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## CHILDREN RESPOND REFLECTIVELY TO LITERATURE

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What does the reading of literature and responding to it have to do with becoming a capable reader? Is this an ambiguous question? Not at all! Actually, it is very important that educators ask this question of themselves and answer it, too. To ignore the question is to do disservice to the children we teach. Examination of the second-cycle objectives for the next round of the National Assessment of Educational Progress<sup>1</sup> in the areas of reading and literature will reveal, I think, the importance of this question and might well offer an answer to it. Included among the objectives for both reading and literature are those which focus on reflective or critical thinking in response to language - be that language in print, oral or enacted. Implementation of these objectives calls for providing learning experiences in which readers must *respond reflectively* to the reading of literary selections and *share* these responses - their understanding, interpretations and evaluations of the pieces, be they fiction, poetry, factual writing, short stories, essays and editorials, dramas, biographies or magazines. Space limitations allow for only a brief discussion of the variety of ways that reflective responses to literature might contribute towards children becoming more capable, thoughtful readers of all printed material. Perhaps the thoughts expressed here will convince you that you are already doing a fine job in using literature to help children become the skillful, thoughtful and critical readers that are reflected in the various objectives included in the reading and literature components of the National Assessment. Perhaps you will view the kinds of learning experiences and specific publications discussed here worth trying and will prove to be effective in helping the children become skillful, thoughtful and critical readers. At best, it is hoped that even this brief discussion will help us to always keep in mind that reading is a thinking

activity and the reading of literature will provide exactly the kind of fare that will help young readers to acquire the habit of engaging in reflective (critical) thinking when they read. Let us consider a few specific responses that suggest reflective thinking to the printed word, responses which can be expected of children at any grade level.

*The reader should be able to understand and evaluate the author's use of words and sentences in context.* Even primary grade children can respond and evaluate literature in this way. Read aloud or ask children to read *Hide and Seek Fog* by Alvin Tresselt and *Emilio's Summer Day* by Miriam Bourne. Ask the children to compare and contrast how the authors of these picture books used words to help the readers to feel the weather elements. Tresselt uses poetic prose to help his readers feel the moisture and the cold, to create the eerie mood when one is playing in the mist and fog. Bourne expresses her thoughts about the oppressive summer heat in language that is direct, simple and forceful. Middle grade readers will easily recognize the power of words to arouse intense emotions and they may be able to appreciate and respect diversity in writing style as they compare two accounts of animals' behavior when they are caught in a forest fire. So dramatically yet so differently do the authors and illustrators of *Wildfire* and *The Death of a Wombat* tell their stories. In *Wildfire*, Evans G. Valens, Jr., uses exquisite poetic prose to tell his account of the animals' terror and Clem-

<sup>1</sup> For information about National Assessment and a detailed list of the revised objectives and exemplifying content write to National Assessment of Education Progress, 700 Lincoln Tower, 1860 Lincoln Street, Denver Colorado, 80203. Reports of the results of the past National Assessment programs may be ordered from Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.

ent Hurd's sophisticated woodcut prints on rice paper masterfully extend and enrich the story. In contrast, *The Death of a Wombat*, Ivan Smith tells his story in language that sometimes simple and sometimes embellished and Clifton Pugh illustrates the story with simple, action-filled, line drawings and expressionistic paintings; together Smith and Pugh personalize the dreadful, urgent sense of tragedy felt by the animals caught in a savage brush fire.

*The reader should comprehend and evaluate how the author combines images, incidents, characters and ideas to create an emotional effect and to state a theme or message.* This kind of reflective response can be evoked from children who read *Mama* by Lee Bennett Hopkins and *My Twin Sister, Erika* by Ilse-Margaret Vogel. Both of these stories are short and easy to read; both are stories that one will think about long after the last word is read and the books are returned to the shelves. In each story the author emphasizes that one must be himself or herself and one must respect and appreciate uniqueness in people. Each story is based on the authors' own childhood experiences and is told as a first person narrative. Yet each story is so different from the other. The readers will remember *Mama*! She is tough, forceful, cheerful, a bit gauche, apparently entirely without feelings of guilt in her thievery and she is overflowing with love for her two fatherless sons. *Mama* is an "up" story but it is one that will leave the reader (like the narrator) feeling anguished, ambivalent and very fond of *Mama*. Ms. Vogel's story is thoroughly poignant and amazingly simply stated, consisting of five episodes involving twin sisters who are so close that only after one of the girls dies at age seven can the surviving twin say that "Today I will be me . . . I will be myself" but promises also to love her mother ". . . as if I was still two." Children will find comfort, security and genuine love in these episodes about Erika and Inge. The girls were so much alike yet so very different from each other. The readers will get to know each of the girls well but they will get them mixed up too, as did their Uncle Max; they will enjoy the accounts of how the girls exchanged identities; they will involve themselves in the girls' arguments and wonderful projects. They, like I was, will

be red-eyed and worn when they finish reading this fine collection of five episodes.

