

The Glory of Books

A Guide for Home Schoolers

By Suzanne U. Clark

Contra Mundum, No. 1, Fall 1991

(c) 1991 Suzanne U. Clark

When I was in college I read a book that made me so depressed I threw it against the wall. Though not a Christian then, I did harbor a flicker of faith, but the book's message of futility blew it nearly out. I was enraged at the author for leading me down such a dark path and at the professor (a Baptist minister and professor of philosophy) for assigning the book. Like music, literature is a language of spirit enabling one to soar heavenward or fall from cliffs or wander through deserts. Introducing children to books is a great and sober duty, for books have the power to create and destroy.

What principles should guide the selection of books in the Christian home? Dr. Stewart Custer, professor of Bible at Bob Jones University, identifies seven categories of objectionable features in literature (from Home School Helper, [BJU Press](#), Vol. IV, 1989):

1. Profanity
2. Scatological realism—pertaining to excretory functions
3. Sexual perversion—homosexuality, adultery, fornication
4. Erotic realism—explicit description of legitimate sexual love
5. Lurid violence
6. Occultism
7. False philosophical or religious assumptions—the most dangerous, yet the most overlooked, of all objectionable elements.

All of these appear in the Bible so that if we would disallow them in the books our children read, says Custer, we would have to disallow the Word of God:

Certainly no Christian should take pleasure in reading material that draws him away from personal holiness; but neither ought any Christian to seclude himself or his students unnecessarily from worthy literature simply because it

contains offensive material. Scripture itself includes notable examples of each type of objectionable elements.

Rather than avoiding all offensive elements, Custer suggests the teacher apply a three-fold test to determine suitability:

1. Gratuitousness—Does the objectionable material in question serve a purpose, or does it exist for its own sake?
2. Explicitness—Is the material, even if not gratuitous, more detailed than the purpose requires?
3. Moral Tone—Does the entire work approve or disapprove of the evil presented? Is the reader attracted to or repulsed by the sin?

A final evaluative tool is the practice of “moral inoculation”. Based on the student's maturity level, the teacher should gradually and in small doses introduce literary works with objectionable elements "so as to inoculate the student against what they refer to."

An additional aspect I would include is consideration of the spirit of the work, something altogether separate from any cognitive apprehension, as my children have more than once demonstrated. After watching *The Never-Ending Story*, they said they felt funny about it, that the spirit of the movie was strange and not of God. My daughter will occasionally bring an unfinished book downstairs from her room saying something isn't quite right and she doesn't want to keep reading. Trying the spirits, as Scripture commands, is a sound literary principle for the Christian reader.

In the case of small children, parents must do the testing for them, previewing any library or birthday book before it goes on the shelf at home. Here, I am not just speaking of books about ghosts and witches, but books that show women mostly as doctors and lawyers instead of mothers, that uncritically convey attitudes of disrespect toward parents and siblings, that uphold group cooperation above individual integrity, that elevate personal feelings and self-esteem to the status of gods. These are the more subtle doctrines of humanism that are so widely disseminated throughout our culture as to be unquestioned; indeed, familiarity with such ideas has made them invisible. But Christian parents must be on the alert for worldly deceptions and oppose these so as to see their children transformed.

In selecting books, lists obtained from respectable sources can be valuable. You as the parent, of course, will have to exercise discernment. Many private schools, both Christian and non-Christian, publish a list for elementary and secondary students. The English department of a good Christian college may be able to furnish you with book titles for high school students. You may know a public school teacher of the “old” (traditional) school who could suggest time-tested literary works for your child. Books about books, such as Gladys Hunt's *Honey for a Child's Heart* and Elizabeth Wilson's *Books Children Love*, are highly worthwhile. A book place in our area to which home-schoolers flock is the Book Place, a huge warehouse of new and used books with an entire wall devoted to

older classics and biographies.

