

A Lifelong

Brush with Magic

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TEN of us took a different look at "Books for Children and Youth" one summer. Our enthusiasm was tinged with a bit of unrest; our joy in books tempered by a feeling of concern. Too frequently we had heard that books, as we had known and used them, were on their way out, to be replaced by various electronic devices and swiftly prepared materials emerging from a machine at the touch of a button.

The class members and the teacher tried to be modern. We attempted to be imaginative about this, but always we came back to the fact that books had been one of the chief and unfailing sources of those delightful brushes with magic which make one sure that life, no matter what, can be warm and lovely, delightful and exciting. The specter of what our lives might have been without books and reading haunted us.

Through the summer we read widely, talked and discussed, enjoyed our reading partners, renewed companionship with old favorites, and discovered new books. We reported to each other on the

titles we called "terrible awfuls," the "good enough to buy" ones, and talked with genuine enthusiasm about the ones which were akin to hyacinths for our souls. But all the time, like an irritating sore, the threat of losing books, for young and old and all in between, kept rising to the surface of our awareness.

Finally we had to stop other pursuits to dream about a course in literature so taught from nursery school through senior high and college that life-long readers were created; children, young adults, and oldsters who simply *had* to keep reading because the last encounter with a book had been soul-satisfying and the next might bring another such moment, fully savored and long remembered.

It might have been a reading moment filled with quietness and peace, beauty and enchantment. The book might have brought a laugh or a sigh, giggles or tears, identification or quiet contemplation. Faith may have been strengthened, resolves born anew, dreams awakened, or conflicts and values

clarified. Most often insights and understandings had been heightened; sensitivity increased. It was through reading that we had begun to know the oneness of man as through the ages, with triumphs and despair, he had sought a fuller meaning of his role as a human being. Sometimes the gifts from books had come slowly for there had to be time to consider carefully, to mull over, to think through. Other times they were like skyrocketing—a series of illuminating flashes against a darkening sky.

Evidently some people felt that the world might move ahead just as comfortably and just as well without authors and their writings. True it would go on, but surely not as well. We were aghast at the price some generations, unknowingly, might have to pay for bookless lives.

What books did we want to include as the enduring core of the literature-for-all-ages class? Simply a vast multitude of titles, each and every one with real literary merit, from which a student might freely pick and choose. Many books would, of course, be from the lists of the past, others from the current publications.

From Heart to Heart

What could threaten the chances of having the best books become part of the lives of boys and girls? What kills reading? The answers came all too readily. Being with people who do not cherish books and reading. Inept teaching. Misunderstandings about readiness. Impossible demands on some children. Teachers so intent on teaching the "how" of reading that they ignore all else. Exasperating drill on minutia. Pressures. Tension. Frustration. Fear. Boredom.

Endless workbook pages. The demands of parental pride. Working on fragments. Having all decisions made by an authority—being told how, what, when and where reading is to take place.

These things had helped reading become distasteful to some girls and many boys. These could be pitfalls to our dream of literature classes for all ages. What we needed was a way to pass from heart to heart the intangible riches which can come from a close relationship with books.

Colin A. Scott, who taught at the Boston Normal School more than fifty years ago, gave us our guideline. In an article published in October 1909, in *Education*, Dr. Scott said,

Nothing is taught until it is learned. Nothing is learned until it is loved and willed an essential and indispensable portion of life. . . . The other kinds of learning will not die, they do not need to die because they were never alive. Their phrases may be learned by rote, may be carved in marble or melted into bronze, may be required by examinations, and solidified into courses of study, and yet they never come alive. They never pass from heart to heart, they are never really taught. Only that which reproduces itself continuously by passing from one to another is alive.

Thus began our search for books which we felt were "an essential and indispensable portion of life," ones which could be passed from heart to heart.

We continued making reading records about the books but to résumés of the choice ones something new was added. Now came the phrases, "For a literature class K—H.S.—College," "A book to span the spaces between hearts," or "This can become a hyacinth, a seren-

dipity, or a brush with magic for many readers."

How do we send messages about books from one heart to another? How had good books entered the mainstream of each of our lives? Who had helped us become devoted readers?

This time the answers came more slowly and were carefully considered by these teachers who worked with 5, 6, 7 year olds right on through young adults of 18 and 19 years.

My mother read aloud to the whole family.

My teacher read *The Secret Garden* to us and we loved it.

My mother kept good books close at hand. I always had something new and interesting to read.

My wicker chair was the most comfortable,

secure spot in the world, there I sat and rocked and read to my heart's content.

No one hurried me at the library. I sampled, mused, and mulled over as I selected.

Giggling about naughty Peter Rabbit.

Standing taller because of Johnny Tremain and the patriots of his time.

The lump in my throat when Skeeter said good-bye to Lady.

My teacher used to bring a whole cart full of books into the room. She would talk about each one and sometimes give one or two a special sort of pat. I could hardly wait to look at them.

My impatience as I watched my family settle down for an evening of reading. Like



Rufus M. I could hardly wait to join the group.

Finding out bits about authors and illustrators. I met Leonard Weisgard and was thrilled. Learning that Sendak always puts a picture of his dog in his books; sure enough Jenny turned up in *Hector Protector*.

