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The two complementary questions--"What does literature do to young readers?" and "Can literature be taught?"--are not easily answered. Youth should not employ literature as an exclusive guide to life since they will encounter numerous unrealistic situations. Instead, literature should entice them to deal vicariously with vivid, new experiences and thus to feel themselves more deeply immersed in life. They should experience new responses and begin to develop their imaginations and critical abilities. If literature can be taught, children should first be taught to listen to the story as a whole and then to participate actively in literature through such creative dramatics as pantomime and play acting. As the children's own awareness and the story develop together, they become readers (or listeners), then performers, and finally dreamer-creators. (LH)

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LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN: AN ENGAGEMENT WITH LIFE

By ARTHUR T. ALLEN

Subways are not *for sleeping — they are for reading!*

ON AN EARLY SUMMER MORNING while traveling one of New York's oppressive subways, I became distracted momentarily by a young boy. "Did we pass the Winthrop station?" he queried.

"No," I said hurriedly and returned to my paperback, Northrop Frye's *Educated Imagination*, a lively and readable book exploring the values of studying literature in our scientific age. Before finding my place I glanced once more in the direction of the young boy and noticed that he too was busy reading. He was engrossed in Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (and, I might add, it was an exceptionally fine children's edition of this outstanding literary classic). I was fascinated by his facial expression and was reminded of John Steinbeck's description of the special delight that a boy encounters in the act of reading: "But Tom got into a book, crawled and groveled between the covers, tunneled like a mole among its thoughts, and came up with the book all over his face and hands."

The boy's head did come up again, and looking at me searchingly he asked the same question, "Did we pass the Winthrop station?"

"No," I reassured him; then breaking his trance somewhat, I asked, "How do you like your book? Isn't it too much like make-believe?"

Giving me a patronizing smile, he replied indignantly, "It's a great story and I know it's storylike." Then he saw his station and hurried away, hugging his "great story" tightly.

I returned to page 91 of Frye's book and found my place. The sentence read, "To bring anything really to life in literature we can't be lifelike: we have to be literaturelike." In an involuntary, childlike way, this young boy of ten had informed me, the adult reader, that he was capable of distinguishing between ordinary life and "literaturelike"!

As a student of children's literature I have been seriously asking myself two questions since this incident: What does literature do to young readers? Can literature be taught?

On the surface these complementary questions appear to be easily answered, although investigation has been meager and is far from complete. The questions have continued to perplex me, but the words of Gertrude Stein on her deathbed quiet my searching spirit. As she lay dying, she turned to her lifelong companion, Alice B. Toklas, and whispered: "Alice, what is the answer?" Alice answered softly, "Gertrude, I'm afraid we don't know." Then Miss Stein thought for a moment and said, "Well, then, Alice, what is the question?"

Miss Stein's response sums up my feelings, for as I think about it, I am really not sure that I know the answers to my own questions. Repeatedly I find myself going back and wondering.

Concerning the first question, What can literature do for today's youth? I keep asking myself, What about the many dropouts and nonachievers who are *not* culturally disadvantaged youngsters from the slums? What can be done for those disoriented, disillusioned, and confused children growing up in our affluent suburban communities? Will literature afford an opportunity for them to experience an engagement with life? I do not advocate that today's youth should employ literature as the exclusive guide to life. In literature the young person will encounter numerous contradictions to life that are storylike, to quote our young friend.

Some of these contradictions are readily observable: the good people always win; the hero and heroine live on together happily forever; all mystery stories are highly complicated and their problems can be solved logically by the all-knowing detective. Not only is this true of popular fiction for children but also of the more purely literary works that children might pick up and read, such as . . . *and now Miguel* and *Onion John* (both Crowell) by Joseph Krumgold. True, the better books are more sophisticated, but they too demand that the reader distinguish between what he knows life to be and the projections, real and unreal, that characterize the work he is reading.

The outer world of reality is constantly putting pressure on all children. They learn early the need to preserve the self, often limiting their apprehensions of the world to their own egocentric ideas: the hard and naked world of their own poverty, their comfortable suburban homes, their families and communities, their immediate peers. They feel safe in anchoring their minds and spirits to those established priorities which they are experiencing

in their here-and-now worlds. They are not always free within their beings to escape from the familiarity of their immediate milieu. Their outer worlds are more relevant to them than their inner worlds. The safe psychological feelings stemming from what they have actually experienced in life are what children will hold on to.

In literature the child realizes that the story is taking him in many different directions away from his fixed "realities," and a good many children will complain loudly about this. For this reason teachers and librarians should first introduce children to stories that have familiar settings rather than to writings with which the child is unable to identify in his inner person.

It is not as impossible, however, to "turn on" a child's sense of wonder through books as I may have inferred. Children have the capacity to move from the naked realism of their outer worlds to the remotest inner feelings of their private worlds. Graham Greene in *The Lost Childhood* says, "Perhaps it is only in childhood that books have any deep influence on our lives. . . . But in childhood all books are books of divination, telling us about the future, and like the fortune teller who sees a long journey in the cards or death by water they influence the future. . . ."

