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READING ROLE MODELS: FICTIONAL READERS IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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Teachers and librarians know how important reading role models are in fostering a positive attitude toward books. This crucial aspect of a child's education should go beyond decoding and comprehension to encompass a true enjoyment of reading. Educators also hope that youngsters will value literature for what it is and what it has to offer. Such a mind set is frequently incubated at home and further developed early on in the elementary grades.

In the home, a child's outlook toward reading is continually being molded by parental and sibling role models. "Naturally how family members regard books, how much they read and talk about what they read and how many books they buy and borrow, keep near them and value, will be a part of the way of life absorbed by their children almost as if by osmosis." (Chambers, p. 301)

For some youngsters, the educational setting may be a continuation of the home support for reading; for others it may be the primary force for developing a life long interest in reading. At school teachers and librarians create a positive atmosphere for reading enjoyment by encouraging creative and critical literary response, the sharing of reading experiences and a spirit that is not always explicitly stated by an adult but is one that has definite implications regarding reading.

Another group of individuals that have an impact on the promotion of reading are characters in children's books. When youngsters become acquainted with characters who are actively involved in reading, they are being introduced to reading role models their own age with similar problems. Characters who read come from a variety of backgrounds and they react to literature in a number of ways. Characters experience the same joys as their human counterparts when it comes to savoring books by a certain author or stories on a special topic. They also suffer the same frustrations when they have difficulties reading or when they cannot find just the "right" book for a special

assignment.

These fictional folks also come into contact with a number of reading situations that are common to everyday childhood experiences that do not necessarily involve literature. For instance, in The Slaves of Spiegel (Pinkwater 1982), the intergalactic beings are avid readers of recipes in search of the "perfect" culinary delight. Youngsters in The Great Grade Point Mystery (Bartholomew 1983) study their textbooks books but they also spend a lot of time pouring over computer programs and printouts. Treehorn, in The Shrinking of Treehorn (Heide 1971), is a devoted reader of cereal boxes so he can keep up with all the current "give away" prizes. While the materials differ, these characters do read and their particular interests seem to dictate the type of reading that is important in their life.

Authors write about busy characters who make time in their life to read for enjoyment; this attitude influences other characters. In Bridge to Terabithia (Paterson 1977), Leslie asks Jesse, "Say, did you ever hear the story about Moby Dick?" (p. 41). When Jess does not know the story, "Leslie began to spin out a wonderful story about a whale and a crazy sea captain who was bent on killing it." In a less direct manner, the reading behavior of one character in Daphne's Book (Hahn 1983) sets another to thinking. During an English class one student sees another totally "lost in a book" she has never heard of. Her friend's absorption in the story leads her to wonder if the book was interesting and if she should get it from the library. These fictional individuals have made it quite clear by their actions that they value reading and that they take their peers as reading role models.

Not all reading role models are so indirectly presented. In the satire, The Problem With Pulcifer (Heide 1982), Pulcifer adheres tenaciously to his literary habit. His parents worry that he does not watch enough television, and that, perhaps, his folks have not set good parental models. Pulcifer is warned by the librarian that checking out books from the library (instead of audio visual equipment) could be the beginning of a very dangerous habit. Pulcifer is sent to a "special corrective remedial class for non-viewers" which he fails due to his "dependence" on reading. Accordingly his visits to an inept psychiatrist are of no avail. Pulcifer sticks to his guns. He has to

read and read he does. Luckily for Pulcifer, his parents accept him (even though they still consider him to be somewhat odd).

Heide cleverly incorporates several of the "reading problem" solution sets familiar to (and frustrating for) many youngsters in the educational setting. Heide's book, is seemingly, a reaction to the research findings that indicate that "middle-graders", who usually can read by this time, will be doing less reading. At the same time, their interest in viewing hasn't waned; according to current TV research, they continue to watch about 28 hours a week. Today more than ever, teachers and parents of middle-grade children must promote the reading habit," (Feeley, p. 15).

Promoting the Reading Habit

Developing an interest in reading can prove to be as frustrating as it is rewarding. In Eight Mules to Monterey (Beatty 1982), a librarian in 1916 attempts to interest the mountain inhabitants of the Monterey, California region in reading and in establishing wilderness library outposts. While Lettie Ashmore is very enthusiastic about her mission, she meets up with individuals who cannot read and feel they are not able to enjoy books as a result. Other would-be-readers are barely eking out a living and are more concerned with the realities of survival than the escapism of literature.

