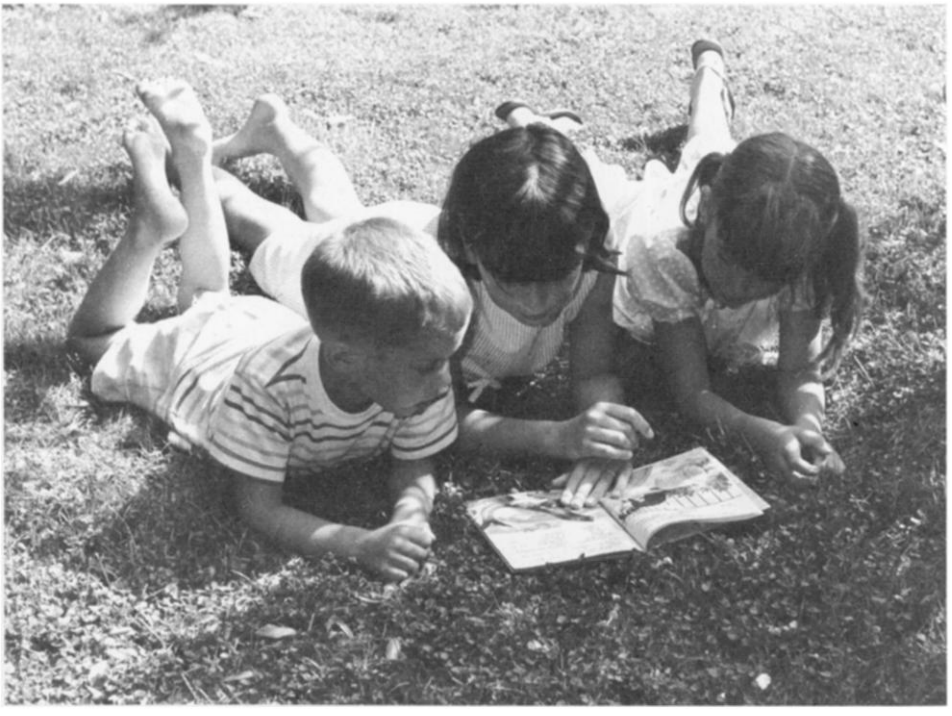
Morals, Morals Everywhere: Values in Children's Fiction

Author(s): William D. Eisenberg

Source: *The Elementary School Journal*, Nov., 1971, Vol. 72, No. 2 (Nov., 1971), pp. 76-80

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1000701



WILLIAM D. EISENBERG
Bloomsburg State College, Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania

Morals, Morals Everywhere: Values in Children's Fiction

"You're thinking about something, and that makes you forget to talk. I can't tell you just now what the moral of that is, but I shall remember it in a bit."

"Perhaps it hasn't one," Alice ventured to remark.

"Tut, tut, child!" said the Duchess. "Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it."—Lewis Carroll

The Duchess had a point. Didacticism in children's fiction has been with us since the time of the Puritans, though today it is often implicit and indirect. Let children enjoy first and learn second, but learn they must. How else will they be prepared for the unprecedented complexities of the world in which we live? How, indeed?

It does not seem to matter whether the instructional material is moral and ethical, psychological, racial and ethnic, or objectively

factual. As long as the instructional material is there, the only question seems to be what kind of instruction it offers. Does the fiction inculcate Judeo-Christian values? Is it educationally and psychologically sound? Is it free of racial and ethical misconceptions and prejudices?

But whether children are reading for enjoyment or for information, what gets them reading and keeps them reading?

Values? Hardly. Children perceive and understand values, but not in the abstract manner of adult philosophy. Stories must seem real. Plots, characters, and settings must seem like actions, people, and places. If they do not, no amount of clever loading of the text with "intrinsic" values will satisfy young readers, who may not even get to the values at all.

Children's fiction, then, must seem believably alive. Lewis Carroll is a name; Alice and the Duchess are real. A child who never heard of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson sings out in full voice, "Soup of the evening, beautiful soup." The Cheshire Cat's smile, the Queen of Hearts' temper, the White Rabbit's hurry, are all more real for children than the man who created them. And why not? Children can be any of these characters, or all of them, at the same time.

Still, for a story to be believably alive is not enough. Events must seem to have a right to happen and to follow each other, characters must be true to their own natures, and places must be those where a child can imagine himself being. A young reader who has never seen a river can be Huck Finn on the moonlit Mississippi, "wider than a mile." Whether a young reader has a right to be Huck on a raft in the middle of a great river is a question he does not ask himself.

Huck steals chickens to support himself and Jim. But why? Because he has no respect for private property? Or because of a need to survive that can be met in no other way? What child would want to stay with a father like Huck's? What intelligent, sensitive, and compassionate man would choose the life of a slave?

Young readers identify and sympathize with Huck and Jim, for both characters are fugitives from brutal oppressors, and neither has done anything to justify the severity of the punishment to which he is legally liable. For children the punishment must fit the crime, and the reward must fit the good deed. There can be no such thing as having Huck hand Jim over to the authorities, or putting Huck in reform school for larceny. That, in the eyes of children, would be immoral.

