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Children's Books Based on TV and Movie Spinoffs

by Lillian Heil

An American cartoonist exemplified the mindless acceptance of anything TV has to offer by showing one character asking his friend, "Do you have any idea the impact TV is having on the social consciousness of our country?"

The friend answers, "No, I just watch the soaps."

All of us who have ever watched the soaps know what the Russian writer, Solzhenitsyn meant when he described American video programming as "TV stupor," for these shows seem to derive their entertainment value from sex, power, humor and action (usually of a violent variety).

Are children's movies and TV shows also producers of stupor? Yes, they seduce concerned adults with overt themes. They want children to learn such as the joy of learning a new skill, the importance of friends, playing with language and getting along with younger brothers and sisters, but their not very hidden subliminal messages are negative ones such as: fathers are stupid show-offs who never grow up, people are not unique and children can't be trusted to think for themselves. I expect we should be grateful that these picture books have dull stories, uninteresting language and mediocre illustrations. But, to make matters worse, the moving picture media are even effecting some of our well done children's books by putting them into TV and movie formats and then republishing the adapted, shortened, and quite often, ruined plots, language and characters into children's picture books. If these two kinds of TV and movie spinoffs are the only books children read, they'll never know the excitement and learning available in good children's books.

You may be wondering what criteria are used to judge a picture story book. Marcia Brown's answer (a children's author) is that quality books give an honest picture of the human spirit. To me, this means that they are more thoughtful about both the overt and hidden messages communicated in story. They have something important to say about human existence. The illustrations or photographs uniquely fit each story in style and detail. The characters come alive because they are unique; they grow and change and often become wiser. Such honest pictures of human experience require thoughtful attention to language patterns; the rhythm and sounds must support the moods and actions of the characters. The authors avoid preaching because preaching prevents the child from learning to find his own meaning in the story. It's like expecting a baby to learn the balance necessary to walk alone if an adult always holds his hand. The preaching also gets in the reader's way because it jars him out of identifying with characters and living the plot. Authors of good stories are willing to trust that within the experience of their story, children can discover for themselves important truths about life. (On a child's level, this is less complicated, but who can
deny the importance of friendship or the joy of learning something new?) These authors know that everyone's encounter with literature has to be a process of self-discovery. Just as no one else can walk for you, no one else can find personal meaning in a story for you.

Robert Burch points out the value of self-discovery in his story of *Queenie Peevie*, a young heroine faced with the responsibility of doing something with her life.

She (Queenie) smiled when she realized what a lecture she had given herself. 'I preached myself a sermon,' she thought, 'and the good part of it was...I listened.'

For adults who want children to "preach themselves a sermon and...listen," there are many excellent picture books that will provide them food for thought. If you've been turning to the Berenstain Bears because you like their themes, let's look at *Go Fly a Kite*. Papa Bear, as usual, is the one we laugh at. He is the braggart who claims he can make the biggest and best kites, but who can never admit he was struggling for his life when the judges thought he was doing kite tricks. The story's language is dull with short sentences, overuse of exclamation marks and uninteresting words (e.g. "Wow!" said Brother. "We're sure to win!" said Sister.) The cartoon bears all look alike except for size and clothes; every happy grin, look of surprise, or worry is the same on every face.

If the reader wants a book to show the humor and excitement of flying (rather than that fathers are stupid, winning is more important than being truthful, or boring language and pictures are good enough for children) then find *Hot-Air Henry* by Mary Calhoun. Henry is an adventurous Siamese cat (really a boy in "fur") who wants to fly a hot air balloon. He accidentally activates the burner and takes off alone. Henry likes flying and sings an appropriate song to the tune of "Sailing, sailing, over the bounding main": "Yow-me, ow-me, ow-meow-meow." Henry has adventures with rivers, inquisitive eagles, power lines and a hostile goose. Ingraham's illustrations make the cat a realistic and intelligent hero who, when safely down, purrs his apology to his master for soloing first. The vivid blue, pink and yellow balloon floats across a frozen white landscape as Henry and the reader share the excitement of a balloon ride.

