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Ambleside.

‘Many Books are Necessary’ Or: Books ‘for children of five, or fifty, or seventy-five.’¹ Charlotte Mason’s concept of Living Books, how we might find them

‘It was a perfectly normal day in the library When suddenly’²

These words begin a story, written by a seven year old who loves reading. He is, if you like, in a place we wish for all the children we know. I start with him to remind us to keep in mind why we need to examine and choose books as informed and thoughtful facilitators in the process of enabling the enjoyment and imaginative interaction between books and children (and/or adults). You will find out what happened, later.

The first part of the title is from Charlotte Mason’s *An Essay Toward a Philosophy of Education*. The second part is from an essay by GMD and indicates the agelessness of some books. Just how many, ‘many’ means of course depends on the individual situation and need, but the more pressing question is, ‘which books?’

So, I have been asked to make an attempt at identifying some criteria by which a parent, or teacher might select ‘living’ books, many or few, according to the need of their students.

This is my plan as to how we can address the question:

- To briefly consider the concept of ‘living books’
- To identify some criteria for selecting such books
- Following identification of criteria, to demonstrate what the criteria might ‘look’ like, by examining a story by George MacDonald, an author whose work crops up on all the main lists of books related to Charlotte Mason’s teaching methods.

(and possibly by mention of other author’s work.)

Living Books

What is a living book? It is quite an abstract term and certainly does not refer to the experience encountered by the protagonist of Washington Irving’s short story *The*

¹ CM quoted in Ney, Marian Wallace. *Charlotte Mason: ‘a pioneer of sane education’*. Nottingham: Educational Heretics Press, 1997. The Educational Heretics Series. p.15. and MacDonald, George. *A Dish of Orts*. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1996. p. 317.

² Johnson, David Randell. From unfinished story being written February and March 2018.

Mutability of Literature in which the gentleman, whilst dropping off to sleep with an old book on the table before him,

‘ he accidentally loosened the clasps; when, to his astonishment, the little book gave two or three yawns ... and at length began to talk.’³

In her explanation of the importance of ‘living books’, Charlotte Mason writes about:

- The importance of the imagination
- Books that engage the emotions – ‘quick and informed with the ideas proper to the subject which it treats’. ⁴
- The power of narration
- Character ⁵

And so we have the basic concept of a learning approach through imaginative writing, through the awakening of emotional engagement and through understanding the emotions, still quite abstract and difficult to pin down, given the vast differences in what might ‘engage the imagination and emotions’ of any given person.

If we take a moment to examine the end result of reading such books, we are looking at reading that nourishes the development of empathy toward, and consideration for, other people, the development of an understanding of what it is like to be in their position, an insight into the difficulties they face (albeit second hand), and a consequent change of behaviour toward them. Which brings us to Charlotte Mason’s underlying reason for education, the development of character. ⁶

This quote from Hannah More in 1804 partially sums up the concept:

‘We do not so much want books for good people, as books which make bad ones better’.⁷

(Susan Schaeffer-Macaulay notes ‘If the child is given a diet of good literature he learns to ‘feel’ with all sorts of persons. He will think about and judge incidents on the basis of what he realizes is right.’)⁸

³ Irving, Washington. *The Mutability of Literature*. A Colloquy in Westminster Abbey. As reported by Washington Irving in his sketchbook. [1819].

⁴ Cholmondely, Essex. *The Story of Charlotte mason (1842 – 1923)*. London: J. M. dent & Sons, 1960. p. 242.

⁵ Final two cited in: Ney, Marian Wallace. *Charlotte Mason: ‘a pioneer of sane education’*. Nottingham: Educational Heretics Press, 1997. The Educational Heretics Series. p. 78.

⁶ Ney, Marian Wallace. *Charlotte Mason: ‘a pioneer of sane education’*. Nottingham: Educational Heretics Press, 1997. The Educational Heretics Series. p. 78.

⁷ from her diary 1804 in *Memories of the Life of Mrs. Hannah More, 2: In Two Volumes*. By William Roberts.. London: R.B. Seeley and W. Burnside, MDCCCXXXVI (1836).

⁸ Schaeffer-Macaulay, Susan. *For the Children’s Sake*. Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1986. p. 114

Due to the development of neuro-science in recent years, we are on firmer ground in terms of scientific evidence for the belief, stated for a long time, including by CM, that what you reads affects how you think. I mention this aspect because sometimes, firmer evidence is needed, when we have to justify our position, than the fact that ‘everybody knows’.