Life, for children, can be intensely and immensely exciting. Fiction should provide the kind of

excitement that falls naturally within the realm of their experience or within the capacity of their imagination. Such fiction takes young readers on a trip unmatched by the trips offered by any drug, and much safer. Few adults are hopeless neurotics because they were once momentarily frightened by the Wicked Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.*

Yet it is not just a question of whether there should be violence and terror in children's fiction, but also of why, how much, and how closely it all touches the child's own experience. To children Polyphemus, who imprisoned Odysseus and his companions, is a bully. Odysseus is the clever one who gives the bully his comeuppance. The gory details of the adult version can be omitted because they are irrelevant. Sadism, latent or otherwise, does not usually enter into the problem at all.

Children desire the inclusion of whatever enhances and advances the story, and the exclusion of whatever does not. My wife and I, observing the behavior of children at a movie theater during a showing of *The Three Lives of Thomasina,* found that children frequently act as their own censors. During mystical, frightening, romantic, or moralizing scenes the children looked away, jabbered among themselves, or went out to buy sodas and popcorn. One little boy sitting near us said to the older one in the seat beside him, "Tell me when the story's back so I can look again."

One can almost hear children today saying, "Tell us when the story's back so we can read again." The adult insistence that stories be clearly and explicitly moral collides head on with this youthful judgment. Morality, for children, needs to be inherent in the characters and their actions. Likewise, objectively factual information should be a bonus a child gets as he enjoys a good story.

Robert McCloskey's *Make Way for Ducklings* and Robert Lawson's *Rabbit Hill* are both good stories and good lessons, but the lessons come across clearly because the stories are told well. Few young readers would willingly set out just to learn the life habits of ducks and rabbits, but McCloskey and Lawson write so interestingly that few of their readers can avoid learning about the ducks' need for a secure nest or the rabbits' fear of foxes. The policeman who stops traffic to make way for ducklings and Little Georgie's escape from the fox in *Rabbit Hill* illustrate McCloskey's and Lawson's sensitivity to a basic need of children—a good story.

"Quite so," say militant critics, "but stories are good only if they are addressed to a child as a member of a group. Only the member of a group, you know, understands what it means to be a member of a group. Only blacks can

understand the black experience; only teens can understand the adolescent experience; only southerners can understand the southern way of life. Children of each group should read stories written for them by members of their group. That way they will have stories they can identify with, enjoy, and learn from."

By that reasoning *Hodie* is a dog story for farm children only, and *Heidi* is a pastoral for little Swiss girls. *Tim All Alone* would be for English school children, *Mei Li* for Nationalist Chinese, and *Sugar Hill* for middle-class blacks.

This kind of thinking could hopelessly fragment children's literary experience rather than giving them "the keys of Canterbury," as an old English folk song put it. Such thinking could narrow rather than widen children's horizons, and children need narrow horizons as surely as the ugly duckling needed rejection.

But children's fiction today must face still another set of challenges from educational and child psychology. Vocabulary and subject matter are to be carefully controlled to avoid any tension, trouble, terror, or trauma. Age and ability levels must be carefully screened, interests must be considered but not pandered to, and stories containing "offensive" elements must be rewritten or dropped.

Little Red Riding Hood has been revised to meet these requirements. One of the oldest versions, which ends with the wolf eating Red Riding Hood, is regarded as so brutal, so horrific, and so cruel that the wolf no longer eats anybody. Red Riding Hood tricks him by running around the room to make him dizzy, and his death occurs offstage, as in a Greek tragedy. Red Riding Hood, Grandmother, and the Woodcutter celebrate the occasion by having a victory tea, for which Red Riding Hood has provided the jelly beans.

It is a little hard to believe that most children are so disturbed by the fright figure of the wolf that they have fearful nightmares about being eaten, or that they acquire permanent neuroses from reading or hearing the story. In fact, there is usually general rejoicing when the wolf is killed, as there is in *Hansel and Gretel* when the witch is pushed into the oven, or when another wolf becomes wolf stew in *The Three Little Pigs.*

Again, we should not encourage sadism or brutality, but can we, or should we, attempt to shield children from the knowledge of what is happening in our world? If a heavyweight champion of the world ignores the fighting techniques of his challenger, how long will he remain champ? Besides, modern communication, transportation, and urban living make a shielded childhood all but impossible for many young children today.

It is questionable, too, whether our society is any less brutal than the primitive peasant culture that produced *Little Red Riding Hood.* Is our society less brutal, or have the forms of brutality and cruelty changed? Atomic warfare is hardly less brutal than a medieval battle, and brainwashing cannot justifiably be called kind.

But which is worse—to underestimate a child's capacity or to overestimate it? I believe that to underestimate is worse. To start a child on fiction that has a controlled vocabulary does prevent some reading difficulties, but holding him to a pre-planned level if he shows the will and the ability to go beyond that level seems like telling the Apollo 13 astronauts not to try to come home.

As for racial and ethnic misconceptions and prejudices, objectivity is probably undesirable, since we are human beings, not machines. Fairness, however, is within our reach—and our grasp. "O Great Spirit," says an American Indian proverb, "let me not criticize my neighbor until I have walked a mile in his moccasins."

Children are not only willing to be fair, they prefer to be—if and when adults will let them. Marguerite de Angeli's *Yonie Wondernose* and Sidney Taylor's *All of a Kind Family* are fairly written stories, but children need more, more, and still more of them.

Perhaps we can update the conversation of Alice and the Duchess a little:

"You're reading something, and that makes you forget to enjoy. I can't tell you what the story is, but I shall remember it in a bit."

"Perhaps there isn't one."

"Tut, tut! Every book has a story, if only you can find it."