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GOOD BOOKS ARE MULTI-DIMENSIONAL

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When we are lucky enough to read a really good story or poem we feel that we have received a gift. The effect is one of feeling uplifted. Our world has been enriched and made more pleasant by something unique and beautiful. It is this very response that I use as one of the major criteria for evaluating the worth of a book, be it for children or for adults. It is this very response that I would expect any teacher or librarian who selects books for their school or classroom collections. Be assured, if a book insults the aesthetic taste or the intelligence of an adult, in all probability it will prove insulting to young readers also. This is not to say that the child reader and adult readers, the enthusiastic and experienced reader or the reluctant reader will come away with exactly the same messages, the same intensity or even the same kinds of responses to the same story. It does mean that a good book is multi-dimensional and offers something of worth to any one who reads it regardless of one's age, be s/he 4 or 40 or 80 years old.

It is not possible in these few pages to identify all of the excellent new books for young readers 4-18 years of age. I will try instead to highlight those books which in this reviewer's opinion (1) exemplify some of the **types** or varieties of books we should include in the book collections servicing young readers, (2) will evoke sincere and varied emotional responses on the part of the young readers, (3) reflect the "**new look**" in literature for young readers and, (4) will cause the readers to **ponder** and **think** about the story's themes and the book charac-

ter's motivation and actions not only while they are reading the books but oftentimes thereafter.

A fine example of a picture book for older readers (10 years through adulthood), is found in Beverly Brodsky McDermott's *The Golem*. This artistic rendition of the well known Jewish legend consists of stunning expressionistic, brilliantly colored illustrations and brief but dramatic and precise text. It would surely evoke a wave of after-images and after-thoughts. This story about what happened when Rabbi Leve molded the Golem from clay contains a great deal of symbolism and many levels of meaning. From it one may learn about some of the tenets upon which Judaism is based. One may experience history and live (vicariously) the horror and terror of the pogroms in Prague. One may relate this legend to modern wars and contemporary society's attempts at establishing a permanent peace. The readers of *The Golem* are offered so much more! Without a doubt, this is one multileveled book that should be in every elementary and secondary school and adult library. Seldom can nor should one say that about any book. This may be one exception, I think.

Another worthwhile multileveled book is *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang* by Mordecai Richler, an author known to many of you probably for his fine adult books. This is a marvelously funny satire about the catastrophic experiences that poor Jacob Two-Two has (he is only two plus two plus two years old) when he is held prisoner in the lair of the

Hooded Fang (a dreadfully insecure and incompetent tyrant). Readers young and old alike (6-66 years old) will enjoy the challenge of unraveling Jacob's dream with the details of his difficult waking life. Mordecai Rechler's talented play on and play with words in this clever and all too true satirical commentary about life's pecking order will delight and jolt anyone who pays heed to them. It might be fun and challenging for those interested in teaching critical reading to twelve through sixteen year olds to ask them to compare aspects of *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang* with Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. The children will enjoy both stories. They will also find the comparison a fun experience, an enlightening one and a challenging one, too. Try it! Also, *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang* will prove to be a good read aloud story for young and old alike – regardless of the level(s) or degree of sophistication they may respond to it.

To my knowledge, Ellen Raskin has never written or illustrated a book that was superficial or one dimensional. Her latest book, *Twenty-Two, Twenty-Three* is no exception. As a matter of fact, it constitutes the ultimate challenge to those who consider themselves advanced in verbal and visual literacy. High schoolers will love the high degree of sophistication of the text and illustrations. Nonetheless, you will find that primary school aged children will want to read and examine its intricate pen-and-ink drawings time and time again and they will enjoy the reparté and repetition contained in the words. Adults, too, will be thoroughly delighted with the many sophisticated and hilarious details offered in this picture book about the journey of a mouse and the "properly" dressed animal folk. It might be mentioned here, too, that Ellen Raskin has designed a special alphabet based on the thirty-three characters in *Twenty-Two, Twenty-Three* and it is available from

the publisher at no charge. The readers are encouraged to cut the letters apart, duplicate them if they want to, color them and create their own signs wishing one and all a "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year." On the reverse side of the alphabet is an informative yet easily understood statement by Ellen Raskin in which she tells how she prepared the colored overlays for her illustrations and encourages the children to make their own color overlays when they use her pen-and-ink alphabet designs to create their signs.