Recent experiments have demonstrated measureable development in those areas of the brain relating to empathy and understanding of another person’s position. Iain McGilchrist, explains research done on the interaction between the two hemispheres of the brain, and reading fiction. Having noted that ‘empathy is intrinsic to morality’⁹ (p. 86) he later writes:

‘Most of us probably share a belief that life is greatly enriched by (books)..... what is in them not only adds to life, but genuinely goes back into life and *transforms* it, so that life as we live it in a world full of books is created partly by books themselves.’¹⁰ (p. 196)

The key word here is ‘transform’.

*(You could say that as with the saying ‘we are what we eat’, so also, we are, partially, what we read – food for the mind and heart – CM’s adage entirely.*¹¹

*Marian Wallace Ney in her succinct and helpful book Charlotte Mason: pioneer of sane education notes that if all education is essentially to educate the will to choose wisely and thoughtfully, then the construct of character is the heart and end of education. It would be possible to digress from the subject over this aspect of character which has been addressed elsewhere. (see A Complete Identity if interested).*¹²

So what does ‘to feed the imagination and engage the emotions’ mean when we come to select books? Surely it must to some extent be subjective, a matter of taste or opinion, another term CM takes pains to unpick and differentiate from a view formed through the informed and thoughtful pursuit of knowledge.¹³

⁹ McGilchrist, Iain. *The Master and his Emissary: the divided brain and the making of the Western world*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010 (2009). p. 86

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 196

¹¹ Coombs, Margaret. *Charlotte Mason: Hidden Heritage and Educational Influence*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2015. *Synopsis of Educational Theory* (1904). p. 265.

¹² Johnson, Rachel E. *A Complete Identity: the Youthful Hero in the Work of G.A. Henty and George MacDonald*. Eugene, OR. Pickwick Publications, 2014.

¹³ From: Mason, Charlotte. *Opinions and Principles*. CM, 1909. Cited in Cholmondely, Essex. *The Story of Charlotte mason (1842 – 1923)*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1960. p.119.

Somewhat like music, we all have different affinities to which we are drawn. We need criteria that can be applied across a wide range of material and thus accommodate such affinities.

Criteria

In order to think about possible criteria to use as a framework within which to examine a book, fiction or non-fiction, a good place to start is with a question, implied by the second half of the title of this talk, a question posed endlessly and discussed by children's literature scholars and one that we need to touch upon and then park, so as not to be distracted by it, namely:

'Is children's literature different from any other kind of literature?'

This question is dealt with at length by Jaqueline Rose¹⁴ in her seminal work *The Case of Peter Pan: or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* and has been addressed by all major scholars of Children's literature, one argument being that Children's literature is in many instances regarded as fundamentally didactic and secondarily as an art form. But, if it is regarded as an art form and educative, does this position necessarily mean it should be theorised differently, as if only children are educated by reading?

Perhaps CM would agree that the criteria for selecting works of literary merit would be the same for books categorised as 'children's' or 'adults', or, as GMD writes, 'for children of 5, or 50, or 75'¹⁵ (GMD Orts p.317), or by C.S Lewis when he writes about his own work:

'I put in what I would have liked to read when I was a child and what I still like reading now that I am in my fifties.'

and 'If you want to read what the writer has to say you will re-read the book at any age – 'the good ones last'.¹⁶

Lewis also notes: 'the neat sorting out of books into age-groups, so dear to publishers, has only a very sketchy relation with the habits of any real readers.'¹⁷

(I have to confess that Librarians may also be guilty of such categorisation.)

¹⁴ Rose, Jaqueline. *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. London: Macmillan, 1984.

¹⁵ MacDonald, George. 'On Fairy Tales' in *A Dish of Orts*. Whitethorn: Johannesen Publications, 1996. p. 317.

¹⁶ Lewis, C.S. *Of this and other worlds*. London: Collins, 1983 p.56 and 59

¹⁷ Lewis, C. S. *Of This and Other Worlds*. London: Collins, 1983. p.63

In view of these comments, a good place to start is with some guidelines mentioned by CM before moving onto some specific criteria noted by MN, a children's literature scholar of international repute.

Charlotte Mason's Criteria

I will note the main guidelines only, in order to lay a foundation on which to build.¹⁸

First: "*For the children? They must grow up upon the best . . . There is never a time when they are unequal to worthy thoughts, well put; inspiring tales, well told. . . . and we shall train a race of readers who will demand literature - that is, the fit and beautiful expression of inspiring ideas and pictures of life.*"¹⁹

CM emphasized "the fit and beautiful expression." The tales are "well put" and "well told." We are to find books of 'high literary quality' but this criteria is highly debatable and, again, difficult to pin down. This criteria is to do with **Narrative**.

