DISCOVERING THE WORLD THROUGH BOOKS

by
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The man who doesn't read has been described as the poorest man in the world, a man limited to his own experiences. To the child who doesn't read, the world is a closed book.

Unlike television, which captures the imagination, reading frees the mind as it provides vicarious experiences beyond the possibilities of any one person and allows readers to discover whatever they seek and even what they do not, which is often more important. Those who read are exposed to different values and ideas and are provided a view of the world as it really is—neither all good nor all bad, but human.

There are many challenges, dilemmas and temptations facing adults, adolescents and even children these days: drugs, alcohol, divorce and broken homes, alternate life styles, early and/or unwanted pregnancies, dishonest in high places, physical and mental abuse—and on and on. In addition, our young people are faced with more responsibilities than ever before. There is a wider gap between their goals, standards and values and those of their peers.

One of the most useful things adults and adolescents can do is to read books that reflect life honestly and accurately, but in many of our homes and schools, parents and teachers are sheltering young people from the books written for them because they deal too much with real life rather than the ideal. These are often the very books young people need the most. When they are overprotected from the world around them, they are not prepared to handle it when they eventually have to face it.

Adults should not give a controversial book too much attention, nor should they avoid talking about it. And they should also avoid automatically assuming that such a book is on how to do something. Books are good for us *because* they tend to shake us up. They can both alter what we believe to be true by testing ideas we have too easily accepted and strengthen us when what we believe stands up under the test. Parents should have faith that any evil their children meet in a book will help them appreciate good all the more, without their having to have a direct contact with the evil.

Many books can help the readers see the whole story. We can read and delight in fantasy, learning moral lessons without confusing them with real life, but we cannot represent unrealistic stories in the guise of real life without creating false expectations and disillusionments. I am afraid this happens all too often in some of our current young adult fiction. It adds to their self-centered satisfaction that they have all the answers and that the answers are easy to come by. It treats good and evil in such a way that it would often appear that rewards and punishments are immediate results rather than long-term consequences.

In the eyes of the young, hypocrisy is probably the worst sin. A half-truth is worse than an outright lie. Honest books tell what being human is like. Ideal books tell what being human ought to be like. Young readers must have hon4est books if the books are going to help them meet the real world. The writer Flannery O'Connor said:

The demand for positive literature comes from the assumption that the devil plays the major role in the production of fiction. Probably the devil plays the greatest role in the production of that fiction from which he is absent as an actor.

Young people want to communicate. They want someone to talk to, someone to listen. But many adults have lost touch with the feelings of insecurity that young people often have and that many authors still possess. The writers most successful with young readers seem to be those able to remember the experiences, problems, and joys they had when they were young. By relating those experiences and treating the feelings, writers can help young people realize that they are not the only ones to have ever felt that way or to have had a particular experience. What better way for young people to learn so much about so many different aspects of life.

One of the most important things an adult can do is to talk to young people, and listen to them. In *Don't Play Dead Until You Have To*, a boy asks his parents for five minutes of uninterrupted time for his birthday. That is all he wants. Parents who have trouble understanding the world of their children would do well to read their books, for while reading is a private act, it can be enriched through sharing—through communication. When both parents and children read, they create the common ground for communication.

Reading, accompanied by thoughtful discussion, will help the truth to grow. For example, in *Catcher in the Rye*, by J.D. Salinger (a book often objected to by adults yet lovingly defended by younger readers for almost forty years), the protagonist, Holden Caulfield, tries to wipe all the obscenities off the school wall so that his little sister Phoebe won't see them. He soon realizes that his efforts are hopeless because the obscenities of the world are unlimited. He can't protect her from the knowledge of the world, but he can be there to offer his love. He can't put hr under glass in the museum to protect her, but he can be there to understand and help. Through a book, parents and their children can begin to learn this invaluable lesson.

Parents should read and be willing to discuss what their children are reading with an open mind, not a censoring one. The more difficult it is to talk about a subject, the more parents should be willing to talk about it. Young people should never be made to feel embarrassed for what they read. If they are, they will likely hide what they read—and what they are thinking and wanting to talk about—and the chance for communication is lost.

Young people need all the help they can get, but they often are not using the resources available to them. Many

books written for teenagers, which could help them with typical problems, are not getting to them. Books such as Bernice Rabe's *Orphans*, Mary Stolz's *Leap Before You Look* and Florence Parry Heide's *When the Sad One Comes to Stay* show teens handling difficult and unpleasant situations. In James Forman's *A Ceremony of Innocence*, a brother and sister try to do something about what is happening in their country, Germany, at the beginning of World War II. They lose their lives, almost knowing that they cannot change anything, but they have to act anyway to keep it from changing them.

Such books can help young readers become more aware of the rest of the world and other perspectives. As they become more aware, they are better able to make the necessary choices to meet the world with more understanding. Making these comparisons can make their own lives clearer. One children's writer, Madeline L'Engle, says:

We can surely no longer pretend that our children are growing up into a peaceful, secure, and civilized world. We've come to the point where it's irresponsible to try to protect them from the irrational world they will have to live in when they grow up. The children themselves haven't yet isolated themselves by selfishness and indifference; they do not fall easily into the error of despair; they are considerably braver than most grownups. Our responsibility to them is not to pretend that if we don't look, evil will go away, but to give them weapons against it.

Adults should talk to children as they read, giving objects names and even different names for the same object, describing what the book tells about the children's world, giving children a chance to talk and ask questions, encouraging them to memorize passages. Parents can also teach a love for reading by reading in front of the children. The fortunate child is the one exposed to reading as a natural part of a happy, loving home where the best (and even some that aren't the best) books are read.

In the later stages of reading, children develop a greater awareness of the vicarious experience reading can provide, and they begin a search for self, for values, for meaning. As young readers see themselves and those they know in what they read, they realize, "I'm not the only one."

Eventually, some readers move to a level where they can enjoy an aesthetic experience. Here the reader becomes concerned with *how* the writers tell their stories, with how effectively they say what they have to say. The reader moves gradually from one stage to another, continually going back to preceding stages. As young people read, they don't leave one stage behind as they move to the next, they simply add a new stage, while keeping the previous one.

In the first stage of unconscious delight, of being completely absorbed into another world more exciting, beautiful, splendid, frightening, lonely, terrible, etc., there is something good—something the reader wants to last.

Gradually, and for a time, what the reader learns from the books about people, times, and places—whether they are real or not—becomes more dominant than the unconscious joy.

With the progression in reading on any topic at the aesthetic level can come the recognition of the tight, inseparable structure and control of a neat work of art, of literature, that recognition of a creative mind at work, which is one of the reasons we all go to art, which ultimately adds to that joy first known while reading at the early unconscious level. But without that first unconscious joy, many will never experience later conscious or unconscious joy and the aesthetic and literary appreciation. And they certainly won't develop the other skills that come from reading regularly.