

I Know A Book

by Diana D. Young

Public Library Consultant

on Children's Services

Division of State Library

The Chinese invented both gunpowder and paper — which is the more powerful? A natural assumption would be gunpowder — not so. For paper made books readily available to the masses and in so doing gave us easy access to ideas, thought, and the power to change the world.¹

How then do we use this legacy? Do we indiscriminately crush our children with a jumble of materials so that they cannot discriminate between that which is good, bad, or mediocre? As a child grows, so does his curiosity. With a firm foundation on which to build, the child might stretch his understanding, imagination, curiosity, and human compassion to heights never before achieved.

With such a serious undertaking before all librarians and parents, where and when should we begin? Certainly our environment prior to birth is a starting place. For, if we are born into a reading, thinking family, our chance for mental growth is easier. We are curious about why Mommy, Daddy, sister and brother want to read. We eventually will try to imitate this pleasurable experience. We have a chance at good ideas. We will imitate what is around us. If we own a book, we are lucky. But if, when very young, we begin an active interest in and pursuit of the library, we are the most fortunate of all, for we have entered into this storehouse of ideas. The fate of the world could rest on what we as children find there. Thus the librarian is responsible for making available those materials which give a child a chance to grow. "The average child reads, outside of school books, perhaps a book a week . . . For the eight years between ages six and 14, that makes a total of

about 400 books."² The 1973 *Children's Books in Print* listed 41,000 titles to choose from:

Of this number, two and one half percent are excellent, thirty-five percent are perceptible sludge and dross, and the rest are in-between, that is, mediocre . . . If the number of mediocre children's books extant is 62½ percent of 41,000 or 27,000, and if the child reads 400 books overall, he has a very good chance of having spent his childhood in reading nothing but mediocre books.³

Must then all of a child's future idea growth depend on the mediocre? Do we want mediocre scientists, doctors, or authors? I think not, but if we persist in not caring about what we give to children that is what we should expect, for

It's the mediocre that drags us all down to a common denominator; common is fine but does it have to be the lowest? It's mediocrity that deprives us of judgment; it's mediocrity that closes our minds to new ideas; it's mediocrity that particularly deprives us of a sense of humor.⁴

Let's give our children a chance. Let them have a foundation on which to build. Then, let them build on this foundation as they choose. That is, give them the widest library experience — wide knowledge, a wide range of opinions — then let them grow at their own rate. Let us not give them a steady diet of any one kind of literature. As adults, we enjoy a wide range of materials. Why not our children? They like fiction, nonfiction, classics, folklore, fantasy, and award books. A steady diet of any one might cause their foundation to be weakened, their growth to be stunted or malformed. Many librarians are caught up in the award book trap. As adults, we do not read only those

books that are awarded the Pulitzer prize. Then why, as librarians and teachers, must we require as the sole criterion of excellence the Newberry and Caldecott award books. They are excellence. That was the initial reason for their creation — to promote excellence. Only let's not stop there. We must not forget the many honor books, notable books, and other quality children's books available. If we use these books as a part of our children's foundation, they can use them as a springboard into the world of ideas.

"The difference between literature for children and literature for adults lies in choice of subject rather than in the depth of feeling or the quality of writing."⁵ Therefore, as we choose criterion of excellence for ourselves, let us do no less for our future, our heritage, and the minds of children. I am not so naive as to think that books matched to the wrong child at the wrong time will lead the child to develop ideas. "The child himself must have the last say about the choice."⁶ If a child has built his reading background on a solid foundation, it will make little difference if he reads Nancy Drew or comic books, for he will not remain with them exclusively. His interest will drive him to explore art, science, and good fiction. He will want quality books like *Wilt Chamberlain* (by Ken Rudeen, New York: T.Y. Crowell, 1970) and *M. C. Higgins, The Great* (by Virginia Hamilton, New York: Macmillan, 1974). For Wilt and M.C. are alive. These characters have that special ability to transcend the stereotypes and staid situations found in the Hardy boys. Because a child has difficulty with reading does not mean his ability to think or his desire for ideas is less than the quick reader. It means we must try harder to give the slower reader the best available; he hasn't time for nor the energy to cope with poor quality materials.

Supply the child with worthwhile, entertaining reading; share it with him, and he

will gain *insight* into his own behavior, his social relationship, and his responsibilities. He will grow in *reverence for life*, in enthusiasm for knowledge, and insensitivity to beauty and goodness. And he will keep his *zest for life* and the gift of laughter.⁷

It is, therefore, our duty as librarians to make available ideas in a form that will be willingly received by children. To leave out the stereotypes of racism, sexism, or the staid male/female role. It is our obligation to provide excellence for the poor reader as well as for the quick:

The true librarian should be for freedom, for searching, for trying to find new and better answers to important questions, rather than relying on answers that have been given in the past. . . The library's function in this is to do whatever it can to make the wealth of fine books, so-called good literature, available, even if there are a few four-letter words, or pictures of nudes included in the package.⁸

And the true children's librarian in selecting books reads himself. He knows what is in the book. When a young patron says, "Can you help me find a good book to read?", he can truly say, "I know a book — a book just for you." Thereby hopefully and happily matching the right child with the right book at the right time.

FOOTNOTES

¹*The Hottest Spot in Town*. (Motion picture) / Missouri State Library; (made by) Calvin Productions, Inc. — 1105 Truman, Kansas City, Missouri 64106: Calvin Productions, Inc., 1968. 1 reel, 29 min.; col.; 16 mm.

²Shelia Egoff, "If That Don't Do No Good, That Won't Do No Harm: The Uses and Dangers of Mediocrity in Children's Reading," in *Issues in Children's Book Selection: School Library Journal/Library Journal Anthology*, with an Introduction by Lillian Gerhardt. (New York: R. R. Bowker Co., 1973), p. 4.

³*Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

⁵Edna Johnson, Evelyn R. Sickels, and Frances Clarke Sayers, *Anthology of Children's Literature*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970), p. xxxii.

⁶Sam Leaton Sebesta and William J. Iverson, *Literature for Thursday's Child*, ed. Karl Schmidt and Barbara Carsenter. (Palo Alto, Ca.: Science Research Associates, 1975), p. 104.

⁷May Hill Arbutnot, *The Arbutnot Anthology of Children's Literature*, 3rd ed. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1971), p. 112.

⁸Eli M. Oboler, "The Grand Illusion," in *Issues in Children's Book Selection: School Library Journal/Library Journal Anthology*, with an Introduction by Lillian Gerhardt. (New York: R.R. Bowker Co., 1973), p. 47.