The benefits of literature are often catalogued by teachers—things like character study, vicarious experience, vocabulary development, etc.—but the most obvious advantage is oddly overlooked. Literature gives pleasure, plain and pure. The dimensions of pleasure are varied, beginning with words themselves. My favorite line is from Beatrix Potter's *Tale of Mrs. Tittlemouse*: “She bundled the spider out the window.” What is more delightful than the perfection of *bundled*? (Unless it would be Babbitty Bumble's peevish squeak.) “Peep squonk” is likewise marvelous; this charming noise occurs in *The Little Duck*, a Random House book. Read to your children and have them read to you and each other. The better part of good literature is its music. The English poet Dylan Thomas said in the *Poetic Manifesto* that as a child he fell in love with words, but not for what they symbolized or meant:

... What mattered was the *sound* of them as I heard them for the first time on the lips of the remote and incomprehensible grown-ups who seemed, for some reason, to be living in my world. And these words were, to me, as the notes of bells, the sounds of musical instruments, the noises of wind, sea, and rain, the rattle of milkcarts, the clopping of hooves on cobbles, the fingering of branches on a window pane, might be to someone, deaf from birth, who has miraculously found his hearing.

To delight in language is to be spellbound by its power. “If I read a book”, wrote Emily Dickinson, “and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.” I think of Jeremiah, tormented and taunted by his opponents, determining he would speak no more of God. “But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.” That is poetry.

There are, to be sure, other reading pleasures. A character from a novel or play may lead us to greater self-knowledge or enable us to experience life more intensely and with deeper understanding. On summer evenings as the purple light of dusk spreads across my lawn, the words of Keats often come to mind: “It is a beauteous evening calm and free.” After the birth of my first child, attended by a prolonged period of post-partum depression, I sighed with Hamlet, “How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world.” But then I would recall the poetry of Jesus: “Whosoever drinketh of the water that I give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” More than once I have withstood temptation with Christian when walking through the Vanity Fairs of my own time, and I have better comprehended the cruelties and crimes of which I read in the newspaper because of meeting the evil Weston in C.S. Lewis's *Perelandra*.

In considering literature, the Christian parent-educator is finally brought to look at the larger question of art itself in relation to the kingdom of God. What is the propose of art? What kind of art glorifies God? The best discussion of these issues that I can recommend

is found in an important little book by Dr. Francis Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*. He uses Scripture to point out that representational art is not forbidden by the Ten Commandments as some Christians contend but rather the worship of created things. He examines the tabernacle and temple as places filled with art both heavenly and earthly and all holy, both cherubim and pomegranates. He observes that art needn't be utilitarian: in the temple are found free-standing columns that serve no architectural function at all but are simply there for beauty. He mentions that secular odes and poems are featured in Scripture; likewise secular works of art. A story should be written, a sculpture produced as *works of art*, Schaeffer maintains, not for some ulterior motive. The creative impulse is a reflection of the divine image in man; art, therefore, has value (though certainly not all works of art are acceptable.) A Christian world and life view will inevitably shine through the works of the artist committed to biblical faith.

What is the significance of these insights for Christian parents who teach at home? For one thing, it means that books can be read and cherished for the glimpses they afford of true reality. King Lear and Hester Prynne have lived through the centuries because they are made in the image of men and women: flawed but granted nobility born of suffering. As in the world so too in books does Providence guide, dropping both blessing and calamity into the paths of characters to test and at times redeem them. Where the author's vision is faulty as in beholding an empty or malevolent universe, the parent can sharpen his child's powers of discernment by bringing biblical truth to bear on the ideas found in poems and stories. Finally, because art is an expression of the spirit, and the spirit of the believer has been redeemed, there is no reason the Christian child cannot fly. Parents mustn't fear nor despise the imagination but should prize it as a magnificent gift that enables us to participate in the god-like activity of creation. In the home where Jesus is Lord, books become ladders of the mind on which angels ascend and descend bearing words destined for glory.