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THE MAKING OF READERS

Helen E. Master

In considering the process of developing anything, we must have in mind a clear concept of the end product we are hoping to attain. In considering the developing in children of an appreciation of literature, we are aiming at producing life-time readers, children and ultimately adults who will turn with confidence to books (using a general term) for information and pleasure. Now in the day of relatively cheap printing, and hence, an overwhelming amount of inferior material, we must qualify the word "books" with the word "good." And though such a description is woefully open to a carping kind of "What do you mean?" criticism, I am fairly sure that most *readers* know what we mean. To add the term "of literary value," only weakens the position to me. I can but repeat that what we are trying to do in presenting good books to our young is make readers of as many of them as possible—readers in the same general sense as a ballet mistress aims to make dancers of her pupils, or a track man to make runners of his. The end in all three cases involves a high standard and a discipline that scarcely has to be defined. There may well be several steps to note in the making of readers.

Begin Before the Beginning

It has always interested me to contemplate the trust that planters of spring bulbs must have as they place the bulbs in the ground in the fall. The first flowers of spring are the result of plans and plantings made many months before blooms can be expected. Planting bulbs requires a faith in the ultimate flowering that must remain strong and unfaltering through a period that shows no results at all of one's labors. Indeed, conditions seem made to frustrate all our plans,—cold, snow, long months of dull, sunless days. Yet, bulbs do flower in a rewarding colorful way when their time comes. The situation is parallel, it seems to me, to that encountered in developing an appreciation of books and reading in children, an appreciation that will carry over into their lives as adults. We must plant these bulbs, so to speak, in the minds and imaginations of children long before we expect them to flower, having a strong faith that a love of the best and most worthwhile in story and poem, indeed, in the special and artistic use of *words* will flower to glow with color and to delight with spicy fragrance. Plant words in the patterns of poetry or in the rhythms of rolling and melodious prose in the ears and muscles and awakening minds of children long before you expect any reaction to them. How shall we

do this? By reading aloud, chanting, emphasizing the rhythms of words and phrases to babies and young children in pieces where words are expertly and memorably used, demanding little or nothing of meaning, but making rhythm and sounding fit the occasion. Try to do this in as many of our activities with the child as possible. Use nursery rhymes, simple little accumulative stories, with their varied but oft repeated phrases. Use the Psalms, the soliloquies from Shakespeare's tragedies, the graceful songs from the comedies or the Queen Mab speech from *Romeo and Juliet* with its lilting, tripping pace, or the great orations with their rolling periods—not expecting what you say to be understood, but expecting the patterns of *how* you say it to become familiar and ordinary.

Many writers of distinguished prose acknowledge their debt to Biblical passages read to them in childhood. They were often forced to listen, but nevertheless they were washed about in the sound and energy of the words strikingly used, and quite unconscious of the power at work in them. Here is a fixing of taste and a sense of the potential that such word-sounds have, a “standard” even for the very young that will not be satisfied with mediocre or cheap imitations. Of course, if mediocrity comes first through failure to select on the part of adults, mediocrity may, alas, have set the taste and pattern. For so universal is the delight that human beings find in rhythmic sound that children exposed exclusively to insipid song and trite slogans of radio and TV, for example, will turn to these when they begin to get sense and meaning from words, and so find their delight in the slipshod and the banal because it is instinctive for us human beings to find delight in *words* and their use, whatever they may be. The importance of establishing patterns of excellence in the developing minds and personalities of the young should be obvious to us.

Let me give a few examples. Any reader could give dozens more even if limited to quotations heard from the playgrounds of his experience. I start with the Mother Goose or nursery rhymes, not because I associate them with nursery children but because they present perfect and easily available material. The unfailing rhythm, the sturdy “matching” words, many of them with double rhyme, assonance and alliteration stress sound and relieve the user of any attempt to supply meaning. To ask for meaning is to negate the purpose of these little verses. Movement and sound, these are the values.

“Doctor Foster went to Gloucester
In a shower of rain . . .”

“Jack and Jill went up the hill
To fetch a pail of water . . .”

“Diddle, diddle dumpling, my son John
Went to bed with his stockings on . . .”

“Ride a cockhorse to Banbury Cross
To see a fine lady upon a white hoss . . .”

“Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet . . .”

Saying these involves the whole person; the foot taps, the fingers drum, the hands clap. And note the many strange, unknown and sometimes meaningless words. This makes no difference; this is unimportant. What is important is the expert use of words in a sturdy pattern of sound, for of course, we say these little rhymes aloud; fortunately, there is no other way.

The most successful of the modern writers of verse for young children have used the style and devices of the nursery rhymes, some with more attention to meaning, but others, especially the writers of modern nonsense verse, with insistence on that elusive quality of words arrestingly used.

“And the lion
Had a green and yellow tie on
In Johnny Crow’s garden . . .”

“James James Morrison Morrison Weatherbee George
DuPree
Took great care of his Mother though he was only
three . . .”

Almost anything from Milne, Ciardi, the earlier Dr. Seuss, or Walter De la Mare,

“Slowly, silently, now the moon
Walks the night in her silver shoon . . .”

Robert Louis Stevenson,

“O Wind a-blowing all day long,
O Wind that sings so loud a song . . .”

