

Laura Haslam

EH 3303

Dr. Cindy Walker

October 20, 2004

Great Books for All Ages

It has long been maintained that reading to children will help them develop skills that are needed in life, as well as a genuine love of stories and imagination. Every successful bookstore has a large children's book section, and awards such as the Caldecot, Newberry, and the Children's notable Books award, are given to books that go beyond just telling a story, to genuinely affecting their readers.

This is wonderful, and shows that the literary arts are not dying out in our society after all. But, there is one mistake our culture has made. A book that is in the Children's stacks may not be meant only for children. The Great Books foundation had this to say about choosing the works for their "Junior Great Books" series.

Providing selections that speak to both leaders and students helps ensure that shared inquiry discussion will be a collaborative effort. In preparing for discussion, leaders do not rely on a teacher's manual or look to an answer key. Instead they experience the same kind of intensive engagement with the text that they want to encourage in their students: they read the selection at least twice,

note whatever they find puzzling or thought-provoking, and write interpretive questions that express their own search for meaning in the work. (Website)

If there are young children's tales (such as "Kanga and Roo come to the forest, and Piglet has a Bath" by A.A. Milne, and "The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin" by Beatrix Potter.) that a teacher can thoughtfully read through and come up with thought-provoking questions, there should be plenty of other children's books with lessons tucked away inside that any adult could benefit from learning.

The first such book this paper will explore is A Wrinkle in Time, by Madeleine L'Engle. Although written in 1962, the plot is so well constructed that, from the story, it is impossible to tell that it was written forty years ago. The issues expressed transcend time, and the characters are realistic to any generation.

20th Century America is a "show me" culture. If something cannot be empirically proved, it must not exist. It is a hyper-rational society, and the squelching of the "instinct" side of human nature has left us without a reasonable balance. Yet balance is possible. This balance requires faith, and Madeleine L'Engle conveys this.

"Do you think things always have an explanation?"

'Yes, I believe that they do. But I think that with our human limitations we are not always able to understand the explanations.

But you see, Meg, just because we don't understand doesn't mean that the explanation doesn't exist.'" (A Wrinkle in Time, pg. 46)

As Mrs. Murray told her daughter Meg, there are explanations for everything. Yet, most adults would contest this truth, because they cannot sense said explanation. A Wrinkle in Time may help someone see this fact, and understand the world a little bit better for it.

This is not the only important lesson that could be learned from A Wrinkle in Time. Another lesson that needs to be learned is that of responsibility. There are many people in this age that are unwilling to pay the price for their actions. Everything is someone else's fault, and the resounding cry is "Do not look at me! It was not my fault!" Unfortunately, this is not the way God made the world work. Someone has to take responsibility, as Mrs. Which tells the Happy Medium, "there will no longer be so many pleasant things to look at if responsible people do not do something about the unpleasant ones.'" (Pg. 86). If society continues the way it has, with no one willing to "step up" and *do* something about the unpleasant aspects of this world, it will just keep spiraling downward, until it is completely unfit to live in. Madeleine L'Engle, apparently a responsible person, tried to do something about the unpleasant things of this world by revealing this truth to the young, and to any adult who might stumble across this book.

The last major lesson in A Wrinkle of Time is that of love. The fallen nature of this world has made people hateful; every human is guilty of unlovely

actions at some point or another. Fortunately for humanity, there is something stronger than our hateful tendencies, and that is the love of God. We are God's children, and we have the ability to mirror God's love, although many never choose to do so. In the climax of A Wrinkle in Time, it is this mirrored love that wins the battle.

“... Suddenly she knew. She Knew! Love. That was what she had that IT did not have. ...But how could she use it? What was she meant to do? ... She was sure that IT could not withstand love. But she, in her weakness and foolishness and baseness and nothingness, was incapable of loving IT. Perhaps it was not too much to ask of her, but she could not do it. But she could love Charles Wallace.” (Pg. 207)

Meg is a weak human, and, as all humans would be, was unable to love the pure evil that IT represented. She was, though, able to love a fellow human, as lost as he was at the time. That is a lesson that everyone, even Christians, needs to learn. All humans are in the same plight, and the only way we might possibly help each other is through love.

The (rather overlooked) first book in the Chronicles of Narnia is The Magician's Nephew. This series is C.S. Lewis' work of children's fantasy, and has been loved by people of every age and no faith for its wonderful story. Lewis inserted many Christian virtues into the Chronicles, in an attempt to slowly build

up the faith in the younger generations. Consequently, this is also a book that could be used to build up faith in adults.

A lesson that Lewis alludes to in The Magician's Nephew and takes a closer look at in The Great Divorce is that of the relation between good and evil. In The Great Divorce, the base, sinful "ghosts" are almost totally insubstantial when compared to the heavenly realm and the spirits that inhabit it. In The Magician's Nephew, there is a similar scene.

"Now that you saw her in the Wood, Queen Jadis looked different. She was much paler than she had been; so pale that hardly any of her beauty has left. And she was stooped and seemed to be finding it hard to breathe, as if the air of that place stifled her. Neither of the children felt the least bit afraid of her now." (Pg. 73)

Jadis, an evil Queen, had seemed terrible and deadly when in her world of death at the end of time, but when she came to the Wood between the worlds, which was good in its nature, she was completely dwarfed by it. Lewis believed in the utter superiority of Good to Evil, and showed it in many of his books. Adults, as well as children, are wrapped up in this world, and often fail to see the "Big Picture". The Magician's Nephew, and the rest of the series, remind people that, no matter how strong an advantage Evil might seem to have at the moment, Good will have a resounding victory in the end.

