

Can children in grades three to six understand what adults call literature? Can it help them develop moral values and discover life's purpose? Can literature be taught in a way to provide pleasure and benefit for young readers?

Literature is sometimes perceived as a course of study taken in high school or college that allows older students to encounter the ideas and experiences of people throughout history. However, literature is accessible to all ages in a variety of forms, ranging from the simple nursery rhyme to elaborate philosophical treatises. But the adults who are best able to do sophisticated analysis of literature are those who have been encouraged to fall in love with great writing at an early age.

Can literature be taught in a way to provide pleasure and benefit for young readers?

The Story Is Basic

Literature includes poetry, drama, biographies, and prose works. In every form, however, the idea of a story is present, and it is this that ensures its value for young readers as well as pleasure and understanding.

Betty Coody says, "Men have always gathered to talk over common problems, to ponder on natural phenomena they could not understand, to lavish praise on their heroes, both real and imaginary, to celebrate victories and accomplishments, and to mourn tragic losses."¹ Literature is not only about the artistic and

Literature: Bringing Pleasure and Value to Young Readers

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imaginative works of writers, it is also about life and living; it is about human experience and humanness. Benjamin DeMott endorses this when he says that the whole scope of language, which includes literature, has to do with “individual human feeling, human response, and human time, as these can be known through the written expression (at many literary levels) of men living and dead.”²

Children can discover themes, recognize virtues, uncover hidden meaning, and experience enrichment within a framework of enjoyment and delight. By the time children reach grades three to six, a period which Jean Piaget defines as the concrete operations stage, teachers and parents can successfully use literature to transmit value and pleasure, since children are able to think more concretely and form better moral judgments than at earlier developmental stages.

Children at this level of cognitive development will have recently developed the intellectual skills needed to read, along with those required to decode. According to David Russell, children at this stage can understand spatial relationships; they can read and understand longer imaginative stories, and can pick up on an action midstream in the story or at any other point.³ They can appreciate good writing and recognize naughty behavior.

Promoting Ethical Sensitivity

Lawrence Kohlberg’s

theory of child development suggests that moral reason and judgment are partially developed during this period, which he labels the conventional level, corresponding with Piaget’s concrete operations stage. Russell, citing Kohlberg, points out that at this level, children’s value judgment is sensitized—they value family, friends, country, nationality, and pets. Norms become important, as does conformity to societal conventions. Children equate goodness with pleasing others and receiving approval from peers and elders.⁴ Because of this sensitivity to ethical issues, children are very receptive to literature that

transmits positive values.

Jesus showed that one of the best ways of forging positive values and rebuking negative ones is through the medium of stories. Whenever people could not understand His teachings, He told them a story. Speaking of the power of the story, Ellen White says: “Jesus desired to awaken inquiry. He sought to arouse the careless, and impress truth upon the heart. . . . No more effective method of instruction could He have employed.”⁵

Stories have great appeal to children because they are so closely tied to experience. Stories inspire imitation and can take young minds into a world of imagination and wonder.

Spalding and Hare say stories give pleasure, teach truth, and inspire imitation. They add that God has put it into our nature to be interested in other people; and stories are the record of what other people have done.⁶ Stories teach truth by the way in which good characters and bad characters are rewarded or punished.

Inspiring Imitation

Stories inspire imitation, as heroic characters move readers to positive action.

Spalding and Hare conclude that “joy makes truth

desirable and imitation natural; truth, because it is truth, enhances joy and satisfies the impulse of imitation; and imitation, the ability to do the desired thing, increases joy and makes truth stable in the soul.”⁷

However, character-building stories should not be used in an overt, didactic manner, since this can be counter-productive. Coody states:

*The storyteller should avoid using moralizing stories with strong didactic overtones. Such stories only serve to offend the sensibilities of children and leave them with a feeling of having been “preached to” by one who lured them into the situation on the promise of entertainment.*⁸

In dealing with children at this critical concrete operations stage, the Christian teacher must be able to work between the two ends of this continuum. At this stage, children are making their own judgments about right and wrong behaviors of story characters, and evaluating episodes and settings that contribute to actions:

Reflecting on what the story communicates is an important task for third to sixth graders. Thinking about what they are seeing in print helps them to experience and perceive the world around them, as Walt Whitman so poignantly asserts in his poem, “There Was a Child Went Forth”:

*There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon,
that object he became,
And that object became part of him
for the day or certain part of
the day,
Or for many years or stretching
cycles of years.*⁹

Rather than taking a didactic approach, it is best to allow the child, after listening to or reading a story, to reflect on the meaning and the value, while the teacher offers advice and guidance.

A Reading Model

Values can be communicated to children at all stages of development. Aileen Pace Nilsen and Kenneth L. Donelson have formulated a model

for reading from the preschool period to adulthood. They call this model “The Birthday Cake.” The emphasis is on layers of mental awareness. Even as early as the first stage, birth to kindergarten, children become familiar with literature through “nursery rhymes, folktales, picture books, cereal boxes and anything else that shows that fun and profit can be gained from the printed word.”¹⁰ This model further suggests that third to sixth graders enjoy stories that are absorbing—stories that allow children to lose themselves in the narrative.¹¹ These include series books such as Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House* books, fantasies, animal stories, and adventure tales.

