

# On Relevance and Reading Problems

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*Where We Live: Teacher's Guidebook*, Annabelle Kennedy and Margaret Simmons. James Lorimer & Company, 1978. 200 pp. \$7.00 paper. ISBN 0-888-62-231-7 paper.

*About Nellie and Me*, Seonida and Barry Dickson. Photographs by Paul Craven. James Lorimer & Company, 1978. 56 pp. \$3.95 pp., \$8.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-888-62-174-4 paper; 0-888-62-183-3 cloth.

*Cedric and the North End Kids*, Bill Freeman. Photographs by Lutz Dille. James Lorimer & Company, 1978. 64 pp. \$3.95 paper, \$8.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-888-62-177-9 paper; 0-888-62-187-6 cloth.

*Marco and Michela*, Satu Repo with Giuliana Colalillo and Vincenzo Pietropaolo. Photographs by Vincenzo Pietropaolo. James Lorimer & Company, 1978. 64 pp. \$3.95 paper, \$8.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-888-62-172-8 paper; ISBN 0-888-62-181-7 cloth.

*The Golden Hawks*, Paulette Jiles. Photographs by Ursula Heller. James Lorimer & Company, 1978. 72 pp. \$3.95 paper, \$8.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-888-62-173-6 paper; 0-888-62-182-5 cloth.

*What's A Friend?*, Satu Repo. Photographs by Lutz Dille and Edwin Gailits. James Lorimer & Company, 1978. 64 pp. \$3.95 paper, \$8.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-888-62-178-7 paper; 0-888-62-188-4 cloth.

The recollection of such reading as had delighted him in his infancy, made him always persist in fancying that it was the only reading which could please an infant . . . "Babies do not want (said he) to hear about babies; they like to be told of giants and castles, and of somewhat which can stretch and stimulate their little minds."

Mrs. Thrale, *Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson*, 1786

The new *Where We Live* reading series advertises itself (quite insistently – I counted the word "alternative" at least five times in James Lorimer's introduction) as something revolutionary, "different from books in other reading series" – a "REAL ALTERNATIVE." The series (of which only the Grade 4 readers and *Teacher's Guidebook* are out at present) is designed on the principle that the reading difficulties of children of immigrant and

non-middle-class backgrounds arise primarily from the content of their reading series, content which is unfamiliar and, consequently, uninteresting to them. Teaching reading, according to the authors, is a matter not of teaching component skills (such as decoding), but of stirring up interest in the activity. They argue that "the ease and success of children in acquiring these skills will depend in large part on the *content* of the material being used to learn the skills . . . meaningful, relevant content will assist in learning to read." (p. 8, *Teacher's Guidebook*). As a result, they have produced a series whose stories take place mostly in urban settings, and whose characters belong to the ethnic groups which make up a large proportion of the school populations in major Ontario cities; the illustrations are photographs, intended to be immediately recognizable to the reader, and the working class characters face the usual problems of job security and lack of money.

Although exposing children to a steady diet of non-Canadian and unfamiliar reading material is certainly undesirable, I cannot agree with the authors that foreign content is the sole reason many children do not learn to read. For hundreds of years before basal reading series were invented, when the horn book, the Bible, and adult literature were the only instructional materials available, many children became competent readers. In Canada as in America, German, Irish, Jewish, Norwegian and Chinese immigrant children (among others) became literate when no special accommodations were made for them. Why many Canadian children leave school as non-readers is clearly a complex question; but including more recognizable material in school reading texts, though of some value, will not perform miracles.

Yet *Where We Live's* reading consultant Judith Newman obviously thinks it will, for she argues that "the causes of reading failure reside not in the children and their learning ability but in the way they are being taught" (p. 22, *Teacher's Guidebook*). Because her introduction "About Reading" is long on theory and short on practical suggestions, it is hard to know what exactly Newman is recommending for the classroom teacher when she states:

Encouraging excessive reliance on print information affords the teacher little opportunity to explore and use the other non-visual information sources so important for understanding the writer's message. (p. 26, *Teacher's Guidebook*)

However, given her bias against oral reading, I take her to mean that as long as one's students can *talk about* the story, the teacher needn't worry if they can really *read* the words in it. Certainly if the teacher never asks some of them to read aloud, he'll never have to know just how many can't decode twenty percent or more of the written words, (that is, how many are reading

at a frustration level). Having taught grades 4 and 5 for eight years, I believe that all the group discussion in the world, all the photographs of familiar places and races, won't teach a child from a verbally-impooverished background to decode the word "abandoned" (p. 30, *The Golden Hawks*) if no teacher has bothered to teach him how to break down the unfamiliar word into syllables or to assign sounds to *an* or *on*.