Second: "*Education is a life. That life is sustained on ideas. Ideas are of spiritual origin,*

and God has made us so that we get them chiefly as we convey them to one another,

whether by word of mouth, written page, Scripture word, musical symphony; but we must sustain a child's inner life with ideas as we sustain his body with food."²⁰ "*Our business is to give him mind-stuff*"²¹

This criteria is to do with **Content**.

Third: "*The children must enjoy the book. The ideas it holds must each make that sudden, delightful impact upon their minds, must cause that intellectual stir, which marks the inception of an idea,*"²² Charlotte Mason, *School Education*, p. 178.

Or, as George MacDonald writes in ABNW

'... what's the use of knowing a thing only because you're told it?'²³

¹⁸ e.g.s from websites on contemporary homeschooling on 'Simply Charlotte Mason' site – list of living books. Also: CM method living book list.

¹⁹ Mason, Charlotte. *An Essay Towards A Philosophy of Education: a liberal education for all*. 1909. (numerous reprints including Radford, VA.: Wilder Publications, 2008.)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Mason, Charlotte. *School Education*. p. 178

²³ MacDonald, George. *ABNW*. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 192. p. 57.

CM also notes it is important the teacher enjoys the book too.

And in terms of feeding the spirit:

The question resolves itself into - *'What manner of book will find its way with upheaving effect into the mind of an intelligent boy or girl? ... our spiritual life is sustained on **other stuff** [than 'twaddle or 'condiments']²⁴ whether we be boys or girls, men or women.*²⁵

Finding the 'other stuff' is the challenge, since we recognise it when we find it but cannot always explain what it is.

(Note: George MacDonald and C. S. Lewis talk a lot about this aspect. Cf. 'Anodos – 'looking about for the mystic mark of red ...,' (*Phantastes* 318)

So, some criteria are shaping up:

1. Does it contain ideas and knowledge suitable for that particular child?
2. Does the child react with delight?
3. Does it make an impact on the reader's mind?²⁶

In terms of number 3, we may refer to Francis Spufford's autobiographical work *The Child that Books built*²⁷ in which he describes 'readings that acted like transformations' (p. 9) and notes the dangers of children reading 'before you know it they'll be thinking for themselves.' (p. 9)

When children start to apply what they have read, and 'think for themselves', you have evidence of the impact of their reading material.

These criteria are a helpful start, but focus, especially the last two, mainly on the child's reaction rather than the book. Many of the examples given in *Philosophy of Education* are equally valid today:

²⁴ Twaddle = *goody-goody stories*, *Condiments* = *highly-spiced adventure stories (condiments)*. 'Again, as I have already said, ideas must reach us directly from the mind of the thinker, and it is chiefly by means of the books they have written that we get into touch with the best minds. (page 177)'

²⁵ Mason, Charlotte. *School Education*. Vol. 3. How to Use School-Books Chapter XV. p. 168.

²⁶ *Ibid.* Chapter XVI. p. 168

²⁷ Spufford, Francis. *The Child that Books Built*. London: Faber and Faber, 2002. p. 9.

Fairy tales, Aesop's Fables, The Pilgrim's Progress, Classical Myth and Legend (cites Andrew Lang, Kingsley (*Water Babies*), Alice, Kipling (*Just So*), Norse Myth²⁸ [There are some outstanding more recent retellings of Fairy tales, Classical Myth and Legend, and Norse Myth available. Notably Kevin Crossley-Holland and Geraldine McCaughrean.]

You will have noticed the preponderance of fairy tale, legend and myth in these examples, for as G.K. Chesterton pointed out in his reflection on fairy tales:

'Fairy tales do not give the child his first idea of bogey. What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey. *Exactly what the fairy tale does is this: it accustoms him to the idea that these limitless terrors had a limit, that these shapeless enemies have enemies in the knights of God, that there is something in the universe more mystical than darkness, and stronger than strong fear.*'²⁹
Tremendous Trifles (1909), XVII: "The Red Angel"

Fairy tales, myth, and legend will always transcend time because they deal with the universals of life faced by every generation, and with spiritual and moral issues that affect the development of character. (Here we are back to CM's fundamental concern.)

