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**Literature for learning:
Can stories enhance children's education?**

Dr Stephen Bigger, December 2009.

Abstract

This article asks how children might benefit from story in their general education. It distinguishes between story for entertainment and stories for learning. Stories not only can be memorable, but can stimulate a child reader to think intellectually, socially, morally and spiritually if they are encouraged and taught how to do this. It argues that the reading of stories is part of critical education and introduces the idea of embodied learning. We conclude by asking whether stories are valuable as just stories, or whether there needs also to be some pedagogical purpose.

Keywords.

Children's fiction, critical education, embodied learning, imagination.

I Introduction

Much of the learning expected of children is factual, assessed by examinations which are tests of memorization. Such learning can be superficial, forgotten soon afterwards. Children are at a deeper level learning about themselves and their relationships with others. Here attitudes, stereotypes, and assumptions can be positive or negative influences. This form of existential learning addresses issues of living and relating, helping to form a foundation for ethics. Stories enable children to reflect on their own world through the medium of a world created from a writer's imagination, into which they enter in their own imagination. This article evaluates the nature of learning that can take place, and how it can be utilized.

II Stories as doorways to an inner world.

Stories published for children vary in quality and are commercial products first and foremost, shaped and censored in order to promote sales. Research therefore should not make simplistic generalisations but can helpfully find ways of distinguishing the good from the bad. Pedagogy with children can help them to become critics of the stories they read, as it should also help them become critical of the films and television they watch.

It is an honour to be asked to contribute to this journal. The argument that I shall explore is

- a) that children enjoy lively and meaningful stories, and
- b) that only some of this material helps their intellectual, social, moral and spiritual development.

That children enjoy stories is no surprise. Parents and teachers tell or read stories to them from infancy, and stories motivate children to want to read. Children tell stories

imaginatively, entering totally into the world they are creating. I watched a five year old Pakistani boy in England pretending to be the captain of the Titanic, trying to stop it sinking. He had entered totally into the spirit of the story, in which he was the only actor. Stories have been a mechanism for moral teaching – Aesop’s ancient fables gave pictures of human character, strengths and flaws. The tortoise, slow and plodding, wins the race; the fleet but lazy hare does not. Each is a vivid and rapid lesson on character.

Stories for children combine plot, character and values. Strong, well-drawn and interesting characters become friends that readers can learn from, interact with, and maybe disagree with. Such a virtual friendship group may have more educational value than a real friendship group of the readers’ own age, where life experience is less and personal wisdom not well developed. These characters in the story will be doing something, and this constitutes the plot. The emphasis in children’s stories has been for plots to be full of mystery, suspense and adventure, and books have titles such as *The Mystery of...* or the *Castle/Sea/Island of Adventure*. The plot is the ‘page-turner’, the exciting tale which ensures that readers want to read the next chapter. Sometimes, this strategy is cynical: *The Bobbsey Twins* by “Laura Lee Hope” (pseudonym, from America) from last century ended each chapter with a gun-waving bandit attacking, or a flood or avalanche threatening. The stories were written to formula, commercial and enjoyable to some but educationally empty. Usually adventures end in a moral way – that is good triumphs and evil is overcome. In the best stories, achieving this is a struggle parallels the moral struggle within life, where the good is not easily identified, and evil represents itself as good, and is tempting.