*The reader should respond to and evaluate a work by relating it to one's self, one's own culture or to cultures of others.* At times the reader will read to seek knowledge and insights about matters involving her - or himself primarily. Thus, for the child who views going to bed as something s/he would rather avoid or for the one who is convinced that the worst part of going to bed is having to get up in the morning, Judi Barrett's picture book about the good and bad things about going to bed, *I Hate to Go to Bed*, will be comforting. The full page crosshatch overlay illustrations by Ray Cruz contribute to the realism and humor which is offered the readers of this insightful and simple text. Likewise, anyone who wants a dog but is told that, "The city (or apartment) is no place for a dog." or "Tropical fish make an educational pet, one that keeps the house neat." will delight in Sidney Offit's short story "A Dog No Eyes Can See." Offit's story of how an affectionate puppy named Rudi (who had the droopy lids of a Saint Bernard, pointed ears, the body of a German shepherd and fine withers, the forearm, knee and pastern resembling a beagle) was made invisible by feeding him magic elixir, endured a trial basis and eventually was accepted as a member of the family. This is one of six original humorous short stories written by well known writers as Scott Corbett, Lloyd Alexander and Marilyn Sachs, gathered in *Just For Fun* and edited by Ann Durrell. Two books that are bound to alert the readers to the beauty that surrounds them in their here-and-now world should be mentioned. One of my favorites among the books this year is *Guess Who My Favorite Person Is* written by Byrd Baylor and illustrated by Robert Andres Parker with line-and-wash impressionistic paintings. The readers will enjoy matching their favorite color, place to live, thing to touch, smell, dream, thing to taste, thing to see moving and time of day with the favorites identified by the narrator and his young friend. Also worthy of note is *The Golden Circle*. This is a little gem consisting of twelve essays about the natural world around us - recording what nature is doing and how it looks from

month to month. Foremost botanical artist Ann Ophelia Dowden's illustrations are dainty, detailed, precise, vivid, realistic paintings (in full color and actual size and in natural settings).

Children are instinctively curious and questive; they soon become valuing in terms of their culture and the quality and variety of their personal and educational experiences. Gradually they become less egocentric in their awareness and awakening; eventually they view themselves in relation to an ever-expanding and more cosmopolitan world. They do not see themselves in isolation but in terms of an interrelation with everything on earth. When a reading teacher or literature teacher asks the reader to respond reflectively or critically s/he is asking the reader to do more than summarize a story, recall facts about an author or his writing or do more than engage in literal interpretations of the printed word. A great many of the contemporary literary pieces offer fare that will cause the reader to think critically about problems, situations and issues that are significant and relevant in society today, that cause the reader to realize that oftentimes there are pros and cons to a social issue, that will lead the reader to evaluate book characters' behavior or authors' themes and messages in terms of an ethical or moral standard. In the publication *Bear's Heart* one finds graphic documentation narrating how a Cheyenne known as Bear's Heart and hundreds of Plains Indians were hunted down in the winter of 1874-75 by the United States Army when the Indians left their reservations in an attempt to regain their traditional way of life and sent to a large military prison in Florida. The events of this Indian experience are recorded in a text by Burton Supree and Ann Ross in a series of colored pictures which Bear's Heart drew in a school notebook given him by his captors. Middle grade and junior high school pupils of history or social studies might enjoy comparing Bear's Heart account with that offered by Scott O'Dell in his historical fiction *Sing Down the Moon*, a long time favorite among young people, or Jamake Highwater's new odyssey entitled *Anpao*. *Sing Down the Moon*, a short and easy to read novel is a devastating narrative about a Navajo girl and her people's "long

march" to Fort Sumner from Canyon de Chelly in 1864; *Anpao* is a full length, mature allegorical novel about an American Indian's dangerous quest across deserts, mountains and prairies and his encounters with the white man and his guns, horses and diseases. All three books provide major ethical and human rights problems which the reader can ponder about.

The short stories which Nicholasa Mohr included in her two most recent books *El Bronx Remembered* and *In Nueva York* offer young readers in the middle grades and up a sensitive and intricate statement about life among members of the Puerto Rican community in New York's Lower East Side called the El Barrio or Spanish Harlem. In all of her stories Ms. Mohr emphasizes that the human spirit gives one strength no matter what the circumstances. Most readers will be amazed that the people in her stories are determined to survive in spite of hard and tragic lives. Ms. Mohr affirms in her passionate and intensely personal stories that in life, these people find humor and pathos, excitement, hope and despair, dignity and self respect.

Like Nicholasa Mohr, James Lincoln Collier addresses his writing to an element among an oppressed people who accomplish great things in spite of the great odds against them. In a very fine collection of biographical studies entitled *The Great Jazz Artists* Mr. Collier provides an interesting survey of the lives and music of the great jazz musicians from its roots in African music and early Black American work songs, to its birth in New Orleans, through the swinging bebop era of the 1940s and to the improvised and free jazz of the 1960s and 1970s. The monoprints in the expressionistic art style by the well known water colorist Robert Andrew Parker contribute a great deal to this unique commentary about the contributions that the leaders of this enduring and influential form of music have had on our society. Each full page portrait would be worth framing and hanging in any jazz enthusiast's room. Accompanying each biographical sketch is an annotated bibliography of books about each artist and the available records of his or her music. Among the jazz artists studied are Bessie Smith, Scott Joplin, Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter)

Blind Lemon Jefferson, Jelly Roll Morton, Bix Beiderbecke, Fats Waller, Fletcher Henderson, Lester Young, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong.