But let us move on to some generic criteria (working here from the general to the particular, or abstract to specific):

In her books *Aesthetics Approaches to Children's Literature: an introduction.*³⁰ and *Children's Literature Comes of Age*, Maria Nikolajeva approaches her subject from generic perspectives, some of which we may examine as potential helpful criteria in our search for help in selecting 'living books'.

Firstly, a definition of aesthetics for our purpose, as,

'a set of artistic features characterising a specific phenomenon in the field of art', which:

- reflects reality
- carries ideology

²⁸ Mason, Charlotte. *An Essay Towards A Philosophy of Education: a liberal education for all.* 1909. (numerous reprints including Radford, VA.: Wilder Publications, 2008.)

²⁹ *Tremendous Trifles* (1909), XVII: "The Red Angel"

³⁰ Nikolajeva, Maria. *Aesthetics Approaches to Children's Literature: an introduction.* Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2005.

-has potential to affect the mind and the emotions³¹ (page xvii)

So, the books are seen as 'both art form and educational vehicle'³² and 'both art form and ideological vehicle'³³

The broad perspectives we can work with today are:

Content

Themes and motifs

Characters

Narration

Language

Suitability for Purpose

(There are many other aspects to consider: genre, setting, style, medium, reader p. 73)

Demonstration of criteria.

Having established a few generic criteria, what might these criteria look like 'in the text'? In GMD's *Adela Cathcart* we find, literally, 'life-giving' stories, in that they bring health to Adela and it would be easy to light on any of George MacDonald's fairy tales, short or long, but instead I will look more closely at *ABNW*, which is what could be termed a multi-genre story, I have problems with genre-ising books, it limits their horizons and subliminally encourages readers to read in a categorical mode thus limiting their expectations, hence the choice of *ABNW*.

George MacDonald – *At the Back of the North Wind*

The aim of this section is to demonstrate this text as a living book.

George MacDonald is regarded by those who know his writing, as a consummate writer of literary fairy tales. The following application could equally be made to his *Princess* books, *The Wise Woman*, and other, shorter tales to demonstrate that GMD writes life into text, inspires ideas, enlarges boundaries of thought, and takes the reader out of the commonplace.

³¹ Ibid. p. xvii

³² Ibid, p. xi

³³ Ibid p. xii

There are so many examples of each of the criteria in ABNW that it may be best, due to time constraints, if anyone who would like more of a particular criteria to be demonstrated more fully from the text, could ask for one during the question time. I hope you do, then I can read more passages from the book.

I will take the criteria chosen one at a time:

So in terms of

Content – in the examination of content we need to make a distinction between content, what a narrative is about, and form, how a story, fiction or non-fiction, is told.³⁴ Both these aspects will impact on the message of the narrative.

A brief overview of ABNW demonstrates that the text contains a realistic setting, a social aspect in the representation of the life of a cabbie, materially poor, in London. This apparent realism morphs very quickly into something more mystical, beyond everyday life, in the characters of the two Diamonds, North Wind, and the introduction of 'goodness.' CSL praised GMD for his ability to depict goodness,³⁵ an ability which raises GMD above what he himself refers to as 'the commonplace'.³⁶ [and fulfils CM's general criteria of '*Books that feed the spirit in some way: thought, feeling, soul.*'³⁷]

With the introduction of North Wind herself, we are given access to GMD's thinking, about for example, suffering, and a glimpse of his theology. So the content includes values, ideology, and message'.

MacDonald's superlative ability to write literary fairy tales, is demonstrated in the story of *Little Daylight*, the centre of this narrative and a pivotal point in the story. A study of this fairy tale and its position in ABNW can be found in *A Noble Unrest*.³⁸ This brief outline indicates the richness and diversity of the content.

(Note: on the need for a book which: 'Has potential to affect the mind and the emotions' , if the reader is open to new ways of looking at the world, his or her mind and emotions will be engaged and affected.)

³⁴ Ibid p. 73

³⁵ Lewis, C.S. *George MacDonald an Anthology*, London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1946. p. 17.

³⁶ See for example, MacDonald, George. *The Princess and Curdie*. Any full text edition

³⁷ Mason, Charlotte. *School Education*. Vol. 1

³⁸ Webb, Jean.(editor) *A Noble Unrest: Contemporary Essays on the Work of George MacDonald*. Newcastle, UK.: Cambridge Scholars, 2007.

Themes and motifs — that is ‘a recurring textual element’ maybe an event, a character, a quest or a struggle, friendship, or death. p. 73

Diamond’s meeting with NW is a major recurring theme, for example.

