



Which Books For Which Children?

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Nicholas Tucker, psychologist and critic, advises...

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It is impossible to set out exactly which books children should or shouldn't read at any particular time. Children themselves can be so different. Where frightening books are concerned, a book which terrifies one may delight another, just as a trip on the Ghost Train can either make or break a first day out at the fair.

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But while one can never be sure about specific individual responses, it is still possible to describe what happens to a number of children when confronted by possibly unsuitable literature. We have after all our own memories as well as written accounts from others recalling certain loathed books from their childhoods. There is too some academic research on the development of fear in children. One of a baby's first instincts is the 'startle response', whereby he or she shoots out both arms and legs when suddenly alarmed. Later on the baby will learn to control this reaction through play, using games like 'Peek -a-boo' or 'Rock a bye baby' to overcome such fear through experiencing a much milder version of it in a warm and loving context. But woe betide any adult who ever plays these games too vigorously, so producing tears rather than the expected laughter.

Early Books

Early books containing potentially frightening objects or situations can also be popular so long as author, illustrator or adult narrator never go too far ahead of a baby's tolerance. Giants, lions, tigers, policeman or park-keepers may be all very well if pictured in essentially comic, unthreatening ways. But put them in a picture-book context where the giant is feeling mean, the lions and tigers are ravenous and the policeman and park-keeper are on the warpath, then infants may sometimes find them all a bit much, preferring instead to return to the safer worlds of **Mr Men** books and other blander offerings.

The reason for this reaction is simple. Small children do not easily distinguish between reality and fantasy. Their dreams and nightmares can seem real not only at the time but long afterwards too. Tales about witches, ghosts or vampires may be believed as literally as stories about visiting the local supermarket to do some shopping. And because infants are invariably egocentric, they will also think that all menacing monsters will be on the look-out for them personally as a first priority. In the nineteenth century some nursemaids and parents used to capitalise on this infantile credulity, terrifying their children into being quiet at night or staying indoors during the day through fear of all the horrific characters they had been told about in stories beforehand. Only a sadistic adult would try to control children in this way today. But thoughtlessness or just bad luck can still sometimes cause problems, with infants occasionally latching on to stories that are too fierce for them, then getting upset as a result.

Most of us have been frightened at some time like this when young, perhaps by a trailer to a violent film or by the odd

story or picture. Learning to put up with such chance happenings is part of living, and parents can never hope to shelter their small children from all potentially fearful experiences. But nor should they be oblivious or insensitive as to what their infants hear or see. Sometimes the most bookish parents can be at fault here, so eager are they for their children to encounter particular favourite literature. My father terrified me by reading aloud his favourite Sherlock Holmes story, **The Adventure of the Speckled Band**, when I was about six. Years later I did the same to my young son by reading him **Treasure Island** too early and never getting beyond Blind Pew, the memory of whose menacing tap-tapping became responsible for the landing light having to be left on all night for the next couple of years. No great harm was done in either case, but there are records of quite traumatic effects on small children arising from very fearful experiences. The children's author E Nesbit blamed years of night terrors on to a visit she was allowed to make as an infant to a skeleton-packed vault in a French church. Today the effects of ghost stories, video-nasties or horror comics could be equally long-lasting for some, though by no means all, small children. Better not to take such risks in the first place, leaving them to sample such terror if they must in the more mature years to come.

Positive Pictures

Deciding to protect children from other types of book at a young age can be a more contentious matter. Given that infants are on the threshold of entering society, I personally would avoid books that convey a very negative picture of the world outside. For example, schools, hospitals, dental clinics and other institutions are all things most of them will have to encounter before long. Filling up their heads with adverse stereotypes in advance seems a stupid thing to do. Later on, when children know many such realities for what they are, the slapstick anti-authority humour typical of the **Beano** and **Dandy** comics also has its place as a valuable safety-valve. But with smaller children it is a pity to portray outside as a necessarily dangerous, alien type of place inhabited by bizarre or dangerous natives. We already have to teach infants sometimes through books not to talk to strangers; many more adverse images of the world beyond the front door and some may start wondering whether it will ever be safe to go through it at all.

Junior Readers

Readers at junior school meanwhile are in a different position, at the edge of adolescence rather than of society itself. They have firmer ideas about what is fiction and what is not, and a growing determination not to be fobbed off with pretty stories in preference for something closer to reality. But this is not an invitation for anything goes in their reading. Though their fiction can now explore a wider selection of emotions, happenings and possibilities, there are still limits imposed not by adults but by the particular children themselves and the various stages of emotional and intellectual understanding they are at. So while they may want to read about sexual attraction from time to time, they are still too far away from full sexuality themselves to be able to make much sense of the incidence and details of adult passion. Trying to anticipate such experiences that lie far ahead can only result in knowingness rather than true knowledge. Although around now is a good time to start thinking about more complex matters as they crop up in stories, it is not a period for aiming at the last word about human history, psychology, sociology or whatever else. Politics as explained by a child to a child, as in **The Diary of Anne Frank**, is one thing. Put over by George Orwell in an adult fable like **Animal Farm**, the implied political message is still too difficult, whatever the brilliance of the writing.