Another lesson from The Magician's Nephew comes out of the creation of Narnia. Aslan says to the animals that he had chosen to be sentient,

“I give to you forever this land of Narnia. I give you the woods, the fruits, the rivers. I give you the stars and I give you myself. The Dumb Beasts that I have not chosen are yours also. Treat them gently and cherish them but do not go back to their ways lest you cease to be talking beasts. For out of them you were taken and into them you can return. Do not so.” (Pg. 128)

God has chosen Humans alone for the gift of reason, the mixture of rational thought and animal instinct. When we drift too far to one side or the other, we are not quite as human as we once were. The few that drift too far to one side or the other become very animalistic in their behavior, and lose the gift of reason. Lewis warns children, and any others who might read, against the dangers of losing the golden mean of your sentience in pursuit of one extreme.

The next lesson this book has for young and old is akin to the last one. As humans drift from reason, they become less open-minded to the truth, and more fixated on what they know as “true”. This is certainly evident in Uncle Andrew, with his rational thought and instinct of self-preservation.

“‘He thinks great folly, child,’ said Aslan. ‘This world is bursting with life for these few days because the song with which I called it into life still hangs in the air and rumbles in the ground. It will not be so for long. But I cannot tell that to this old sinner, and I cannot comfort him either; he has made himself unable to hear my voice. If I spoke to him, he would only heard growlings and roarings. Oh

Adam's sons, how cleverly you defend yourselves against all that might do you good!' (Pg. 185)

Lewis again warns his readers, hopefully adult as well as child, against becoming "so sharp they cut themselves". Those that drift too far from reason will be unable to return, or even realize that something is wrong with their thought processes. Uncle Andrew's situation is more exaggerated than most, to be sure, but the principles still hold clear. Those that do not want to hear God's voice most likely will not; only "growlings" ... dim echoes of the truth.

At the Back of the North Wind was written by George MacDonald, in a style geared toward children, yet it has many deep things to say about the relationship between God and Man. Anyone who happens to read it will doubtlessly notice, and will perhaps learn from what MacDonald had to say.

One question that many adults have about God is "Why does He do bad things to good people?" Surprisingly, MacDonald takes a look at this question early in the book, in terms a child would be able to understand, no easy task.

"Here you are taking care of a poor little boy in one hand, and sinking a ship with the other. It can't be like you.' ... 'Which me do you know?' 'The kindest, goodest me in the world.' ... 'Why should I be good to you?' 'I don't know, except it be because it's good to be good to me.' 'That's just it; I'm good to you because I like to be good.' 'Do you know the other *me* as well?' 'No...' 'And you are sure there can't be two mes?' 'Yes' 'Then the me you don't know

must be the same as the me you do know...the me you don't know
must be as kind as the me you do know?' 'Yes' 'Besides, I tell you
that it is so, only it doesn't look like it.'" (Pp. 67-68)

The question of the goodness of God is one that is hard for many Christians, whether they are answering it for themselves, or someone else. Many wrestle with why God would let something bad happen to a little innocent child, then let a criminal live like a king. MacDonald answers this question in a child-like format in a page and a half. God is, ultimately, kind to everyone, although it may not look like it. A dead child has gone to be with Him in Heaven, but the criminal gets his kindness here on Earth, and his punishment in eternity. God is both kind and cruel to all, but, as mortals, we are often too wound up in our own situations to take a look outside ourselves, and realize that. Yet it is there for anyone willing to look in the pages of a children's book.

At the Back of the North Wind also deals with the existence of God, another weighty issue, even for Christians.

"... I am so happy that I'm afraid it's a dream. How am I to know that it isn't a dream?' ... "I think... that if I were only a dream, you would not have been able to love me so. You love me when you are not with me, don't you?' "Indeed I do...I see! I see! How could I be able to love you as I do if you weren't there at all; you know?
Besides, I wouldn't be able to dream anything half so beautiful all

out of my own head; or if I did, I couldn't love a fancy of my own like that, could I?" (Pp. 326-329)

This is a conversation that many people would like to have with God, Himself. Our sight is currently limited to this world, and we are unable to totally comprehend the awesomeness of God. How could humans make up something that is so far beyond them? This is visible in the gods that humans *have* made up. All the ancient gods (Greek, Norse, Egyptian) were basically just humans with phenomenal, cosmic powers. Our God is far from like them, and He is not a dream. This book would reassure many humans, if they cared to read it.

Although not all children's books have such lofty themes and issues, a fair amount of them do. They are treasures of this world, for all ages can learn from them. They should be read thoughtfully by the old to the young, and then carefully thought about by both.

Works Cited

L'Engle, Madeleine. A Wrinkle in Time. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1990.

Lewis, C.S.. The Magician's Nephew. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

MacDonald, George. At the Back of the North Wind. New York: William Morrow and Co., 1989.

The Great Books Foundation. "Junior Great Books for Elementary and Middle School ." Junior Great Books . 18 Apr. 2003. Great Books Foundation. 18 Apr. 2003
<<http://www.greatbooks.org/programs/junior/about/elem.shtml>>.

Another factor we have to consider is that children read entertainment books is beneficial to family, on the one hand, absolutely it is sweet time when parent company with children to read entertainment until children sleep, it is believe that children will have more strong safe feel when they are adult. On another hand, entertainment book will give more communication topics that will help to parent cross the gap between children. take me as an example, I am used to read my son's entertainment books due to some internet word or sentence I need learn from these books, thus my son think his