for: so that hearth life and home life can be protected, so that in the end the adventurers can return to just such a life. So too in the *Odyssey.* After all, it is Odysseus's keen desire to get home that drives the plot. More than a simple adventure story, this prototype of all adventure stories is also about the restoration of family life. It anticipates by twenty-five hundred years Samuel Johnson's observation that "the end of all endeavor is to be happy at home."

Odysseus was a navigator trying to find his way home. It took him a very long time to do it—more than twenty years. Today's navigators are luckier. They have a framework of longitude and latitude, and a prime meridian from which to take their bearings. Children, likewise, need a prime meridian—a fixed standard—to reach their destinations in life. The voyage from childhood to responsible adulthood is long, difficult, and stormy. Good stories provide compass, chart, and bearings for the journey.

CHAPTER 5

Selecting and Sharing Good Books: Some Guidelines

Because of space limitations, there are many good books that couldn't be included in our guide. For those who want to go beyond the list here are some suggestions for choosing books that build character.

THINK BACK TO stories that had a positive impact on you when you were growing up. There's a good chance the same story will have a similar effect on your child.

Choose books that are in keeping with your own values. Don't choose a book simply on the basis of its reputation. Reading the book yourself is the only sure way of knowing if it reflects your outlook on life.

Try to distinguish between issues and virtues. Many contemporary children's books focus on trendy issues rather than character development. You should be looking for books that reinforce courage, responsibility, and perseverance rather than books that offer prepackaged opinions on divorce, euthanasia, and the like. You want your child to acquire strengths of character before he acquires a lot of secondhand opinions. It's one thing to have an opinion on an issue such as immigration, and quite another to develop a habit of helping those you have an opportunity to help. Having enlightened opinions is no substitute for having character.

Of course, there are good books for children that do deal with contemporary issues, but the issues are integrated with the characters, setting, and plot. Good books are people centered, not problem centered. The characters are real. We are gladdened by their victories and saddened by their sufferings. They are not there just to teach a lesson. The author has an interesting story to tell, not a message to convey. In short, you don't feel he or she has designs on your child.

Context is crucial. Character-building books are not simply about good people doing good things. Moral books may deal with immoral behavior. The question is not whether unethical behavior is present but how it is presented. The hero or heroine of a story may well give way to temptation, but a good book will show the real costs of such a choice. In the Arthurian legend, for example, the adultery of Launcelot and Guinevere leads to awful consequences both for themselves and for many others. So does Arthur's own earlier indiscretion. It's not a matter of preaching at the reader but of showing him how certain behaviors work themselves out over the course of time.

Of course, the story can't do all the work. The reader has to sort things out and draw conclusions. This is easy enough with a simple story such as *Peter Rabbit* but not so easy when it comes to plots requiring more mature judgments. So parents need to ask some hard questions. Are the consequences of an undesirable action clear to any reader? Or only to a more sophisticated reader? Will your child be able to make the proper distinctions? In the last analysis it's a judgment call. Perhaps the most important question is this: How well do you know your child?

Context is also crucial in making judgments about rough language. Many contemporary authors use "street" language to give an authentic flavor to their stories. You need to weigh the redeeming elements of the story against the coarsening effect of overexposure to vulgar language. Is the language truly necessary to the story? Or is it there just for shock value or to demonstrate the author's hipness? A few vulgar expressions here and there may add a certain realism to a story, but too many may simply have a desensitizing effect.

Allow some room for growth. Although you want to be