Friendship and affinity between two Diamonds runs through the whole text

D’s relationship with Mr Raymond and how it affects Mr R – a thread of character development

Increasing struggle of the Coleman family – tests – a fairy tale motif³⁹

Diamond’s lengthening time at the back of the north wind – out of this world – becomes increasingly dominant

Any of these themes and motifs could be discussed at length.

Character – examination of character can be broken down into so many elements we could get bogged down. In order to extract manageable criteria here, the first point is to clarify what we mean by character. Again, Nikolajeva is helpful and narrows the meaning down to ‘agents performing actions.’⁴⁰

From this definition we can ask questions such as:

- Is there more than one identifiable protagonist?
- Are they complex? For example, Is it obvious whether they are good or bad? Is the reader encouraged to admire or condemn? *E.g. Nannie?*
- Is the protagonist (or other character) Flat (two dimensional, one trait)? or Round (multidimensional, a number of traits)? (is this portrayal appropriate to the story?)
- Is the protagonist (or other character) static or dynamic, that is, is there change and growth?⁴¹
- Are they consistent or inconsistent?⁴²
- Is the protagonist a Type? e.g. youngest son, trickster, orphan – this character may be needed in some narratives to support aspects of content
- Are they subordinate to plot?
- How is the protagonist (and any other character) represented? – *Narrator’s comments?*;

³⁹ See Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*. 2nd ed. Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1968

⁴⁰ Nikolajeva, Maria. *Aesthetics Approaches to Children’s Literature: an introduction*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2005. p. 145

⁴¹ Ibid p. 158

⁴² Ibid. p. 159

- *Other character's comments?; Action? Reactions?; Direct speech; Indirect (reported) speech?; Internal representation? p. 145; Can the reader get to know them?*⁴³

... which questions, in application, could take up an entire talk on their own, so we will focus on the two Diamonds and a brief mention of North Wind in this overview.

Little Diamond is an ideal, comparable to Sir Gibbie the eponymous protagonist of GMDs novel.

In his novel *Sir Gibbie* (1879), MacDonald defends his depiction of ideal characters against what he perceives as the demand for, 'the representation of that grade of humanity of which men see the most,' (*Sir Gibbie*, 43) when he writes,

whatever the demand of the age, I insist that that which *ought* to be presented to its beholding, is the common good uncommonly developed, and that not because of its rarity, but because it is truer to humanity. ... It is the noble, not the failure from the noble that is the true human.⁴⁴ (*Sir Gibbie*, 43)

In this passage, MacDonald's position on character representation encapsulates his rejection of the demand for less than the ideal. He creates Diamond as an ideal, spiritual character, a carer and a problem solver. His travels with North Wind provide him with experience beyond the everyday and enable him to see 'the everyday' as anything but commonplace. Clare Skyrmer, the protagonist of *A Rough Shaking* (1883) is another example of such a character.

So, when examining character representation, we do need to have some idea of what kind of character we are looking for, aspirational? or 'that grade of humanity of which men see the most'? or both, since both are represented in ABNW.

Old Diamond - It may appear strange to single out a horse for character examination but Old Diamond displays most of the fruits of the spirit – 'peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control'. (Galatians 5:23-25) and plays a crucial role in the story, alongside, Ruby, another horse, who superficially appears to be the antithesis of Old Diamond but is actually an angel, sent for a purpose.

⁴³ Ibid p. 145

⁴⁴ MacDonald, George. *Sir Gibbie*. Whitethorn: Johannesen, date?

This passage, describing Diamond's first ride on Old Diamond, demonstrates a theme of mutual cooperation also found in Diamond's dealings with other people and with NW herself:

Quote: '*And another discovery he made was that, in order to guide the horse, he had in a measure to obey the horse first. If he did not yield his body to the motions of the horse's body, he could not guide him; he must fall off.*'⁴⁵

I hope from this comment you can deduce that these two characters are complex, even if you are not familiar with *At the Back of the North Wind*.

A word on North Wind herself – reams have been written and endless discussions had about this character and what or whom she actually represents. Her connection with the Wise Woman (WW), and the Grandmother in the *Princess* books is clear. She is the lady who appears in difference guises, old/young, beautiful/ugly, large/small, the Sophia, the wisdom figure⁴⁶.

Leading onto the next criterion, 'how are their characteristics portrayed, or, narrated, that is, how are they described by the narrator?'⁴⁷

Narration – again, there are many potential questions, such as:

- what is the narrative perspective (who is telling the story)?

