

Choosing Good Books for our Children

part of our Parent Education Literature Series



by Rea Berg

That which occurs by accident is not art. ~ Seneca (3 B.C.-65 A.D.)

The ancient philosopher reminds us that all true art is purposeful and is the product of expertise, creative genius, and often--intensive labor finding fruition in a work of beauty. No one would acclaim a toddler's spilled baby food as a masterpiece of design and imagery, and adolescents seldom write great works of literature (The Diary of Anne Frank perhaps excepted). Because art is imitative, it requires the mastering of techniques that

enable the artist to create a work of beauty that reflects reality in a convincing way. Literature is no less a work of art than painting, sculpture, music, and dance. Thus literature must portray worlds that are believable because they in some way imitate the real world. This principle holds true in the world of children's books as well as the adult world of literature.

When considering classic literature, it is easy for most to identify the great works that belong to the canon of Western literature. The works of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Dickens, might head the list of writers across

the pond, while classics of American literature would include *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *Red Badge of Courage*. But when it comes to choosing "classic" literature for children, we wonder, "Is there such a thing?" Is there truly a canon of children's literature? Great critics of children's literature such as Humphrey Carpenter, Anita Silvey, Virginia Haviland, Cornelia Meigs, would say unequivocally,

"Yes." Indeed, Humphrey Carpenter, in his book *Secret Gardens*, identified 1860-1930 as *The Golden Age of Children's Literature* (the subtitle of his book). The writers that emerged in this period cover the span from Lewis Carroll to A. A. Milne and include such notables as George MacDonald, E. Nesbit,

Charles Kingsley, Kenneth Graham, Beatrix Potter, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Louisa May Alcott, Mark Twain, and J.M. Barrie and many others. The 70-year period between 1860 and 1930 established a literary foundation for children's literature still built upon today.

What Lewis Carroll was proposing when Alice fell down the rabbit hole was the very subversive notion that children's literature could be just for fun. Indeed, Lewis poked fun at the piously didactic juvenile literature of the past and wrote a rollicking tale of imagination at the same time. The popularity of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking Glass* changed the course of children's publishing and established a precedent that other children's authors have followed. E. Nesbit wrote of the adventures of the rambunctious but loveable Bastable children in *The Treasure Seekers*--introducing Edwardian children who were totally believable and not the pious angels of the past. While her protagonist's best intentions always seem to backfire in humorous ways, the children are honest, intelligent and brave. The popularity of Nesbit's *Five Children and It* and *The Railway Children* and their sequels moved the domestic novel away from the sentimentalized depictions of children in previous offerings. J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* immortalized eternal childhood while Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* was one of the first Robinsonnade adventures to avoid didacticism. Stevenson's masterful characterization combined with a gripping pace moved the boy's adventure story onto an entirely new plane. Frances Hodgson Burnett's beloved *Secret Garden* and *The Little Princess* had

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no angelic protagonists, but believable children who start out either quite pampered or unpleasant and through hardship and faith grow up nicely. Still popular today, these titles garner Hollywood remakes on a regular basis, (though none seem able to top Shirley Temple as Burnett's loveable protagonist in *The Little Princess!*). Louisa May Alcott created the impetuous, emotional, tomboyish but unforgettable Jo March

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in *Little Women*, taking the girl protagonist new heights and investing the quiet domestic scene with vibrancy, humor, and interest. Beatrix Potter and Kenneth Grahame in their anthropomorphic creatures Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail, and respectively, Toad, Rat, Mole and Badger—created animal worlds filled with delight and wonder for generations of children. So astute were both these authors at investing their animal creatures with human qualities that readers find it easy to see themselves or someone they know in these memorable creations. And finally, A. A. Milne's unforgettable Christopher Robin, with his companions of the Hundred Acre Wood—the unassuming, slightly simple-minded but deeply endearing Pooh, the nervous Piglet, the dreary

Eeyore and Tigger and Owl and so on. A childhood devoid of the companions of the Hundred Acre Wood would be dull indeed.

What these nineteenth and early twentieth century authors for children demonstrated through their work was that children's literature must rise to the same standards expected for works of adult literature. In fact, few children's books that are not enjoyed by adults as well as children ever achieve the status of classic. Within the works above the authors have:

~ constructed plots that move the action in such a way that the reader must find out what happens next.

~ created settings that are convincing, clear, and so well described that the reader can see, hear, feel, and even smell the scenes as they unfold.

~ endowed his or her characters with flesh — in the sense that they are not stereotypes or cardboard figures, but are believable in their human-ness (even if they are animal creatures or imaginary figures), enabling the reader to see themselves or others they know through these creations.

~ constructed concise, rich, and evocative language to carry the meaning of their story clearly.

~ carried their protagonists through conflict to resolution in such a way that readers can identify vicariously with the subject's fears, defeats, joys, losses, challenges, and victories in order to experience catharsis and ultimately empathy.

In essence, what each of the authors above have achieved has been

the fruit of careful labor that pulls all the above elements together creating a work of beauty that speaks to universal themes of the human experience.

Matthew Arnold, the nineteenth century author and critic, noted that the purpose of literature is "instruction and delight." It seems that literature instructs best when it delights most. The authors explored here seemed to understand this notion. While they do not hold a monopoly on "children's classics" their work offers a good place to begin exploring the wonderful world of children's books. In the next installment we will look at twentieth century authors who built upon this legacy and whose works continue to instruct and delight in the new millennium.

Rea is the wife of Russell, married for 29 years and mother of six. Rea is an avid reader of history and lover of children's literature. She has home schooled for over 20 years, an experience which became the impetus for her eight guides for teaching history through literature. These guides have won awards and national acclaim in the home schooling community. Rea graduated with a BA in English from Simmons College and a Master's Degree in Children's Literature at the Center for the Study of Children's Literature in Boston where she was named a Virginia Haviland Scholar. She resides with her family in San Luis Obispo, California. Rea and Russ together co-founded Beautiful Feet Books.

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