TEACHING YOUNG CHILDREN WISE CHOICES IN LITERATURE

In introduction, I will begin with a truism: that reading for enjoyment is difficult to censor and control. The reason is that tastes differ so widely and also the standards set up by the varying characters among God's children. However, it is still the task of covenant parents and teachers to guide covenant children to choose proper books to read and to mold their tastes so that they read *quality* literature. It is also a *challenge* to teach them critical analysis so that they are able and willing to judge and evaluate, using high standards, and then choose literature that will enrich them. That is the challenge with which this article struggles.

First, we must get children to read. Teachers are very eager to have their pupils read, but too many parents are not interested in getting their children interested in quality literature or even in reading at all. Hence, many children are not interested. If a child does not read, there is no need for critical choice.

It follows, then, that we must have reasons for reading. Why read? For at least nine reasons, which I will briefly state:

1. Information: for facts – names, places, distances
2. Knowledge: using the facts and applying them in solving problems
3. Guidance: the "what to do if" books, such as medical guides, sociology guides, and moral guides
4. Pleasure: for interest and enjoyment, whether it be in plot, character studies, or the details of a story
5. Fun: this is a shade different from pleasure and would include stories of the imagination, stories of humor, wit, or fantasy
6. Empathy: animal stories, particularly horse stories with touching incidents, such as *The Lonesome Colt,* by C.W. Anderson; or a story about the under-dog, such as Wanda in *The Hundred Dresses,* by Eleanor Estes; or family-kinds of stories, complete with warm, gentle characters
7. Stimulation: by action, suspense, use of logic (as in mystery stories); or stimulation by heroes whom the children become acquainted with and want to imitate, heroes with strong, stedfast characters, as in *Call it Courage,* by Sperry.
8. Aesthetics: the order and beauty of words, rhyme, rhythm, repetition, poetry, as in *Listen Rabbit,* by Aileen Fisher

9. Insights: the causes and results of actions or situations, the "whys" and "what thens" of moral issues, the coming to grasps with the complexities of life.

Who gets our children to read? Teachers do. Because the classroom is a structured situation with learning as its goal it is the best situation. Teachers try to inspire their pupils to read, and it is a big task. Gladys Hunt in *Honey For a Child's Heart,* shows why we teachers want to inspire them:

> Take all the words available in the human vocabulary and read them from the dictionary, and you have only a list of words. But with the creativity and imagination God has given human beings, let these words flow together in the right order and they give wings to the spirit. Every child ought to know the pleasure of words so well chosen that they awaken sensibility, great emotions, and understanding of truth. . .
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> We cannot underestimate the use of words in creative thought! Proverbs says, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver." The right word in the right place is a magnificent gift. Somehow a limited, poverty-stricken vocabulary works toward equally limited use of ideas and imagination. On the other hand, the provocative use of the right words, of a growing vocabulary gives us adequate material with which to clothe our thoughts and leads to a richer world of expression.

The elementary teacher knows how true the following words of Nancy Larrick, taken from *A Teacher's Guide to Children's Books* is:

> The six years of elementary school are crucial. This is the time when a child learns to read independently. It is also the time when he is likely to establish reading habits that will prevail through high school and adult life. As evidence, high school librarians report that their best patrons are students who became eager borrowers in elementary school.

Parents also try to get children to read, but it is not so easy to encourage them to make their families "reading families." And it is not of great importance to all parents. What can we do about it? Take the message of the importance of *good* reading to the homes through notes, speeches, and propaganda. We can tell them such things as the following, from Gladys Hunt's book:

> As Christian parents we are concerned about building whole people – people who are alive emotionally, spiritually, intellectually. The instruction to *train up a child in the way he should go* encompasses so much more than teaching him the facts of the gospel. It is to train the child's character, to give him largeness of thought, creative thinking, imaginative wondering– an adequate view of God and His world. He can never really appreciate the finest without personal redemption. But many a redeemed person lives in a small and insecure world because he has never walked with God into the larger place of His domain. We have books and the Book at our disposal to use wisely for God's glory.
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> A young child, a fresh uncluttered mind, a world before him – to what treasures will you lead him? With what will you furnish his spirit?

Hunt also speaks of the child's basic need for milk and honey from his parents. *Milk* is the symbol of the care a child receives for his physical needs. *Honey* symbolizes the sweetness of life, that special quality that gives the sparkle within a person. She says, "Most mothers are capable of giving milk, but only a minority of giving honey, too." To give honey, one must love honey and have it to give. Good books are rich in honey.