Since the plot often puts the child characters into danger (kidnapped, imprisoned, shot at, blown up and other forms of attempted murder), the modern trend has been to make plots safer (even though in real life some children are subject to worse than the dangers described in stories). Part of this trend has been to relocate the story into a different world, where dangers can be faced but in a fantasy environment. C.S. Lewis for example, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1951, inspired by war experiences) invented the land of Narnia, entered through a magic wardrobe. Here there is a wicked dictator, the Witch (resembling Hitler) who has brought a perpetual winter to the world (that is, eliminated hope, creativity, new growth) with her network of secret police and informers. The children, and upright (non-human) citizens of Narnia such as the family of beavers, battle against evil and defeat it, even though their own lives are seriously threatened. Narnia was a Nazi-dominated world; and the first child readers in 1951 had lived through the real thing. But its magic location distances the child reader from the danger whilst still being able to model the potential learning, about bravery, determination, uprightness and justice. A similar inspiration lies behind *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien, where the battle against evil is fought out by the non-human characters in “the shire” of Middle Earth. The battles are fought and won by ordinary folk, the powerless villagers. Those holding power are represented as magicians or wizards, some good, some evil and some ambiguous, just like real life politicians and holders of power. The message for child readers is that top-down power can be resisted, and ought to be if it presides over an unjust world. More recently, the Harry Potter books merge the real world with the magical, magic being kept invisible from non-wizard humans, but influencing real events. Evil is a power behind life and politics and tempts some people through promises of wealth and influence. Voldemort was the most recent, but not the

only evil power. He is exposed as paranoid, and held power only because few would resist him and risk death. Harry is a despised outcast with a small loyal band of followers, and many powerful enemies. Grief and loss are feelings addressed, since Harry's parents were murdered by the tyrant: Harry had been saved by his mother's love, and it is this love which gives him his solemn destiny. Throughout the seven books, the major question posed the reader is: what kind of person are you? For goodness and justice? Or against it?

Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy places the other world (actually plural, for there are many parallel in a multiiverse. The 'skin' between which can be cut with a 'subtle knife', a parallel to science in our world, symbolising human interference with the natural order. Parallel Oxford and its world is ruled by a tyrannical religious (Christian) authority whose power is based on deception, which is finally defeated. Political power and hegemony are said to be founded on damaging myths which need replacing; indeed it is the purpose of the trilogy to destroy and replace those myths. These myths are assumptions which exist in the public mind, and are taught to children. The two central characters, a girl Lyra, and a boy Will, live out lives which change this dominant worldview. Will has a mentally ill mother and a disappeared father, and is a runaway outlaw; Lyra has an institutionalised wild childhood with uncontrolled intuition. Mental crisis is a recurrent theme, with adults rendered catatonic by spectres, and children being deprived of their souls. The 'god' from whom the religious authorities take their power is shown to be an impostor; the fear of death and Hell is exposed as a conspiracy, with death shown to be something which is not feared; the doctrine of human sinfulness is replaced by belief in the human values of honesty, love, self understanding and empathy. The world is declared to be a commonwealth run by its citizens, not a kingdom ruled by tyrants. Cooperation of equals should replace rule by sovereign power. Improving the world is a task for all of us.

A story is a door to another world, a world inside us, in the imagination. It is a powerful place, because the reader gets drawn in, absorbed, the real world blocked out. Child readers find many of their role models here, characters they want to resemble, heroes, ideals. Also, they learn to recognize and deal with evil, unfeeling behaviour, and injustice. The general message is that, however powerless you think you are, you can still overcome, by determination, cooperation with others, and refusal to be afraid.

Story can deal with hard messages, the hardest being the effects of nuclear war. Raymond Briggs won international fame with his graphic story, *The Snowman*. His graphic novel *When the Wind Blows* is the story of a man and his wife, told in cartoon fashion, preparing for a nuclear explosion. In the end they die, of nuclear fall-out rather than explosion, a slow death. In a sense it is a message of hopelessness; however it encourages readers to take the issue seriously and campaign for the eradication of nuclear weapons. For young children, the picture story *Dinosaurs and All that Rubbish* by Michael Foreman deals in an amusing way with humankind's tendency to litter the world: in this story the dinosaurs tidy it up.

III. Critical education and embodied learning.

Stories are part of a broader nurture and education process that has itself to be examined for its assumptions and objectives. The tradition that the west pays lip-service

to is that education should enable children to think intellectually, to express their feelings creatively, and to develop their character morally. The aim is autonomy, that is, developing the ability to draw inner guidance from within based on evidence. This liberal message underlies government reports and inspection regimes, and has been the basic assumption of several generations of educational thinkers. I refer to 'lip-service' because policy and practice do not always match. Neither SAT tests nor examinations actually promote autonomous learning but reward memory and conformity. Schools are authoritarian institutions that demand compliance. Stories and literature are certainly part of the curriculum, but this does not necessarily bring about embodied learning.