If you have decided to purchase *Big Bird Visits the Dodo*, because it teaches a lesson about having friends of every kind who care about you, then look further than the Sesame Street book. The bird committee who send Big Bird to live with the Dodos are insensitive and thoughtless; the Dodos look and act as dumb as their name sounds. The lesson really is that birds are stupid so Big Bird is better off with his friends on Sesame Street. A story of friends is better told in Sharmat's *Mitchell is Moving*. Aruego and Dewey's illustrations show Mitchell, a vivid turquoise dinosaur, who has decided after 60 years to move to a new place. Margo, an orange dinosaur, doesn't want her friend to leave. She threatens to glue him to the roof, tie him to the front door and paperclip him to his house, but Mitchell is determined to leave the same bedroom, the same kitchen and the same bathroom. He travels for two weeks, builds a new house and then starts missing Margo. When she arrives, he admits the new place is not terrific.
because he has no neighbor. She says she has the same problem so they build her a house next door. The outlandish ideas Margo has for keeping Mitchell from moving, his creative way of finding a new home ("wherever I will be after I walk for two weeks") and the happy reunion, are all told in rhythmic language that shows the value and uniqueness of two loyal friends.

If you're about to purchase the story *Bert and the Missing Mop Mixup* because you want to introduce children to the fun of playing with language, let's compare it to a better book with the same theme. Bert spills some milk and asks Ernie to get a mop. Ernie asks Bettie Lou to help and she thinks he says map. She asks Oscar to help and he thinks she says mat. And so it goes with each character hearing it wrong. Everyone brings Bert the wrong thing and a kitten laps up the milk. The story has humor, loud color, characters that look a lot alike and a focus on how one or two letters can change a word. In *Don't Forget the Bacon*, Pat Hutchins has the same theme with a humorous interplay between pictures and text as a mother sends her daughter for,

"Six farm eggs,
a cake for tea,
a pound of pears,
and don't forget the bacon."

(Say it aloud and you'll appreciate the nice rhythm to that grocery list.) The little girl repeats the list to herself as she passes three women with large legs. The list changes to:

"Six fat legs,
a cake for tea,
a pound of pears,
and don't forget the bacon."

When a boy passes on a bicycle with a superman cape flowing behind him, the list changes to:

"Six fat legs,
a cape for me,
a pound of pears,
and don't forget the bacon."

The reader will be delighted at how ingeniously the list is changed back to the original so that the errand runner returns home with all the articles on the list, except--you guessed it--the bacon! If the reader wants humor and language play, the Hutchins' book provides more of both than Bert and his mop mixup.

If you've chosen *The Care Bears and the Terrible Twos* because it will help an older child live through the problems caused by curious two-year-olds, then compare it to Judy Blume's *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*. The Care Bear book shows Melinda's
birthday being ruined by her twin 2-year-old siblings until three Care Bears arrive to console her and give her advice. She forgives the twins and enjoys her birthday party. Blume portrays the thinking and acting of the active two-year-old much more realistically as she has Peter's brother eat flowers, act like a dog at the dinner table and decorate the guests' suitcase with green stamps. Peter's survival and solutions are described with humor and warmth in a family that is far from perfect but really care about each other. It's a much more convincing story than a bunch of care bears gliding from heaven to interrupt the story with moralizing and advice.

I hope all of these examples help me to say that it is worth the time it takes to find books with integrity of spirit, with creative thoughtful language and illustrations, and without the moralizing that tells children what to think. But I must add one warning about TV and movie spinoffs--their best salesmen are children who beg parents to buy these books about their favorite TV and movie personalities.

When children read the spinoff books, they mentally see the awkward walk of Big Bird or the swish from the clouds as the Care Bears arrive on earth. The same is true of books about movies. Luke Skywalker's climactic flight up the narrow canyon to destroy the Death Star isn't very exciting in a still picture unless it is powered by the visual memory of the incredible speed of planes racing toward the evil star's one vulnerable spot. A good deal of the charm of these books is gone without the mental memory of movement.

The fascination with movement may also explain why movie and TV directors do such a poor job of adapting popular children's books into animation or moving pictures. They cannot possibly use the complete story in a book as long as Farley's Return of the Black Stallion or Alexander's The Chronicles of Prydain.

Large portions of these stories must be omitted for movies or TV but still, the story must remain a cohesive whole. Naturally, they pick action horse races, sword fights and the awaking of the walking dead; but action always comes across stronger than the cohesiveness of plot or thoughtful use of language. (Readers of the original books are seldom satisfied with the shallowness of the visual images and shortened plots.).

So, be aware of the powerful enhancing effect of the mental memories on weak spinoff books from TV and movie productions. Those memories of movement will give life to stereotyped characters, pedantic stories, boring dialogue and poor illustrations. It is unfortunate that movie producers for children's shows (or adults shows) have a hard time using their strongest asset--the capacity to show movement--with maturity. Instead, they overuse chase scenes so that excitement is magnified to the point of mania and pay too little attention to plot, vivid language and characters.

Good children's books await the reader who wants to experience for himself a wiser and more balanced view of what life is and can be.
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