*[or, who is the implied author, the narrator, the narratee, the implied reader, the real reader?]*⁴⁸ p. 171-2

In ABNW, there are a number of focalisers, we find at the end that the Mr Raymond has been telling Diamond's story, but also Diamond often tells his own story throughout, and then there is North Wind herself. She presents the bigger picture, always taking the reader out of the familiar world, from which vantage point, she presents it from a different perspective. The ship sinking episode is an example of her defamiliarisation of any given situation.

Given CM's emphasis on readers learning to 'think for themselves', a key question is:

⁴⁵ MacDonald, George. *At the Back of the North Wind*. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1992. p. 54.

⁴⁶ Hayward, Dierdre. 'The Mystical Sophia: more on the Great Grandmother in the Princess books.' *North Wind: Journal of the George MacDonald Society*. 13 (1994) 29-33.

⁴⁷ Nikolajeva, Maria. *Aesthetics Approaches to Children's Literature: an introduction*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2005. p. 160-1

⁴⁸ *Ibid* p. 171-2

-how **didactic** is this narrative? – is the message ‘constantly interfering with the story, telling the reader what to think’ about any given character or situation?⁴⁹ p. 182

GMD’s story *The Wise Woman* has been criticised as being overly didactic so it would be a good story for you to examine with this question in mind.

Of course there is a didactic element in GMD’s stories, as there is in most children’s literature. The question is, is it intrusive? The answer depends partly on the reader’s view of Victorian literature per se, but suppose we agree with GMD’s Christian perspective to examine this question – my conclusion would be that the story takes precedence. GMD tells the story primarily as a story. Of course, his message does come across, and he himself said his adult novel writing became his pulpit,⁵⁰ the message comes from his inherent faith, life and thought rather than in a contrived plot to convey a message.

Then we come to

Language – is it simple/ complex?

- Polysyllables see p.
- Lack of direct speech
- Imagery and figurative language see p.
- Irony and ambiguity⁵¹

- descriptions that really describe, dialogue that can produce some illusion, characters that one can distinctly imagine.⁵²

A typical dialogue between Diamond and NW demonstrates the way in which GMD lures his reader into thinking about the world (and beyond), differently, freshly:

‘I am not a fairy’ answered the little creature.

‘How do you know that?’

‘it would become you better to ask how you are to know it.’

‘You’ve just told me’

‘Yes, but what is the use of knowing a thing only because you’re told it?’

⁴⁹ Ibid. 182

⁵⁰ MacDonald, Greville. *George MacDonald and His Wife*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1924. p.

⁵¹ Nikolajeva, Maria. *Aesthetics Approaches to Children’s Literature: an introduction*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2005. p. 197.

⁵² Lewis, C. S. *An Experiment in Criticism*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1961. p. 29/30.

The conversation continues until Diamond's preconceptions about fairies, and about who he might be talking to, are swept away.⁵³

The complexity of the language in this story is diverse, from straightforward storytelling, through a wide range of vocabulary and intertextual allusion, demonstrated in the episode in the Cathedral, to what Rod McGillis has discussed in terms of the pre-language language of Diamond's songs and rhymes. Diamond creates these rhymes to sing to his baby brother.⁵⁴

And last but not less important

Suitability of purpose

- purpose of text – (e.g. fiction or non-fiction)⁵⁵
- and for the reader

is ABNW suitable for the intended purpose of introducing whatever it is the teacher wishes to introduce? This question can only be answered by any given teacher, after the narrative has been examined, which leads on to the next consideration, noted by CM, that the book must have the potential to be enjoyed by both teacher and student, a difficult criterion to fulfil, especially when strict categorisation is applied. For example, in terms of enjoyment:

Horace Walpole commented, in 1926, on writing for children:

... children divide into the two eternal divisions of mankind, ...
Romantics and Realists, Prosists and Poets, Business Men and
Dreamers, Travellers and Stay-at-Homes, Exiles and Prosperous
Citizens. ... (17-18)⁵⁶.

He continued by opposing the realists as the readers of adventures and the Romantics as the readers of fairy tales.

We could spend a long time examining why this statement is far from as clear cut as he indicates, in just about every aspect, but suffice it to say that the number of

⁵³ MacDonald, George. *At the Back of the North Wind*. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1992. p.57.

⁵⁴ McGillis, Roderick. 'Language and Secret Knowledge in 'At the Back of the North Wind'. In *For the Childlike: George MacDonald's Fantasies for Children*. ed. R. McGillis, Metuchen, NJ: The Children's Literature Association, 1992. 145-59.