The spirit surrounding books and reading comes across quite clearly in this historical fiction novel. One problem of note, peculiar to the time, was Ashmore having to overcome any negative attitudes she might hold about having a library outpost in a saloon. She finally reconciled her feelings by knowing that access to the library was far more important than the actual location; if a place of alcoholic refreshment had a tendency to draw a large audience, perhaps these same people would also be readers.

In the Mariah Delaney Lending Library Disaster (Greenwald 1977), a reluctant reader is surrounded by books at home but even access does not make an immediate impact. Mariah repeatedly hears about the joys of reading from her English teacher mother and book publisher father. Much to her parent's chagrin, she is more concerned with income producing schemes than reading. Mariah interests

herself in literature when she thinks she can open her own library using her parent's books for "bait." In the process of setting up her "business" Mariah goes to the public library to research card files, cataloguing, and the like. When her plan backfires, she volunteers at the public library to discover where she went wrong. While there, she begins sharing books with young children and becomes a reader with a purpose. Even though parts of the story line seem far fetched and the parents seem myopic as to what is going on in their home, the outcome is pleasing in terms of a child developing a reason for reading and then reading for enjoyment.

Frustrated Readers

As in real life, not all fictional youngsters are surrounded by positive reading role models. An adult's insensitivity to a child's interest may hamper a reader's enthusiasm. In Who Stole the Wizard of Oz (Avi 1981), Becky wants to finish her summer reading book reports as soon as possible because the work and the books are not of her choosing. She and her fifth grade classmates were notified by their sixth grade teacher that they couldn't read mysteries, make-believe or romantic adventures. Becky noted that the list featured only "basic, useful information. Yuck!" (Avi, p. 7) Becky also surmised that the teacher was more concerned with the mechanical technicalities in writing the reports than the students enjoying the books. Luckily for Becky, the public librarian shared a very positive regard for literature with the children.

Conflicting messages about reading enjoyment are presented in A Word to the Wise (Herzig and Mali 1978). Eight fifth graders were required to sit at a special table in the library, choose from pre-selected picture books about monkeys, mice, and the circus, when they wanted to read thick and exciting books about rockets and horses. They were prohibited access to the "big shelves" in the library because they were in the slow reading group. When the children found a thesaurus, their special reading teacher exclaimed that it was an "absolute treasure," a "gold mine," and a "gem of the first water." However, she refused to let the children have it because it was not at their reading level. They felt they had to take drastic measures to read this "forbidden" book, so they stole it; they eagerly shared and enjoyed it in spite of their teacher.

The actions of these teachers are somewhat mirrored by a study concluding that "teachers do consider developing attitudes toward reading to be important . . . However, they reported spending little class time focused on developing positive attitudes toward reading." (Heathington & Alexander) Heathington and Alexander found that educators feel pressured into developing reading skills during class time and they surmised that youngsters who could read would simultaneously be developing a positive attitude toward reading. However, the investigators were quick to point out that "of course, research has not always shown a correlation between attitude and reading achievement. There are readers who can read but don't like to."

Teachers are not the only culprits when it comes to discouraging certain forms of reading enjoyment. Franny Dillman, in It All Began With Jane Eyre (Greenwald 1980) was a devout reader of Jane Eyre and Pride and Prejudice, books her mother believed were unnatural reading material for a ninth grader. "'She's reading again, Howard. It's like an affliction. She doesn't read. She hurtles herself into book and glues herself to the pages.'" (Greenwald,p.6) Rather than develop Franny's interest in the classics or strike a compromise, Franny's mother piles contemporary teen novels on her daughter. Because these stories were supposed to mirror life, Franny began to worry why her family wasn't like those of the characters who were experiencing divorce, mental illness, diabetes, infidelities and the like. As a result, Franny became confused by what she read, though eventually she and her mother learned some valuable lessons about life and book selection.

In these three examples, the adults ignored the value of reading interests and related attitudes thus presenting poor reading role models for the children. Rather than be pleased with a definite liking for topics or genre, the adults in effect attempted to control reading behaviors. In direct opposition to this stance, Guthrie (1981), in a summary of research, reported that children understood more of what they read if they held a high interest in the subject, noting "interest leads to knowledge which leads, in turn, to increased comprehension." Even though the adult figures attempted to interfere with the reading enjoyment of these youngsters, the children's true spirit prevailed; they went on and found a motivation to read and continued to read even under the influence of a less than positive environment.