No doubt you have noticed this past year or so the proliferation of books about aspects of American history pertinent to the Bicentennial Celebration. Books on this topic are so plentiful one could easily devote an entire article (even an entire book) to it. Suffice it to say at this point, it would be to one's advantage to make use of the reissues of the multi dimensional books by Edwin Tunis (such as *Shaw's Fortune, Colonial Living and The Tavern at the Ferry*) and Eric Sloane (such as *Diary of an Early American Boy; Noah Blake - 1805; Museum of Early American Tools; The Do's and Don'ts of Yesterday* and Eric Sloane's *Almanac and Weather Forecaster*). The author of *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, namely Robert Newton Peck, has written *Fawn and Hung for Treason*, two fast-paced and intensely moving historical fiction novels which offer the literal reader as well as the most thoughtful and critical reader (ages 10-18) a wealth of information about the political and more humane aspects of the Pre-Revolutionary War era. As usual, this talented writer of historical fiction will lead the more thoughtful readers to realize that his stories also have considerable relevance to, and offer significant insight into some pressing and serious social issues that exist in contemporary times.

Speaking of social issues and problems of contemporary times there are many well-written modern realistic stories addressed to children and

adolescents. Anyone who reads adult books as well as those for children and adolescents will notice that there are similarities in many of these books. We find in books for children, adolescents, and adults, be they picture books or novels, that the stories are existentialistic, surrealistic or impressionistic in structure, style, content and theme. These stories deal with many of the issues and ills that prevail in contemporary society — the plight of the aged, child abuse, child rights, conditions in prisons and reform institutions, attempts at behavior modification and population control, psychological disturbances, portrayal of and attitudes about minorities, to name only a few. There is no paucity of books (factual or fictional) for young readers on any of these topics. Among the many titles about these and other social issues and problems one will find a variety of points of view as well as many suggestions for solving or coping with the complexities, ambiguities and paradoxes inherent in them — an environment beautifully conducive to the teaching of thoughtful and critical reading. The monochromatic water color paintings by Leo and Diane Dillon and the poetic prose by Sharon Bell Mathis were fortunate combinations in the creating of the 1976 Newbery Honor Book entitled *The Hundred Penny Box*. This is a touching story of a warm relationship between young Michael and his 100 year old great-great Aunt Dew. Their relationship is complicated by the boy's mother's displeasure with Aunt Dew's presence in the home and her exasperation with the fragile ole woman's preoccupation with the past rather than the immediate present or future (Aunt Dew tells Michael fascinating stories which are brought to mind as she looks at the date embossed on the pennies contained in her treasured old and battered wooden box.) *The Hundred Penny Box* alerts readers of any age to the many complex problems experienced by the senior citizens and

their families.

The terror, anxiety, shame and mistrust that tends to typify the feelings of one who has been victimized by child abuse are portrayed convincingly by Irene Hunt in *The Lottery Rose*. This is an easy to read story about the psychic and physical wounds of ten year old Georgie Burgess. His story of how he slowly learns to accept and give love, learns to trust others and accept their overture of friendship will bring both children and adult readers to tears and elation. These emotions are not maudlin. They are totally warranted and sincere. Two other junior novels that evoke considerable after-thought and sincere intense emotional responses are *Dust of the Earth* by Vera and Bill Cleaver and *Mad Martin* by Patricia Windsor. Each of these titles constitute a very different and worthwhile literary experience. In none of them do the authors present their messages in a didactic way. In each story, the reader be s/he ten or eleven or an adult student of psychology or child study, will recognize and fully appreciate very important tenants of human behavior: One will possess feelings of well-being and self-worth and will find a significant degree of happiness if and when s/he has been afforded ample opportunities to receive love from and give love to significant others; has the freedom and opportunities to share ones feelings and thoughts with others if and when one wants to in the way one wants to; has experienced in give-and-take situations sincere acts of friendship and can accept others despite their limitations. Readers of these three novels will think about the characters and incidents in these stories as well as the authors' messages long after they close the covers and return the books to their shelves.

One more important trend in multi-leveled reading materials is noticed in the biographies for juvenile readers. Quite a few interesting biographies about the authors of children's litera-

ture are now being published. Some of the recent titles include Donald Zochert's *Laura, The Life of Laura Ingalls Wilder*, Christopher Milne's biography of A.A. Milne entitled *The Enchanted Places* and Marguerite de Angeli's autobiography *Butter at the Old Price*. The older readers who remember and cherish the stories by each of the authors who are the subjects of these biographies, as well as the more advanced and talented readers will find new worlds in these detailed, thoroughly researched, carefully written studies! Each author's life story contains certain facts which younger children who are just now reading their classical stories will delight in finding out about. Any teenager, teacher or librarian who has taken the time and put forth the effort to read these engaging and authentic recreations of the lives of these well known and well-loved authors will surely want to share many parts of them with the younger fans who are not up to reading such lengthy and detailed biographies. Be assured, they will love you for sharing your reading with them. They will be more than impressed by your knowledge. More important, perhaps, you will help them realize that literature is written by real flesh-and-blood people and they will want to read more books by and about these (and other) literary greats.

These titles reflect only a few of the many multileveled stories one can make accessible to young readers: stories which contain many potentials for helping our children become thoughtful and critical readers; stories which will help children learn that reading of literature is a pleasurable activity and a mind expanding one, too; stories which will make them feel that the authors have created a treasured gift.

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