1998

Those Magic Moments

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Wadham, Rachel L. (1998) "Those Magic Moments," Children's Book and Media Review: Vol. 19 : Iss. 1 , Article 2. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cbmr/vol19/iss1/2

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There is something mystical about the moment when a child truly connects with a book. It happens when a two year old asks for a favorite story again, even after the fourth telling of it. A connection occurs when a teenager laughs or cries aloud at a novel. The moment happens when a reluctant reader clamors for the next installment of a favorite series. As teachers, librarians, and parents, we realize that it does not matter when or where the magical moment of connection occurs, it is only important that it happen. Creating this bond between a young person and a book is one of our greatest joys, as well as one of our greatest challenges. The most satisfying part of our job comes when we see, hear, or feel a child make a connection to a book that we have placed in their hands. The challenge comes when we try to determine how a child will react to a given book. No mathematical formula exists that shows us how to determine if a child with a certain type of personality will connect with a particular type of book. So we use our collective expertise and the foremost reference sources to do the very best we can. Even if there is no exact method we can use to connect child and book, there are some tangible reasons why children respond to literature. Children connect with literature because it helps them to discover themselves and the world around them. Connections occur because books nurture a child’s natural creativity and imagination. Literature also helps children break down artificial barriers. Let us take a closer look at these three reasons why children connect to books.

Discovering Themselves and Their World

Since its beginning, the major concern of all literature has been the past, present, and future state of the human race, both individually and collectively. Without respect to genre, most themes in books try to answer some of life’s most basic questions: Who am I? Where am I going? What am I doing here? What will happen to me in the future? The growing-up years are one of the times when answers to these questions of identity and place are needed. Children constantly try to determine where they fit into the society around them. Toddlers throw tantrums to test the barriers of their world. Teenagers often use more rebellious or violent ways to discover society’s rules. Reading is one avenue through which children can learn some of the fervently sought answers to these questions.

Lloyd Alexander, author of numerous novels and picture books for children, believes that for young people, literature is a dress rehearsal for life. Through books, young people are given time to audition different aspects of their world. As they read, they encounter diverse situations that allow them to practice new values and ways of dealing with problems. Literature guides children through the numerous possible attitudes a person can have toward life. Books show them an infinite variety of values, emotions, and lifestyles. Then books help young people select from this rich pallet those portions which are correct for themselves and the society around them. One item of critical importance to children on this journey of discovery is that it is done in a nonthreatening environment. The perils and evils in books are not overly harmful or overwhelming, and they are easily vanquished by simply closing the pages (Alexander, Future 165; Fantasy 444; Identifications 144-45; High 584).

Many adults may be shocked or even outraged at the numerous unbounded worlds available to young people in books. This is especially true when we propose that children use books to test all aspects of their world. We are all inclined to protect children from the harsh realities of the world. In doing this we also try to censor the
things young people read with the hopes of keeping them innocent. This certainly is a noble endeavor, but we must be extremely careful. Since young people truly desire to know and experience many things, it is important that we not make the mistake of showing them only the simple, easy, and light portions of the world. We must allow them to discover the bad things, as well as the good, so they may have an opportunity to formulate their own values and find the solutions to problems by themselves. As adults we must guide children, but not manipulate them. It is the children who are allowed to make mistakes who are the most fortunate. For it is only through this gentle, nonmanipulative guiding that young people acquire the keys to their future (L’Engle, *Before Babel* 668; *Danger*, 153).

**Fostering Creativity and Imagination**

Literature has an extraordinary capability to foster children’s natural creative and imaginative potentials. Some adults believe that imagination is an extraneous and often hazardous part of a child’s personality. This is far from true, however. A fully developed imagination is an essential part of a young person’s character. One hundred years ago, television, travel to the moon, and computers were only visions in someone’s imagination. Without creative minds, these things would have never existed. If we continue to devalue imagination, it is highly possible that in the next hundred years, the number of extraordinary inventions and societal advancements will decrease.

From birth, young people’s imaginations are turned on and their minds opened. However, somehow along the way most children’s natural imaginative inclinations are stifled. Whether they are suppressed by experiences at school or home, by the time they are young adults, many children have lost the ability to embrace the seemingly impossible world of the imagination (Alexander, *Literature* 308-309). The responsibility to capture and retain a child’s natural imagination rests upon us. We, the parents, teachers, and children’s librarians, must ensure that through education and experience a young person’s imagination is nurtured and that it increases in ability and quality. Children are filled with a sense of discovery, and their imaginations soak up everything around them. These growing-up years when the imagination is fully functional are crucial in determining what kind of adult a child will become. During this time it is extremely vital that children go on looking, listening, and reading. Books are one of the main tools we can use to help children develop and keep their imaginations. Reading is a key to opening a child’s mind. For it is only through the pages of books that children have the ability to explore the entire physical world, as well as the whole world of the imagination (Cooper, *Dreams* 59, 117, 122-23, 170).

**Breaking Down Barriers**

As adults we have built up many barriers that affect how we relate to the world we live in. Prejudice, sexism, stereotyping, and fear are just a few of these barriers. Some of these, such as fear of snakes, for example, can be beneficial and helpful to us. Others, such as prejudice, are only destructive. In the battering around that is the growing-up process, children also develop these barriers. A child may take on a protective shell of fear of snakes after receiving a bite. A teenager may take on a barrier of racial prejudice in order to fit in with a local peer group. No matter what the barrier is, these types of boundaries only close the doors of possibility for children. A fear of snakes may shut the door to the entire world of wonderfully creepy reptiles. The barrier of racial prejudice closes young people off from potential friends, and if it leads to violence, entire lives of possibility can be cut short.

Author of many books for children, Susan Cooper has observed that young people react to books in a very uncomplicated manner. Young people experience literature with much the same attitude grown-ups have when they have just fallen in love. Children surrender to books with complete acceptance, warmth, and generosity. Because children are more accepting, children’s literature is more apt to present anything at all without barriers. Their intended audience gives children’s authors an honest slate of literary elements to work with (Cooper, *Address* 54). This
Candid honesty helps children see the world in the best light. Books can present world views that are free of barriers. The contrasts between characters who live with and without barriers show children more positive ways of living. By exposing them to numerous events and to many different views of life, reading assists young people as they break down their own boundaries. Children close their open doors of potential and create barriers because they are frightened by the perceived evils that lurk around them. It is up to us, the adults, to show children how to have the courage to open the doors and break down the artificial barriers they create (L'Engle, Key 267).

**Summing It All Up**

It is difficult, even impossible, to determine how a certain child will react to a certain book. However, there are some tangible reasons why children connect with books. First, books help children discover themselves and the world around them. Second, books nurture a child’s natural imagination and creativity. Third, books help children break down barriers. Studying these reasons will not give us the ability to ensure that every child responds to every book. Taking a closer look at them will, however, help us gain a greater understanding of how children look at and respond to books. Hopefully, as we understand more about the minds and hearts of children, the probability of our making successful connections becomes even higher.

The process of making a connection with a book is not simple, and young people need a lot of guidance along the way. It is during this time of guidance that we have the marvelous task of becoming the wizards and fairy godmothers that show the hero the path to the boon. Sadly, as we guide children to books, we may never know what door of potential we have opened or even exactly what the children did with what we gave them. These things would be nice to know but are not necessary. What truly matters is that we provided them with a wonderful experience, opened up a window to their imaginations, and gave them the courage to tackle their barriers (L'Engle, Key 268).

**Works Cited**


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“The key, the door, the road.” *Horn Book* 40.3 (1964): 260-268.