Graham Greene is saying that literature reveals more fully the "new slants" that life is opening up to us. Literature becomes an engagement with life as we immerse ourselves in the total body of our reading. This process takes a lifetime, but its beginnings stem from our early years of reading. As Annis Duff in *Bequest of Wings* has pointed out, we are adding new wings in our journey in life through the books that become a part of our private lives.

Literature, therefore, does something to us as we focus our attention on what we are sensing, thinking, feeling, building, and re-creating in ourselves. When a child experiences a story near to his feelings, he discovers within himself different reactions to the same situation. He lives them out alone and then shares his very personal responses with his special friends, real or imaginary. The voices he hears within himself quicken his imagination, and literature becomes an engagement with life now and with life as it may become. It is this engagement that helps educate the sixth sense — imagination — and also prompts the child to exercise his personal creative power over his very existence. He dares to reach out beyond the comfortably known to the adventuresome unknown without some of the former fears and bewilderment

that haunted him when he was unable to release himself from his preconceived existence. He begins to trust this sense of wonder lying within himself, and he dares to become not only a dreamer but a creator too. This myth-making power embraced by the human mind can change the world for good or evil. It was a book, *Microbe Hunters,* and a New York City high school teacher who led Jonas Salk to an awareness of the infinite complexities of life revealed in the study of the biological sciences.

Such childhood experiences are vividly and poignantly expressed by the poetical works of children as found in *Miracles* by Richard Lewis (Simon), a recent collection of children's poetry. Consider for example "A Strange Place" by twelve-year-old Peter Rake of England, who wrote:

A strange place
A place unknown
Only a stone's throw
From the Human race.

It is not deep
It is not wide
It is not tall.
Or small.

This place you shall never find
For it is mine and mine alone.
Strangest of all
No place is so unknown.*

or the poem "My Brain" by ten-year-old Annabel Laurance of Uganda:

I have a little brain
Tucked safely in my head
And another little brain
Which is in the air instead
This follows me, and plays with me
And talks to me in bed
The other one confuses me,
The one that's in my head.†

If it can be assumed that literature is a way of looking into life, teachers and librarians need to help children encounter the values that are found in authentic literature; and this brings us to the second question: Can literature be taught?

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*"A Strange Place" by Peter Rake reproduced by kind permission of Daily Mirror Newspapers Ltd., London.

†From *Miracles* collected by Richard Lewis. Copyright © 1966 by Richard Lewis. Reprinted by permission of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

If there is such a thing as teaching literature, I have a hunch that children must first be taught the art of listening to the story as a whole. This initial phase may best be accomplished through the ancient art of storytelling. Storytelling strikes the chords of self-awareness in the listener and creates a vivid experience which becomes a part of the mind and person of the listener.

When one listens to a story, one is being creative by lending to it his own imagination. For the child, the story is the way to his heart.

Next, I believe that children need to participate actively in literature by means of creative dramatics. Then the reading and acting out of literature becomes an engagement with life. Through acting out his "feelings" or "responses" the child enlarges his understanding of the text, sharpens his perceptions, and thereby learns to know his own self more intimately.

However, before boys and girls are introduced to creative dramatics, they need experiences in pantomime and play acting so that they can reproduce the actual experiences they are living through in their personal world of play and fancy. These experiences will stimulate their creative imaginations. This first step cannot be realized hurriedly, especially with the culturally disadvantaged child or, for that matter, with any child in the American culture.

The child's productive imagination is enhanced, then, by the *vividness* of the story and not by its truth to actual experience. And this is why we as teachers want the child to become a performer through dramatic improvisation. As he experiences literature *feelingly,* he communicates to those about him his own inner symbols. In order to do this, he first becomes a text reader (and if not a text reader, a story listener), then a performer by acting out his own personal ordering of the text or tale, and finally a dreamer-creator by making judgments of value based on the rich and multiple associations that he encounters in literature and life.

Granted we all make uncritical responses to a literary experience; but the child's "uncritical responses" in creative dramatics aid the adult to see and capture the moments of inner ecstasy, wonder, and delight that children experience. This is the very first step in the process known as literary criticism. After such an engagement in acting out what he has read, the child is better able to find words for his thoughts and feelings and we, his teach-

ers, are better equipped to teach him about theme, plot, and characterization.

Yet, in too many classrooms and libraries, we tend to hurry to a high level of abstraction past this process of active creation and re-creation of the text. We rush into a dissection of a literary work, overemphasizing theme and the analysis of technique: a sure way to "turn off" youngsters from an engaging experience with prose or poetry. Let the child's own experience open the poem or story to him and, conversely, let the poem or story open the child to his own experience. Simply let him live it. Let him *grow* through literature for a long time before we attempt to teach him how to analyze it. Let him open the treasures found in literature at will, not by coercion. Out of his own inner thoughts and feelings, the "reader-child" is capable of making a new ordering, the product of creative endeavor carried on by the reader under the guidance of the text and teacher.

The teacher's role is to foster the child's openness to the "new" in literature. The child, whether he be from the slum or middle-class white suburbia, needs literature, for that will give him, as Robert Lawson put it, ". . . the chuckles . . . the gooseflesh . . . the glimpses of glory" he loves. For, in reality, in this golden day of children's literature, books are available for *all* children to unlock at will.