⁵⁵ Nikolajeva, Maria. *Aesthetics Approaches to Children's Literature: an introduction*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2005. p.201.

⁵⁶ Walpole, Hugh. 'Reading': Being One of a Series of Essays Edited by J. B. Priestley' and Entitled: *These Diversions*. Ed. J. B. Priestley. Vol. 1926. London: Jarrolds, 1926.

identifiable genres (should one wish to define them as such) in *ABNW*, should stretch the preconceptions and satisfy the 'taste' of most readers who look in the story for their preferred sort of story. Incidentally, *ABNW* includes just such a discussion in Chapter 27 (p.256) in which Mr Raymond asks the children in the hospital what kind of story they would like him to tell.

CM's wonderful expression of the need for a book to have an 'Upheaving effect on the mind'⁵⁷, includes the need for a reader to be prepared to have her preconceptions 'upheaved'. Preconceptions can seriously get in a reader's way when approaching a book. If preconceived expectations are not met, confusion can follow leading to rejection, or criticism of that book. If the mind is open enough to be 'upheaved', then expansion, not rejection can follow.

This confusion and possible rejection can occur particularly if a reader has a preconceived idea of what genre a narrative should fit into. For example, in the case of *ABNW*, the reader may expect, a more realistic novel rather than a fantasy containing a fairy tale, not anticipating a mixture of all three.

GMD crafted the story to fall into two sections, with, what the internal narrator (Mr Raymond) calls 'a sort of a fairy-tale'⁵⁸ in the middle.

Quite early in the narrative, events going on around Diamond demonstrate a move deeper into the fantasy or parallel world, the 'real' world is elided into the fantasy/parallel world and fades as the parallel world becomes clearer, more 'real'.⁵⁹

p. 63

With the episode of the sinking ship and the conversation between Diamond and NW, the immediate material world becomes submerged (literally) as the larger picture of the parallel world takes precedence and becomes 'the norm'. It remains so for the rest of the story. The 'reality' and the 'fantasy' have swapped places, the unfamiliar becomes the 'real'.⁶⁰ p. 75

Does this remind you of anything else? (Lewis's *Great Divorce*?)

The reader who prefers 'realism', social critique or commentary finds it in *ABNW*. GMD critiqued the society in which he lived not only in his adult novels, but in his books written for children.

⁵⁷ Mason, Charlotte.

⁵⁸ MacDonald, George. *ABNW*.

See also Johnson, Rachel. 'A Sort of a Fairy tale' in *A Noble Unrest, Contemporary Essays on the Work of George MacDonald*, edited by Jean Webb, *A Noble Unrest*. Newcastle, UK.: Cambridge Scholars, 2007.

⁵⁹ GMD. *ABNW*. p. 63

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p. 75

As Jack Zipes notes in his book *When Dreams Came True: Fairy Tales and their Tradition*, MacDonald addresses issues of a radical nature and often, 'turned the world upside down and inside out to demonstrate that society as it existed was based on false and artificial values.'⁶¹

The reader looking for the mystic, spiritual teaching, also finds it. The reader looking for action and adventure, finds it, perhaps unexpectedly in the actions of the Prince in the fairy tale *Little Daylight*. Character maturation and growth (a foundational tenet of all GMD's work) runs through the text, unusually, in the narrator as well as in the major characters, and those looking for commentary on life in the form of theology or philosophy, find it (mostly) in the dialogue between Diamond and North Wind.

Thus, another CM requirement, that '*children will need to "dig" a bit for their knowledge*', and that '*the books would not be dumbed-down or a distillation of ideas*'⁶² are met in *ABNW* which both 'reflects reality' and 'carries ideology.'

I can't leave you hanging on what happened on 'the perfectly normal day in the library so here is the story so far'⁶³

It was a perfectly normal day at the library. People were quietly reading, and taking books out of the bookshelves. **When suddenly, the books started to shuffle.** The librarian dropped the book he was scanning, and walked over to the bookshelves. He looked at the books and then he saw some feathers growing between the books. And then he thought he must have gone crazy, because suddenly a book flew out of the bookshelves and hit him on the head. Then something even more weird happened, all the books vanished. Then he hears a floorboard creak open, and all of the books flew out. And when the books landed, their wings disappeared to be replaced with legs! Then all of the books walked out of the door, and marched down the street in single file. And then the front book stopped, and all the other books copied. **The front book made his legs vanish and replaced them with wings and all of the other books copied.** Then suddenly they all rose up towards the sky. All of the books flew into space and changed their wings into supersonic rocket blasters!