I here explore two ideas, one old and the other new. The old is that of critical education, or education critical of society and the status quo. Early ideas in Frankfurt, Germany, were driven out by the Nazi party to America where critical studies were further developed. When applied to the reading of story, a critical reading would emphasise *equal opportunities, discrimination and prejudice, status and class, justice, dominant voices and unheard voices*, and so on. We could survey the whole published body of children's literature to see whether these themes are covered or marginalised; and we could critique a particular book through these headings. This critical strategy has strengthened considerably over the past fifty years. Books written in the light of this agenda are increased gradually. There is not a chapter on critical theory in Hunt's *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (1996 or 2004) although some aspects are addressed to some extent under ideology. Meek opens the encyclopedia emphasising that child readers should "interrogate texts" and become "critical and not conformist" (Hunt, 2004: 10). Nor is there a treatment of children's literature in *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Education* (Apple, Au and Gandin, 2009). Two starting points would be 'Critical Media Education and Radical Democracy' (chapter 21 by Kellner and Share) and Teitelbaum's 'Educating Children for "Good Rebellion"', chapter 23, pp. 318-325. How to respond to television, film, comics and the internet has as its aim morally aware and (politically) active students. "Good rebellion" means not accepting unjust and unacceptable government and power structures. Its origins have socialist ambitions, of which groups like Leslie Paul's Woodcraft Folk, with outdoor pursuits and fireside stories, are the best known example (Paul, 1951). This has links also to the work of Paulo Freire (1970) in turning literacy education into a politicizing act. The implications for children's fiction is that stories can generate deep thinking on self and relationships if the readers are socially aware and engage with social justice. The child reader in turn learns to interrogate the relational and social implications of the story both in private and through group (including class) discussion. Teachers need to be tuned into this in order to facilitate the discussion. In practice, published stories are varied in quality and children will be in a position to critique stories for content, characterisation and assumptions of privilege. The selection of stories for publication favours the bizarre over the ordinary. The discussion of the book is thus crucially important to prevent readers simply accepting its hidden assumptions and messages.

The newer idea of embodied learning I take from studies of theatre and performance. Here, ideas are performed to audiences, and the actors embody the ideas, points of view and feelings. The aim of a performance is to be as authentic and convincing as possible, the actors living the ambiguities, dilemmas and contradictions that they depict

(Riley and Hunter, 2009). This book emphasises that performance can become research into human feelings, attitudes and relations and moreover can reach its audience more powerfully and rapidly than a wordy research monograph would allow. I am applying this to children's stories in two ways.

First, the writing of stories for children is a performance (ideas and values being displayed for public audiences) bearing the same demands for honesty, sincerity and authenticity as applies in drama and the theatre. Quality writing is thus a craft requiring talent and dedication. Writings for children potentially affects their development and ideas, and needs therefore to be of the highest quality and integrity. Although authors need freedom in their writing, stories should be defensible as promoting healthy personal and social development, and not promoting prejudice, hatred, disrespect and other such negative attitudes. However, stories need to be thought-provoking rather than bland homilies, and are likely to stimulate thinking about these negative themes.

Secondly, the child reader as audience can be emotionally moved by the book, and led to consider issues that might be potentially world-view changing, even life-changing. In a story in written form, this demands vividness in description and honesty in characterisation, characters who impress as real, engaged in dilemmas which are true to life. This will not be the case where characters are cardboard and adventure plots banal. A serious issue emerges on what is suitable for children to read. In adventure stories, children have routinely been placed in danger, and excitement linked to this. The limits are constantly tested, stories for example engaging with death, war and atrocities (such as *Ellie: Coming of Age in the Holocaust* by Livia E. Bitton Jackson. Where a story is sensitive and does not indulge in gratuitous and sadistic violence, it should be capable of promoting personal development. If the story gives the impression that human life has little value, then it is potentially harmful.