Motivations for Reading

In Who Stole the Wizard of Oz (Avi 1981), Becky and her twin brother Toby read The Wind in the Willows, Winnie the Pooh, Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There besides other classics to solve a mystery concerning stolen library books. These two exhibited a fondness for reading and a knack for sorting stories according to their similarities in an attempt to collect clues. While the probability is high that average youngsters would not have the same motivation for reading, Avi, a librarian, builds a case for the adventure filled books these characters explored. In doing so he promoted the reading of the classics by children. Hopefully, this notion will have a positive impact on future reading role models. Watson (1981) noted "instructors of children's literature courses should not take it for granted that enrolled students bring with them a wide reading background in known children's literary classics and award winning books." (p.220)

The writing of a children's book often calls for reference work and that is what led the seventh grade students in a Write-A-Book contest in Daphne's Book (Hahn 1983) to read familiar picture books such as The Snowy Day, The Story About Ping and Make Way for Ducklings. Readers are privy to how two characters see the need to discuss the story outline and how important actions and outcomes as well as the illustrations are in a picture tale. Youngsters will note that writing a children's book not only takes imagination but great concern for the reader. Some of the seventh graders grasped the concept of a primary audience while others did not, as evidenced by the appropriate "The Mysterious Disappearance of Sir Benjamin Mouse" versus the dubious picture book "The Nightmare Slumber Party."

Hahn's basic premise was sound and such contests are popular across the country. However, the main plot line of the story switched focus to revolve around a character and her less than desirable lifestyle with her senile grandmother. Perhaps the intent was to explain why this character was such a sensitive artist, but the two story lines did not fully complement each other.

Christine McDonnel is successful in including a chapter about literature in Toad Food and Measle Soup (1982). Readers will appreciate Leo's predicament when he

realizes he must give an oral report while dressed as a book character in just one week. He enlists the aid of a librarian who knows his interests and who suggests a number of books. Finally, in desperation, Leo concludes that he needs a thin book that is funny and is about an ordinary boy. Without specifically mentioning book titles, McDonnell lends an air of familiarity by mentioning the stories in the reports as though the readers are knowledgeable about the characters and their accoutrements. Enough clues are given so a child could actually find a certain book in the school library. It is rewarding to note that Leo's prize for coming in third (he was Homer Price) was a book.

While book reports are one form of literary response that is practical in a group situation, the sharing of a book between individuals often creates a more intimate magic. The friendship between Jesse Aarons and Leslie Burke in Bridge to Terabithia (Paterson) is memorable because Leslie added a new dimension to Jesse's life by sharing the adventure and in turn Jesse shared his artistic talent. So strong was Leslie's attachment to the wonderment of reading, she created the land of Terabithia based on the imaginary world set down in the books that make up "The Chronicles of Narnia." In a gesture of friendship, Leslie lends all her books about Narnia so he can learn about her and so he can revel in the same delights from the stories as she did.

These youngsters read for pleasure and they read to have a common ground between them. The stories they read provided material for their imaginations. Paterson made it seem as though reading was one of the most captivating and imagery producing adventures available. It seemed only fitting then, that after she died, Leslie's father made sure that Jesse received all her books which were quite a legacy indeed.

Conclusion

In an age when educators and parents are concerned about the lure of television and after school activities as competition for reading time, it is important to provide reading role models of all sorts. Book characters are a natural source of input for they are seen in the act of reading without being didactic about their activities. Also, they can promote a positive attitude toward reading as peer members. A bonus, of course, is that the children

are reading about a reading role model, so in effect, two aspects are effectively tackled at the same time.

Hopefully, children will create a sentiment regarding the precious nature of books similar to that developed in the science fiction story, The Green Book (Walsh 1982). In this story each pioneer was allowed to take two personal items and one book on the space trip. The computers were reserved for research and exploration, so their memory banks did not include books. Enroute to their destination passengers were told to read each sentence twice and to savor the experience. Ultimately everyone read their one book and they came to important realizations: they had little variety in the reading material due to duplication of titles (three copies of Robinson Crusoe for instance), but most importantly they wanted to read and develop their minds. Everyone's attitude about the value assigned to literature was summarized by the comment: "for one thing, just sitting around all evening like a zombie soon gets to be a bit much, and for another, all the things that were happening to us were just slopping around in our heads, and we needed some stories to cheer us up. Stories are tidy; they don't just slop around like happenings" (p.43). Such a sentiment is definitely worth savoring and sharing with readers so they too can become aware of the importance of positive reading attitudes and reading role models.

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