They blasted off at such a speed that it cannot be measured. Suddenly, all of the books burst out of our universe and sped towards a planet in the distance. When they all landed, lots of books rushed out of caves and holes to greet them. The other books brought them into a gigantic hall, where lots of books were feasting on words from letters telling them to go back to their libraries. The books that had gone on a journey from their library ran right into the feast and started to eat. After the feast, all of the books went to bed. The beds were made out of stretched i's that had been weaved together. In the night the new books had

⁶¹ Zipes, Jack *When Dreams came True: Fairy Tales and their Tradition* London: Routledge, 1999. p.125

⁶² Mason, Charlotte.

⁶³ Johnson, David Randell. From unfinished story being written February and March 2018

dreams about their library and its librarian. When it was time for breakfast, all of the books came down the stairs and started to eat the leftovers from the feast the night before. After breakfast everyone went back up the stairs to get dressed. **All of the books changed out of their paperback covers and put on their hardback covers.** Then they all went outside and saw a group of books rocketing towards their planet. One of the books explained to all of the other books on the planet, that these books had gone out on a mission, and they had brought back more food (words) for all of the books to eat. When the books landed everyone went back inside and finished off breakfast. Some of the books hadn't actually got dressed, so they went back upstairs and got dressed.

A group of children had gone outside and brought a scrunched up letter with them, so they could play football. The adult books were talking about how spikey some of the letters in their food was. Some of the book families went out to the bookshop, went to the restaurant, and went to work. Their children brought in stuff from the printer.

There was only one company on the planet of books, and it was called Books. Books made everything that Planet Bookrule needed. Nearly every adult book worked for Books. And if a book didn't work for Books, then they would go to planet earth and get more food..... story as yet unfinished.

Conclusion:

We accept the vital importance of encouraging children (of all ages) to read texts which we hope will enlarge their capacity to develop hope, empathy and imaginative responses to life, people and experience. We hope for the transformational effects of such reading for their development as human beings (in relation to each other and to God).

In his essay on fairy tales, George MacDonald, wrote 'let fairy tale of mine go for a firefly, flashing and flying

I will finish by saying that, whilst bearing in mind the practical or concrete criteria mentioned, look out for that extra dimension whilst selecting books for any given set of people/children, that 'single mark of red'⁶⁴, that 'flashing and flying'⁶⁵ that lights books up, and makes them live.

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⁶⁴ GMD. *Phantastes*. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1994. Final page.

⁶⁵ GMD. *A Dish of Orts*. 'he Fantastic Imagination'. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1996. p. 321.

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Other Criteria

To include:

- Isaiah 53 v 10-12 – cf fairy tales and the rectification principle. E.g. The Juniper Tree; the talking horse's head? Patient Griselle?
- Tales of Eternity

- First and second things p. 25
- CSL An experiment in criticism pgs. 40 and 50

CM Parents and Children Vol 2 1989 (1904) – chap. 25 – see photocopy

Examples of living books that fulfil the above criteria:

Elizabeth Laird (*A little Patch of Earth, and others*).

Tove Jansson (Moomin books, *The Dangerous Journey ; Comet in Moominland*).

Astrid Lindgren (*Brothers Lionheart ; Ronia the robber's Daughter ; Mio My Son*)

White, E.B. *Charlotte's Web*

Stig of the Dump

The Book thief

Authors:

Lewis, C.S.

Birdsall, Jeannie.

Konigsburg, Elaine Lobl

Banks, Lynne Reid

Funke, Cornelia.

O'Brien, R

Cleary, Beverley.

Sachar, Louis.

Perkins, M ?

Kimmel, E.

Ende, Michael

Tolkien, J.R.R.

Nesbit, E.

Gripe, Maria.

L'Engle, Madeleine.

McCaughrean, Geraldine.

Books to read

- Farmer, Penelope. *A Castle of Bone*
- Haugen, Tormod. *A Novel about Merkel Hanssen* (if translated)
- McCaughrean, Geraldine. *A Pack of Lies* – consistent narrative device with GM
- Gripe, Maria. *The Shadow Sanctuary*. Also *Glassblower's Children*
- Alcock, Vivien – *Cuckoo Sister*
- Lindgren, Astrid. *Ronia the robber's Daughter*
- Wrightson, Patricia. *Wirrun trilogy*