All are specifically marked by memorable word combinations and mouthfilling sounds.

The examples are many. Nor must we depend on verse only. Beatrix Potter’s “Flopsie, Mopsie, Cottontail and Peter,”—what strikingly adequate use of words for rhythm, sound, and pattern. Also the nursery tales, from their standard opening and closing formulas—

“Once upon a time,” and “They lived happily ever after,” to their characteristic style of telling—“And they went along and they went along and they went along, and presently they met, etc.” Or “I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house in”; “Grandmother, what great big eyes you have”; “Back we go again for you’re not the bride I seek.” Such prose tales have their modern equivalents and imitators, too. Kipling’s *Just So Stories*, Robert McCluskey’s *Make Way for Ducklings*, Elsa Minarik’s *Little Bear Stories*. The point is that children are experiencing their first literature in a beautiful joy and delight that is truly literary appreciation, natural, happy, and full of potential, without force or constraint. Children thus “tempered” are bound to demand the same in all the stories and verse given to them; they are on the way to becoming readers.

Present the Values of Literature as Many-sided

As the *sounds* of words and their patterns of use have been the first important means of establishing an appreciation of literature, so let these devices continue as the process matures and broadens. Add meaning; add emotional involvement; add the delight in “finding out about things,” i.e. building up a fund of information, but make every effort to keep some of the literary experience *oral*.

As children grow older the oral character may be kept by two practices: story-telling and reading aloud. Story-telling is the natural next step beyond the emphasis on sound discussed above. When meaning begins to count, when the words begin to fit together to reveal what is happening, sound can still function in story-telling. The child is rare who does not enjoy listening to a story. “Tell us a story,” they say and settle down to listening eagerly. Story-telling is more appropriate for younger children; the stories told are shorter than longer and carry a sense of finish, conclusion so that the youngest say, “Tell it again,” and the older ones say, “Tell another one!”

Reading aloud, on the other hand, presents an interest of longer duration. Reading aloud can be a family activity and used to be just this. A novel of Dickens, Stevenson, Conan Doyle, Kipling would last all winter. The modern historical novels for young people of Rosemary Sutcliffe, or the stories of Jean George, Esther Forbes, Joseph Krumbold, to name a few of the many, will serve the same purpose. Time is a helpful element in creating enjoyment; a sense of suspense is built and the mind and imagination works away at what is happening even when the reading is not actually going on. All this means a deepening of experience which is a potent factor in developing appreciation.

Naturally a widening of the appeal of literature comes with the growing importance of meaning and of emotional involvement. But if a standard of taste has been set up, the young reader will demand that the meaning be logical, reasonable, justifiable, and “true” in the large sense, not necessarily factual. He will feel betrayed by a plot that is overdrawn, impossible, contrived. He is not to be moved by a sensational tearing at his emotions or by a maudlin sentimentality. Such traits will bore and disgust him.

We should show him that books are to be turned to for facts and information as well as for entertainment. He is ready to appreciate informative books about his surroundings, about people like himself or unlike himself, about the world of science, about the world of nature. These facts must be given in fitting style; he turns away from the didactic, the fairy tale approach. The facts should be there as such; the information presented in an interesting but objective, direct report-writing style. When a child turns to books to answer such a need and one that is in every child, he has become a reader, he has achieved a goal.

Let us be ready to show the appeal of books as many-sided, as a means to different ends. Such an awareness can and should be developed in children by a conscientious effort on the part of adults. We all should be willing to make this effort when we realize how books become the answer to many searchings and problems in children as they grow into maturity.

Keep Books in Evidence

Insist on the presence of the book itself, of books. Let the child realize as soon as he can sense it that the pleasure of what he is hearing is for him to renew for himself and to share with others. A successful story-teller keeps the book in hand. He may never refer to it while he is telling his story, but in addition to giving him a confidence that he will not forget, it will give the listener a conviction that the book is a means of revealing and preserving the story he is hearing. How obvious this is when reading aloud is being done; whoever is doing the reading says, “Get the book,”—ah, happy preface to the satisfying hour to come.

The importance of buying books for children should be stressed in this discussion. When you wish to take a present to a youngster, take a book, of course a “good” book! Bring home a book as a surprise. Build up that shelf of books in a child’s room. Encourage the child to use his school library; take him to the public library or bookmobile

wherever he is. Be sure he has the knowledge of the process of borrowing books. See that he returns the books he borrows when they should be returned. Impress upon his mind the value of books and insist that any book he uses, his own or a borrowed one, be treated with the care and respect that all books should have.

Finally see that the adults and young people in a family are readers, too. Have all kinds of books around the house—books that are obviously not of interest to a child, but books that appear to be of great and vital interest to others, and hence, of potential interest to him. Discuss books at mealtime; discuss the books that you are reading; encourage children to talk about the books they are reading.

These, then are three concerns that should be of help in developing an appreciation for literature in children: Establish the oral patterns of words, excitingly and arrestingly used; keep the experience of reading many-sided; and keep books about, add to them and cherish them as things of value. Here is a start at the delightful task of making readers of our children.

Helen E. Master is Associate Professor Emeritus of English at Western Michigan University. She is remembered by her students as an excellent teacher of Literature for Children.