Teachers can help parents to feed their children honey by motivating parents to read to their children or to read the same books as their children do and afterwards discuss with them, which is enriching for both. Teachers can try to sell good reading to parents. If we succeed, or partly succeed, we are ready to begin the process of *setting up standards;* and the following are four yardsticks for discerning good books:

1. Good books are what Hunt calls "real books." She says, "Real books have life. . . . The author captures reality, the permanent stuff of life, and something is aroused in the heart of the reader that endures. . . A good writer has something worthy to say and says it in the best possible way. Then he respects the child's ability to understand. Principles are not preached but are implicit in the writing."

2. May Hill Arbuthnot, in *Children's Reading in the Home,* says, "Children's books should measure up to two sets of criteria: (1) Do they meet the child's needs and interests at a particular age level? (2) Do they fulfil standards essential for good writing for any age group?"

Good writing includes expert use of the following four criteria:

a. It must have real characters – clever, resourceful, deceitful, humble, kind, consistent, but always *uncomplicated* and *convincing.*

b. It must have a simple theme, a unity of the main idea, as, for example, in *Tim All Alone,* by Edward Ardizzone which through a misunderstanding (he believes his parents are dead and he goes to sea) uses the convincing theme of utter loneliness consistently, bringing tears to the eyes of young children.

c. It must have a plot with action, conflict, suspense, or obstacles, all woven expertly into the whole of the theme. The plot of *Tim All Alone* uses all these facets and Tim is lonely to the end of the book. It has a happy ending, the kind of ending young children like. Real life does not always have a happy ending, but young children feel a need for a happy ending; and if the ending cannot be happy, it should at least have a satisfactory resolution.

d. It must have a suitable style. Style is a weaving with words,

the music of the book. A staccato style is suitable for a fast-paced mystery and a tender style is right for a kitten story.

3. The format and illustrations should fit with the style of the book: bright colors or gentle lines; bold strokes or delicate pen sketches; old fashioned or modern art. However, the art should be legitimate art, a representation of the beauty of God's world, not a distortion of it.

4. The book should be morally good. That does not mean *moralistic:* a little moral lesson added or applied now and then. It also does not mean that sin and evil may never be portrayed, for that is what surrounds us in this life; but to be moral, evil must be shown to be evil and the right path must be shown to be the right path. The book should be able to stand in the face of God's law.

In *setting up standards,* we must also reject poor books, those which do not measure up to the standards we set. When we measure these books, we will do well to remember that in a discipline such as literature it is difficult and often impossible to set up absolute standards, to say that a book is very good or very poor. There are degrees of goodness and badness here, and we may want to limit, but not ban, a certain caliber of books. The following, then, are yardsticks for rejecting (or using caution with) poorer books:

1. Books that are absurd and silly rather than clever and humorous. Some of the Dr. Seuss books fit here. *The Cat in the Hat* contains absurd, preposterous situations, in language which is sounds, not words. Arbuthnot calls the book a "completely satisfying nightmare." I disagree. It is not satisfying. *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins* is flippant in style and fantasy gone wild. *Julius,* by Syd Hoff, and *Drummer Hoff,* by Emberly are silly, pointless stories. For years I have watched the reactions of young children to books such as these and without fail I have noted that it brings out the worst in them. Their over-reactions take the forms of exaggerated silliness, to the point of rolling in the aisles. The *Curious George* stories, though not silly to the degree of the books just mentioned, are borderline and non-edifying nonsense at best. They are books that do not enrich a covenant child. For the older child, Cleary's *Henry Huggins* comes close to absurdity. It is best to limit, if not ban that caliber of story as trite and superficial.

2. Books with distorted art. The Dr. Seuss and Syd Hoff books fall into this category, as well as a host of modern books. There is a moral issue here, I believe. The authors use God's creatures and distort them for purposes of getting laughs. We may not laugh at distortions of

God's creation. It is what the wicked always do. When our covenant children get their hands on these books, they do it, too.

3. Books with themes of rebellion. This type of book seems to be proliferating these days. *Tweety and Sylvester,* by Seymour Reit with a distorted, cartoonish style of illustration, is a story based on a broken promise (which is wilful disobedience) and takes that premise as being very funny. A book such as this is not proper fare for covenant children.

It's Like This, Cat, by Emily Neville, won the 1964 Newberry Award. Arbuthnot has quoted the following section to show how it breathes rebellion and disrespect:

> My father is always talking about how a dog can be very educational for a boy. This is one reason I got a cat.
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> My father talks a lot anyway. Maybe being a lawyer he gets in the habit. Also, he's a small guy with very little gray curly hair, so maybe he thinks he's got to roar a lot to make up for not being a big hairy tough guy. Mom is thin and quiet, and when anything upsets her, she gets asthma. In the apartment – we live right in the middle of New York City – we don't have any heavy drapes or rugs, and Mom never fries any food because the doctors figure dust and smoke make her asthma worse. I don't think its dust; I think it's Pop's roaring.
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> The big hassle that led to me getting Cat came when I earned some extra money baby-sitting for a little boy around the corner on Gramercy Park. I spent the money on a Belafonte record. This record had one piece about a father telling his son about the birds and the bees. I think it's funny. Pop blows his stack.