Elsewhere while junior children often adore the ghost stories that once frightened them and may also lap up violent films and comics, they still have childish susceptibilities though now at one stage removed under a tougher outer skin. But stories about the occult can remain genuinely disturbing for many juniors when put across with full quasi-scientific solemnity. Examples of violence divorced from immediate entertainment may also be upsetting. This is not a time for detailed descriptions of rape, torture or agonising death. Not that books must always be optimistic: sadness has its place in literature for all ages, and sobbing over a touching passage of fiction has its moments of pleasure too. But there is a difference between descriptions of melancholy and of total despair, just as there is between accounts of rough and tumble and the sick sadism of the video-nasty. Fiction for juniors must always be a halfway house between childish myths and adult realities. Getting this balance wrong is either to infantilise children or else to treat them as prematurely adult.

Books for Adolescents

Selecting books for adolescents is perhaps a contradiction in terms, since at this age readers will want to choose their literature for themselves. With many already reaching into adult fiction there is little point in trying to keep writing for teenagers in any particular ghetto where subject matter is concerned. Pretending to older readers that bad things do not sometimes happen to people both young and old will no longer work; ignoring such facts altogether is simply to hand the job of explanation over to television, pulp novels and teenage magazines. So while writing for young adults can now be expected to take on the concerns that face all of us, adolescents included, it is worth remembering that the teenage years also embrace moments of happiness, idealism and companionship. Making 'adolescent' synonymous with 'problem' is a poor idea whether in fiction or anywhere else. Books that feature the positive sides of this time of life have just as much a place as those that quite legitimately delve into adolescent depression and its various social causes and manifestations.

Personal Tastes

Such at any rate are some broad outlines involved in choosing or not choosing books for young readers at different ages. An additional factor is the individual taste of the chooser. In my own case, I happen to dislike violent, depressing literature of the type produced by the American writer, Robert Cormier, about whom I have already written in a previous edition of **Books for Keeps**. I cannot justify my feelings in terms of literary criticism, realising that they derive more from my own particular make of personality. I also have to admit that Cormier is a powerful writer and that many older children and some critics enjoy his work. But in an area as personal as our own individual reading responses, I still maintain I have the right to dislike Cormier's books. Within my own family I would not give them as presents nor contemplate reading any of them aloud. If my children had ever wanted to read him for themselves, that of course would be their own affair and one in which I would not dream of interfering.

Having permitted myself this indulgence, I must then also allow others to have similar foibles about children's literature. I therefore do not see it as merely laughable that some adults detest the lavatory humour in Raymond Briggs' later picture books, while others cannot take the heavy swearing in Robert Westall's **The Machine-Gunners**. As it happens, I think Raymond Briggs is very funny and that Robert Westall's novel is a brave and mostly successful attempt at describing how some children are affected by war. But knowing how strong personal reactions can be, including my own, I would be careful about choosing these or other controversial books to read to the class were I still a teacher. Nor would I ever mock complaints from the public about bad language in children's books of the type that booksellers so often have to field. It is perfectly normal to react personally to books, so long as one does not try to act for others too - children as well as parents - without consulting them first.

The Case of Mrs Wolf

Mention of booksellers reminds me of an interesting case of censorship on which to finish. A nice lady bookseller who was a former teacher once spoke to me in a moment of rare anger about a new picture book by Mary Rayner which she had quickly withdrawn from her shop. Called **Mr and Mrs Pig's Evening Out**, it describes how mother and father pig leave their ten little piglets in the care of 'a very nice lady' while they go out for a couple of hours. Alas, the baby-sitter has a dark face, gruff voice, hairy legs and a disconcerting tail. Her name is Mrs Wolf, and once the coast is clear she takes Mrs Pig's invitation to have 'something to eat later' in the evening' very literally indeed. Just rescuing their brother from going into the oven, the rest of the piglets manage to tie Mrs Wolf up and she is finally dumped in the river by father pig on his arrival home.

'Can you imagine what effect that book could have on children themselves left with a baby-sitter' raged my bookseller friend. At the stage of still needing baby-sitters for my own family, I was inclined to agree. All this happened in 1976, the year of the book's publication. But shortly after there was a very nasty incident nearby involving a real baby-sitter and a child, and today - following the publicity about child sexual abuse - all parents should certainly be much more careful about whom they invite to look after their children.

Them or Us?

So where does that leave **Mr and Mrs Pig's Evening Out**? Still in print today, it remains a fairly tough story, though softened by the author's jolly accompanying pictures. But with hindsight, I now believe that if this hook ever does cause sonic distress this is not necessarily a bad thing if this also helps remind parents of the continuing need to be very careful about baby-sitters in real life. As to the bookseller's original violent reaction to it, this could well have been not so much because she thought the book might disturb children but because she herself was upset by its implications for her own arrangements made for her children when she occasionally went out during the evening.

In other words, when we are most adamant about what books should *not* get to children, are we sometimes more concerned with protecting our own delicate sensibilities, some of which may be rather less easy to justify than others? So long as this possibility remains, the case for protecting children from books always needs more critical examination than the case for letting them read what they like. Yet both have to be argued at times, and anyone who suggests that there are easy answers is underestimating both children, books and the perpetually interesting but always elusive dialogue that then arises between them.

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