Children at the concrete operations stage between grades three and six can learn great truths while experiencing imaginative works of literature for the sheer joy they provide. The box on page 41 suggests some books children will enjoy. Included are appropriate grade levels and values to be transmitted.

Communicating Values

Teachers have many opportunities to guide young children in moral development. Apart from the Bible

teacher in elementary and high schools, the teacher of literature or language arts has the best opportunity to communicate values to children. These values can be negative or positive, hence the importance of a Christian philosophy.

In Gary Paulsen’s *Hatchet*, Brian, the central character, is overcome by hunger and life-threatening fear in the jungle where his plane has crashed. The first person he remembers is his English teacher, Mr. Perpich.

*Brian had once had an English teacher, a guy named Perpich, who was always talking about being positive, thinking positive, staying on top of things. That’s how Perpich has put it—stay positive and stay on top of things. Brian thought of him now—wondered how to stay positive and stay on top of this. All Perpich would say is that I have to get motivated. He was always telling kids to get motivated.*¹²

The words of this English teacher came to Brian as inspired words of the Bible come to the mind of a Christian when faced with a crisis. It is this mind-talk that makes Brian a survivor as he searches and finds ways to overcome his wilderness hurdles.

In Conclusion

Children between grades three to

six can enjoy literature. As they face life's experiences in the reading of imaginative works, they are constantly called upon to respond. Often, this response involves moral judgments growing out of a values system. The approach of parents and teachers to this art form, therefore, is important in helping young people to think critically and logically and to come to terms with their emotions, attitudes, and prejudices. Through stories, truth and value can be transmitted, while bringing delight and pleasure to growing, exploring children. ☞

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REFERENCES

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3. David L. Russell, *Literature for Children: A Short Introduction* (New York: Longman, 1994), p. 22.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
5. Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1941), pp. 20, 21.
6. Arthur W. Spalding and Eric B. Hare, *Christian Story Telling* (Mountain View, Calif.:

- Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1966), p. 13.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 15.
 8. Coody, p. 37.
 9. Walt Whitman, "There Was a Child Went Forth," *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, James E. Miller, Jr., ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), p. 258.

10. Alleen Pace Nilsen and Kenneth L. Donelson, *Literature for Today's Young Adults* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, and Co., 1985), p. 36.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Gary Paulsen, *Hatchet* (New York: Bradbury Press, 1987), pp. 49, 50.

Suggested Literature for Children

Cleary, Beverly. Beezus and Ramona. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990.

This story shows how nine-year-old Beezus deals with her highly imaginative and unpredictable little sister. Beezus tries hard to be patient. Sometimes she succeeds, but other times she fails. This makes her feel guilty until she finally understands from her mom that she can have the freedom to feel angry but still love. Suggested grade levels: 3-5.

White, E. B. Charlotte's Web. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1952.

This is a beautiful story title about Fern, a little girl who demonstrates unconditional love for a newborn runt pig, whom she calls Wilbur. Within this story is imbedded the tale of Charlotte, a female spider, who shows unflinching and self-sacrificing love for Wilbur—an engaging story of friendship, commitment, and loyalty. Suggested grade levels: 3-5.

Paulsen, Gary, Hatchet. New York: Bradbury Press, 1987.

Hatchet is an adventure and survival story that demonstrates the virtues of courage, patience, and hope as Brian, a young boy, deals with the harsh realities of wilderness living after the plane in which he was flying crashes into a lake. This is a story of overcoming obstacles, using whatever is at hand to find solutions, and learning from mistakes. Suggested grade levels: 5-7.

Spinelli, Jerry. Maniac Magee. New York: Little, Brown, and Company, Inc., 1990.

This book is the hilarious, exciting, and engaging story of Jeffrey Lionel Magee, an unusual orphan who demonstrates love and forgiveness, and breaks down myths, stereotypes, and racial barriers. Suggested grade levels: 3-5.

Danzinger, Paula. The Cat Ate My Gym Suit. New York: Delacorte Press, 1974.

The story centers on shy, chubby, bespeckled Marcy Lewis, who is unhappy with herself. Her father is a dictatorial tyrant and Marcy has no friends at school. However, everything changes when the new English teacher, Ms. Barbara Finney, opens up a new world to Marcy and her friends; she encourages them to speak up, move ahead despite fear, and think for themselves. When Ms. Finney is fired for her radical teaching methods, the children rally to get her rehired. Young readers are faced with the issue of adopting the values of others, while being challenged to sort out their own. Suggested grade levels: 4-7.

Guy, Rosa. The Friends. New York: Bantam Books, 1974.

This book is a moving story of loyalty and commitment to friends despite difficult circumstances. Phyllisia, Cathy, and her sister Ruby are West Indians who live in New York City with their parents. Phyllisia's Caribbean accent, studious attitude, and national pride are constant irritations to students in her class, and she becomes an object of ridicule. She struggles with loneliness, isolation, and fear until Edith Jackson enters her life and appoints herself Phyllisia's best friend. Edith is poor and orphaned, never does her homework, and is always late for school.

Their friendship survives the deaths of Edith's brother and sister and Phyllisia's mother. This story highlights loyalty and commitment to friends and family, as well as the challenge of coping with new cultural situations. Suggested grade levels: 4-6.