Where the Wild Things Are, by Maurice Sendak, which won the 1963 Caldecott Award, is described by Arbuthnot as follows:

> Here is a touch of wildness that might be classified with the fanciful stories, but since it begins and ends in the real boy's bedroom and the fantasy is only a dream, it has been classified with the realistic tales. This extremely funny story is about a small boy who puts on wolflike pajamas complete with tail, and then becomes outrageously naughty. After he is put to bed, he falls asleep and dreams of horrible monsters, but *he* becomes king of them all. The drawings are hilarious, and children thoroughly enjoy both them and the text.

Our children should not and most likely would not enjoy the book, for both pictures and text breathe an atmosphere of total rebellion; and this rebellion is rewarded with kingship!

Books for the middle elementary grades often exploit erratic behavior, lying, rebellion, disobedience, and violence. Arbuthnot gives the gist of one of these:

> *Harriet the Spy,* by Louise Fitzhugh, il. by author. Harper, 1964. (9-12).
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> Another completely contemporary story, *Harriet the Spy* is a popular

book with children and a controversial one with adults. Harriet is a nonconformist and a rebel with unusual potentials. She is never without her notebook in which she records not only her secret life as a spy, sleuthing around her neighborhood, but also, alas, her personal and caustic comments on her classmates. So when the children find and read the notebook, they are properly indignant and gang up on Harriet. She is definitely out. With ostracism, her behavior goes from bad to outrageous. Harriet's rebellion comes to a hopeful conclusion that is not wholly conclusive. Children find this book convincing, because Harriet is urban, modern, and a very real little girl.

Of course, using such a theme of rebellion in a story is not per se wrong. Scripture does it, too. But it is wrong to base a story on such a theme, making the wrong seem right and the disobedient, lying child the hero because of her sin. It is not palatable fare for a covenant child. He, too, must learn at an early age to distinguish between sinful fiction and sin in fiction, which is recognized and condemned as such.

4. Books with sex aberrations or books that make sex a joke. About *The Long Secret,* also by Fitzhugh, Arbuthnot tells that: "One chapter in which Janie, Harriet, and Beth Ellen discuss menstruation strikes some adults as very funny but shocks others. Certainly, the chapter is an improvement on some of the lugubrious attitudes of the past, but it is probably for home rather than school reading."

The Egypt Game, by Zilpha Snyder, deals with child molestation in an improper manner, as do many other books for children in this age group. It is hard enough to teach young children the sanctity of sex according to Scripture. It is a tender age – that of pre-adolescence – and much influenced by the racy delights of the aberrations of sex. Even if these stories are written to make children aware of the social evils around them, I judge that they are too young and too impressionable to be exposed to such evil knowledge.

5. Books whose only virtue is superficiality and materialism (often along with a wrong view of life). Series books are often guilty of this kind of thing: the Nancy Drew books, where life is a series of successes and always turns out happily; or the Bobbsey Twins type, stories with a bland sameness, in which life is always happy; or the Eddie and Betsy books, which boast superficiality and triteness; or the Zane Grey type, the rags-to-riches books, which promote the materialistic philosophy that all that matters is to get ahead in this world. Parents and teachers should limit a child's reading of this caliber of books.

6. Books that perpetrate the vain-glory of man. Biographies and Cinderella kinds of stories fit here. In *Marian Anderson,* by Shirlee Newman, we read of a person with no noticeable flaws in her character,

and some struggles in her life which she gladly endures for the sake of her goal – fame and riches. Our children need much guidance with a story such as this. *Florence Nightingale* by Charles Walcut portrays the heroine as a "do-gooder" who seemingly has no faults and who almost superhumanly overcomes all obstacles for fellow man – a true common grace story.

Many hero stories, those about Daniel Boone, Abraham Lincoln, Patrick Henry, etc. glory in the great achievements of man, and we who guide young children should take great care in limiting books such as these, especially in these days of the vain-glory of man.

7. Books that present a pseudo-religion or idolatry as acceptable or books that are blasphemous. Many books portray characters of seemingly flawless morals, but never mention any worship of the Lord, nor a God-fearing walk, nor any moral issues. A good example of a book of this kind is *The Boxcar Children,* by Gertrude Warner. Young children ask many questions, such as "Were they Christians? May they do that on Sunday?" They need guidance for this kind of book, too.

Many books include stories of idolatry. If it is portrayed as idolatry, our children will be able to face the false religion for what it is, but in stories such as *The Egypt Game,* where the characters act out an orgy, with temple, gods, chants, and ceremonies of idolatry, our covenant children face a real danger. In *Little Scarface,* by Gilbert Wilson there is the elusive rainbow-spirit (a play on the Holy Spirit?) and too much explanation is needed for our children.