Realizing that I had been dodging an issue and that I, like Amos Fortune, must face it.

Finding that others had survived their first love affair and their seventeenth summer.

The strange sights, varied sounds, and pungent smells evoked by the Goddens' books on India.

Laughing wryly at the basic truths undergirding the spoof, *Up The Ivy*.

The atmosphere of magic and wonder of a silvery night surrounding the moon jumpers.

The pangs and pains of growing up relived with Miguel, Dave, and Joey.

Loving and being loved. Being a part of Laura Ingalls Wilder's family.

Sharing a pet like Rascal.

Finding courage to face the unknown, the frightening. I think of Sarah wrapping her mother's coat more closely about her.

Becoming hilarious at the utter absurdity of Mr. Popper's adapting his life to that of his penguins.

The strange blending of the now with the past at Green Knowe.

Crossing the narrow edge of reality with Arriety.

Facing the need for action and racing to warn the Indians with Caddie.

Sharing the wisdom of Charlotte.

Excitedly reading on even though you know the inevitable end of *Vulpes*. Every page is tinged with deep regret.

Dreaming with Sara Carew.

Feeling a surge of hope each time you feel the brush of a dawn wind.

Realizing that life calls for sacrifices as you think of Carolina and her doll.

Slowing down my reading pace so that I might not miss a word of the beautiful prose in *The Once and Future King*.

Through Time and Space

These were some of our remembered brushes with magic—only a few of the many. Over and over we had been saying that within the pages of books authors had captured and shared with us startling beauty and a depth of perception. They had given us insights into ourselves and others. We had gained perspective; could even laugh at ourselves. Through books we had come to cherish more fully kindness and compassion, humility and courage, integrity and loyalty. Through books we had been able to become part of the lives of the great, the near great, and the tawdry. Life had been vastly extended for us far beyond the confines of any three score and ten years as we had roamed through time and space with books.

As a group the class went back over their findings, faced the practical problems, and decided as a first step to set up literary shelves for many age groups. I had to laugh as I looked around the class. The kindergarten and the first grade teachers were reaching for *Peter Rabbit* while the twelfth grade teacher put a protective hand over *To Kill a Mockingbird*. We had already begun to translate our thinking into action. A second step came when we decided that many books could appear on two or more "shelves."

Next steps emerged: We could duplicate packets of our best reviews for all of the teachers in the system. An emphasis would be put on the values of reading aloud at every level. The best book lists,

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suggested buying guides, the best writing about literature would be put into every school in multiple copies. Ordering of books and keeping up to date about them would be made as easy as possible. And as a school system we would take a serious look at the materials and methods now used in teaching reading.

Throughout all of the preceding steps, and the ones still to emerge, an emphasis was to be maintained on the joys and satisfactions to be found in books and reading. For after one brush with magic a child or adult becomes a purveyor of books and more books to others. Thus every teacher, each librarian, the eager reader, many parents, editors, illustrators, and authors automatically become teachers of our dreamed of class, "Literature for All Ages." Those whose hearts are filled to overflowing with beautiful and powerful books consciously spill this richness into the lives of every, well almost every, boy and girl.

Note: Characters or incidents from books are named in the following sequence in Dr. Harbage's article:

Frances H. Burnett. *The Secret Garden*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1962.

Beatrix Potter. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. New York: Frederick Warne & Co., Inc., Anniversary edition.

Esther Forbes. *Johnny Tremain*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943.

James Street. *Good-Bye My Lady*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1954.

Eleanor Estes. *Rufus M.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1943.

M. Sendak. *Hector Protector*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.

Elizabeth Yates. *Amos Fortune, Free Man*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1950.

Maureen Daly. *Seventeenth Summer*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1942.

Jon and Rumer Godden. *Two Under Indian Sun*. New York: Viking Press, Inc., 1966.

Academicus Mentor. *Up The Ivy*. New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1966.

Janice May Udry. *Moon Jumpers*. New York: Harper & Row, 1959.

Joseph Krumbold. *And Now Miguel*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1953.

Emily Neville. *It's Like This Cat*. New York: Harper & Row, 1963.

Robert Murphy. *The Pond*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1964.

Laura Ingalls Wilder. *The Little House Books* (8 titles). New York: Harper & Row, 1953.

Sterling North. *Rascal*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1963.

Alice Dalgleish. *The Courage of Sarah Noble*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954.

Richard and Florence Atwater. *Mr. Popper's Penguins*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1938.

Lucy M. Boston. *The Children of Green Knowe*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1955.

Mary Norton. *The Borrowers*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1953.

Carol R. Brink. *Caddie Woodlawn*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1935.

E. B. White. *Charlotte's Web*. New York: Harper & Row, 1952.

John and Jean George. *Vulpes, the Red Fox*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1948.

Frances H. Burnett. *A Little Princess*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1963.

Rosemary Sutcliff. *Dawn Wind*. New York: Henry Z. Walek, Inc., 1962.

Elizabeth Yates. *Carolina's Courage*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1964.

T. H. White. *The Once and Future King*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958.

Harper Lee. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1960. ☞

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