The authors' idea of what constitutes "relevant" reading material is unduly restrictive, though the word itself (which recurs nine times between pages 8 and 11) is never defined. It would appear that a "relevant" story is a realistic tale about children, set in an urban or suburban setting, with characters from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds. Yet children's most enthusiastic response to literature is often reserved for folk tales and fantasy. Why is a story about two Jamaican boys playing hockey more "relevant" than "Hansel and Gretel"? The one describes the child's external surroundings, while the other traces the child's inner world, "tak[ing] these existential anxieties and dilemmas very seriously and address[ing] itself directly to them: the need to be loved and the fear that one is thought worthless; the love of life and the fear of death."<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, despite their concern with offering the children "relevant" reading matter, the authors are often surprisingly insensitive to the natural interests of the nine or ten-year-old. A passage like the following:

There was a lot of money and jobs then. The housing and construction industries were booming. Office buildings, apartments, factories and private homes were popping up everywhere. But the construction industry was also a "jungle" in those days. Everybody competed furiously with everybody else. The owners wanted their buildings up fast, and the contractors pushed their men to work harder and harder. There were not many rules of fair play.

(*Marco and Michela*, p. 42)

is hardly engaging reading! What it is, is *didactic*, and the frequency of such writing is perhaps the outstanding defect of this series.

Repeatedly, didactic intentions interfere with literary judgement. Feminist views lead the authors to select for the Italian grandmother's story a folk tale whose bitter moral ("a donkey is better than a man any day," *Marco and Michela*, p. 33) might amuse a teenage girl, but is meaningless to most young children, for whom the fairy tale moral that virtue triumphs over evil remains singularly satisfying.

In fact, this series falls squarely within the tradition of didactic children's reading material that began with the Puritans and lasted until the "Golden Age of Children's Books" (to borrow Roger Lancelyn Green's phrase) in the mid-nineteenth century. Passages like the one just quoted are not much

different in *intent* from the following, written in 1801:

Patty put her poor Cousin to bed, where she lingered a few hours, and then expired saying – ‘had I been GOOD, I should have been HAPPY; the GUILTY and the UNFEELING can never taste of PEACE.’<sup>2</sup>

The aim of both is to instruct rather than to entertain the reader. One is justified in attacking *Where We Live* on these grounds because, unlike many basal reading series, it has literary pretensions. The short novel format would indicate that each story should be taken seriously as a book, and Lorimer tells us in his introduction that consulting editors Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence made suggestions from a “literary viewpoint.” Perhaps these went unheeded.

If *Where We Live* aims to teach reading by exciting interest, it overlooks the fact (as many basal reading series do not) that not all children are interested in the same *types* of stories. While not all the stories in *Where We Live* are realistic fiction, most basal stories also include historical fiction, non-fiction, folk tales and legends, fantasy, humour, poetry and plays, so that most readers are likely to find something they like. Because of this range, some basal series select pieces by the best children’s authors – Twain, Grahame, E.B. White – offering the reader at least *some* exposure to writing of the highest calibre. There is no writing of that quality in *Where We Live*. Had the authors been less single-minded, they might have drawn up a series that incorporated some genuinely creative writing by good Canadian children’s authors. Extracts from the novels of Seton, Roberts, Houston, Nichols, Mowat or Richler, and from Hill’s and Melzack’s renditions of Indian and Eskimo legends, might even have had the happy consequence of encouraging students to go out and read the complete works.

I cannot disagree with the view that familiar settings make realistic fiction more readable to some children. For that reason alone *Where We Live* is inappropriate outside urban Ontario. The very profusion of specific local references – to Kensington Market, to Spadina, to Victoria Park – would be as foreign to my Nova Scotia students as I have found *Mary Poppins* to be. Furthermore, Nova Scotia’s immigrant and minority groups are not Southern Ontario’s. Greeks are more common in Halifax than Portuguese, and Nova Scotia’s indigenous black children face different problems than Jamaican immigrant children. For Canadian children living in small towns or small cities, the semi-rural background of many stories in American series like Ginn 360 is less strange than *Where We Live*’s urban setting. *Where We Live* is a far less “Canadian” series than it set out to be.

It is unfortunately characteristic of most publishers that they present their new reading series as miracle cures for all the reading difficulties

confronting us. Sadly, the new ideas come and go, while the reading problems remain. What is needed now is some *humility* in the face of these problems – and some perspective. Children learn to read in a *variety* of ways – some by sight, some by decoding, some quite idiosyncratically. Some prefer fantasy, some fact, some fiction. Inevitably, an approach geared too exclusively to one type of pupil will neglect those who do not learn that way. There is no doubt that there is a place for *Where We Live* in many Toronto classrooms; but there is no place for its arrogant assumption that it offers the only solution to a complex problem that has beset us for many years – and will, unhappily, beset us for many years to come.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Knopf, 1976.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted by Sheila Egoff, "Precepts and Pleasures" in *Only Connect*, Oxford 1969, p. 423.

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