Other books which parade under the name Christian teach either a pseudo- or a poor Christianity. I have in mind some of the sentimental books published by Zondervan Publishing Company or some Beka books, whose themes are either "goody-goody" parents and children or a God Whose only attribute seems to be a shallow love and the view that if *you* walk in kindness toward others, all will be rosy ever after. That is not a Biblical view of life and is very dangerous instruction for our children.

Once again, remember, there are degrees of badness in every area of this critique. However, when in doubt, throw it out.

How then, as godly parents and teachers, should we go about finding books for the varied interests of covenant children of primary age? We may want to turn first to books written by authors who are Christian or possibly Christian, and there are not many: The Narnia Series by C.S. Lewis, probably some by Paul White, George Mac Donald, Lloyd Alexander, some of the Paideia Press books by Vande Hulst, Anne De Vries, Lambregtse, Norel, and others.

But I do not believe the issue in choosing proper literature for our children lies in searching scrupulously for Christian authors. I believe that we must teach our children to read *as godly children.* They are called to learn as much as they can of the world about them, to be enriched by reading of God's creation and of His workings with men. Therefore it is important to guide them into a broad knowledge and experience, to expose them to tastes of adventure, historical fiction, animal stories, logic (mysteries), humor, family stories, fantasy (stories of the imagination) and poetry.

I suggest that teachers of primary children choose a quality, recommended booklist, such as Larrick, Arbuthnot, or Hunt have published, and then use these lists selectively, ending with a quality, *edited* booklist for our children.

Then our children can select books from that list. We are guiding our children in critical, independent choice, for soon they must achieve independence through sanctified guidance. The key word in the previous sentence is *guidance.* We may never forget that it is the nature of all children (covenant children especially) to be *fed.* That is a Biblical principle. We may not leave them too soon on their own, but always monitor their books as long as they are under our jurisdiction.

Yet we *guide* them to be independent. When they say, "I don't know what to read," we may want to hand them part of Larrick's questionnaire to help them determine their own taste.

1. When do you have the most fun at home?
2. Why do you have a pet? Or why not?
3. What person do you like to play with best of all?
4. At school whom do you like to work with?
5. What do you like to play indoors?
6. What do you like to play outdoors?
7. What is your favorite sport?
8. What is your favorite hobby?
9. What is one thing you want to learn more about?
10. What is one thing you want to learn to make?
11. If you could do anything you please next Saturday, what would you choose?
12. If our class could take a one-day trip, where would you like to go?
17. What do you like to read about?

    animals science make-believe nature
    covered-wagon days sports boys' adventures
    knights of old trains and planes
18. What person (in real life or in history) do you want to be like?

Another possibility is to introduce the game of the Three Wishes: I wish I were _____; I wish I had _____; I wish I could _____.

Or to ask each child to write a few sentences to complete the state-

ment: "One thing I wonder about is _____." Many youngsters ponder long over what they wonder about, and their comments will often give clues to their anxieties as well as their interests.

Teachers, insist that their choices be varied by asking for selections from several different categories. This kind of guidance is for parents, too. The premise for insisting on varied choices is that our children do not yet know what they really enjoy. They must taste all kinds before they say, "I like" or "I don't like." The purpose, of course, is to mold their literary tastes in their formative years. Then they will be ready to make their own choices without teacher or parent.

The execution of all these ideals does not come easily. We teachers must campaign for good literature. Many parents do not know, but would like to know what kind of good reading to select for their young children. Grandparents want to know, too. They often ask me. A solution would be to institute a *Talk to Parents Night,* complete with incentives and enthusiasm.

If these principles are followed, when our children reach late primary age they should know high literary standards. Urge them to use them. Talk, converse with them about these standards. In class, discuss with them a much-read or a little-read book to sharpen their interests. And then remind them to read with godly thought as critical covenant children, children who ask and answer their own penetrating questions. Most of them can. Many don't. The proper ones are: "Can I read this to God's glory?" "Am I using my time well?" "Would I be ashamed if Jesus read this with me?" "Am I reading the best?"

In instructing children and making them independent in their choices, we never expect to achieve fully in this life; but we keep on striving. We, too, need prods, reminders, booklists, talks with parents, and the grace of God to help us and our covenant children.

Gertrude Hoeksema

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"He who would become a better teacher must become such not by wishing but by dint of hard work. Improvement will come only as the teacher constantly gives thought to making his teaching better, as he studies to improve, and as he works diligently to produce better results. No amount of wishing will avail as a substitute for work."

— Principles of Teaching for Christian Teachers,
by C.B. Eavey