*A reader should reflect on and evaluate what s/he reads in comparison with other works of literature, to other forms of art and/or to other modes of expression.*

All of us have known people who are compulsive readers or compulsive viewers of television or movies, but seldom in their reading and viewing the media do they move to the point of comparing one book with another, one program or film with another or even comparing a book with a television or film version. Seldom do they evaluate their reading or viewing in terms of their artistic quality, authenticity, depth or validity of the author's theme or message. It is imperative that the reading program and literature program include learning experiences that will give pupils opportunities to think about their reading and viewing of the media in this fashion. One could examine Nancy Burkert's full-page paintings and monochromatic sketches that illustrate Eva Le Gallienne's translation of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Nightingale* in terms of how authentically she has interpreted and adhered to the Chinese traditions, mores, beliefs and symbolism. Consider some things I noticed and decided about her illustrations: The big black ant, the ladybug, the butterfly and the grasshoppers which on the petals of the flowers on the book cover are there for a reason - a Chinese would not remove or kill that black ant or any other harmless insect if s/he plucked a flower, for the very presence of an insect on a flower or fruit means that it is a very attractive, a very sweet flower or fruit; therefore, the best and worthy of being offered to the gods, the royalty or a loved one. The picture of the dragon appears in the beginning and the end of the book. Why? It is the most awesome, most powerful and most loved of the good luck bearing creatures. One sees dragons in about every design that is Chinese (frames of the lanterns, the protrusions of the pagodas, on the pillars and stairways.) Thus it is right and proper that Ms. Burkert included them in her paintings, too. Her landscapes of the Emperor's palace and environs are typical Chinese scenes, complete with the seas,

the mountains, the waterfalls, the native flowers, trees and shrubs. The teahouse, a bridge and low curly clouds which complete the Chinese landscape give the viewer a sense of meditation, serenity, peace, quietude, coolness and spiritual communion that suggests the mysticism and contemplation so typical of the traditional Chinese. The artist included the full moon in some of her pictures for she is obviously well aware that the Chinese are a lunar people and believe that incidents of great importance seem to happen during a full moon. Intricate details are included in her portrayal of the pagodas, the decorations on the vases, walls, windows and staircases. On one window one will note that what appears at first glance to be mere decoration is actually the word "longevity" written in the Chinese characters. A detail like the shaven heads of the infants is also included by this meticulous and scholarly book artist. These details and so many more authenticate her interpretation of this well known fairy tale and will be noticed by the thoughtful and informed reader of words and pictures.

Readers of Vera and Bill Cleaver's junior novels (*Trial Valley, The Whys and Wherefores of Littabelle Lee, The Memosa Tree, Where the Lilies Bloom*, etc.) will recognize that these talented authors have amassed in their stories an amazing wealth of knowledge about the life styles of mountaineers, the practice of herbal medicine and most important perhaps, the human condition in general.

Few young people who have read William Armstrong's *Souder* or Alice Childress's *A Hero Ain't Nothin But a Sandwich* will fail to respond to the film versions of these stories. The changes that were made in translating these novels into films are quite readily apparent and some people think the results serve to do an injustice to the original story. On the other hand, although the film version of the Cleavers' novel *Where the Lilies Bloom* is somewhat different from the novel the result is the creation of a truly artistic film story. Commercial film and television versions of literary themes abound and offer the reading teacher or literature teacher fine vehicles for teaching children to respond reflectively to their reading and viewing of enactments of literature on the media.

There are many beautiful retellings of folktales available for use in reading, social studies and literature classes. These traditional tales can help children realize that people from different cultures are much alike and very different from each other. They can learn from these tales the traditions, the theological and psychological beliefs of people from different cultures. These stories can be used to help children realize that from the beginning of time to the present people of all cultures have been asking the basic humanities questions, that oftentimes they express their thoughts and answers about these questions in literal terms and by way of symbolism. Two retellings of folktales which might be used to gain insight into the thinking and values of people from different cultures might be cited. *Cricket Boy*, retold by Feenie Ziner and illustrated by Ed Young with full color paintings suggestive of the classic Chinese art form is an excellent book! Attention to some of the questions asked by Scholar Hu will surely evoke considerable thoughtfulness to the basic humanities questions: "How can great things grow from small ones?" "How does power spring from weakness?" "How is that some crickets are naturally shy, and others are born fighters? What happens to the spirit of a cricket when summer ends and its body dies?" Another retelling of a folktale, this one a myth of Ancient Egypt entitled the *Voyage of Osiris* and is retold and illustrated by Caldecott award winner Gerald McDermott. In this story one finds a key to understanding the Egyptian belief in Life after Death, reincarnation and spiritual rebirth. The opaque watercolor illustrations contain many authentic Egyptian graphic symbols. The paintings are done in an art style suggestive of the ancient Egyptian art form yet are distinctively those which are always done by Gerald McDermott in his own unique form.

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