IV Imagining Reality.

Both writing stories and reading stories involve acts of imagination, but they are different. The child does both by telling, acting out or writing stories as well as reading them. The writer's imagination needs more research, since there is a subtle combination of research, observation (ethnography, in fact) and make-believe in the production of a work. An event described in fiction may have happened in real life; characters may be combinations of people encountered; personal characteristics may have been observed in real people. Yet the combination is a new act of creation. The population of a story with characters requires the integration of these background factors, and their visualisation into a new character. Some, like Harry Potter, will have positive qualities, but others, like Pullman's Mrs Coulter will be anti-heroes, threats to the main characters, enemies in real life. Children of course need to deal with friends and enemies, so each has a literary purpose. And evil characters have the potential for redemption.

For the child reader, the story provides a new world to enter, with new people to meet and deal with. They may resemble people they know, or be larger than life. The reader becomes part of the virtual community created in the book, an onlooker who likes or dislikes the various characters. The reader shares the emotions encountered in the group, the tensions as danger comes, the anger at acts of selfishness or betrayal. Even where the characters are creatures of fantasy, with talking animals, or wizards, or evil

spirits, the story provides an adventure which has to be engaged with intellectually, emotionally and morally. Since real life is full of ambiguity and uncertainty, a story can develop a high level of complexity.

My final section discusses the writing of stories for children, with reference to my own *Wolf in Old Town* (Bigger, 2009), a story written for school use. Some chapters are provided on the internet to inform this discussion. The story follows a class of 9 year old children through a school year. There are various friendship groups, but one in particular is dominant in the narrative. Their adventures include the sort of activities that children normally experience, and they are shown dealing with problems, such as bullying, peer pressure and poor teaching. The story follows the experiences of one boy, Josh, into a new school and establishing himself with the others, and making some friends and some enemies. There is an emphasis on children solving problems, being independent free thinkers, and being cooperative. Every child is a mix of characteristics of real children, and their activities and adventures have really happened to children of their own age. Thus the story seeks to feel real, and keep away from the emphasis on magic and fantasy so prevalent today. The fictitious school is not in an affluent area, is multicultural, and is not a model school. This gives me, as writer, the flexibility to explore community relations, the problematic quality of schooling, and issues such as bullying, drugs, latch-key children and so on. I wanted to get an intergenerational perspective, but without devices such as time shifts, so my story has both a 2009 and a 2030 setting: the children from 2009 relive their memories with their own children through a scrapbook they made at the time. The 2030 context allows a degree of prophecy about how the world may have changed by then, and transport, food and energy supplies.

The on-line chapters feature Jake, who is a combination of various troubled boys and girls. This character, with appropriate support and affection, turned himself around to succeed in adult life. In the story, Jake becomes a hero and role model for pupils who suddenly find hope when there was none. My guesses about what life will be like in 2030 are not only great fun (the reality will be far more unimaginable than I can imagine) but prompt the child reader to say, "Yes, I can work towards that".

V. Conclusion.

There is a place for both stories as entertainment and stories with a serious message. However, many story writers for children create their stories within uncritical comfort zones, and the exceptions to this surprise and delight. I agree with Meek (in Hunt, 2004:1-12) that criticality should begin in the kindergarten, with infants. Children tend to be bombarded by media materials and skills to distinguish the good from the bad can prove useful. 'Good' and 'bad' are to be problematised – it is the *discussion* about what is good and bad that is important. The same applies to books: stories bear messages which should not be blindly accepted but rather challenged in an attempt to understand them more deeply. Children will not be able to do this unless they are guided and taught. Stories can miseducate, promote fallacies, and provide negative role models. Helping children to become critical readers is crucial to their personal and social development.

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